



Touching History: The Untold Story of the Drama That Unfolded in the Skies Over America on 9/11

Lynn Spencer, Ben Sliney (foreword), Larry Arnold (afterword)

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A moment to moment chronicle of the drama that unfolded in N. American skies on 9/11 as the FAA, the military & thousands of commercial pilots called on all of their training & courage to improvise a response to the first attacks on American soil since Pearl Harbor & contend with a new kind of aerial war.

Foreword

Preface

Prelude: Skies Severe Clear

American 11, do you hear me?

No ordinary hijacking

Another

Confusion in the cockpits

The unfathomable

A nation under attack

Secure the cockpit!

NORAD responds

No more take-offs!

The Pentagon is hit

Every plane out of the skies

Generate! Generate! Generate!

Chaos in the skies

Weapons free

Shoot down authority

A tightening grip

The skies belong to NORAD

The longest day

Epilogue

Afterword

Notes

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Touching History: The Untold Story of the Drama That Unfolded in the Skies Over America on 9/11 Details

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From Reader Review Touching History: The Untold Story of the Drama That Unfolded in the Skies Over America on 9/11 for online ebook

Alissa says

Very important book written from a unique perspective.

ej cullen says

How the aviation industry/military handled the 9/11 crisis. Stories of many commercial pilots and military pilots on that fateful day, and how they reacted to the unprecedented situation. Confusion reigns.

David says

Unique perspective on 9/11 -- not the story of the burning buildings, rescues on the ground, politics, or the passengers taking matters into their own hands on the flight that went down in PA. Instead, it's all about air traffic control and the effort to rapidly (a) assess what was happening and (b) regain control of the skies.

The book reads very quickly and gives an appreciation for what a confusing, overwhelming set of events it was in real time. People had to make instant, consequential decisions in the face of a lot of uncertainty, suboptimal communications capacities, and obviously tremendous stress. Some of the ways in which they dealt with these problems were fascinating (e.g., getting precommitment from fighter pilots that they would be willing to shoot down civilian planes if it became necessary -- seemed analogous to "prequalifying" jurors for trials in which the death penalty might come into play).

The book is written in tick-tock fashion (a chapter based on the 9:45 am situation in such-and-so air force base, then another from 9:50 am in a control tower somewhere else.....), and while that generally worked well, I could have used a bit more context. It's clear that the author sees her report as a counter to 9/11 commission report, but for the most part I could not understand in what way. The one specific disagreement I understood (whether or not they could have shot down the plane headed for White House before it got there) only becomes clear in afterward.

All told, though, a suspenseful account of an angle on 9/11 I had not read about in nearly this detail before.

Kim Raccoon says

People don't really think about what happened in the skies this day beyond the planes crashing and everything being grounded. There is so much more to that story and while not as emotional as stories of

people directly in the line of fire, this is still a very charged book that is worth a read.

Wes Baker says

Spencer provides a perspective on 9/11 I haven't seen from other accounts. She interviewed commercial and military pilots and air traffic controllers to provide an almost minute-by-minute account of the attacks and response. I was moved by the stories of pilots who were trying to figure out what was happening, of air traffic controllers trying to deal with an unprecedented event and military pilots answering the call to patrol the skies and, perhaps, have to shoot down a civilian aircraft. You get a sense of the "fog of war" as people tried to understand the unthinkable and everyone was having to work around a system that was inadequate to the task. I am thankful for the people who overcame those obstacles to prevent any further attacks--and there was at least one other attack foiled when a plane was grounded. It and the United flight were undoubtedly targeting Washington, D.C., so it's likely that additional attacks on the White House and Capitol building were planned.

Erik Graff says

Although author Spencer, herself a pilot, has no previous writing experience she has done a creditable job with this book, the result of three years research on events in the air over North America during 9/11. The book is a suspenseful page-turner.

While critical of the 9/11 Commission Report for errors and omissions, this book does not address all of the outstanding issues from that day. It does not address, for instance, Richard Clarke's critiques, nor the questions pertaining to the ability of the downed planes to effect the damage they did on the ground. It doesn't even mention the flights of Arabs, including members of Osama bin Laden's family, in USA airspace that occurred after global no-fly orders were given.

Such sins of omission notwithstanding, this appears to be a valuable contribution to the on-going debate about 9/11 and the political uses to which it has been put.

Jimmy Blair says

Very interesting insight into what was happening in the air and ATC facilities during 9/11.

Mary says

This book offers a really interesting perspective for the events of 9/11 that I had not previously seen or even thought about.

Don says

A behind the scenes look at the pilots and ground control that dealt with the events of 9/11. The most interesting section was the plane that was grounded after the first two planes hit the towers. The airport closed and no planes were allowed to take off. It was supposed to have taken off, but was 30 minutes late. There were 4 young Arab men in first class. When the plane was not allowed to take off they disappeared and we don't know what happened to them.

The military was not in place to stop any of the first 3 planes, but there was a fighter jet in position to stop United 93 had it not crashed in Pennsylvania. The jet had scrambled so fast it had no weapons on board. The fighter pilot was prepared to crash his fighter into the airline to bring it down before it reached Washington.

Tom Riley says

As a certified news-a-holic I thought I had read everything, seen every documentary and Discovery Channel special on 9/11. I didn't think there were any storylines that I wouldn't have at least heard of. Boy was I wrong.

This book is amazing. A true inside look at the minute to minute happenings between the military and civilian leadership, the airlines, the airports, and dozens of actual pilots who were in the skies on the morning of Sept 11th.

This is a must-read book.

Tom says

I read this book because I've been fascinated with the way that the air traffic control system in the United States managed, in about three hours, to entirely clear its airspace of all non-military or non-essential airtraffic, a function never contemplated for the ATC system. The improvisation and professionalism required to do this is pretty amazing, and, while one cannot say it went really smoothly, it worked about as well as anyone could possibly expect, with no serious mishaps despite the number of airplanes that came down.

The author is both a commercial pilot and a military pilot, so her interests sort of swing back and forth between what's going on in the cockpits of planes that were not hijacked, as well as on the jet fighters that were ultimately authorized to bring down any further airplanes threatening urban targets. I would have liked the book better had it focused on the ATC system itself--how it works, how controllers and pilots worked together to bring the planes down, how the airports managed to gather up and park planes that really didn't belong at some airports, and so on. This book is a good overview for the casual reader, but I would like to have seen the details. The writer is, of course, writing for a lay audience. The writing is workmanlike, but not particularly florid. But it's also a page turner, and I learned a lot.

Tippi says

I picked up this book after I heard the author do a reading from it at Barnes & Noble a couple of months ago. She wanted to share how 9/11 was experienced by combat and commercial pilots.

The beginning of the book is full of procedures and acronyms. While she does explain everything in layman's terms, it comes across as a bit clinical. Of course, once the attacks actually start, things get more "exciting" (if you could call it that).

Even though I watched the events of that day unfolding on CNN, this book does not recount the day I remember. I guess I couldn't really wrap my mind around it, but at the time I just thought those four (!) attacks were isolated incidents.

Reading about it from the pilots' perspective is like reading a Tom Clancy novel. Most of them have military experience; as a result, their first reaction is, "We're at war." When I heard that all flights had been grounded, it seemed like a natural response to the crisis. When they heard that order, it had so many more connotations. They were now viewed as threats by the jets that had been deployed and by their own air controllers, and viewed everyone else on their planes and in the skies as a threat. The book comes across as Pearl Harbor meets Thirteen Days, in that there is a catastrophic attack on the U.S., which might lead to the next World War.

Overall I tend to stay away from 9/11-themed movies or books, because I feel like they're trying to capitalize on people's emotions. This one won me over on that count, but there really wasn't that much new information. It's meant to be a defense of the military response and demonstrate that terrorists using planes as suicide bombs was never even considered a possibility, which is why they got away with it. I still think what I always thought: we were overwhelmed and unprepared, and did the best we could under those circumstances.

So if you're a 9/11 junkie, this one's for you. Otherwise, you already know the story.

Lina says

Oh, my - I guess this is what happens when you check out books without looking at the subtitle.

I thought this was going to be something about history, but it's actually a very dry, fairly technical book about aviation on September 11. The author is herself a pilot, and reading the book almost gives you the sensation of being a flight controller - she throws out about eight billion events and facts, and you just run out of time for any "drama in the skies." This was dreadfully boring.

Greg Bailey says

This is a pretty good book with one of the worst titles ever--which may be why the book, published in 2008, is already out of print.

The book recounts the events of 9/11 from the perspective of people in the aviation industry (pilots, etc.),

air-traffic controllers, and air-defense responders. It's a taut account filled with great details, quite a few of which I had not seen reported before. I came away somewhat appalled at the level of confusion that initially existed that day, but also impressed at the way the U.S. air-defense mechanism responded to a situation that was unprecedented and wholly unanticipated.

So, I liked the book. I'd actually rate it between three and four stars.

By why on earth did the publisher title it "Touching History"? Well, the author said in her preface that as she interviewed countless pilots, air-traffic controllers, government officials and others, she felt as if she was "touching history." OK, that's nice, but every reporter or author who interviews people about a big event would feel the same. Indeed, every historian could probably claim the same feeling. Incredibly, then, this book's title is about the author's experience of writing it, not about the experiences of the characters in the book. Really, something closer to the subject matter might have helped sell the book.

Jill Meyer says

Lynn Spencer's book on 9/11, "Touching History", is not a new book. It was originally published in 2008, and then republished in 2018. Spencer covers the response of the American air system - commercial, general, and governmental - to the attacks on 9/11.

Most people reading this review will remember "that day"; the skies were so blue almost everywhere in the country that they were termed by flyers as "severe clear". It was into those skies that three wide-bodied airplanes were flown into buildings and another went into the ground in rural Pennsylvania. But what of the other commercial airplanes in the air that day? Lynn Spencer interviewed pilots - both commercial and military - and airline and government officials as the skies were cleared. Spencer is a very good writer and the book is very interesting.

By the way, there's a fantastic graphic on You Tube. I can't link but if you put in "September 11th 2001 Airspace Shutdown (With Timeline)"
