

FLIGHT PATH

THE FIFTH PLANE AND THE
THREAT TO AIR FORCE ONE

KRISTJAN THORSTEINSON



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RANNSÓKN BOOKS

Rannsókn Books eBook edition: September, 2014.

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ISBN: 978-0-692-28455-1

Chapter 2

"To Bush, With Love"

Q: What's your best surmise now? Was there a fifth plane, a sixth plane?

Dr. Rice: I suspect there might have been a fifth plane -- yes.

- Bob Woodward's interview with US National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, Internal transcript from the Office of the Press Secretary dated October 24, 2001¹

In the early evening of January 30, 2002 several hundred people packed into the Daytona Jet Center hangar at the Daytona Beach International Airport to hear President George W. Bush give a speech.² It was almost six o'clock when the majority of attendees had settled in under the watchful eye of the secret service. With the president scheduled to speak in a half hour, a number of invited speakers began their formal introductions.² Meanwhile George W. Bush sat smiling, drawing confidence from the support of the present assembly, still enjoying the success of his last speech.

Only the night before, the president had given his State of the Union Address to Congress where he outlined for the nation and the world the accomplishments his administration had made in the four months following the attacks of September 11, 2001. He referred to the rebuilding efforts still underway in New York and Washington, D.C. and how the United States' actions had "rid the world of thousands of terrorists, "and "saved a people from starvation, and freed a country from brutal oppression".³ The president also gave an indication of the administration's new focus on Saddam Hussein's Iraq:

Iraq continues to flaunt its hostility toward America and to support terror. The Iraqi regime has plotted to develop anthrax and nerve gas and nuclear weapons for over a decade. This is a regime that has already used poison gas to murder thousands of its own citizens, leaving the bodies of mothers huddled over their dead children. This is a regime that agreed to international inspections, then kicked out the inspectors. This is a regime that has something to hide from the civilized world.³

Although his approval rating had dipped slightly from the 90% he had recently garnered, the president was still riding the tide of widespread support when he made his return to Florida the next day.⁴ After being introduced by the widow of Dale Earnhardt, the president waved down the crowd's cheers and took the stand. His voice resonated in the overlit, crowded hangar. With a nod to the previous night's address he acknowledged the nation's achievements and gave an indication of what lay ahead. In thirty concise minutes, punctuated by applause, the president praised the American people for their strength and emphasized the "dangerous phase" the nation had entered in the war on terror.⁵

Four months earlier the picture was much different; President Bush was only a couple hundred miles Southwest of Daytona Beach at the Emma T. Booker Elementary School in Sarasota. While sitting in a chair listening to children read their lessons aloud, the president was notified by White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card that the country was under attack. Many thought that the president appeared anxious and criticized how long he spent at the elementary school. Since then, it was a priority for the president to project the image of a decisive leader. The Daytona event, like his speech to Congress, was very successful.

Having wrapped up his speech at the Daytona Jet Center, President Bush stepped into the crowd and began shaking hands. A baby was reportedly crowd surfed to the

president as the press memorialized the event.⁵ While the enthusiasm of the crowd was sincere, everything had been neatly organized and choreographed. The event had been carefully planned to symbolically show that the president had the approval of the American people as well as Congress. The next morning he would tour the Volusia County Fire Services Training Center and give a short speech to senior volunteers before returning to Washington the same day to meet with German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder at the White House.⁶

The meeting between the two was a formal exchange of pleasantries, much of it for the press. Both men, however, reportedly discussed the prospect of Germany's participation in a coalition opposing the regime of Saddam Hussein.⁷ A decade later, this has turned into a bone of contention between the two former heads of state. In 2006 Gerhard Schröder published his political memoirs, *Decisions: My Life in Politics*, in which he criticized then President George W. Bush:

"I don't know exactly when in the year 2002 the change in justification for a war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq took place -- when, in other words, the fight against international terrorism slid into the background and the possible existence of weapons of mass destruction was thrust into the foreground. But the change made me increasingly distrustful."⁸

In his similarly titled *Decision Points*(2010), the former American president insisted that Gerhard Schröder had initially shown support for Germany's involvement in Iraq during their meeting and quoted him as saying, "What is true of Afghanistan is true of Iraq. Nations that sponsor terror must face consequences. If you make it fast and make it decisive, I will be with you."⁹Schröderhas since responded explaining that his offer of support was conditional; the United States should have provided conclusive evidence that Iraq supported Al-Qaeda fighters.¹⁰

Security for President Bush's speech in Daytona Beach was exceptionally strict. Everyone who had been admitted into the hangar had their identification checked and was issued a color coded ticket distinguishing the general audience from the press.⁵ Holding the event at an airport was unconventional, but the hangar was ideal for security; it would be virtually impossible to approach the event unseen. The Daytona Beach Jet Center would have been very grateful for the exposure provided by the event, given that they were affected financially by the attacks of September 11, 2001. Continental Airlines pulled its operations from the airport, forcing the fixed-base operator (FBO) to lay off a number of employees. An October 2, 2001 article from the Daytona Beach News-Journal explained the FBO's duties which included, "ticketing, ground-handling and fueling for the airline":

The Daytona Beach Jet Center has laid off 24 employees, or about one-third of its work force, because of the decline in flying following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, officials said. "This is a terrible thing, but it's part of the ripple effect," said Dean Marchetti, the Jet Center's general manager. "Continental's pullout affected us adversely." "The Jet Center did the ticketing, ground-handling and fueling for the airline..."¹¹

There were good reasons for the Secret Service to be so meticulous. Not only had the hijackers made Central Florida their home, but the city of Daytona Beach had featured prominently in the news as a hotbed of investigation only days after the September 11, 2001 attacks. The FBI had a presence at the airport on the night of the attacks, investigating flight school records, such as those of Phoenix East, for any trace of the hijacker cells.¹²

Only one school at the airport had records that matched the name of one of the hijackers. The Daytona Beach International Airport is adjacent to Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, a flight school established in 1926. Embry-Riddle has provided

flight training for pilots from around the world for decades, many of them from the Middle East. The school made the national news shortly after the attacks when authorities initially thought that one of the hijackers, Waleed A. Al-Sheri, may have trained at its campus in Daytona Beach. By September 22, 2001 he school had been vindicated; the man initially thought to be the hijacker Waleed A. Al-Sheri was found alive in Morocco.¹³

The New York Times revealed that more than one hijacker's name was associated with Daytona Beach. Although an ERAU graduate who had the name of Waleed A. Al-Shehri was not connected to the attacks, the manager of same apartments said that another hijacker, Ahmed al-Ghamdi, had also lived there. *The New York Times* reported that the hijackers, "overlapped in Daytona Beach in the mid- to late-1990's. A manager at the Anatole apartments near Daytona Beach International Airport said Ahmed al-Ghamdi, who was on United Airlines Flight 175, lived in the complex in 1995 (School officials say they have no record of Mr. Ghamdi attending the school). Records also indicate that a man whose name matched Mohammed Atta's lived at a different address in Daytona Beach during the mid- to late 1990's."¹⁴*The Boston Globe* reported that as many as thirty six individuals, described as, "possible confederates and moneymen," had connections to Daytona Beach.¹⁵

Hijacker Mohamed Atta spent time flying in Volusia County according to a record showing that he purchased \$36.33 of fuel at the "Daytona Beach Airfield" for a plane owned by Huffman Aviation in Venice (Tail Number N225HA).¹⁶

Besides the FBI's initial interest in Embry-Riddle, another incident involving a strip club in Daytona Beach made the national news in the first weeks after the attacks.

Only ten minute drive from the Daytona Beach International Airport, The Pink Pony was widely reported to have had customers with advanced knowledge of the September 11, 2001 attacks. The manager of the Pink Pony told investigators that three patrons "spewed anti-American sentiments in his bar and talked of impending bloodshed the night before the attacks."

The day after the attacks, agents interviewed John Kap, manager of the Pink Pony and Red Eyed Jack's Sports Bar in Daytona Beach. He said three men spewed anti-American sentiments in his bar and talked of impending bloodshed the night before the terrorist attacks.

Kap said he told FBI agents that one man left a business card and a copy of the Quran - the sacred book of Islam - at the bar.

That story was bogus, said an attorney for one of the men.

Orlando attorney Mark NeJame said his client, a U.S. citizen born in Kuwait, went to the adult nightclub with two friends the night of Sept. 10. The 34-year-old furniture business owner didn't want to be identified because he is married to a U.S.-born woman and has two kids, NeJame said.

At the bar, the three men engaged in a conversation with another patron on Christianity and the Book of Revelations, which describes catastrophes, wars and violence. During the discussion, the other patron went and got a book on Christianity, which apparently was left behind. The FBI questioned his client but he was never taken into custody, NeJame said.

"They realized it was a completely bogus claim," NeJame said.

FBI Special Agent Bill Hurlburt declined comment on the report.

Kap would not answer specific questions Tuesday about the incident but said, "we didn't do this to become famous. We just turned over information."¹⁷

As in the case with Embry-Riddle, United States investigators found more smoke than fire; what was first seen as a solid lead was reported later to be a misunderstanding. The Orlando lawyer that represented the three men said that his clients were not

discussing the impending attacks, but religious matters with another Pink Pony customer. Their use of apocalyptic language was, he explained, misinterpreted. The book that was left at the bar, thought to be The Koran, was described later as a "book on Christianity." If authorities were not frustrated enough by reports such as this, they were further impeded by the hijacker cells' deliberate attempts to leave behind false leads.

Investigative journalist Seymour Hirsch consulted a number of "high-level" sources shortly after the attacks who discussed the false trails left behind in detail. Some officials, taking into consideration the level of planning and military precision involved in the attacks, expressed their apprehension that Osama Bin-Laden's al-Qaeda network had acted alone:

A former high-level intelligence official told me, "Whatever trail was left was left deliberately—for the F.B.I. to chase."

...

In interviews over the past two weeks, a number of intelligence officials have raised questions about Osama bin Laden's capabilities. "This guy sits in a cave in Afghanistan and he's running this operation?" one C.I.A. official asked. "It's so huge. He couldn't have done it alone." A senior military officer told me that because of the visas and other documentation needed to infiltrate team members into the United States a major foreign intelligence service might also have been involved.

...

"These people are not necessarily all from bin Laden," a Justice Department official told me. "We're still running a lot of stuff out," he said, adding that the F.B.I. has been inundated with leads.¹⁸

For over a decade since the attacks, Daytona Beach has been represented as a mere footnote in the history of the hijacker's movements in Florida. It was, however, the site of one of the most important crime scenes related to the attacks of September 11, 2001.

In the early morning of September 12th, 2001, while rescue efforts were still underway, a Continental Airlines 737 Jet was investigated at the Daytona Beach

International Airport by local Volusia County authorities. Surrounded by an ambulance, police cars and a bomb disposal unit, the plane sat for the entire world on *CNN* for almost two minutes. With the stricken Manhattan skyline as a backdrop, Paula Zahn reported on the unfolding investigation of the mysterious plane:

"All right. Leon, I'm going to take you directly back to Daytona Beach. Looking at some interesting pictures from the Daytona International airport. We are told a bomb squad is thoroughly searching the cargo hold of a Continental jet. We don't know a whole a lot about it but our understanding is that the luggage in this plane for whatever reason did not make its connection. We do not understand at this moment how this might be connected to the other stories coming out of south Florida."^{19*}

That same morning *Salon* reported, "Also, a bomb squad searched the cargo hold of a Continental Airlines jet at Daytona International Airport. Fox News reported that some of the terrorists may have received flight training at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach, but it was not known why the plane was being searched."²⁰

Local NBC News affiliate *WESH Orlando* was able to ask investigators on the ground detailed questions and acquired very specific information regarding the mysterious plane:

"Two commercial jets that have been parked overnight were investigated and graffiti was found near the main landing gear of one of the planes. Sources said that the graffiti said "To Bush, with love." The flight originated in Newark Tuesday morning. It is still unclear if the writing was put there before the flight took off or after it landed in Daytona Beach."²¹

The luggage aboard Flight 1078 had "not made its connection." Why wasn't the luggage removed from the plane the day it landed? It is as if the commercial jet had

*Paula Zahn's segment is available from the "September 11 Television Archive" on Archive.org: CNN Sept. 12, 2001 12:35 pm - 1:17 pm (September 12, 2001). The segment starts 5:55 minutes into the archived clip, clearly showing the plane's tail number:N60312.
<https://archive.org/details/cnn200109121235-1317>.

landed in an unofficial way, bypassing normal procedures. If airport workers had attended to the plane on September 11th, 2001, removing its luggage that day, in all likelihood the strange message it bore would have been reported to the authorities immediately. Regardless, the plane was not found until the next day.

Stranger still, a *London Guardian* "intelligence source" confessed that box-cutters were "found taped to the backs of fold-down trays" on board a "Continental Airlines flight" that originated from Newark. It was believed that the plane was "due to be hijacked". If the source was referring to Flight 1078, then the plane had not been cleaned or inspected after it landed in Daytona Beach on September 11th.

Following the discovery of fresh documentary evidence, investigators in the US and Europe are working on the assumption that 30 terrorists, in six teams, were intended to have taken part in the onslaught. It is thought at least one plane was to have been aimed at the White House.

...

An intelligence source in the US said another plane due to have been hijacked was a Continental Airlines flight from Newark on the morning of September 11. Retractable knives (similar to Stanley knives) of the same type used in the four successful hijackings were found taped to the backs of fold-down trays.

...

The source did not give details of the sixth plane. However, similar knives were found stashed in the seats on a plane which had been due to leave Logan airport in Boston the same morning, and which was delayed and then cancelled.²²

The Daytona Beach News Journal reported that authorities were particularly alarmed by the mystery plane due to the bizarre message found "scratched" into its front wheel well. They were also concerned that the Continental jet took off at "roughly the same time" as Flight 93, which also originated from Newark:

FBI agents and other law enforcement officers scrutinized a Continental Airlines jet stranded at Daytona Beach International Airport on

Wednesday after a security sweep revealed a scrawled message apparently addressing President Bush. The salutation, which officials did not release but sources confirmed made a reference to the president, prompted a close inspection of the craft partly because of its origin -- Newark International Airport in New Jersey. One of four planes hijacked in a wave of terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., on Tuesday took off from that airport at roughly the same time as the flight to Daytona. "(The graffiti) raised concern," Volusia County spokesman Dave Byron said.

Byron said the FBI is handling the investigation into the graffiti found on one of the plane's wheel wells. A thorough search of the Boeing 737 jet revealed nothing otherwise out of the ordinary, he said.

Meanwhile, as part of Wednesday's search at the airport, officers from several agencies used a bomb-sniffing dog to check both planes as required under the FAA's heightened security measures, Byron said. An officer found the message scratched into one of the Continental jet's wheel wells, officials said, prompting a more thorough search that involved deputies, FBI agents, the Daytona Beach Police crime scene processing unit and others. Sheriff Ben Johnson and other high-ranking officials showed up on the scene during the search. The Sheriff's Office bomb-disposal unit was among the vehicles surrounding the plane.²³

Whether the plane was first found during a security sweep by police or by an airport worker depends on the source. *The Daytona Beach News-Journal* article reported that "An officer found the message scratched into one of the Continental jet's wheel wells, officials said, prompting a more thorough search", while the local *Orlando Channel 9 Eyewitness News* maintained that it "was discovered by an airport worker." *Channel 9* reported:

The FBI is also investigating a suspicious airplane in Daytona Beach with a threatening message on it.

...

Federal agents searched a plane at the Daytona Beach International Airport. There was a scrawled message on the wheel well of a Continental plane was discovered by an airport worker. Officials would only say the message addressed President Bush. Federal agents are concerned because the plane originated in Newark, New Jersey on Tuesday. One of the four planes hijacked by terrorists on Tuesday was also out of Newark. A spokesman said the FBI told them not to discuss it.²⁴

In either case, it appears that no one searched the plane until the day after the attacks. The *Orlando Sentinel* ran a similar article: "The Continental flight from Newark, N.J., became the focus of attention when graffiti was found on one of the plane's wheel rims. Volusia County spokesman Dave Byron would not say what the inscription said or how it was written on the wheel. The plane was searched by the sheriff's bomb squad, and the FBI was notified."²⁵

Finally, according to a September 15, 2001 article from *The Mirror*, FBI agents left little to the imagination when initially voicing their concerns about the mysterious Continental jet:

FBI agents now believe a Continental Airlines plane was intended for an attack on President Bush while he was aboard Air Force One in Florida. A mysterious message found on the undercarriage of the jet at Daytona Beach, Florida.

One airport worker said: It was something like 'To Bush with Love'. A police spokesman said: The graffiti caused some concern. It is being investigated by the FBI - they want to know how it came to be on one of the wheel wells.²⁶



Photo Courtesy of the *Orlando Sentinel*.

There was only one Continental Airlines jet that was scheduled to arrive in Daytona Beach from Newark on the morning of September 11th, the tail number of which matches the one that was shown nationwide on CNN: N60312.

According to the Bureau of Transportation's detailed statistics for departure, on the morning of September 11, 2001, Continental Flight 1078 left its gate at 7:45 AM, 5 minutes ahead of the scheduled take off time of 7:50 AM. It took 25 minutes to taxi onto the runway and its wheels left Newark International Airport at precisely 8:10 AM.²⁷

Detailed Statistics

Departures

Airport: Newark, NJ - [Newark Liberty International \(EWR\)](#)

Airline: Continental Airlines (CO)

Month(s): September

Day(s): 11

Year(s): 2001

Carrier Code	Date (MM/DD/YYYY)	Flight Number	Tail Number	Destination Airport	Scheduled Departure Time	Actual Departure Time	Scheduled Elapsed Time (Minutes)	Actual Elapsed Time (Minutes)	Departure Delay (Minutes)	Wheels-off Time	Taxi-out Time (Minutes)
CO	09/11/2001	1078	N60312	DAB	07:50	07:45	0162	0152	-5	08:10	0025

It touched down at Daytona Beach International Airport at 10:15 AM, taxiing for 2 minutes. It had arrived fifteen minutes earlier than its scheduled time, which was not unusual. The entire flight lasted two and a half hours, spanning the length of the attacks and their immediate, chaotic aftermath.²⁸

Detailed Statistics

Arrivals

Airport: Daytona Beach, FL - [Daytona Beach International \(DAB\)](#)

Airline: Continental Airlines (CO)

Month(s): September

Day(s): 11

Year(s): 2001

Carrier Code	Date (MM/DD/YYYY)	Flight Number	Tail Number	Origin Airport	Scheduled Arrival Time	Actual Arrival Time	Scheduled Elapsed Time (Minutes)	Actual Elapsed Time (Minutes)	Arrival Delay (Minutes)	Wheels-on Time	Taxi-in Time (Minutes)
CO	09/11/2001	1078	N60312	EWR	10:32	10:17	0162	0152	-15	10:15	0002

It is curious that someone was able to vandalize Flight 1078 and escape unnoticed. Equally puzzling is the fact that no one appears to have attended to the personal property on board the jet once it landed. If box cutters were actually found "taped to the backs of fold-down trays" then the direct flight had obviously landed under suspicious conditions. If Flight 1078 had gone through normal landing procedures, it would have been inspected and cleaned that day. The box-cutters, if the Guardian article is correct, would have been found. The luggage would have made its way to the baggage claim. To what degree, then, had the plane been compromised?

Ultimately, the crime scene at the Daytona Beach International Airport acted as a macabre taunt to investigators. It could be argued that the scene was "staged," although the term usually applies to a deliberately altered crime scene meant to mislead or misdirect investigators. It would be appropriate to consider not only the motive of this particular crime (the seeming hijack of a plane and its vandalization), but the motive behind the staging itself (the elaborate scene left for investigators).²⁹

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