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'I thought it was the start of World War III'

By [KEVIN DENNEHY](#)
STAFF WRITER

When he looked back, the tower had disappeared, and, for a minute, the Otis pilot manning one of the two military jets first on the scene at the World Trade Center thought World War III had begun.



□ "We did everything we could do to get there in time," says Nasty, one of two 102nd Fighter Wing pilots to reach Ground Zero first. "I was the same as everyone else. I was shocked and disbelieving, and frustrated that we were so late." (Staff photo by KEVIN MINGORA)

A second hijacked airliner had just sliced into the towers on the morning of Sept. 11, and the two Otis pilots were trying to clear the airspace over Lower Manhattan.

No one was sure if the attack had ended, and the fighter pilots scrambled to steer all nonemergency aircraft away from New York's besieged skyline.

Then, while facing away from the city, the pilots turned to see that Tower 1 had vanished in a plume of dust.

"When we turned around, all we saw was Lower Manhattan covered in dust and debris," said one of the

pilots, who lives in Forestdale and is just now speaking publicly about that day.

The 35-year-old pilot, who follows military safety protocol by using his call name, Nasty, rather than his real name in the media, thought terrorists had just struck again.

"Then Duff (the other pilot) said over the radio, 'It looks like the building collapsed.' I thought to myself, 'There were just tens of thousands of people killed,'" Nasty said yesterday.

"I thought it was the start of World War III."

Nasty and Duff, a part-time Guardsman from Duxbury who just happened to be on duty that day, flew over New York for

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more than four hours, unaware in their cockpits of the rumors and fears that were gripping the nation below them.

"We were still busy doing what we needed to do," Nasty says. "There wasn't time to reflect."

There would be time for that in the months that followed, a busy period at Otis Air National Guard Base, home of the 102nd Fighter Wing. More than 500 reservists were mobilized to support 300 percent more flights than normal, as pilots flew combat air patrol missions around the clock over New York, Washington and Boston.

The number of flights have dropped, as the base returns to a state that can be called somewhat normal.

But the pilots don't forget, says Nasty, who has been with the unit for about two years and who was the target of enemy fire over Kosovo and Iraq before he came to the Cape.

He still seethes over the events of Sept. 11, frustrated that more couldn't have been done.

"We did everything we could do to get there in time," the Cape pilot said yesterday, sitting in the same control room where he first heard about the hijackings last fall.

"I was the same as everyone else. I was shocked and disbelieving, and frustrated that we were so late. But then again, it was out of our control."

The real deal

On the morning of the 11th, Nasty was sitting in the Otis control office, its walls lined with pilot schedules and charts, working an "alert" shift for another pilot, who was scheduled for training that day.

While the unit always had two pilots on alert, much of the regular flying time was devoted to training high over the Atlantic.

At 8:40 a.m., all that was going to change.

An American Airlines flight out of Boston had apparently been hijacked, a colleague told Nasty.

There hadn't yet been an official call for a scramble, but the two pilots on alert duty hustled to a nearby room and donned flight gear.

As they walked across the airfield to their jets, which stood armed on alert, a horn sounded and the public address system blared their instructions: This was an official military scramble. They should report to their battle stations. According to the North American Aerospace Defense Command, or NORAD - which is responsible for U.S. and Canadian airspace - the scramble was ordered at 8:46 a.m.

Nasty had responded to only seven or eight scrambles since he

joined the 102nd in the spring of 2000. Typically, they were false alarms - a Navy plane flying toward the coast that controllers couldn't contact; a Coast Guard boat that couldn't be identified.

But even in the earliest minutes, Nasty knew this was likely the real deal.

No sooner had he and Duff strapped into their jets than the green light went on, signaling them to depart as soon as possible.

The pilots guided the jets to the nearest runway on the Otis airfield. Soon the planes were booming over Sandwich. They were up even before the jets' radar kicked in.

Within moments, they were traveling at supersonic speeds. All the pilots knew was that they were to intercept one airliner that appeared headed toward New York City.

The plan was to find the airliner on the jets' radar, follow it, let the ground controllers know what was going on.

But it was already too late. By the time the jets had left Otis, Flight 11 had crashed into the World Trade Center. Eleven months later, Nasty doesn't even recall hearing that the first plane hit.

And by the time he heard a word about a second hijacked plane, United Airlines Flight 175, it had already smashed into the second tower before the horrified eyes of millions on TV.

That happened at 9:02 a.m., according to NORAD records. The two Otis F-15s were about 71 miles - or eight minutes - from Manhattan.

Visibility was extremely clear that morning, and Nasty could see the plume of black smoke pouring from the first tower.

With both buildings in flames, radar controllers watching the skies over Manhattan and military controllers based in Rome, N.Y., tried to make sense of what had happened, and coordinate military and rescue aircraft.

For a few minutes, the Otis jets were directed to a 150-mile chunk of air space off Long Island where the unit's pilots typically train.

"Neither the civilian controller or the military controller knew what they wanted us to do," Nasty recalls.

But within minutes, the pilots received orders to head to Manhattan for combat air patrol, which would become a routine mission for Otis pilots over the next several months.

The two pilots tried to identify the dozens of small aircraft suddenly flying over Manhattan. There were several police and rescue aircraft, but also media helicopters and a few curious small-plane pilots.

Nasty and Duff alternated. One would drive away those aircraft that didn't belong toward airspace over the ocean, while the other monitored Manhattan.

They refueled in midair just over the water.

While they usually flew at about 10,000 feet in those first few hours, the pilots sometimes had to get as low as 500 feet off the ground.

"I didn't dream of ever flying that low over any major cities," Nasty recalls, "especially that one."

Both pilots were together, near John F. Kennedy Airport, about 15 miles from the World Trade Center, when the first tower collapsed.

Later, Nasty was flying his F-15 about 5,000 feet above the second tower when it, too, folded into a torrent of dust and debris.

The threat of more

Unlike millions of Americans who watched the events live on television, the Otis pilots were basically unaware of what was happening elsewhere in the country.

It was only later that a controller mentioned in passing that there was a similar attack in Washington.

"He didn't elaborate, and we didn't really have time to think about it," Nasty said.

At one point, a civilian controller said that if another plane were hijacked it would have to be shot down. But that, Nasty says, was an off-the-cuff statement.

At no point were pilots instructed by the military to shoot down any airliners.

And any discussions now about shooting down airliners, he says, is conjecture. At the time of the first two hijackings, the military pilots couldn't be sure the commercial pilots weren't having electrical problems, for example. Besides, the only person who could have ordered them to be shot down was the president, and he was still at a public event when the second tower was hit.

"If we had shot down four airliners on Sept. 11, we wouldn't have been heroes," Nasty says. "You don't have the choice of outcomes. They're all bad."

"If we had intercepted American 11, we probably would have watched it crash," he says. "We didn't have the authority to (shoot it down). We didn't suspect they would use kamikaze tactics that morning," he says.

"We weren't ready for that type of an attack, to quickly shoot down one of our own airplanes."

When he landed about 41/2 hours later at Otis, it was a different base.

Armed security with flak jackets guarded every entrance. Personnel were swarming in the buildings, and officers were trying to locate all the reserve pilots.

As soon as he climbed off his jet, Nasty was told by a crew member on the ground that another airliner had smashed into the Pentagon. And he was told that a military F-16 had shot down a fourth airliner in Pennsylvania, a report that turned out to be incorrect.

He went back to his Forestdale home and watched the news until he fell asleep. Just like so many other Americans.

By 6 a.m. on Sept. 12, he was back at the Otis gate, "and there were jets flying already. And they were loaded."

Almost a year later

Almost a year has passed. Nasty still flies full time for the fighter wing. And he thinks about that day all the time.

For several months after the attacks, the unit's pilots flew combat air patrols over New York, Washington and Boston nearly around the clock.

They're still flying those patrols these days, though not as much.

In fact, the Air Guard is expected to demobilize all but about 150 service members. Those left will be mainly military police and maintainers, who will likely be kept on duty for another year.

It's a bit closer to normal, Nasty says. But the memories of that day aren't ever far from his mind.

He still gets angry. And he hopes the American military settles its score with the al-Qaida terrorist network that masterminded the attacks.

"Hopefully, we'll do what needs to be done to fight the war to its end, so this won't happen again," he says. "This isn't something we can put off, push aside and hope it goes away."

He understands the historic impact of that day, and of what he saw.

A few months ago, Nasty was among several members of the 102nd Fighter Wing invited to Ground Zero for a tour of the site.

"From the air, you're kind of at a distance. But when you go down there and see the impact it had, not just the physical size of the area they destroyed, but the people. All the photos..." he says, then stops for a moment.

"It was something that I thought I needed to do. It was very moving. Whether it helped me or not, I don't know."

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