

Most of you know that I am a pilot for American Airlines and on 9-11-01 I was flying a Boeing 767 (same type that hit the Twin Towers) from Caracas, Venezuela to NY.

We had left Caracas at 8 am, so we had no idea what was going on until we reached the radar controlled airspace surrounding Puerto Rico. The air traffic controller would only tell that JFK was closed and we needed to contact our company. When we queried the controller about why the airport was closed, he responded "I can't tell you over an open frequency." The Captain & I are both retired Air Force pilots and those words sent a huge chill through both of us.

So, we then used the satellite phone in the cockpit to contact American Airlines in Dallas. The Dispatcher in Dallas only told us that 2 airplanes had flown into the World Trade Center Towers and that we should divert to Miami. HE DID NOT tell us the planes were airliners or that one of the planes was an American flight.

We immediately knew it was some kind of attack, but NEVER dreamed it was airliners; rather we were thinking light aircraft out of one of the numerous northern NJ airports.

The only other communication we received from the company was a message telling us that NOT EVEN the Flight Attendants were to be allowed in the cockpit. Well, after that message the crash axe was in my lap for the remainder of the flight.

We elected to NOT tell anyone on board we were diverting to Miami, not even the Flight Attendants. As far as anyone on board knew we were on our way to NY.

About halfway between Puerto Rico and Miami, Miami Air Traffic Control transmitted the following: "ALL US AIRSPACE IS CLOSED! I WILL CALL YOU BACK SHORTLY TO FIND OUT WHERE YOU WANT TO LAND OUTSIDE OF THE US." He then began contacting individual flights and sending them to numerous airports all over the Caribbean, Central and South America.

After about 15-20 minutes of him diverting planes the controller announced that 3 flights would be allowed to land in Miami. We were first, followed by a Continental flight 30 minutes behind and then an American flight 1 hour behind. To my knowledge, these were the last 3 flights to land at Miami that day and were probably some of the last flights to enter US airspace.

Miami International is an extremely busy airport and the skies around Miami are normally full of aircraft and the accompanying radio chatter, but not when we arrived. When we checked in with Miami Approach Control there was an eerie silence as we were the ONLY aircraft in their airspace. The tension in the cockpit was pretty thick at this point since even at 3 in the morning you usually aren't alone with Miami Approach. Our approach was pretty uneventful until about 4 miles out from landing when our flaps malfunctioned. We didn't dare go around at this point to run our checklist; we simply took what we had for flaps and landed on the north runway at Miami.

Now came the real shock. The north side of the Miami airport is a HUGE parking area used mainly by cargo and charter aircraft. Well, on 9/11 the north ramp was covered with more airplanes than I had ever seen! They were packed in like sardines and for any of you who have been to the military and civilian aircraft storage facilities in AZ, well, this was tighter! Up again went the pucker factor!

Our flap malfunction prevented us from retracting our flaps after landing which, before 9-11, was a HUGE PROBLEM for us. To taxi into the parking area with your flaps down was a signal to ground personnel that you were being HIJACKED and wanted **ARMED INTERVENTION NOW!!!!** I'm thinking this as I look to my left and see all those jets crammed together so as we clear the runway the first word out of my mouth are "GROUND, AMERICAN 936 IS CLEAR OF RUNWAY 09 LEFT AND OUR FLAPS ARE DOWN BECAUSE **THEY'RE BROKE!**" (Yes, I was yelling.)

Somehow we were given a gate to park at and as we pulled up the Captain made a PA to the passengers telling them the little we know. "Ladies and Gentleman, some of you may have realized by looking outside or at your watches that this I not New York...." He then told all the passengers to remain seated until we had a chance to talk to the agents meeting the flight.

Now, you must remember, we still don't know that commercial airlines have been used in this attack, nor do we know about the Pentagon of Flight 93 in PA.

The agent came on board and made a PA informing the passengers and the crew of the events and now for the first time we know of the devastation in NY as by this time both towers were down. You could have heard a pin drop.

On the home front, my wife and children (14, 9, and 6) have NO idea where I am, only that I'm supposed to be home that afternoon. When I turn on my cell phone there's a tear filled voicemail from my wife wondering where I am or even IF I am, but because of the phone system where she worked I can't reach her. I do contact the grade school for my 2 younger kids and when I tell the secretary that I'm a pilot for American Airlines she just lost it!

My kids expected me home that day and I asked her to contact them at the end of the school day (they hadn't told the kids about the attacks) that I was ok and in Miami. She also contacted the High School for me where a Guidance Counselor went to my oldest daughter's class. Needless to say having Guidance come to your room looking for you while watching aircraft like your Dad's crash is pretty intense for a 16 year old. I think she had it worse than I did since I knew I was ok.

I finally did get a hold of Debbie, my parents, and in-laws but I couldn't tell them much except I was in Miami for a while and didn't even know where I was going to be staying.

It took a couple of hours but we ended up at our normal layover hotel in Miami Beach where I spent the next 5 days watching the F-15's fly up and down the beach wishing I was back with them (I had only been retired for a year).

I finally got home Saturday night around midnight and spent Sunday close to my family. Monday morning found me on my way back to JFK for my next flight. My normal 2-2 ½ hour drive took 4 hours that Monday and crossing over the Verrazano Narrows Bridge was truly humbling.

The Twin Towers were the dominant feature of Manhattan, especially the lower end and the Verrazano offers a beautiful view of NY harbor and lower Manhattan. Six days later, the fire was still burning, smoke was still rising from Ground Zero plus there was this huge gap in the buildings where the Towers had been 8 years later, I still look and miss the sight of the World Trade Center.

Will I ever forget? NEVER! Every time I go to work I think about what happened that day and wonder when they'll try it again and will I be ready.

I will always remember that day, where I was, what I and my family went through and I will always remind others of what happened that day and what it means to me, my freedom, and my way of life.

Jeff Fellmeth  
American Airlines Pilot

PS I send this letter out every year now as we approach the anniversary of that fateful day. May we never forget those who died that day nor the freedoms and liberty we enjoy in this great country.