



## 100 Years of Flight

### COPING WITH THE UNTHINKABLE

Land every flight in U.S. airspace — now. Air traffic controllers faced that daunting logistical challenge on Sept. 11.

Controllers train for engine failures, fires, bomb threats, medical emergencies, and even hijackings. But bring down every plane in the air? In the words of USA Today, the “four most critical hours in aviation history began at 8:15 a.m., EDT” on September 11.

At 8:24 a.m., air traffic controllers at the Boston Center knew something was wrong when crackling over the radio in the dimly lit control room came the first chilling words “we have some planes just stay quiet and you will be okay we are returning to the airport.” For each hijacked aircraft controllers were in the unenviable position of being the first witnesses as tragedy struck our nation, but there was no time for shock as the safety of nearly 5,000 airborne aircraft was their primary duty.

During those four hours, air traffic controllers, under the greatest possible pressure, made unprecedented decisions based on information both terrifying and ambiguous. At one point, the government believed that as many as 11 planes had been hijacked. Every second counted; each move was critical.

After halting all takeoffs, controllers began clearing the skies over America — for the first time ever. Under unprecedented conditions, controllers successfully:

- Guided 4,500 planes carrying 350,000 passengers in U.S.-controlled airspace to safe landings.
- Brought in roughly 75 percent of those planes within an hour of the order.
- Rerouted more than 1,100 of the 4,500 flights within the first 15 minutes of the landing order — about one every second. (On an average day, controllers divert about 20 aircraft an hour because of emergencies or bad weather.)
- Dealt with a limited work force by improvising. Many controllers in the West were not yet on duty because it was so early in the day. Controllers tasked primarily with making sure planes remained on course suddenly had to redirect hundreds of jets.
- Cleared the skies over America within 2 1/2 hours. They accomplished this mission without any loss of separation between aircraft.

- Landed planes at the rate of 30 a minute over that 2 1/2 hour period.

After 9/11, the FAA considered writing a new set of procedures for clearing the skies. Ultimately, the agency decided there was no need for it. The training and instincts of the nation's controllers and managers proved capable under the nation's most difficult test.