

Ten years later, questions still linger

by Hugh Turley

Summing up his creative exploits as a young reporter in Baltimore, where he and his colleagues wrote made-up news, H.L. Mencken once said with straight-faced understatement, "Journalism is not an exact science." Mencken's droll observation, made in a chapter of his autobiography called "The Synthesis of the News," came to mind after a recent exchange of mine with one of the local practitioners of the trade. "Mission Unimaginable" was the title of the extraordinary article on the front page of the

Washington Post Style section on September 9, just in time for the 10th anniversary of the September 11 tragedy. Unimaginable, indeed! It turns out that staff writer Steve Hendrix had no proof for one of his central "facts," that is, that F-16 pilots had "orders to bring down United Air Lines Flight 93."

Regular readers of this column may have noticed one of the problems with this story. In September 2009, I reported the contradiction that the military both knew and did not know about Flight 93 before it crashed. My article quoted

U.S. Air Force Lt. Anthony Kuczynski saying he was ordered to shoot down Flight 93 and other Air Force brass confirmed that the Air Force had been tracking Flight 93 even before it went off course. This was a direct contradiction of the 9/11 Commission Report, which flatly stated the military had no knowledge of Flight 93 until after it had already crashed in Pennsylvania.

The Post article reminded me that this important contradiction has never been resolved. The recent story by Hendrix claimed two F-16 pilots took off from Andrews Air Force

Base in unarmed planes to ram Flight 93, Kamikaze-style.

Not only does it seem more sensible to intercept an errant plane by attempting less extreme measures first, that is official protocol. Think of a highway patrolman tasked with apprehending a motorist. The steps he follows may be summarized: solicit voluntary cooperation, threaten violence, employ violence. I emailed Hendrix and asked him who gave the order to these pilots to kill themselves and the passengers. I also asked him how the military had learned that flight 93 had been hijacked. He replied, "Don't know, honestly."

I then informed Hendrix that his story that pilots had orders to bring down Flight 93 contradicted the 9/11 Commission Report statement that the military did not know about Flight 93 until after it crashed. They can't both be true.

Hendrix then responded, "Penney [the military pilot] remembers a warning that a specific plane was suspected to be headed toward Washington, transponder off. I don't believe they were given a call sign, but I made it United 93. ..." To me, this was a stunning admission that there were, in fact, no "orders to bring down United Air Lines Flight 93," as he had written in his article.

Regarding the origin of the

suicide mission, at first Hendrix said, "their remarkable plan" to ram a passenger plane was the pilot's idea. Then he said, "[Their superiors] knew they were sending them up unarmed...to stop any incoming plane(s) and they knew that ramming it was probably the only way."

Really? The philosopher Rene Descartes said, "It is a mark of prudence never to place our complete trust in those who have deceived us even once." One must wonder at this point how much of the rest of Hendrix's story is accurate. His admission that he fudged the facts in this instance also calls the credibility of his employer into question.

The Washington Post, we might recall, initially publicized the "heroism" of PFC Jessica Lynch, reporting how she "fought fiercely and shot several enemy soldiers ... firing her weapon until she ran out of ammunition" and "continued firing at the Iraqis even after she sustained multiple gunshot wounds" and "was also stabbed." The decorated Lynch denied being wounded and courageously said she never fired a shot. Lynch was injured when the Humvee in which she was riding crashed into a tractor-trailer.

I do not know what truly happened on September 11, 2001. Are we likely to find the truth in any newspaper where news is reported in the fashion H.L. Mencken described?

Page 9

Hyattsville Life & Times | October 2011



Hugh's News