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On Flight 77: 'Our Plane Is Being Hijacked'

By Marc Fisher and Don Phillips
Washington Post Staff Writers
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There was not even the grace of instant death. Instead, there was time to call from the sky over Virginia, fingers pumping cell phones, terrified passengers talking to loved ones for one final time.

Herded to the back of the plane by hijackers armed with knives and box-cutters, the passengers and crew members of American Airlines Flight 77 -- including the wife of Solicitor General Theodore Olson, a Senate staffer, three D.C. schoolchildren and three teachers on an educational field trip and a University Park family of four headed to Australia for a two-month adventure -- were ordered to call relatives to say they were about to die.

About an hour after takeoff from Dulles International Airport yesterday morning, Flight 77, a Boeing 757 headed for Los Angeles with 64 people aboard, became a massive missile aimed at the White House. The target would change suddenly, but the symbolism was equally devastating.

By about 9:40 a.m., when the diving plane carved out a massive chunk of the Pentagon, its passengers had experienced unspeakable terror, hundreds died, and the nation's greatest symbol of security lay shattered, thick plumes of smoke camouflaging a gaping hole in its heart.

Barbara K. Olson, the former federal prosecutor who became a prominent TV commentator during the impeachment of President Bill Clinton, called

Pentagon Personnel

Army personnel assigned to the Pentagon should call 1-800-984-8523.

Family members may contact service representatives at the following numbers:

- Army: 1-800-984-8523 or 703-428-0002
Navy and Marine Corps: 1-877-663-6772
Air Force: 1-800-253-9276

Flight Information

Families of passengers on the following flights may call the airlines for information at the numbers below:

- American Airlines: 1-800-245-0999
Statement from American Airlines
United Airlines: 1-800-932-8555
Statement from United Airlines

The following flights were used in the attacks:

- American Airlines Flight 11: A Boeing 767 en route from Boston to Los Angeles.
American Airlines Flight 77: A Boeing 757 en route from Dulles Airport near Washington to Los Angeles.
United Airlines Flight 93: A Boeing 757, crashed southeast of Pittsburgh while en route from Newark, N.J. to San Francisco.
United Airlines Flight 175: A Boeing 767. The flight was bound from Boston to Los Angeles.

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her husband twice in the final minutes. Her last words to him were, "What do I tell the pilot to do?"

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"She called from the plane while it was being hijacked," Theodore Olson said. "I wish it wasn't so, but it is."

The two conversations each lasted about a minute, said Tim O'Brien, a CNN reporter and friend of the Olsons. In the first call, Barbara Olson told her husband, "Our plane is being hijacked." She described how hijackers forced passengers and the flight's pilot to the rear of the aircraft. She said nothing about the number of hijackers or their nationality.

Olson's first call was cut off, and her husband immediately called the Justice Department's command center, where he was told officials knew nothing about the Flight 77 hijacking.

Moments later, his wife called again. And again, she wanted to know, "What should I tell the pilot?"

"She was composed, as composed as you can be under the circumstances," O'Brien said.

But her second call was cut off, too.

"Incidentally, she wasn't even supposed to be on this flight," O'Brien added on CNN. "She was booked on a flight yesterday, but today is Ted's birthday, so she wanted to be here this morning to have breakfast with him before she left."

On the ground, air traffic controllers watching Flight 77's progress westward suddenly lost touch with the plane, which disappeared from radar screens and cut off radio contact.

Someone on board Flight 77 had flipped off the transponder, the device that sends a plane's airline identification, flight number, speed and altitude to controllers' radar screens.

But soon after losing contact, Dulles controllers spotted an unidentified aircraft speeding directly toward the restricted airspace that surrounds the White House. Federal aviation sources said Dulles controllers noticed the fast-moving craft east-southeast of Dulles and called controllers at Reagan National Airport to report that an unauthorized plane was coming their way.

Controllers had time to warn the White House that the jet was aimed directly at the president's mansion and was traveling at a gut-wrenching speed -- full throttle.

But just as the plane seemed to be on a suicide mission into the White House, the unidentified pilot executed a pivot so tight that it reminded observers of a fighter jet maneuver. The plane circled 270 degrees to the right to approach the Pentagon from the west, whereupon Flight 77 fell below radar level, vanishing from

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controllers' screens, the sources said.

Less than an hour after two other jets demolished the World Trade Center in Manhattan, Flight 77 carved a hole in the nation's defense headquarters, a hole five stories high and 200 feet wide.

Aviation sources said the plane was flown with extraordinary skill, making it highly likely that a trained pilot was at the helm, possibly one of the hijackers. Someone even knew how to turn off the transponder, a move that is considerably less than obvious.

Details about who was on Flight 77, when it took off and what happened on board were tightly held by airline, airport and security officials last night. All said that the FBI had asked them not to divulge details.

"Because of the heightened security due to the nature of today's events," American Airlines said in a statement, the airline "is working closely with U.S. government authorities and will not release more information at this time."

But some passengers on the flight were identified by friends and family. Flight attendant Michelle Heidenberger had been trained to handle a hijacking. She knew not to let anyone in the cockpit. She knew to tell the hijacker that she didn't have a key and would have to call the pilots.

None of her training mattered. "I'm just so heartbroken," said Ruby Ramer, Heidenberger's neighbor in Chevy Chase, where she lived with her husband, Tom, a pilot for US Airways, and their 11-year-old son and college-age daughter. "I just can't believe she won't be one of our neighbors."

Flight 77 was to be the first leg of a long, happy journey for Leslie A. Whittington and Charles S. Falkenberg, both 45, and their two young girls. The University Park family was on its way to Australia, where Whittington, a Georgetown University professor of public policy, was to work as a visiting fellow at Australian National University. Her husband, a software engineer and nature buff, was looking forward to exploring and encountering the wildlife -- kangaroos, koala bears, scorpions and snakes -- said James Gekas, a neighbor who hosted a farewell dinner for the family Sunday night.

Three District schoolchildren and three teachers were on Flight 77, headed to Santa Barbara, Calif., for an ecology conference sponsored by National Geographic. School board President Peggy Cooper Cafritz said the students and educators, whose names were not released, were from elementary and middle schools.

In the hazy hours that followed the attack, it was unclear which of four hijacked planes ended up where. But witnesses soon identified the aircraft that smashed into the Pentagon as an American flight, and then as Flight 77, which was unusually light on passengers this day.

On a Metro train to National Airport, Allen Cleveland looked out the window to see a jet heading down toward the Pentagon. "I thought, 'There's no landing strip on that side of the subway tracks,'" he said. Before he could process that thought, he saw "a

huge mushroom cloud. The lady next to me was in absolute hysterics."

At the Dulles Airport Marriott, which American Airlines used last night as a bereavement center, families of passengers began arriving about 11 a.m.

Paul Sharp, a hotel manager, said three or four families, totaling about 10 people, were meeting with grief counselors and clergy in private suites.

In the lobby, dozens of anxious travelers whose flights had been diverted watched news programs solemnly.

Kathy Foley, 49, a United Airlines flight attendant from Chicago, was stranded in the hotel lobby after mechanical problems delayed her 9 a.m. flight. "Everything was perfect at 8 o'clock this morning," she said. "Nobody had any idea anything was happening. This is not what our country was about. As horrible as it is to say it, I want revenge."

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