

## FILM REVIEW



### **Grounded on 9/11**

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*Grounded on 9/11* is a documentary about air traffic controllers and dispatchers doing what had never been done, grounding all the planes flying over the United States. On 9/11, air traffic controllers had to make quick decisions about landing all planes after it was discovered terrorists had hijacked several flights.

While there were no actors, as this was a documentary, there were interviews with 15 key players that were working and directly involved with landing all the planes on 9/11. Those interviewed were: Bob Berry—ATC Specialist, New York Center; Jane Garvey—FAA Administrator, 1997-2001; John Carr—President National Air Traffic Controller Association; Bill Keaton—ATC Specialist, Cleveland Center; Doug Fralick—Director of Safety and Technology, NATCA; Capt. Hank Krakowski—Vice President, Security and Quality, United Airlines; Joe Vickers—Director of Flight Dispatch, United Airlines; Lt. Bernie Barabas—Commander, Cleveland Police, SWAT; David White—Tower Op. Specialist, NAV Canada, Whitehorse; Chris Moulard—Operations Manager, NAV Canada; Don O'Brien—Team Supervisor, NAV Canada, Gander Center; Bruce Terris—Tower Arrival Specialist; Richard Anderson—ATC Specialist, Memphis Center; Lt. General Norton Schwartz—Alaskan NORAD Commander, 1999-2002; and Bob Miller—Air Traffic Manager, NAV Canada, Whitehorse.

*Grounded on 9/11* starts out by describing the flying conditions on the morning of 9/11. It was what pilots call “severe clear” meaning it was a perfect day for flying. There were no clouds or rain anywhere in the country, which is really a rare thing. There were 30,000 flights scheduled for that day and when the first plane crashed into the World Trade Center, there were around 5,000 planes over or approaching near North America with one million total passengers. The air traffic controller’s primary task is to keep the planes separated. Planes must be three miles apart from wing to wing and a thousand feet apart from top to bottom. There are several roles and key players in a plane taking off and landing. There is ground control on the runway, departure control for the initial climb-out, and en route or center control that is responsible from the initial climb-out and on. The flight is then transferred from center to center. The controllers could be equated to traffic cops, directing the traffic in the air. Dispatchers work for the individual airlines and handle only their company’s vehicles by monitoring those flights. If there are pilot problems, a sick passenger, or some other emergency, the dispatchers handle it.

The documentary basically goes in the order of the events for that day from when the air traffic controllers and dispatchers thought the first plane crash was an accident to the point that all planes were grounded. The people being interviewed went into detail about specific flights that were hijacked or thought to be hijacked and how they handled those situations. The controllers and dispatchers were torn between getting the aircraft where they needed to go and worrying about their children, family and friends, wondering if they were safe. A new procedure was implemented that day which is still being used. It is called “positive contact” and it is where the dispatchers make contact with the planes every 10 or 15 minutes.

International flights coming to the United States were not allowed to land at their destinations, but were directed to Gander, Newfoundland. After United Flight 77 crashed into

the Pentagon, the Federal Aviation Administration declared all planes must be grounded, an order that had never been implemented. Once that order was declared, there was more than one flight grounded every second. “That day, 5,000 commercial flights were grounded within three hours with an estimated one million passengers with no preparation or plan, but with quick decisions and experienced judgments.” The documentary concluded noting that “written rules would impede the ability for air traffic controllers and dispatchers to land planes.”

The structure of the documentary was easy to follow. It went in chronological order, but it gave background information about the way planes are controlled from the ground whenever it was necessary to understand what was going on. The subject matter required knowledge of how air traffic controllers and dispatchers operate and the documentary did a good job of transitioning from background information back to the main point. Most movies are structured the same way as this one. They go in chronological order and fill in gaps in information when necessary. It is the simplest movie structure and the easiest to follow.

The documentary had a couple of special effects that I enjoyed. It had several live pictures of what an air traffic controller actually sees on their screen. It is basically a map with planes on it, representing where the planes are going, which allows them to determine if they are staying on course. There were also recordings of controllers and dispatchers trying to make contact with the planes that day, along with the transcript of the conversation on the screen. These effects made explaining the controllers’ and dispatchers’ jobs easier and the recordings and transcript put the audience in the employees’ shoes and allows us to see a small part of what they were experiencing that day. The directors were Jeffrey Fine and Mark Marabella. I thought they were successful in directing this documentary. The graphics were effective in helping the audience to better understand what was going on.

There was dramatic music when the situation called for it, such as when it showed the World Trade Center after the planes had crashed into it. When air traffic controllers had to figure out what they needed to do, the music was faster and high-pitched. If someone was to just hear the music, he could make a good guess about what part of the film it was or at least what kind of mood the directors were trying to set.

This documentary is significant for law and bioterrorism because it allows us to know what would happen if there were a bioterrorist attack similar to what happened on 9/11. Although, we would have to know that the bioterrorist act was occurring before air traffic controllers would have a reason to land the planes. A terrorist would have to announce to the plane that he either had a biological weapon or was infected by a highly contagious biological agent. This would have to happen on several flights or one terrorist would have to announce that other terrorists were on other flights before the FAA would land all flights. Even though airport security standards are more stringent than before 9/11, those standards remain susceptible to biological weapons. The recent case of Andrew Speaker proves that flights are not as secure as they need to be to protect passengers from biological weapons and highly contagious diseases.

*Grounded on 9/11* was accurate in portraying policy, science, public health, and international issues. The goal of most documentaries is usually accurately portraying a historical event. It did not specifically address law issues, but it did reference those other four. Air traffic controllers implemented a policy that day that had never been implemented before, which was grounding the planes. When the international flights had to be rerouted to Gander, Newfoundland, that airport had a plan in place in case the computers crashed on January 1, 2000. That plan is what they used to land the international flights. The documentary touched on science issues when it briefly discussed the technology that air traffic controllers and dispatchers

use to do their job, but the information relating to science is not extensive. This information appeared to be very accurate because the documentary showed the actual computers the air traffic controllers use along with the interviews with 15 professionals in the field. The public health issues mainly revolved around preventing as many deaths as possible by landing the planes. All planes had to be landed because it was impossible to know which planes had been hijacked. Because international flights were affected, the documentary also touched on international issues. The air traffic controllers in the United States had to work with those in Gander, Newfoundland to schedule the international flights' landing there. Accomplishing the safe landing of all international flights in another country took a cooperative effort of all those people involved. The events of that day affected travelers from all other countries and changed the world and the way countries deal with one another. Policy, science, public health, and international issues were portrayed accurately.

The documentary was interesting and allowed me to see 9/11 from a different perspective. I learned so much about the jobs of air traffic controllers and dispatchers. I had never fully understood what it took to ground all the planes or even who was in control of that aspect of the response to 9/11. It is good to know that our air traffic controllers now have experience in grounding all the planes and would be able to do it again if necessary. I recommend this movie to anyone interested in terrorism in general because the situation that day can be applied to several other scenarios.