

SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

By Captain Jack Arnold, S80 ORD

I have always felt my job was rewarding as I transported people around this small world of ours. I have learned, however, that this vehicle of transportation can also be used as a deadly tool. Not only deadly to innocent passengers, but thousands of unknowing people on the ground, and my fellow colleagues as well. We all stand in awe questioning the despicable, senseless loss of life.

I was closer than I wanted to be to this tragedy and would like to share my experiences with you.

We landed at Newark airport Monday night, September 10 and went to one of the airport hotels for our layover. Tuesday morning we arrived back at the airport to work the 9:30am flight to O'Hare. I talked to one of the airport police officers at approximately 8:30 at our gate and asked him if he needed a ride to Chicago. He said hypothetically, he would love to if he could. (I later found out why he was at our gate). Once on the airplane, I settled in the cockpit and the gate agents started

boarding our plane. The co-pilot came in the cockpit and said during his walk-around one of the ground workers had told him, "An airplane has hit the World Trade Center and one tower is on fire!"

Newark Airport is located just across the river from Manhattan Island, so I looked out the cockpit window to witness a huge billowing smoke cloud coming from one of the World Trade Center Towers. I decided to listen to the Newark control tower because this was obviously a big deal that would, at the least, give us an extensive takeoff delay. The tower controller was describing the

events to everyone. These are his statements to the best of my recollection: "The World Trade Center was struck by an airplane about 15 minutes ago and is on fire! There are indefinite delays at Newark and, hold on, there is another airplane flying toward the other World Trade Center Tower. He's flying right at it! He hit it; he hit it! United go-around, Continental go-around, Newark airport is closed!" I now could see black, billowing smoke out of each tower. I made a quick announcement to the passengers that an airplane had hit the World Trade Center and we were probably not going anywhere.

I ran out of the airplane down the jetbridge stairs onto the pavement and stood with a rapidly assembling crowd of American Airline employees. We watched in complete disbelief, everyone murmuring, "This can't be happening."

I went into our operations area and called our dispatch center in Dallas. From the dispatcher's voice on the phone I could tell he was in shock. I asked, "What is going on out here?" He told me, "Two airplanes were hijacked out of Boston and flown into The World Trade Center." He paused took a deep breath and continued tearfully, "One of them was one of our 767s."

I stood in disbelief, why?

Stunned, I walked back to the airplane having intense feelings of disgust, anger, pain and overwhelming anguish. Once in my airplane, I sat in the cockpit, explained what I knew to the co-pilot, then made an announcement to the passengers: "Ladies and Gentleman, this is a terribly sad day at American Airlines. I was just advised by our dispatcher that two airplanes have been hijacked out of Boston's Logan Airport and flown into The World Trade Center. I also regret to inform you that this flight and probably others will be cancelled."

Within minutes, the reports came in that one of our 757s had been hijacked out of Washington DC and crashed into The Pentagon.

We also heard of the fourth hijacking, a United Airlines plane that had left the gates right behind us about an hour earlier. As I stood with a group of employees outside our airplane we looked at the United Airline gates behind us, how could this be happening? As we watched the burning of the two World Trade Center Buildings the smoke of one seemed to intensify, was the fire getting worse? Were the firefighters unable to gain control of the fire? All of the sudden the huge pillar of Manhattan, known around the world as a symbol of freedom and com-

merce, collapsed and was gone. We could only pray for the thousands of people involved in this despicable act of terrorism.

By now the airport police and the FBI were evacuating the Newark Terminal. We assisted others, then hurried ourselves out of the Newark Terminal. I was told that the airport police had spotted more suspected terrorist in the building! Once outside the terminal, we loaded immediately onto a van to get away from the terminal. As we drove away we watched the remaining Twin Tower crumble and fall to the ground; both of The World Trade Centers were gone!

The next few days at the hotel we tried to focus on our families, our companies and the rescue worker's efforts in Manhattan. On several occasions the FBI and Federal Marshals searched different rooms in our hotel looking for suspects.

Finally, Saturday morning at 2am, we left our hotel and boarded one of our airplanes with one hundred fellow employees and departed Newark Airport. Passing Manhattan immediately after takeoff, a saddened silence came over the cabin as everyone looked out the right side of the airplane at the changed skyline of New York. It was a beautifully clear night and north Manhattan

glistened in all her glory as one of the world's most impressive skylines, lit up by the lights of some of the world's most majestic structures. The south end of the island however, was covered by the silhouette of a gray, smoke-filled mushroom cloud, back lit by the huge floodlights. We all knew of the desperate efforts and the grim reality that was unfolding. The rest of the flight to Chicago was reflective, somber and quiet.

Now in the comfort of my home, I realize how precious our life and its freedoms really are.

