

My 9/11 Story



Dan Johnson

On September 10, 2001 I was a US Airways Airbus A320 Captain based at New York's LaGuardia Airport. My schedule that day was on the US Airways Shuttle for two round trips between LaGuardia and Boston's Logan Airport. As I reported for duty at 1 pm a line of severe weather was approaching the New York area from the west. As we taxied out an hour later most of the west and southbound traffic from LaGuardia was ground stopped due to the approaching weather. Our northeasterly route to Boston, however, was still open and we were cleared to depart on runway 13, headed away from the oncoming storm.





The Airbus flight deck crew consists of a Captain and First Officer, both well qualified to fly the aircraft. As Captain, I elected to have Ken Hertz, my FO, fly the trip to Boston so I could better monitor the weather conditions on the aircraft radar. We departed without incident, stayed well ahead of the line of thunderstorms, and proceeded to an uneventful landing in Boston about 45 minutes later.



Ken Hertz on 9/10/2001

the Approaching Storm

Our schedule has us returning to New York the following hour, but the bad weather had descended upon the area and for several hours all air traffic to New York was halted. Later that evening the weather finally improved and we departed Boston around 10 pm for a smooth flight back. We would be the last flight from Boston to LaGuardia that evening.

Since many of my scheduled trips with US Airways were one-day sequences like the one on September 10th, I shared a small apartment near the airport with several other pilots who were based in New York but lived elsewhere. The Boston trip had been the last on my schedule for several days so I awoke early the next morning to catch a flight home to Georgia. Pilots have agreements with airlines other than their own that allow them to ride (free of charge) on the extra seat that all airliners have in their cockpit. That seat, called the jumpseat, is there for the occasional federally required check of crew qualifications and adherence to procedures. Most of the time, however, it is unoccupied and therefore available to commuting pilots. US Airways had no non-stop flights from LaGuardia to Atlanta, and Delta Airlines had almost hourly non-stop service, so I went to the Delta terminal that morning and secured the jumpseat on the 8 a.m. departure to Atlanta, a Boeing 767.

As the Delta flight was about to begin boarding, the agent in charge announced there would be a delay. One of the aircraft's brakes was worn to the limit and would have to be replaced. The mechanics had to remove the tire, then replace the worn brake assembly with a new one. The process took about 40 minutes and around 8:30 the boarding process began again. I made my way to the cockpit and introduced myself to the Captain and First Officer. We engaged in some airplane small talk as we waited for the boarding to complete. A few minutes before 9 a.m., while still waiting for the final passengers to be seated, we heard that all departures from LaGuardia had been stopped. This is not unusual when there is weather in the area, but that morning was sunny and clear. We wondered what was up. Moments later the agent appeared in the cockpit and told us he had heard a small plane had struck one of the World Trade Towers and that was why they had called a ground stop. Our immediate assumption was that some nut in a light plane had gotten too close on a sightseeing flight. The agent left to attend to his duties and returned a few minutes later, looking very shaken, with the news that another airplane had flown into the other tower. We knew at that point that this was not a random accident, but a terrorist attack.

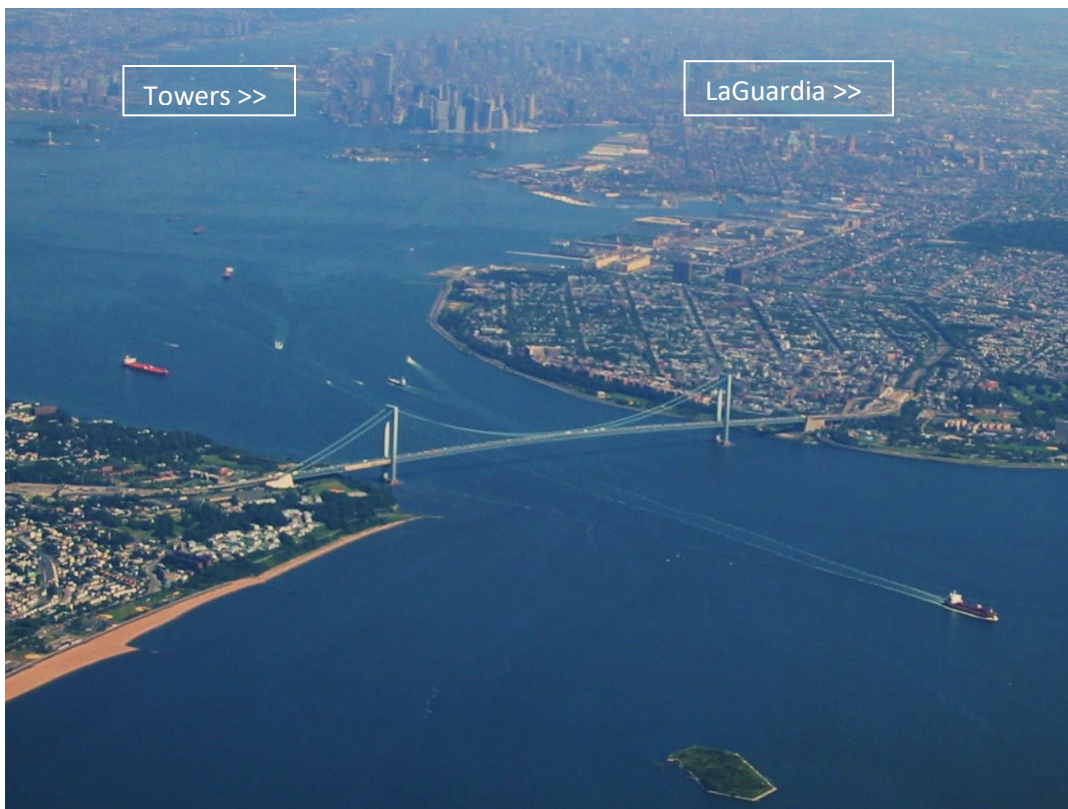
Minutes later we got the word that all flights were cancelled and that everyone should get off the aircraft. I departed and went to the US Airways terminal next door. I tried repeatedly to call home on my cell phone, but all circuits were busy. As I entered the US Airways building my phone rang and I was able to tell my terrified family, who had last heard that I was boarding a flight in New York, that I was not on one of the planes that crashed.

I went downstairs to the Flight Crew area, which had a television, to get the latest news on what was happening. While there I learned that the Pentagon had also been struck. Then the announcement was made that the entire airport was being evacuated and everyone had to leave. I went upstairs and boarded one of the buses that transported employees from the

terminal area to the parking lot on the other side of the airport. As we drove there I could plainly see the huge billowing clouds of black smoke coming out of the World Trade Center towers on the Manhattan skyline.

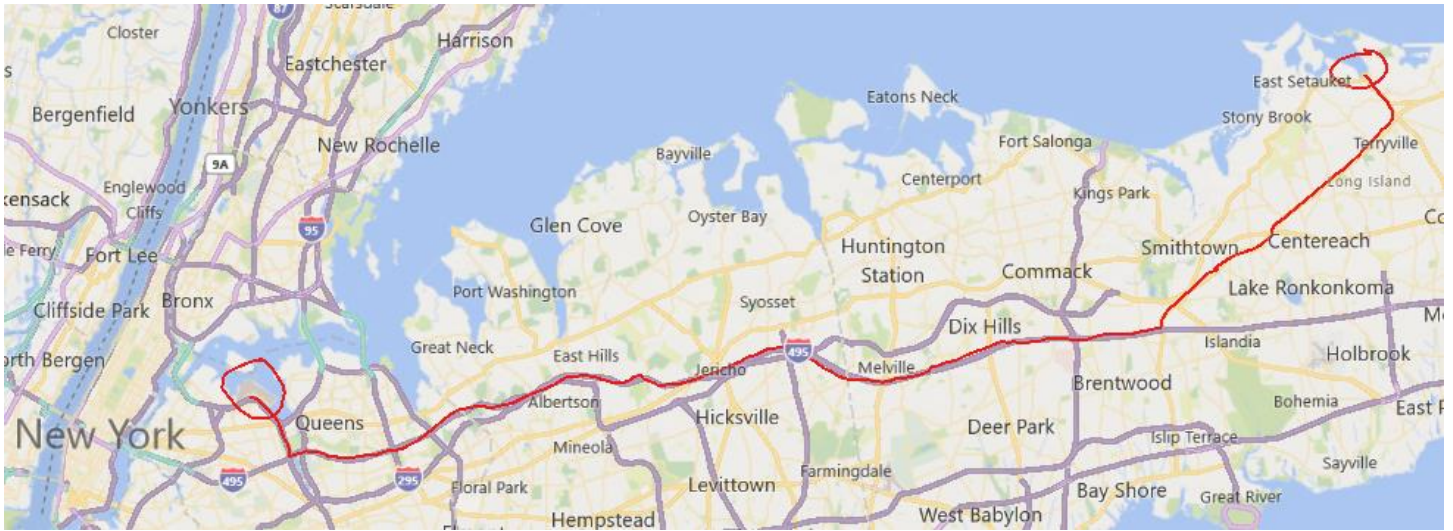
My apartment was just a few blocks from the bus route, so I did not keep a car in New York, preferring to walk. I got there just after the first tower had collapsed. As I watched on television in disbelief the second tower came down. There was also news that a fourth airliner had crashed somewhere in Pennsylvania. None of my pilot roommates were at the apartment, but the son of one happened to be staying there that morning. He had an old red pickup truck that he had planned to drive up to his father's place in New Hampshire. After discussing it, we both decided it was probably a good idea to get out of the New York area, since for all we knew there may have been toxic chemical or biological agents on the aircraft that crashed into the buildings. We packed up what we needed and headed out the door.

LaGuardia airport is located at the very westernmost end of Long Island. As such, you must cross a bridge somewhere to get off it. That was our immediate problem. All the bridges had been converted to one-way routes into Manhattan so that fire and rescue equipment could be brought in from Long Island and elsewhere. The roads to the bridges outbound were clogged with traffic at a standstill.



One option would be the Verrazano Narrows Bridge to New Jersey, but the smoke from the towers was blowing right across the route to it. Didn't think it was smart to drive thru it.

As we looked at our map of the area we saw that about half way out Long Island on the north shore there was a ferry that went to Connecticut. We decided to try that route out.



We got to the ferry terminal area and found the line for it seemed to stretch for miles. We turned up a side street hoping it would lead us to the end of the line, but it turned out to be a dead end. We turned back and as luck would have it, someone let us into the line not far from the ferry dock. A couple of hours later we were on the boat headed for Connecticut.

Inbound Ferry with NY smoke visible on horizon



I talked to my wife and she made some calls to rental car companies and found a car available at the airport in Hartford, Connecticut. Hartford was right on the way to my friend's destination, so he dropped me off there, I got the car, a big old full-sized Ford, and headed southbound. I drove until midnight, stopping at a motel somewhere in Pennsylvania for a few hours rest, then headed on, listening to all the bad news on the radio. I drove down the Blue Ridge Parkway through Virginia, the Carolinas and arrived home in Georgia around dusk on September 12th.



It turned out that trip from Boston to New York would be my last. I retired several months later.