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Commander of 9/11 Air Defenses Retires

BY ROBERT A. BAKER
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Col. Robert Marr Jr. was in charge of air defenses during the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. (Photo by Dick Blume)

ROME, N.Y. -- On Sept. 10, 2001, Col. Robert Marr Jr.'s mission at Griffiss Air Force Base appeared to be on the wane. The Cold War threat his National Guard unit was designed to keep in check had all but disappeared.

Twenty-four hours later, Marr found himself in the center of another war. His command, the Northeast Air Defense Sector, coordinated the military's air response to the terrorist attack that brought down the World Trade Center and ripped a massive hole in the Pentagon. By the end of that deadly day, Marr was in charge of elements of 24 Air Force and Air National Guard wings, a Marine Corps air group and two Navy aircraft carrier groups.

Marr had trained his whole life to make the decisions he made that day. His leadership Sept. 11 is what he'll be remembered for long after he steps down as commander of NEADS April 30.

NEADS is headquartered in a nondescript brick building on the sprawling former air base in Rome. The unit was designed as a Cold War defense against an external enemy attack.

But the group's mission changed Sept. 11, when the Federal Aviation Administration asked NEADS to put a plane in the air to keep an eye on a hijacked airliner. That airplane and three others would turn into weapons.

For many of the men and women serving under Marr, Sept. 11 stretched into a month of living in the building, subsisting on little more than a sense of duty mixed with adrenaline. Sometime during that period, when the days had stretched to weeks, Lt. Col. Kacey Blaney

When the FAA called Sept. 11, Marr already was in the Battle Cab, a room at NEADS headquarters where commanders manage an engagement and monitor 14 radar screens covering the borders of the United States.

"It's a pretty grave situation once you do call the military because our job is to bring violent force to a situation," Marr says. "When you call the military, you're seriously thinking about the possibility that people could die."

NEADS had nine minutes' notice before the first plane hit the World Trade Center. In the Battle Cab, Marr and his staff tried to make sense of what they were learning.

"Realistically, when you go to Sept. 11, the first one was a terrible accident; the second one was New York City under attack," Marr says. "And then, after that, we started getting reports of other hijacked aircraft. I think at one time I was told that across the nation there were some 29 different reports of hijackings."

The team's directive changed from following a hijacked airliner to intercepting aircraft before they could do any harm on the ground.

"No longer did we look at an enemy outside the borders, but now one had penetrated our borders and found a new weapon to use, an airliner that had been turned into a cruise missile," Marr says. "It was a different form of war."

The morning was "very high intensity, very reactive," Marr says.

"We were doing whatever we can to try and prevent the next thing," he says, "trying to get more fighters into the air than we had access to."

As American Flight 77, the third hijacked airplane, crashed into the Pentagon at 9:38 a.m., NEADS was still tracking airliners that may or may not have been hijacked.

United Airlines 93 was flying parallel to Delta Flight 1989 over Pennsylvania and heading west. Both were thought to be hijacked, Marr says.

"At that time, we didn't have any fighters out there; the only fighters we had were on the coast," Marr says. "I directed the battle staff to look for anyone who was out there, anyone who could help us out."

Two Air National Guard fighters had just taken off from Selfridge Air National Guard Base near Detroit and were heading north along Lake Michigan. The two fighters were ordered south in case United Airlines 93 was targeting Chicago.

...naming them that we're going to protect and the only guys we know of
are those guys that are in the air."

The only problem was that the two fighters were on a training mission and unarmed.

The mission crew commander asked Marr what they were going to do.

"I said, 'We're going to have the fighters fly as close to the cockpit as we can and we're going to convince that airliner that he can't get to Chicago and he needs to put down someplace else,'" Marr recalls.

And if they don't comply?

"And I said, 'Then we'll talk about what we have to ask those pilots to do,'" Marr says. "Yes, there were unarmed people in the air and, let's face it, you do what you've got to do if you're going to protect the populace. You're in the military."

Before it was intercepted by the fighters, United Airlines 93 turned around and headed toward Washington. Then it became a matter of strategy, Marr says. Do you have the jet fighters flying combat air patrol over Washington meet the plane, or do you wait for the airliner to come to them?

Marr ordered the jets to remain on patrol for fear of having the jet change course and get behind them. Over the nation's capital, two armed jets waited for the airliner to close in.

A passenger revolt on the airliner brought the plane down in a Pennsylvania field. If it had become necessary, Marr says, the jet pilots would have done their jobs.

"When you've gone home at night and you decide that maybe it's worth two fingers of Scotch as you're thinking about it, you allow yourself to drop some of the barriers and think about what you just had to do," Marr says. "On the other hand, when you're doing what's right and what's required, even though it's unpalatable, when you look at it and say, 'Yes, I might have had to direct the destruction of an airliner with 90 or whatever innocent people on board,' you're drawn into the other option, which is allowing that aircraft to continue and kill hundreds if not thousands of people.

"If you want to call it the lesser of two evils, then perhaps that's what you have to live with," Marr says.

"I have a duty or responsibility to do what's right, and I can't shirk that. I can't walk away from that. That's what I am, that's what I do.

"And if I decided no, I can't bring destruction on those people, I've just condemned the others.



The image shows the Wayback Machine interface. On the left is the logo for 'INTERNET ARCHIVE Wayback Machine BETA'. To the right is a search bar with a 'Go' button. Below the search bar, it displays '43 captures' and a date range '19 May 05 - 12 Sep 09'. A calendar grid is visible, with the date 'March 31, 2005' highlighted in yellow. A bar chart below the calendar shows the frequency of captures for each day, with a prominent peak on March 31st.

March 31, 2005

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