

F-16 pilot was ready to give her life on Sept. 11

The Washington Post



Photo: Jeff Swensen / Getty Images

WASHINGTON — Late in the morning of the Tuesday that changed everything, Lt. Heather “Lucky” Penney was on a runway at Andrews Air Force Base and ready to fly. She had her hand on the throttle of an F-16 and she had her orders: Bring down United Airlines Flight 93. The day’s fourth hijacked airliner seemed to be hurtling toward Washington. Penney, one of the first two combat pilots in the air that morning, was told to stop it.

The one thing she didn’t have as she roared into the crystalline sky was live ammunition. Or missiles. Or anything at all to throw at a hostile aircraft.

Except her own plane. So that was the plan. Because the surprise attacks were unfolding, in that innocent age, faster than they could arm war planes, Penney and her commanding officer went up to fly their jets straight into a Boeing 757.

“We wouldn’t be shooting it down. We’d be ramming the aircraft,” Penney recalls of her charge that day. “I would essentially be a kamikaze pilot.”

For years, Penney, one of the first generation of female combat pilots in the country, gave no interviews about her experiences on Sept. 11 (which included, eventually, escorting Air Force One back into Washington’s suddenly highly restricted airspace).

But years later, she is reflecting on one of the lesser-told tales of that endlessly examined morning: how the first counterpunch the U.S. military prepared to throw at the attackers

was effectively a suicide mission.

“We had to protect the airspace any way we could,” she said last week in her office at Lockheed Martin, where she is a director in the F-35 program.

Penney, now a major but still a petite blonde with a Colgate grin, is no longer a combat flier. She flew two tours in Iraq and she serves as a part-time National Guard pilot, mostly hauling VIPs around in a military Gulfstream. She takes the stick of her own vintage 1941 Taylorcraft tail-dragger whenever she can. But none of her thousands of hours in the air quite compare with the urgent rush of launching on what was supposed to be a one-way flight to a midair collision.

First of her kind

She was a rookie in the autumn of 2001, the first female F-16 pilot they’d ever had at the 121st Fighter Squadron of the D.C. Air National Guard. She had grown up smelling jet fuel. Her father flew jets in Vietnam and still races them. Penney got her pilot’s licence when she was a literature major at Purdue. She planned to be a teacher. But during a graduate program in American studies, Congress opened up combat aviation to women.

“I signed up immediately,” Penney says. “I wanted to be a fighter pilot like my dad.”

On that Tuesday, they had just finished two weeks of air combat training in Nevada. They were sitting around a briefing table when

someone looked in to say a plane had hit the World Trade Center in New York. When it happened once, they assumed it was some yahoo in a Cessna. When it happened again, they knew it was war.

But the surprise was complete. In the monumental confusion of those first hours, it was impossible to get clear orders. Nothing was ready. The jets were still equipped with dummy bullets from the training mission. As remarkable as it seems now, there were no armed aircraft standing by and no system in place to scramble them over Washington. Before that morning, all eyes were looking outward, still scanning the old Cold War threat paths for planes and missiles coming over the polar ice cap.

“There was no perceived threat at the time, especially one coming from the homeland like that,” says Col. George Degnon, vice commander of the 113th Wing at Andrews. “It was a little bit of a helpless feeling, but we did everything humanly possible to get the aircraft armed and in the air. It was amazing to see people react.”

Things are different today, -Degnon says. At least two “hot-cocked” planes are ready at all times, their pilots never more than yards from the cockpit.

A third plane hit the Pentagon, and almost at once came word that a fourth plane could be on the way, maybe more. The jets would be armed within an hour, but somebody had to fly now, weapons or no weapons.

“Lucky, you’re coming with me,” barked Col. Marc Sasseville.

They were gearing up in the pre-flight life-support area when Sasseville, struggling into his flight suit, met her eye.

“I’m going to go for the cockpit,” Sasseville said.

She replied without hesitating.

“I’ll take the tail.”

It was a plan. And a pact.

‘Let’s go!’

Penney had never scrambled a jet before. Normally the pre-flight is a half-hour or so of methodical checks. She automatically started going down the list.

“Lucky, what are you doing? Get your butt up there and let’s go!” Sasseville shouted.

She climbed in, rushed to power up the engines, screamed for her ground crew to pull the chocks. The crew chief still had his headphones plugged into the fuselage as she nudged the throttle forward. He ran along pulling safety pins from the jet as it moved forward.

She muttered a fighter pilot’s prayer — “God, don’t let me [expletive] up” — and followed Sasseville into the sky.

They screamed over the smoldering Pentagon, heading northwest at more than 400 mph, flying low and scanning the clear horizon. Her commander had time to think about the best place to hit the enemy.

“We don’t train to bring down airliners,” said Sasseville, now stationed at the Pentagon. “If you just hit the engine, it could still glide and you could guide it to a target. My thought was the cockpit or the wing.”

He also thought about his ejection seat.

Would there be an instant just before impact?

“I was hoping to do both at the same time,” he says. “It probably wasn’t going to work, but that’s what I was hoping.”

Penney worried about missing the target if she tried to bail out.

“If you eject and your jet soars through without impact . . .” she trails off, the thought of failing more dreadful than the thought of dying.

But she didn’t have to die. She didn’t have to knock down an airliner full of kids and salesmen and girlfriends. They did that themselves.

It would be hours before Penney and Sasseville learned that United 93 had already gone down in Pennsylvania, an insurrection by hostages willing to do just what the two Guard pilots had been willing to do: Anything. And everything.

“The real heroes are the passengers on Flight 93 who were willing to sacrifice themselves,” Penney says. “I was just an accidental witness to history.”

She and Sasseville flew the rest of the day, clearing the airspace, escorting the president, looking down onto a city that would soon be sending them to war.

Later, as the Penney family checked in on each other from around the country, they marveled at the other fateful twist on the extraordinary

events: the possibility that Penney's own father could well have been in the cockpit of her airliner target.

John Penney was a captain at United Airlines at the time. He had been flying East Coasts routes all the previous month. The daughter had no way of knowing whether the father was airborne or not.

"We talked about the possibility that I could have been on the plane," Col. John Penney said. "She knew I was flying that kind of rotation. But we never fell down and emotionally broke apart or anything like that. She's a fighter pilot; I'm a fighter pilot."

Penney is a single mom of two girls now. She still loves to fly. And she still thinks often of that extraordinary ride down the runway a decade ago.

"I genuinely believed that was going to be the last time I took off," she says. "If we did it right, this would be it."