

DARKEST OF DAYS: 113th WING on 9/11

By Stephen Chapis



85-450 loaded with the formidable air-to-air weapons load of four AIM-120Bs, two AIM-9Ls, and 511 rounds of 20mm HEI. (Photo from 113th PAO)

For the members of the 113th Wing, District of Columbia Air National Guard, Tuesday, September 11, 2001, was their first day back to work after returning from Red Flag two days prior. Upon the realization that America was under attack, and with the smoke from the Pentagon visible from their flightline at Andrews AFB, the Capital Guardians swiftly organized Combat Air Patrols over Washington, D.C., and readied their F-16Cs for a new type of war.

DEFENDING NORTH AMERICA

The Aerospace Defense Command (ADC) was created in 1946 as an integrated air defense system for the Continental United States (CONUS). In late 1956, as the Cold War became more frigid, the Joint Canadian-U.S. Military Group recommended the establishment of a defense network of the entire North American continent. In February 1957, North American Air Defense (NORAD) was established, in which ADC was a major component. At the height of the Cold War, ADC consisted of 93 active duty USAF interceptor squadrons, 76 ANG interceptor squadrons, Navy fighter squadrons, USAF and USN airborne early warning squadrons, as well as radar and anti-aircraft missiles units. All of these units were poised to repel any attack by Soviet bombers flying over the North Pole in a first strike on North America.

In 1977, both Congress and the USAF Chief of Staff instituted major re-alignments in order to reduce costs, and in 1979 ADC was inactivated and interceptor fighter squadrons were placed under Air Defense, Tactical Air Command (ADTAC). Throughout the 1980s the number of interceptor squadrons slowly dwindled, followed by a sharp reduction after the Soviet

Union dissolved in 1989. On the morning of September 11, 2001, NORAD had just 14 fighter aircraft available at seven alert sites across the entire North American continent. On that morning the Northeast Air Defense Sector (NEADS) was defended by a pair of Massachusetts ANG F-15A Eagles of the 104th Fighter Wing (FW) at Otis Air National Guard Base and a detachment of two F-16ADFs from the North Dakota ANG 119th FW at Langley AFB, Virginia.

Whereas all other ANG units report to their respective state governors, the District of Columbia ANG reports directly to the President of the United States. Although the Block 30 F-16Cs of the DC ANG 121st FS were parked a mere 11 miles from the Pentagon, they were not part of NEADS. The events of that fateful morning would radically change the 113th in the post-9/11 world.

BACK TO THE ROUTINE, UNTIL...

In the two weeks prior to September 11, 2001, the 113th had deployed from Andrews AFB in Maryland to Nellis AFB, Nev., for Red Flag as part of their spin-up for their upcoming deployment to Operation *Southern Watch*. Personnel and aircraft had returned to Andrews on Saturday, September 8, and were off Sunday and Monday. On that gorgeous, fateful Tuesday morning the *Capital Guardians* returned to their routine duties, but that would change forever in the intervening hours.

At 0800hrs in the 121st FS Ops Building adjacent to the flightline, several officers and NCOs gathered for the morning maintenance meeting. Among those in attendance were then Lt. Col. Marc "Sass" Sasseville, Director of Operations 121st FS; then Capt. Brandon "IGOR" Rasmussen, and then Maj. Daniel

“Razin” Caine, who was the Supervisor of Flying (SOF) that day. At the same moment, American Airlines Flight 11, a Boeing 767-223, took off from Boston-Logan International Airport bound for Los Angeles International Airport (LAX). As the DC Guardsmen organized the flight schedule for the coming week, Mohamed Atta launched the al Qaeda terrorist plot at 0814hrs when he hijacked American 11 over Albany, N.Y., and turned the aircraft towards New York City.

Twenty-eight minutes after Atta took control of his airliner, United Airlines Flight 175, a Boeing 767-222, en route from Boston Logan to LAX, was also hijacked. Simultaneously, the F-15s at Otis were ordered to battle stations and the scramble order came just four minutes later at 0845hrs. One minute later the course of American history was forever and horrifyingly altered when Atta flew American 11 into World Trade Center 1 (North Tower) at 465mph. The Eagles at Otis were wheels up at 0852hrs.

Back at Andrews, the maintenance meeting was interrupted just before 0900hrs when someone cracked the door open to inform the group that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center (WTC) and then closed the door. In a 2016 interview, now Brigadier General Caine recalled, “We all thought the weather must be bad in New York City and it was a case of a light airplane flying into a building inadvertently.” Meanwhile, in northern Virginia, Technical Sergeant (TSgt) Ralph Huppert, a bomb loader with the 113th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron (AMS), was on his way to the base when he heard the news of the first plane strike on the radio. He wondered to himself, “What kind of idiot can hit a building on such a clear day?”

A few minutes after hearing the news that an aircraft had struck the WTC, the planning meeting adjourned and Major Caine and the others went into the lounge where a crowd was watching the carnage in Tower 1 on Fox News. Within minutes they were stunned to see United 175, flown by Marwan al Shehhi, slam into WTC 2 (South Tower) at 0903hrs. Today, General Caine vividly remembers that moment, “We all stood there in silence as the second aircraft came into the picture and struck the second tower. We knew immediately that our country was under attack. You could have heard a pin drop for the first few seconds and then it was like a switch was thrown and we got to work. I went to the ops desk and picked up the phone and called the bomb dump and told them to uncrate the live AIM-9s¹ and bring them around. They did not have a TV down there, so they thought I was a nuts.” Out on the Dulles Toll Road TSgt. Huppert heard the news of the second tower strike and put the pedal down and made the rest of his commute at high speed, and at one point he was passed by a naval officer. They briefly exchanged looks of disbelief.

The air war over the United States was just beginning. By the time United 175 struck Tower 2, American Airlines Flight 77 had been under the control of hijacker-pilot Hani Hanjour for almost 10 minutes. Like his fellow terrorists, Hanjour turned off the transponder, which kept flight controllers from seeing the exact heading, altitude, and airspeed of the Boeing 757. At the 121st Ops Desk, Lt. Colonel Sasseville had a phone to each ear. When Caine hung up the phone with the bomb dump, he immediately called the unit’s Secret Service contact and asked what the *Capital Guardians* could do to help. He was told they would

call him back. He then attempted to contact Maj. Billy “Hutch” Hutchinson who was leading a three-ship air-to-ground training mission over North Carolina. Caine was unable to contact Hutch directly due to the distance, so he did so through the Tennessee ANG KC-135 that was refueling the three DC Vipers. Caine ordered Hutch and his wingmen to RTB as quickly as possible.

Meanwhile, Captain Rasmussen and then 1st Lt. Heather “Lucky” Penney were leaning on the desk because, as now retired Major Rasmussen said in a recent interview, “The ops desk is where we get our ‘go’ orders.” As Caine finished talking to the distant KC-135, another phone rang as he recalls; “It was a military aid at the Presidential Emergency Ops Center (PEOC) at the White House. He said, ‘Get anything you can airborne immediately; the nation is under attack.’ That is when General Wherley walked in.” Brig. Gen. David F. Wherley, Jr. (1947-2009) was the 113th Wing Commander on 9/11. Rasmussen recounted this moment, “General Wherley took the phone from Razin and said, ‘They’re loading missiles. You guys get ready to step while I get permission to use them.’ The aid at the PEOC was on another phone with a White House official who was face-to-face with Vice President Dick Cheney, who gave the order to get fighters airborne and do whatever is necessary to protect the White House and take out any aircraft that threatens the Capitol. General Wherley took this to mean that his pilots would launch “weapons free.” The *Capital Guardians* had their “go” orders.

In June 2016, now Maj. Gen. Sasseville talked about what he called the shortest flight briefing in history, “Razin, Lucky, IGOR, and myself, plus the guys airborne on the training sortie were pretty much the full time cadre of pilots that day. We’d just come back from Nellis and all the traditional Guardsmen went back to their civilian jobs. I said pretty much what we were going to do is point defense. Lucky and I would launch immediately without weapons so Razin and IGOR would wait until they had AIM-9s loaded.” They would launch as *Wild Flight*.

When Sass wrapped up the briefing, he and Lucky went to life-support to suit up and it was there that they discussed the ominous tactics they’d have to employ if they had to bring down an airliner. Sasseville continued, “I was an airline pilot so I knew that the TP ammo would do nothing but go through the skin. Even if it hit a fuel tank it may not set off the spark to blow it up. Even if it did explode it might not be enough to bring it down. Even a heavily damaged airliner can still fly, look what happened with that DC-10 in Sioux City (referencing United Airlines Flight 232, a DC-10 that crash-landed in Sioux City, Iowa on July 19, 1989 after suffering catastrophic failure of its tail-mounted engine, which led to the loss of all flight controls). So, we knew we’d have to drop the jet. We’d have to make it stop flying.”

With reports coming in that the missing American 77 was potentially headed south, NEADS scrambled the North Dakota ANG F-16ADFs (*Quit Flight*) out of Langley at 0924hrs, but the standard Cold War-era scramble procedure was for the Vipers to head east while climbing to 29,000 feet, which is what *Quit Flight* did for 60 miles before they were vectored northwest towards Baltimore-Washington International (BWI) Airport. While *Quit Flight* was getting airborne, hijacker-pilot Ziad Jarrah stormed the cockpit of United Flight 93, a Boeing 757, turned off the transponder and turned back towards his assigned target.

It was now 0937hrs and Huppert was struggling to navigate through rush hour traffic on the crowded Beltway when Hanjour flew American 77 into the west side of the Pentagon at 530mph. In a 2014 interview Huppert recalled, "I saw the smoke rising into the air and I could smell it as I crossed the Woodrow Wilson [Bridge], because the wind was carrying it south down the Potomac. When I got to the shop I immediately went to the flightline, where I joined the guys in dropping the travel pods and TERS² and loading the AIM-9s so we could get jets in the air."

NO MATTER WHAT, I'VE GOT YOUR BACK

On any given morning prior to 9/11, the 113th flightline was a somewhat serene and secluded locale. Situated in the southeast corner of Andrews AFB, the ramp was naturally isolated from view by a small gully and a grove of trees. It was not uncommon for maintenance personnel to hear birds chirping in the trees or see deer drinking from the creek while working on their Vipers. But on that morning the pall of black smoke rising from the Pentagon could be seen over the trees as maintenance personnel worked feverishly to ready their Block 30s for war... over the nation's capital. General Caine said of the men and women of the 113th AMS, "The accomplishment of the maintenance guys on 9/11 was nothing short of extraordinary."

The exact time line of events at Andrews that morning are understandably fuzzy, but at some point while *Wild Flight* was getting suited up, the three-ship training flight had landed and since Hutch had the most fuel, albeit a paltry 2,800 lbs, he was ordered to launch again and head north to look for any airliners coming down the river at low altitude. He saw none and returned to Andrews.

At 0958hrs, just as Tower 2 collapsed in NYC, General Wherley stopped his pilots just as they were running out the door towards the flightline. General Caine recalled, "General Wherley met us and gave us the very liberal rules of engagement (ROE) that were in effect that morning, and they pretty much put it all on us. Then he said something that I will never forget. He looked at Sass and myself and then our wingmen and said, 'Look. I don't know what you are going to face out there, but one thing you gotta know is, no matter what, I've got your back.' I will never forget that moment."

At 1028hrs, as Tower 1 collapsed in NYC, Sasseville (*Wild 1*, F-16C 85-461) and Penney (*Wild 2*, F-16C 85-474) lit their afterburners and rocketed into the unknown with just 200 rounds of 20mm TP³ ammo between them. When they split up into their point defense combat air patrol (CAP) Sasseville re-evaluated his ramming tactic, "When we got split up I knew we would not have time to rejoin to take out the airliner together, so I thought the best way to take it out was to go for the wing root, which would certainly bring it down."

Back on the ramp at Andrews, Caine (*Wild 3*, F-16C 86-209) and Rasmussen (*Wild 4*, F-16C 85-438) were watching the weapons load crews upload two live AIM-9Ls on each jet, when Caine gave Rasmussen one final ROE. Rasmussen remembered, "Razin looked at me and said, 'Alright. Here's the deal, bro. Don't shoot it unless I shoot it first, and if I shoot it make sure it goes down.' Thankfully it didn't come to that."

In aerial combat, pilots often establish a reference point

from which the position of an aircraft can be determined. This reference point is called "bullseye." When Sasseville and Penney headed west, Sasseville flew over a Target store south of Reagan National that had the company's bullseye logo painted on the roof! So, he marked the location and informed Washington Center and Reagan Approach that the point was "bullseye" for what became a defensive counterair (DCA) mission. In June 2016, Rasmussen reflected on the early part of what would be a 3.8 hour sortie, "Razin and I launched out of there just like we do every day of the week, but when we headed west I saw the smoke from the Pentagon. It was the blackest caldron of smoke I'd ever seen. That's when it got real. I mean it was like, 'No shit, you're in the show now. Let's go to work.'"

Once Caine and Rasmussen were airborne, Sasseville assigned each member of *Wild Flight* a quadrant of airspace around "bullseye." When Rasmussen was assigned the southeast sector, which covered southern Maryland where Rasmussen and his wife lived, the air war over America suddenly became intensely personal for him, "None of us had any inkling about what was going to happen that morning. When I got up, like everyone else I figured it was going to be another typical workday. Now it was mid-morning and I was literally flying Point Defense DCA over my own house."

As each pilot began to patrol their sector, they steeled themselves for the possibility of intercepting and shooting down United 93, unaware of the fact, as most were at the time, that United 93 crashed in a field near Shanksville, Penn., at 1003hrs. General Caine reflected, "Ya know, there is not a day that goes by that I don't think of the passengers on United 93. I have no idea if we would have been able to do anything about it if we had to because of the timing and how things went down that day, but we did not have to because of the bravery of those passengers. The selfless sacrifice of the passengers on United 93, at least in the minds of the *Capital Guardians*, was the first strike back at al Qaeda in the War on Terror. That very morning, by themselves, when they knew absolutely what they were doing, they took on those terrorists in what was one of the boldest exhibits of the American spirit."

Rasmussen had barely begun to patrol his sector of airspace when he got his first vector of the day. He recalled, "Washington Center vectored me south to intercept two tracks a mile apart, headed north at high speed and at low altitude. I thought to myself, 'They [terrorists] learned to fly formation did they?' So I hauled ass south, locked them up and rolled in on what turned out to be the Fargo Vipers. They were at about 5,000 feet and hauling the mail at about 450 knots. I rolled up so they could see me and called them on Guard and gave them the frequencies we were using and a quick brief on the DCA we'd set up."

According to Penney, NEAD sent a tanker into the area so the Vipers could stay airborne and since they'd been airborne for quite a while at high speed, the Fargo jets hit the tanker first. In short order *Wild* and *Quit* Flights had their DCA firmly established and began rotating to the tanker that was orbiting at 25,000 feet right over downtown Washington, D.C. Rasmussen praised the air traffic controllers on duty that day, "Washington Center and Reagan Approach got up to speed real quick. Being air traffic controllers, it was not the first time they'd given vectors



F-16C 85-400 (center) prepares to launch on a six-hour Combat Air Patrol (CAP) over Washington, D.C., on the night of September 11, 2001. The Capital Guardians operated from Andrews' Taxiway Echo for nearly two weeks after the attacks, using the Maryland State Police hangar, barely discernible at right, as an operations building. (Photo by Michael Porter)



*Weapons Loader Ralph Huppert said, "When we got home [from Red Flag] two days earlier, the jets were put to bed "as is" – still configured with travel pods, wing tanks, TERs, and inert missiles. When the s*** hit the fan, the first thing people did was drop travel pods and TERs, and launch the first handful of jets with inert missiles and 20mm TP! That was it!" (Photo by Michael Porter)*



Armed only with a pair of AIM-9Ls, F-16C 85-474 prepares to taxi for a late night CAP out of Andrews AFB, Maryland. The 113th would continue these six-hour CAPs for nearly six months and led to the Capital Guardians taking on the Aerospace Control Alert (ACA) mission, as part of Operation Noble Eagle, which continues to this day. (Photo by Michael Porter)



F-16C 85-480 stands ready on Taxiway Echo on the evening of 9/11. Once the sun set, the Capital Guardians could no longer see the smoke rising from the Pentagon just 11 miles to the west, but the gravity of the day's events and what it meant for the future of America, and the world, weighed on their minds. (Photo by Michael Porter)



After flying morning CAPs loaded with only 20mm TP, followed by 20mm HEI in the afternoon, live AIM-9Ls missiles were delivered to the 113th ad hoc alert ramp on Taxiway Echo. Weapons loaders are seen here loading those AIM-9Ls on 85-481. (Photo by Michael Porter)



Viper 85-481 sits beneath a beautiful starry sky on the evening of America's darkest day. With the national airspace shut down, many 113th personnel noted the eerie silence in the skies above Washington, DC on the night of 9/11. (Photo by Michael Porter)

and traffic call outs. They'd call 'Bullseye' and give us bearing, range, and altitude and we'd run the intercept. It really went like clockwork. It was amazing."

Since they did not have live missiles loaded, Sasseville and Penney recovered at Andrews first while Caine, Rasmussen, and *Quit* Flight continued to run intercepts, often at rooftop level, on unidentified aircraft, and escorting them to the nearest airport. "We intercepted a lot of people that day, everything from helicopters and private aircraft to business jets and airliners. As the day went on the airspace became cleaner and cleaner once the FAA called for the airspace shutdown," Caine remembers. Early in the mission Rasmussen said every time he looked at his radar, he saw hit after hit after hit. IGOR recounted, "We intercepted news helicopters and medevac helicopters headed to the Pentagon to evacuate casualties. We also did a lot of general aviation intercepts because some guy that has an airplane sees the stuff on TV and wants to see it for himself, so he takes off without a flight plan and trundles into the area, until he gets a face full of F-16 and is told this is neither the time nor the place to be rubber-necking."

ESCORTING AIR FORCE ONE

After nearly four hours in the air, *Wild* 3 and 4 finally recovered at Andrews. By 1500hrs Caine said there was an AWACS, a KC-135, a KC-10, and a four-ship of Langley Eagles stacked up over Washington, D.C. Caine and Rasmussen were done flying for the day, but Sasseville and Penney now had live AIM-9Ls loaded on their jets, so they launched on their second sortie of the day. It would be a memorable flight.

Sass and Lucky joined the other fighters over D.C. and since the *Capital Guardians* were on their "home turf" and had an established relationship with the local controllers, they were the initial CAP commanders. Sass recalled what is likely to be the most memorable intercept of his life, "AWACS vectored us about 120 miles to the west, but I wasn't sure what they wanted us to do at first. They were trying to get a fighter escort for Air Force One, but were trying not to publicize it because we did not have secure comms. So, Lucky and I headed out there and two of the Eagles came with us. I put Lucky about 10 miles out in front

as a pathfinder and the Eagles were high and to the right, while I joined up on the left wing. I felt like I was being given the responsibility of getting the President back in [to Andrews], so out of habit I got in close to visually inspect the aircraft and then took up a position off the left wing."

In addition to the DC F-16s and Langley F-15s, a pair of Texas ANG F-16s were five miles in trail. These six fighters escorted Air Force One all the way to its landing at Andrews. The Texas F-16s landed behind the VC-25, but Sasseville and Penney remained airborne another 45 minutes. At the conclusion of our interview, Sasseville reflected on this unique sortie, "As far as I know that was the first and only time Air Force One had a fighter escort."

READY FOR THE UNKNOWN

As the day progressed, 113th maintenance personnel moved every available F-16 out to Taxiway Echo, as close to the runway as possible in case they needed to scramble to intercept any other hijacked airliners. Initially, the jets were loaded only with 20mm HEI⁴ and live AIM-9Ls because there were no live AIM-120s⁵ on the base. There were rumors they would be coming in from an undisclosed location and would arrive around midnight. Huppert recalls, "The 'C-130 landed and did a 180 in the middle of the runway and taxied back to the first turn off. He rolled up to the first jet, did another 180, and parked with the loading ramp facing the F-16s. With the '130 still running, we lined up the jammers, unloaded the crated '120s, and took them directly to the jets where the load crews got them uploaded. It was a wild night."

During a brief moment of respite on an otherwise busy night, Huppert took a moment to marvel at the silent star-filled sky above Andrews, "I looked up and saw no air traffic at all, but then coming from the south I saw the lights from a tanker and it was refueling an F-16. You could also see the lights of other F-16s in formation with the tanker. It was an amazing sight to see but also eerie when you realized that they were the only jets flying over DC that night."

Master Sergeant Michael Porter, a former bomb loader that had recently taken a position in the 113th Quality Assurance



In the days following the attacks, 113th Vipers flew in a variety of configurations including two AIM-9Ls and a centerline tank as seen here on 85-481. (Photo from 113th PAO)



Prior to 9/11 there were no live AIM-120s at Andrews and the Capital Guardians never loaded live weapons at home. Since that day, loading and flying with live weapons is part of the daily routine. (Photo from 113th PAO)



Prior to 9/11 there were no live AIM-120s at Andrews and the Capital Guardians never loaded live weapons at home. Since that day, loading and flying with live weapons is part of the daily routine. (Photo from 113th PAO)

office, recalls seeing the tankers too and added that he could hear the F-16s changing power settings to maintain formation with the tanker. During the night Porter snapped 14 surreal black & white photos of maintenance and weapons personnel preparing F-16s for a six-hour midnight DCA mission. These photos, many of which are published here for the very first time, are the only known photos that document combat operations at Andrews AFB on September 11, 2001.

As the clock ticked past midnight and 9/11 became 9/12, the *Capital Guardians* went about their business of making every F-16 ready for 'round the clock patrols and standing ready to repel any follow-up attacks. Many members would remain at Andrews for almost 24 hours straight, leaving only when they

were ordered to stand-down. Although they appeared calm and resolute on the outside, they knew in the back of their minds that the 113th Wing, the United States, and the entire world would never be able to return to the seemingly care-free times that they enjoyed when the sun rose on September 11, 2001- the darkest day in American history. →

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F-16C 85-461, still toting the LANTIRN targeting pod from Red Flag, taxis to its parking spot on Echo. This aircraft gained worldwide notoriety when it was photographed escorting Air Force One into Andrews in the late afternoon of 9/11. Photo: 113th PAO



Technical Sergeant Darwin “Dewey” Ricker, a weapons loader with the 113th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, inspects an AIM-9L prior to a CAP sortie. Photo: 113th PAO

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Email correspondence with Heather Penney

(Endnotes)

1. AIM-9 Sidewinder. The AIM-9L was the first version “all-aspect” Sidewinder with the ability to attack from all directions, including head-on.
2. TER – Triple Ejector Rack for carry under-wing weapon stores.
3. 20mm TP (Target Practice), inert projectile used for training.
4. 20mm HEI – a high-explosive incendiary round.
5. AIM-120 Advanced Medium-Range Air-to-Air Missile, or AMRAAM, is an American beyond-visual-range air-to-air missile (BVRAAM) capable of all-weather day-and-night operations



A 113th Viper parked on Taxiway Echo awaiting its next CAP sortie. Its configuration of two AIM-120s and two AIM-9s has since become the standard ACA weapons configuration. Photo: 113th PAO