The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
n-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

The Enigma of 9-11

Muneo Narusawa

The Enigma of 9-11

By Narusawa Muneo

What happened to United Flight 93 on September 11, 2001? The heroism of passengers in challenging the hijackers leading to the crash in Pennsylvania of United Airlines Flight 93, a tale embellished by President George W. Bush and an eager journalist corps, is engraved in the popular imagination of the events of that date. But is the story credible? Why do questions linger about the crash? In particular, was Flight 93 shot down by a US Air Force plane? The Enigma of September 11 is taken from a multi-part investigative series examining unanswered questions about the events of 9-11. It was published in Kinyobi on December 13, 2002. Narusawa Mineo is an editor of Shukan Kinyobi.

United Airlines Flight 93 allegedly crashed as a result of passengers fighting with hijackers. But facts that emerged afterwards have cast doubt on this story.

Whenever there is a historic tragedy, stories emerge of the spirit of noble self-sacrifice. In an earlier time, when disaster struck the Titanic some passengers assisted others into lifeboats and went down with the sinking luxury liner.

Last year's September 11th was the same. 343 firemen who rushed into the burning World Trade Centre to save lives disappeared within the crumbling rubble. And then there were the passengers of United Airlines Flight 93 who allegedly struggled with hijackers and perished when the passenger plane spun out of control and crashed.

President Bush, FBI Director Mueller, and senior government officials all praised these people as heroes, and *Newsweek* went as far as to describe them as "citizen soldiers" who "rose up, like their forefathers, to defy tyranny."

How are we to understand the tragic deaths of the 45 passengers and crew on Flight 93?

Various Witness Statements

At 10:06 am on September 11, 2001, Flight 93 crashed near an old coal mine outside a town called Shanksville, in the remote Pennsylvania countryside. According to the testimony of Lee Purbaugh, the sole eyewitness to the crash, the theory that the plane crashed due to "loss of controlï" is doubtful. "It was only a split second but it was like watching a slow motion movie. The plane seemed to rock from side to side, then suddenly, it plummeted. The nose broke up, there was a huge explosion, then the plane dived into the ground. I knew immediately that no one could possibly have survived." (*The Independent* (London) August 13, 2002)

Although they didn't witness the instant of the crash, several residents caught sight of Flight 93. Their testimonies contradict Mr. Purbaugh's. One of them, Kelly Leverknight, said, "There was no smoke, it just went straight down" (*The Daily American*, September 12, 2001). So far no other eyewitnesses of an "explosion" have emerged.

So did Flight 93 "explode" just before it crashed? It wasn't just Flight 93 that was observed in this short space of time. At least 6 residents saw a mysterious low-flying jet plane.

Among them, the most detailed testimony is that of Susan Mcelwain, 51. "I was driving and it passed right over my head. It was white with no markings; at the rear it had an engine, an enormous tail, and two fins (vertical stabilizing wings). It was definitely military." (*The Daily Mirror* (London) September 13, 2002).

Mr. Purbaugh also roughly confirmed the features of the plane: "I did see a white plane, it circled the crash site twice."

Was There Another Airplane?

Comparing government announcements and these eyewitness accounts leaves a truly baffling impression. Of course it is possible that a fighter

jet-like plane may have flown in to intercept the "hijacked plane", but the question of whether there ever really were any such planes in the area elicits different official responses.

Director of the Air National Guard General Paul Weaver stated that "no Air National Guard or other military planes were scrambled to chase Flight 93." However, Department of Defense Deputy Secretary Paul Wolfowitz declared "an Air Force plane was tracking Flight 93." On the other hand, a North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) spokesperson announced, "We cannot confirm or deny that Flight 93 was being followed."

The FBI initially stated that "there was no other airplane in the area of the crash site." Then, perhaps noting the reports of eyewitnesses, this position changed to "a Falcon civilian business jet surveyed the area at the request of the authorities" (*The Independent* (London) August 13, 2002).

But at 9:45 that day, an emergency alert was issued for all civil aircraft in US airspace to land at the nearest airport. It was not possible that a civilian plane was airborne at the time of the crash.

After Flight 77 crashed into the Pentagon, three F-16 fighter jets near Washington took off before 10 a.m. These planes could have reached the Flight 93 crash site in less than ten minutes. However, the three pilots testified that for some reason "during flight they didn't hear anything about Flight 93."

On the other hand, a New Hampshire flight controller, ignoring the media ban, said, "One F-16 was chasing Flight 93, he should have seen the crash." And the instruments at an earthquake monitoring station about 96 kilometers away from the crash site recorded a sonic boom from a supersonic flight (restricted mostly to military craft). Why such disparate statements?

There is one point on which the White House, the military, and the FBI agree. The crash was caused by the failure of the aircraft controls, resulting from desperate action by the 'heroes'. Flight 93 was definitely not "shot down" (1).

But various reports to date have raised questions in regard to this point.

Looking into The Truth of "Hero" Stories

The birth of these "hero" stories owes much to their reproduction in the notes and recollections of the families who received several telephone calls from Tom Burnett**,** Jeremy Glick and other passengers who are said to have taken on the hijackers.

Thus far, the "human voice" of Burnett and others who said, "I know I'm going to die. Three of us are going to do something" (2), has been related in snippets in the newspapers, but what really happened on board has scarcely been reported at all.

The main reason for this is that Flight 93's black box, of the four passenger flights "hijacked" on "Sept.11th the only one to be retrieved in working order, has not been made public, as is normally the case in airplane accidents. The exchanges between the pilot and flight controllers remain undisclosed, and media interviews with the flight controllers are still prohibited.

The black box consists of the cockpit voice recorder (CVR) that recorded voices in the control room from 30 minutes before the accident, and the flight data recorder (FDR) that recorded 25 minutes of aircraft altitude and speed, and engine and other data.

The FBI has been unusually secretive particularly in relation to the CVR, refusing to release information because it is "under investigation" or "in order to protect the privacy of the relatives." But in April 2002, in response to strong demands of the families of the deceased, FBI officials met with the families at a hotel in the state of New Jersey, and the CVR information was made public for the first time, only to deepen confusion surrounding the incident.

One of those who attended, Kenneth Nacke, lost his older brother in the accident. "There is no sound of the impact. The quality of the sound is really poor," he said, adding that the sound cut out on the tape three minutes prior to the crash. Another relative who preferred to remain anonymous said that they could hear something that sounded like a struggle but that the decisive last three minutes were without sound. (*The Philadelphia Daily News* September 16, 2001)

In short, the content of the CVR, the only official recording that objectively indicates the situation on board, probably leads to the conclusion: "that the crash was the result of a struggle between passengers and the 'criminals', is mere presumption" (*The Daily Mirror* (London) September 13, 2001). There is no explanation for the three minutes of blank tape from the FBI or from any other investigation bureau.

So is the cause of the crash still a mystery? Some clues remain. At this point, let's return to the site of the accident.

Why Did Fragments Fall From The Sky?

Of particular interest is the statement of many residents that "fragments of an airplane fell from the sky." Also, fragments of mail and sheets of paper loaded on Flight 93 were found as far away as 13 kilometers from the site, and parts of the engine weighing more than one ton broke away from the fuselage and were lying 1.8 kilometers away.

The FBI explains "the wind transported mail and other light debris. And the engine parts were blown away by the shock at impact." But on that day the wind was very light, and it is inconceivable that paper could have been transported so far. Furthermore, the soil at the site is extremely soft and it would have been difficult for the engine to have been blown as far as 1.8 kilometers by the momentum following impact.

Moreover, the aircraft broke up so much that apart from the fuselage, "the largest pieces of the plane still extant are barely bigger than a telephone book" (3)

By this stage, we can infer that the chances of Flight 93 having simply crashed to the ground are slim. This is the reason why so much attention has been paid to the testimony of Mr. Purbaugh. So, if there was a blast on board the flight while it was in the air, did it come from within or was it the result of an attack from outside?

There is another testimony of deep interest. After the incident the mayor of Shanksville declared, "I know of two people who heard the sound of a missile. F-16s were very close." (*The Philadelphia Daily News* November 15, 2001)

Anyhow, why have there been so many baffling aspects and so much information control surrounding Flight 93? By February 2002, a joint Congressional investigation committee was established, but it has yet to reveal any new facts that shed light on the true nature of the incident.

In response to these anomalies, in June, journalists, independent researchers and others met in Washington and launched an independent group called 'Unanswered Questions' to inquire into the truth of the incident, declaring "Neither the government nor Congress has clarified the reality of 'September 11th" (4).

Discussing the theory that Flight 93 was downed by a missile, Kyle Hence, one of the co-founders of "Unanswered Questions", says "A 'hijacked plane' can be shot down if the President says so. However, from various information it can be conjectured that Flight 93 was going to ram into some important facility but encountered a situation that caused it to land. Perhaps someone prevented it from reaching that destination."

Hence concluded, "However problematic, the truth will definitely become clear. But, among other things, Bush is using 'September 11' as an excuse to attack Iraq. As long as this is so, for the time being we want to emphasize the fact that the government's explanation of the incident is questionable, at the very least. So, this incident, replete with suspicion and doubt, must not be allowed to be used as the pretext for a bloody war."

1. "Operation 9.11' No Suicide Pilots", http://www.rense.com/general18/opp.htm

2. For details of the Barnett interview, see "Flight 93 Timeline" at http://www.unansweredquestions.org/timeline/AAflight93.html. The "portable in flight telephones" allegedly stopped completely eight minutes before the crash, from which time the situation on board became unclear.

3. Same as note 1. It is reported that there were only fragments of the fuselage and pieces as large as a large table.

4. Unanswered Questions. Org. See http://www.cooperativeresearch.org/completetimeline/index.htm

Translation by Vanessa Ward