

The following transcript is of an interview conducted on September 7th, 2011 by APRN's Lori Townsend with retired Anchorage Air Traffic Controller Rick Wilder about events on September 11th, 2001. This transcript is the property of APRN and should not be re-printed without permission. Townsend's questions are in capital letters.

SO GOING BACK OVER THAT MORNING, YOU GOT TO WORK, THE ATTACKS HAD HAPPENED ON THE EAST COAST, AND ALONG COMES THIS KOREAN 747, MORE THAN 200 PASSENGERS AND FOR SOME REASON IN PART OF A TEXT MESSAGE ARE THE LETTERS HJK, WOULD THIS IN ITSELF HAVE BEEN ALARMING ON ANY OTHER DAY OR WOULD IT HAVE BEEN MORE OF A CURIOSITY?

I think it would have been just more of a curiosity. Somebody just happened to catch on to it, I believe it was called Air Ink, so it wasn't an FAA person but it's another organization that works with these messages and transmits them and receives them. And I'm not sure how they filter through them and not sure how they caught it, because if you're scanning messages, there's a lot of those messages going between carriers. So I don't know what their method was to come across those particular 3 letters. Typically unless it said HIJK, I wouldn't think about it because that's what I believe what would flash on our scope when we had the 7500, so to me, it doesn't look that interesting. Maybe the guy slipped, maybe he was part of a pretend hijack scenario, but someone would have come out and corroborated that if it was true so I'm not sure about it.

AND SO HERE THIS JET IS COMING CLOSER TO ANCHORAGE, AND THERE'S A DECISION ABOUT SENDING IT ON MANUEVERS TO SEE HOW THE PILOT WOULD RESPOND IS THAT CORRECT?

Yes, that happened before it got to my sector, at the center we have various sectors and he was still up on the western part of Alaska. I believe the controller had him make a turn. And that's how you can look at, an aircraft, if they don't respond, then you go, ok, something's going on. If the radio seems to be working, he was communicating before and then if there was some suspicious behavior, then you'd start trying to do stuff and if he didn't follow his turns you'd know, oh, there's something going on.

A hijacker's not going to let that happen. He's just going to turn off the radio and go for their target. In this case the Korean air was complying with everything. There was no questions he complied with everything I asked him. I think he was asked. Each time it was a negative response. That can be a little shaky because if it's a hijacker flying then he's going to say oh no, nothing's wrong. But there just seemed to be consistency with the flight.

AT SOME POINT, NOT SURE IF IT WAS YOU OR THE PREVIOUS CONTROLLER BUT ASKED IF HE WAS SENDING OUT THE SQUAWK OF 7500?

Yes, it was the previous controller and I have not talked to that controller about what happened or how it worked, I just read some of the transcripts. I thought I saw one that said he actually had the code flash up on the screen but I'm not positive. Couldn't reply to that. He was asked and he replied negative.

SO WHAT WAS HAPPENING WHEN YOU TOOK OVER DUTIES OF COMMUNICATING WITH THIS PILOT?

Well I'd been working the sector for a while already. We were kind of deep in re-routing aircraft at the time. We were starting to send aircraft away and I'd already had one waved off from Anchorage and threatened to be shot down, I guess would be the mild way to say it. So I knew there was a lot of issues going on and I'd already heard that there was a possible hijack with the Korean air but nothing suspicious was going on other than this message that had come across, the message didn't really look ominous to me but I'm just working the traffic, so I don't really know. Everything was routine with what I was working with this aircraft. There was nothing out of the ordinary. We were just routing him North of Anchorage.

A lot of it was to see if he would comply and that's what we did a lot of times we just did things and go well are they going to do what we ask? And that's how you determine, ok, there's nothing going on and I thought at some point it was determined that there was no interference going on at the time. I believe that occurred when the instructions came down to have the aircraft squawk 7500, I think, I thought it was already determined that he was fine but he still had fighters trailing him.

SO YOU'RE WORKING WITH THIS PILOT, SEEMS FAIRLY ROUTINE, HE'S FOLLOWING THE ORDERS THAT HE'S GIVEN. NOT RAISING ANY ALARM, AND YET, AN ORDER CAME TO YOU TO DIRECT THIS PILOT TO SQUAWK 7500, ESSENTIALLY PUTTING A BULLSEYE ON THE PLANE THAT THERE'S HIJACKERS ON BOARD?

I was pretty shocked, I've never been asked to do that or there's never been a case where that would have been done. And I couldn't think of a case in the book or any book we had out there that would have applied to that scenario like an airtraffic controller telling an aircraft to squawk 7500 because it is a big deal. It's not like an aircraft squawking emergency, we do have them dial up an emergency frequency, typically so the next controller can see ahead of time see where the aircraft is, you know, you're busy and you don't want to go hunting around for them, but that's more routine, if it's an emergency you're dealing with the issue, and you're not telling an aircraft to do something that could result in a big accident, whereas telling someone to squawk 7500 with fighters following them, that's an accident. And that's, the experience I had with the communications with the military and civilian sectors, it was just kind of dictating to me that this not a really good thing to do.

AND SO WHAT DID YOU DO WHEN YOU WERE FIRST TOLD TO GIVE THE PILOT THIS ORDER?

I just refused. I was astounded, I couldn't even, I didn't even know what to say, it was so off the wall. I just told them I wouldn't do it. And I kind of gave some reasons for it. The fact the F15s were following them. They could be a little trigger happy because of events going on. I mean everybody was on edge, I could see mistakes being made throughout the whole system and it's just because we'd never dealt with anything at this level. So we all had little experience dealing with this. What I was drawing off of, was just the experience I had had in the past just as a controller and what can happen when aircraft do certain things. In this case, I've never seen an aircraft been told to squawk 7500 hijack with fighters on them, but I could just imagine what would happen. So I refused, I told the supervisor that that would be certain destruction of the aircraft in my opinion, it could be. I was definitely wrong, that was nice, I was happy about that, but that's what happened, that's what I was feeling so I just refused.

AND THEN WHAT HAPPENED?

They left, another convening up at the watch desk. Not sure if the managers at Anchorage center thought it was reasonable that I denied this, and maybe they thought ok, we really don't need him to have to do this, but a supervisor came back later, not sure how long a time but he said, headquarters is ordering us, ordering that aircraft to squawk hijack. So that was a little more direct and I realized it was coming from another location. I also thought about the person ordering it, I never thought it was something for nefarious reasons that could be going on, to this day I still don't know why but I thought, well I hope it's just not some desk jockey up there wanting to order, you know, tell people what to do and not thinking about it. Because I had no idea if the person making that decision was a controller and knew what it meant, knew the weight of what that meant for the aircraft doing that with F15s or fighters on it.

WHEN YOU TOLD THE PILOT SQUAWK 7500, THE MOVIE RELAYS THE AUDIO OF HIM KIND OF QUESTIONING BACK THE NUMBER, BUT THEN HE COMPLIED, WERE YOU SURPRISED BY THAT?

No, that's one reason, I didn't want to do it. I think if it was an American carrier, they wouldn't have done it. I wouldn't have done it, as a commercial pilot when I was flying, I would have never done that. I would have thought that's the most ridiculous thing in the world. I'll do anything but I won't do that because if my aircraft isn't being interfered with, that's just somewhere you don't want to go. I think if any other carrier had been asked other than an Asian based air craft, probably wouldn't have done it. But the Korean culture, or I should say maybe just the Asian culture, it's a little different. They would do things we'd ask them to do without a lot of questioning. You'd just sort of laugh at it, you'd tell an American pilot, Delta, American, United, and they would just kind of laugh and say, we're not doing that. Whereas these guys would just say roger and will do it, even if it meant flying in less than optimal conditions, they wouldn't put their aircraft in danger, but they would do things if they had the ability to do it. So I knew he would do it, just the Asian culture, the way they are, he's going to do it, so when he had that question in his voice, I felt pretty sick because I know he's going to do it instead of just denying it.

AND HE DID, HE AGREED TO THAT. DO YOU THINK AT THAT TIME THAT HE WAS AWARE HE WAS BEING FOLLOWED BY F15s?

No, the way the F15s intercept an aircraft like that, they do it in a way that the crew or the passengers don't know. Because they don't want to alarm the passengers or potential hijackers that could be on board, so they do it in a manner that is, well, sneaky.

AND SO THE JET IS DIVERTED TO WHITEHORSE, IT LANDS SAFELY THE MORE THAN 200 PASSENGERS WERE SAFE, WHEN YOU LOOK BACK ON THIS NOW, THERE WAS A LOT OF FEAR AND CONFUSION THAT DAY, NO ONE REALLY KNEW WHAT WAS HAPPENING, DO YOU THINK THAT WAS THE RIGHT DECISION OR WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THAT NOW A DECADE LATER.

Sending the plane to Whitehorse?

SQUAWKING THAT CODE...

It's still pretty amazing it happened; in my mind there is no doubt that it shouldn't have happened. It's just way off the wall, event that happened, that someone, whoever it was probably gave the order that probably wasn't really thinking about it. So I think the whole thing was just a big mix up or mess up. From the squawking the 7500 to actually sending the aircraft to Whitehorse. He was destined to land at Anchorage for fuel if I remember right. And when he was re-routed, I believe I asked him, is fuel on board and he said an hour and 10 minutes and I think he had 55 minute flight to Whitehorse and as a controller I might have gone whatever, but as a pilot I go, this is off the wall and I actually relayed that information again to the management that we were pretty much sealing someone's fate in a bad way. I just couldn't picture a plane wanting to go there with 15 minutes reserve. Whitehorse is an airport in the middle of nowhere we might say and weather or runway conditions could be uncertain. I don't think the pilot wanted to go there, I think he understood but again it falls into that compliance. I'm kind of wondering if an American based carrier would have just squawked 7700 said, I'm here in an emergency and I'm going to land where I want to land and you're going to have to deal with the consequences which the Korean air wouldn't have done again, he's just going to comply, he might complain, but he's going to comply. And that part was almost as big a mistake as the squawk.

IT IS CURIOUS IT DIDN'T JUST LAND IN ANCHORAGE WHERE THERE'S A LARGE MILITARY PRESENCE SO THAT IF THERE WERE TROUBLE IT COULD HAVE BEEN DEALT WITH, IT WAS ALSO SENT TOWARD GALENA, AT THAT TIME THERE WAS MILITARY PRESENCE IN GALENA. BUT YET IT WAS DIVERTED TO THIS VERY SMALL TOWN IN THE YUKON. IS THERE A REASON WHY YOU WOULDN'T WANT A HIJACKED AIRLINER TO BE NEAR A MILITARY INSTALLATION IN ALASKA?

As far as a military installation, I never really thought about it, I was just thinking about civilian targets, so I was taking a guess, they didn't want them to land or get in the Anchorage area for whatever damage they could cause to the population of Anchorage. The military yes, that would be a big target, unfortunately we let him fly right over the pipeline by sending him to Whitehorse, we were patrolling the pipeline and keeping that pretty secured and safe just after all this happened. So you have to ask questions, what was it? Where did the thinking come from. I was concerned that we were sending our problems to Canada, why are we shoveling, are we not big enough to take care of our own problems, is the threat going to go away, I mean people live in Whitehorse.

COMMANDER SCHWARTZ SAID, IT WAS A STRONG RECOMMENDATION THAT WE BE ALLOWED TO DIVERT THE PLANE TO WHITEHORSE AND CANADA AGREED. DOES IT SEEM TO YOU THAT IT COMES DOWN TO WELL THERE'S NOT AS MANY PEOPLE THAT WILL GET KILLED IN WHITEHORSE THAN IN ANCHORAGE, COULD IT BE A DECISION BASED SOLELY ON THAT?

I'm not sure, but that's the conclusion that you could, most people would draw from it. Oh sure the Korean air or hijacked aircraft could cause damage at Elmendorf and they would be flying over a large population of people. But other than that, that's where I would go with that line of thinking, is that, oh it's just a more remote place. And then again, why did they send them to Vancouver, I don't think that's so remote, but we were re-routing aircraft to Vancouver too instead of letting them go to their destination in the lower 48. So I'm not sure what the military was thinking at the time, but they did take over our airspace. If I remember right, that was something that did not occur in the lower 48. I think

civilians did retain control of the airspace. Up here, at one point we were pretty much hands off, as far as controlling, the military assumed responsibility for all the separation of everything going on. But that was after the civilians were down. They aren't equipped for that kind of activity. So they, it could have been just, you know, in so many words, you know we have control of the airspace and civilians are hands off, but it was a little different here, I guess Alaskans got their own way of dealing with these kind of events in the lower 48.

FORTUNATELY THE WORST DIDN'T HAPPEN, THEY WEREN'T SHOT OUT OF THE SKY, BUT WHEN YOU LOOK BACK AT HOW CLOSE IT WAS, DO YOU WISH YOU WOULD HAVE DONE SOMETHING DIFFERENTLY, THAT YOU WOULD HAVE CONTINUED TO REFUSE OR HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT IT NOW?

If I had continued to refuse, they would have, I have a D side, there was a radar position and a D side position, and I could have very well let the D side issue that because I refused to do it. I could have done that, I don't know if the person would have done it or not. I think they probably would have because I'm not sure everybody was thinking what I was thinking and again, I thought well somebody's got to do the dirty job and well I'll do it. I probably would go down that same road but I might have been a little more vocal if I knew, but there was already a lot happening. When they've already threatened to shoot down some planes I'm working and that sort of thing, there was a lot to think about it that day. The Korean air was just one of the issues. He was the highlight of the whole time I was working almost.

AND AFTER SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, WERE YOU GIVEN ANY EXPLANATION FROM THE FAA FROM HEADQUARTERS, ABOUT WHY THIS SERIES OF EVENTS WENT DOWN THE WAY THAT THEY DID?

No, there was no discussion about it. The people working congratulated us and said, good job, and keep doing what you're doing. There was no, I'm not sure if there was any reflecting back on what happened with any of these aircraft, with these other situations, with the Korean air, with the other craft they were threatening to shoot down, I don't if there was any questions or any follow up with that, but there wasn't with us, we were just patted on the back and said, thanks, good job.

AND SO AFTER NEARLY A DECADE YOU'VE DECIDED TO TALK PUBLICLY ABOUT THIS, WHY NOW?

About once of year, it just bothers me, I wonder does anybody care about what happened with the Korean air and also the September 10th issue that was coming up. I wonder if anyone is pulling up any information out about it. So I would just go online and search it, see if anything is there, I would just do it quietly in the evening when I wasn't doing anything else. So about once a year I'd check it out. I believe it was back in April in the afternoon and I thought, well, I wonder if anyone cared and I do a little search and I saw this guy did a documentary on it and I thought wow, and then thought, well it's got to be old. Then I looked and said, wow, it's current and some guy made a documentary about it, so I ended up contacting him that day, just to say hey, I was there, I don't know what documentary you made, so we talked about it. And it's kind of an interesting situation that occurred but it's one people in the lower 48 wouldn't even know about or even care about but it wasn't in the newspapers real prominent down state but it's just something that reflects on maybe changes or training, something that we need to change and the way we do business in the military, civilian side of emergency situations that occur like that. It's kind of good to talk about it and get it out. I don't really have any deep information, and like I

said, I'm not even sure what was going on, there is a lot of questions and theories and I just know what happened in my little air space on that day with my little airplanes and I just wanted to tell what happened I've read so many articles and the question was, why did he do it? Why was he doing it? Well it's because we told him. That's what I kept wanting to tell people, just kinda scream, after the 11th, and after as articles were coming out about the Korean air, it's like wow, why would he do this, he must have been hijacked, no it's because we told him and because someone in Washington DC ordered the aircraft to do that. There was no mystery on the part of the carrier, he just did what he was told to do.

THERE WAS A TIME THAT YOU WERE HESITANT TO TALK TO ME ABOUT THIS. ARE YOU CONCERNED ABOUT MAKING THIS PUBLIC?

I am a little bit, I don't know, uh, I....yes. I don't know what people would react to, I just don't know what they would think about it. I don't even.....I don't know but I am. But I've looked through it and realized, yeah it just needs to get out there.

ANYTHING I DIDN'T ASK THAT YOU IN PARTICULAR WANTED PEOPLE TO KNOW?

No.

OK THANK YOU VERY MUCH