

Dulles air traffic controller recalls 'chilling' Sept. 11

Candace Chellew - Wires CNN

WASHINGTON (CNN) -- The last words Dulles International Airport air traffic controller Danielle O'Brien spoke to the pilots of American Flight 77 before it flew into the Pentagon Sept. 11 were "good luck."

"It's chilling," O'Brien told ABC News 20/20 in an interview that aired Wednesday night. "I usually say 'good day' as I ask an aircraft to switch to another frequency. Or 'have a nice flight,' but never 'good luck.'"

O'Brien said since that day she's had nightmares where she has "set straight up in bed ... reliving it, reseeing it, rehearsing it."

Twenty minutes after wishing the pilots of Flight 77 good luck, the three hijacked airplanes began their deadly assaults on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. A fourth hijacked plane crashed into a field in Pennsylvania after an apparent passenger revolt.

Air traffic controllers like O'Brien were the first to realize something was wrong.

O'Brien had already handed Flight 77 off to a different air traffic control center and didn't realize the unidentified blip now on her screen was the same flight.

"I slid over to the controller on my left, Tom Howell, and I asked him, 'Do you see an unidentified plane near southwest of Dulles?' she remembered. "And his response was, 'Yes. Oh, my gosh, yes, look how fast he is.'"

Not only was the plane going "full throttle" O'Brien said, it was heading directly for the White House.

As the plane approached, Vice President Dick Cheney was rushed to a special basement bunker and White House staffers were told to evacuate the building as quickly as possible.

Then, three miles shy of the White House, the plane turned.

"In the room, it was almost a sense of relief," O'Brien said. "This must be a fighter. This must be one of our guys sent in, scrambled to patrol our capitol, and to protect our president."

The sense of relief only lasted a few short seconds as the plane turned 360-degrees and dropped from their radar screens.

"And we waited. And we waited," O'Brien recalled. "And your heart is just beating out of your chest. And then the Washington National Airport controllers came over our speakers in our room and said, 'Dulles, hold all of our inbound traffic. The Pentagon's been hit.'"

O'Brien said there were gasps of shock in the room, but no tears. Instead, the air traffic controllers hunkered down -- charged with the task of getting almost 5,000 other aircraft in the sky onto the ground immediately.

"It was a sense of protectiveness," said O'Brien. "It's the same protectiveness we work these planes with every day of the year. But, daggonnit, nobody was going to take any more, not if we could help it."

But, why did the plane turn away from the White House and head for the Pentagon?

O'Brien believes the hijackers were flying too fast and couldn't see the presidential mansion because they were flying east, into the sun, and "because the White House was beyond a grove of trees."

"They came over the Pentagon or saw it just in front of them. You can't miss the Pentagon," she said. "It's so telltale by its shape and its size, and they said, 'Look, there it is. Take that. Get that.' They certainly could have had the White House if they had seen it."

Like many other Americans, O'Brien needed to talk to others about her experience after the terrorist attacks left nearly 5,000 dead in New York and 184 dead at the Pentagon.

She left a message on a friend's answering machine hoping to recount her stressful day. Several days passed before she heard from her friend -- something she thought was "odd."

When her friend finally called, O'Brien said, "she sounded different on the phone."

As O'Brien launched into her tale of that fateful day, her friend interrupted to say her husband, Bob, had been working at the Pentagon Sept. 11 and had been killed in the crash.

"Last week, I went to his funeral," O'Brien said. "It's real personal."

So are her nightmares about that day -- dreams struggling to make sense of the senseless, and longing to put right things that have gone terribly wrong.

"The one that comes to mind most, dreaming of a green pool in front of me," O'Brien said. "That was part of the radar scope. It was a pool of gel, and I reached into the radar scope to stop the flight. But in the dream, I didn't harm the plane. I just held it in my hand, and somehow, that stopped everything."

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