

UNITED FLIGHT 93

Situation: Passengers attempt to retake a commercial airliner after learning of prior terrorist attacks and assessing different courses of action.

On 11 September 2001, middle east extremists hijacked and destroyed four US commercial airliners in less than two hours. Three of the aircraft, used as guided missiles, collapsed both towers of the World Trade Center in New York City and extensively damaged the Pentagon in Washington, DC. The attacks cost the lives of approximately 3,000 innocent people and resulted in billions of dollars in damage and economic impact.



The events of September 11 demonstrate the ability of terrorists to plan and execute complex operations at multiple locations within the US. However, the loss of life and destruction could have been much greater. The fourth hijacked aircraft, United Airlines Flight 93, crashed in an empty field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, well away from population centers and symbolic targets. The passengers learned the intentions of the terrorist hijackers and decided to attempt to retake control of the aircraft — an action that may have saved countless additional lives.

During a terrorist incident, your only chance of survival may be through taking action. But this decision should only be made after evaluating the situation and your available options.



Prior to the events of 11 September 2001, airplane hijackings usually ended in a hostage standoff and negotiations between government representatives and the terrorists. To avoid situations as encountered on TWA Flight 847 in which US military personnel were singled out by terrorists, DoD Service Members on hijacked aircraft were encouraged to remain inconspicuous and hide their identity.

However, the employment of suicide tactics designed to inflict mass casualties requires every passenger on a hijacked aircraft to make a personal decision — remain calm and inconspicuous or undertake active resistance. Either option may be correct depending upon the circumstances, but should only be made after careful evaluation of developing events.

Take time to decide how to react in a terrorist incident. At the first signs of trouble start evaluating available information.

At 8:42 a.m., United Flight 93 took off from Newark Liberty International Airport to begin its transcontinental flight to San Francisco. None of the seven crew members or thirty-two passengers had heard that commercial aircraft had been hijacked earlier in the morning. The flight progressed normally until four terrorists attacked the cockpit at 9:28 a.m., well after the attacks on the World Trade Center Towers and only minutes before the attack on the Pentagon. After securing the cockpit, the hijackers changed course and directed the aircraft east, towards Washington DC.



Specific details of events on Flight 93 are limited, but it is known that after the hijackers assumed control of the plane, passengers used onboard and personal cell phones to contact family members, colleagues, and law enforcement officials on the ground. From these discussions, passengers were able to confirm from multiple sources that similar commercial aircraft had been used to strike the World Trade Center Towers and the Pentagon. The passengers concluded that the hijackers of their plane had similar intentions and chose to attack the hijackers when the aircraft was over a rural area.

The decision to take action should be made on the best information possible. You should weigh your options and their potential consequences carefully.



At 9:57 a.m., passengers rushed the cockpit in an attempt to gain control of the aircraft. Shortly afterwards, the airliner crashed into an empty field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania at 10:02 a.m. killing all on board. While their actions provided the only option to save their own lives, they may have saved the lives of hundreds that would have been killed had the hijackers successfully struck an additional target. The courage and decisiveness of these passengers have been immortalized by the last words heard by phone from passenger Todd Beamer: "Let's roll!"