



Brothers and Sisters,

Today, we join the nation in marking the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks and remembering the victims. We are also unveiling a new chapter in our recorded NATCA history, [a collection of first-person written accounts from our members who worked that day](#).

Over the course of the last year, we received stories from our members. For many, this was the first time they had recounted and written down the specific details of their shifts. It is not easy to relive the worst day on the job. For those who worked the airspace the hijacked aircraft flew through, it is even tougher. But as we get further away from that tragic day, this archive will be a vital way to remember the important role that our members played in protecting our nation from possible further attacks.

Our members were the first ones to know something was wrong.

Retired member Greg Taccini was working the BOSOX sector 47 at Boston Center (ZBW). He issued a frequency change to American Airlines Flight 11, which then veered off course and turned off its transponder. The frequency was put on the speaker in the sector.

“This is when I first heard the chilling transmissions from the cockpit and had a very strong sense that it was coming from the American 11 flight,” said Taccini, who yelled across to the adjacent area that a hijacking was in progress. He would soon also have United Airlines Flight 175 on his frequency. That aircraft had departed Boston Logan (BOS) after American 11.

Taccini and his co-workers discussed what might happen as part of this hijacking. An aircraft had not been hijacked in U.S. airspace since 1987, although several subsequent attempts had been thwarted. They assumed it would continue to a New York-area airport, land, and make some demands. Instead, they saw the primary target disappear just north of New York City. American 11 hit the north tower of the World Trade Center at 8:46 a.m. EDT.

“My supervisor gave us the devastating news,” Taccini said. “My heart buried deep into my stomach. It wasn’t until hours later that we found out the pilots weren’t flying. I would never have had the thought of the hijackers taking over control of the aircraft. It was unthinkable.”

The four hijacked flights were beyond the control of our members. But the attacks were followed by an action that was very much something we could control. An unprecedented shutdown of the National Airspace System was ordered. Our members across the country sprang into action to order every aircraft in their airspace to land immediately. Controllers guided 700 aircraft to land in the first four minutes, 2,800 in the first hour, and over 4,500 within the first three hours. Over a million passengers landed without incident.

After United 175 flew into the south tower of the World Trade Center and it was clear that a coordinated terrorist attack was underway, retired member Phil Nicola went up to the tower cab at New York-John F. Kennedy ATCT (JFK) where aircraft were still inbound for landing. Departures had been stopped. As aircraft continued to land, he told his manager, who was standing next to him, that there was nothing to prevent the tower from also being a target of an arriving aircraft.

“At this point, the decision was made to evacuate the tower,” Nicola said. “I became part of the detail that would relocate out onto the airport to establish a temporary tower. Through prior arrangement via phone, the radar approach controller was to call us on the approach control frequency if they observed any unknown targets heading our way, in case there might be a rogue aircraft inbound to do damage. Thankfully, that was never the case. I did observe a friendly fighter-type aircraft, however, approach the airport from the south at about 1,000’, overfly the airport, and continue to Manhattan. That’s a sight I’ll never forget.”

Retired New York Center (ZNY) member Patrick Shanahan said there were rumors of additional attacks and possibly up to a dozen aircraft possibly hijacked, but this was all going on in the background.

“I could not take my eyes off the scope and could not be distracted, there was still too much at stake,” he said.

After the order to close the airspace was given, retired New York TRACON (N90) member Sharon Keller handled many of the aircraft that were being sent back to ZBW. Each of the pilots asked her what was happening, with some stating that they had relatives that worked at the World Trade Center.

“We were all scared that we were under attack and didn’t know if we were in harm’s way,” she said. “After all the planes were handled, we closed all but a few scopes. I called my fiancé who was an Emergency Service Unit cop at the Port Authority (which owned the WTC), worried that he had gone into work that day. He had not but ended up going down to the pile for a few weeks looking for the 39 Port Authority cops who died that day.

“The next few days we worked the police helicopters and military aircraft. We also had to tell any pilot who took off to return to the airport or be shot down and advise their intentions (I did have one). When the airspace finally opened,

we weren't allowed to let our aircraft go too high or the military planes would go after them. I had one aircraft do that; I was so scared he would be shot down. I was in shock for weeks. Every day after his 12-hour shifts, my husband came home smelling like a burning building, and I had to go into work every day also.”

The next few days at JFK were surreal, Nicola said. Aircraft operations were prohibited, and the public was not permitted in the terminals or on the roadways. During the walk from Nicola's car to the tower each day, the usual noise and bustle of cars, trucks, and airplanes was replaced by an unnerving quiet. “I think all of us, during the days that followed, were overwhelmed with the realization of what had happened on 9/11 and how the world had changed forever that day,” he said.

At the [link here](#), we invite you to read the stories of our members who have shared their experiences of working that day.

We will never forget 9/11.

In solidarity,

**Rich Santa
President**

**Andrew LeBovidge
Executive Vice President**