

# UNITED 93

By Gary Palamara

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Of all the events that took place on September 11, 2001, perhaps least reported by the media was the downing of United Airlines flight 93.

Because of the remote location of the crash site and the delays involved with getting "live" video images from the scene, the flight 93 story did not carry the same visual impact as planes crashing into the World Trade Center or the destruction at the Pentagon.

Nonetheless, to the 40 victims on board the aircraft, and to their surviving families, the horror of that event was no less tragic, no less painful.

Maybe it was out of a sense of respect or perhaps it was just morbid curiosity that led me in November of 2004, to visit the flight 93 crash site in Pennsylvania. I remember thinking at the time that I wanted to see this place, before time changed it forever. For me, it would be sort of like going back to see Pearl Harbor soon after the 1941 attack, rather than viewing it as I had, years later when everything was cleaned and sanitized by the decades.

So, when word reached me in 2006, that I would be taking part in some of the promotions for Hollywood's first attempt to tell the flight 93 story, I was both interested and wary.

If done correctly, attention would finally come to the heroic deeds of the passengers and crew on board the ill-fated aircraft. But I was wary because many Hollywood films come pre-packaged with a political agenda or try to make a "statement" of some kind. Luckily, that didn't happen with this film.

Below are my recollections of visiting the site, some info about the flight and a behind the scenes look at the film's promotion. The pictures from the crash site were all taken during that brief November 2004 visit.

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**Within a short time after arriving on site, I found myself standing on a windswept, moonscape hill outside the little Pennsylvania town of Shanksville.**

**Before me was a small makeshift building erected by the local towns folk. Visitors were encouraged to sign the guest book and**

**speak with the volunteers who kept the place open 7 days a week. One of the volunteers that I met that day lived on an adjacent property and had actually witnessed the crash.**

**To the right of the building, was a forty-foot section of fencing where previous visitors had left flowers and other memorabilia. Religious symbols, plaques and American flags dotted the landscape throughout the area.**

**In the distance, perhaps a quarter mile away across an open field was a double row of chain-link fences. The outer fence had an American flag attached to it but except for the no trespassing signs, the inner area had no markings at all. Within this doubly secure border was a slight depression in the earth surface with a mound of dirt just beyond. This area was all that remained of the United Airlines Flight 93 impact zone.**



## Background

While the final outcome of the Flight 93 story is widely known, as they say, the devil is in the details.

On the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, United Flight 93 took off from Newark Airport in New Jersey bound for San Francisco, California. Its scheduled departure time was 8:00 am. But due in part to airport congestion, the actual departure was delayed until 8:42. That delay, would later prove crucial for the fewer than normal passengers on board the Boeing 757.

The first forty-six minutes of flight 93 was routine, as the plane headed westbound and climbed to an altitude of thirty thousand feet. Then, at 9:24am, a United Airlines flight dispatcher sent the following text message via company radio to all cross-country airliners within his control. *“Beware any cockpit intrusion – two A/C hit World Trade Center”*. Puzzled by the message, 93’s Captain, pilot Jason Dahl, radioed back for clarification at 9:26am. The hijacking of United Flight 93 began less than two minutes later at 9:28.

According to Flight 93’s cockpit voice recorder, which was recovered at the crash site, after a long and protracted struggle to retake control of the aircraft, at 10:02:23am, one of the four hijackers shouted *“Pull it down. Pull it down”*. Less than a minute later, at 10:03:11, while flying upside down, United Flight 93, slammed into the ground at 580 miles per hour.

Upon impact the plane buried itself nearly 50 feet into the ground. As it struck, it pushed up the earth in front of the impact zone creating a huge dirt mound. Jet fuel sprayed into a row of hemlock trees just beyond the crash site and instantly caught on fire. The total number of souls on board was forty-four, thirty-seven passengers and a flight crew of seven. No one survived.

## First Films



This year, as the fifth anniversary of Sept. 11, 2001 approached, the motion picture industry offered up its first serious attempts to chronicle part of the 9-11 story.

Written and directed by Paul Greengrass and produced by Universal Studios, the full-length motion picture *“United 93,”* which debuted in April 2006, depicted the heroic efforts of 40 passengers and crew to thwart the hijacking of a United Airlines transcontinental jet. In August, Paramount Pictures also released the Oliver Stone movie *“World Trade Center,”* which

documents the successful rescue of two Port Authority policemen amidst the rubble of New York's Twin Towers.

My role for both films was to provide engineering services and audio equipment to facilitate the radio and television interviews used for the film's promotion. For the United 93 film however, I also had a unique front-row seat to view an historic invitation-only event.

### Issues

Almost immediately upon announcement of the "United 93" film project, questions began to surface about the movie. The controversy revolved largely around the timing of the release and also the showing of the film's trailer to unsuspecting moviegoers. For many it was too soon to revisit the memories of that September morning. For others, it is a story that needs to be told again and again. Surely the surviving families would have a unique perspective and I was anxious to hear their views.

Throughout the United 93 project, Universal Studios had worked closely with the victims' families. Writer/Director Greengrass secured the approval of every family of those killed aboard the plane, prior to beginning the project. But even so, as the film approached completion, their reaction to the first screening would be a critical component to help shape the last minute details and to promote the movie. To that end, Universal Studios arranged two invitation only screenings of the yet unfinished film for the surviving families.

One screening took place near Flight 93's origin, which was renamed Newark Liberty Airport in New Jersey, on Saturday, April 8. On Sunday, April 9 a second screening took place near the plane's destination point, in the San Francisco bay area of California. Other private screenings were arranged for those who could not attend either theater.

At both screenings, the film's director Paul Greengrass spoke to the families via a two way satellite hook-up from London. Greengrass was in England, mixing the final sound track and putting the finishing touches on the film.

### The Screenings

It was clear from the outset that for many loved ones of the victims killed on that September morning, the pain is still very real and immediate. After viewing the film there was a ten or fifteen-minute break while the families collected themselves.

The down time gave me, and the rest of the technical crew a chance to make last-minute audio and video checks with the London location. In

Newark, a portable satellite truck, video cameras, wireless microphones, plasma TV monitors and a separate theater sound system were all preset prior to the film's viewing.

When, the satellite conference began, director Greengrass asked the group if anyone thought that it was too soon, to tell the 93 story. None of the approximately 75 family members at my location said "yes." In fact, their reaction was quite the opposite.

To a person, everyone who spoke that afternoon appreciated what they all referred to as a horrifically accurate portrayal of the events as we know them. All seemed grateful that their loved one's sacrifice was finally visualized through the medium of film.

While it was extremely emotional for the families to view the screening, most had positive comments and applauded the director's efforts. Many thanked Greengrass for the ensemble manor in which the victims' stories were told. Aboard the plane, *"It was a group effort"* Said Greengrass *"and that's the way the story was portrayed on film."*

Perhaps one of the most poignant comments during the discussion came from a family member who spoke about being swept away by the film's storyline. She told of being detached from reality at times while watching the events unfold on screen. In a surreal moment, she even found herself wondering if the passengers would ever get to the cockpit in time to save the plane. Seconds later, she remembered the terrible truth.

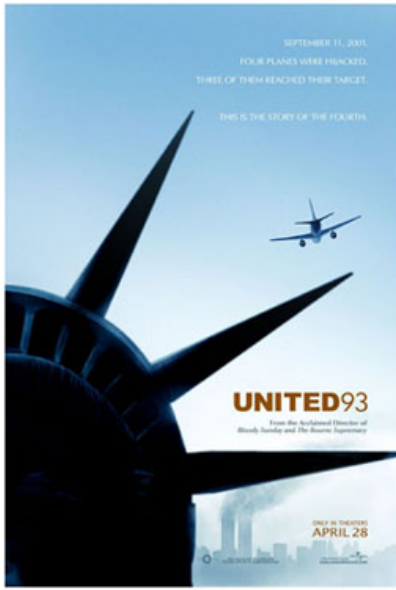
Speaking with colleagues who worked on the West Coast screening, the reaction of the families in San Francisco appeared quite similar to the folks in New Jersey. They too, overwhelmingly supported the film.

### Promoting the Film

When a movie company wants to promote a new film, it typically assembles many of the key players in one location and makes them available for press interviews. Such was the case with "United 93," although the atmosphere surrounding this film's promotion took on an almost reverent tone.

The promotions took place in New York City on April 18 and 19, with a series of radio, print and television interviews. Each Television journalist





had 5-6 minutes to interview each of the film's participants on camera. The radio and print interviews took the form of roundtable discussions. In this format, several reporters interview one or two of the principles from the film in a style similar to a mini “press conference”. Each round table interview typically runs 20 to 30 minutes. All of the reporters have access to the same questions and answers via an audio press mult and the engineering services I provide.

The interviews are also recorded digitally and are sometimes dubbed onto CD for future distribution by the movie studios. After five or six of these recording sessions, reporters will normally walk away with several hours of unedited interviews.

Along with the film’s director, a real world FAA flight controller and three actors who played key roles, several family members also took part in the film’s promotion. Among those were the parents of Todd Beamer, the brother of Edward Felt and the sister of Linda Gronlund who were all killed on board Flight 93.

Over the grueling two-day promotion schedule, hundreds of interviews were conducted. During that time, none of the family members that I came in contact with had a negative word about the project. When asked about viewing the film, Todd Beamer’s father David responded; *“Yea, it’s tough to see, because it’s a real story about real people, a real event, and a real war. But my first reaction was one of relief, because they got it right... They got it right.”*

*“It was incredibly painful and gut wrenching,”* said Edward Felt’s brother Gordon. *“But it’s a story that needs to be painful, it needs to shock, because it’s so important that we don’t forget the events.”*

### Accuracy

Director Greengrass striving for accuracy on every level, went as far as to hire many of the real people who actually participated in the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> to help tell the United 93 story.

Benjamin Sliney, who plays himself in the movie, actually



managed the FAA Command Center in Herndon, Virginia on the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup>. Sliney who began his career in the Air Force during the Viet-Nam war is a well-seasoned air controller. Nonetheless, he was perplexed by the events he witnessed on that September morning.

*“I’ve handled many hijacks in the course of my career but there was a different protocol for them prior to 9-11”* said Sliney. When a hijack occurred before September 11<sup>th</sup>, you got all of the other aircraft out of the way, helped the plane to land and then listened to the hijacker’s demands. *“At no time in history, as far as I know, did a hijacker ever pilot the plane. So, to watch an aircraft strike that building, (WTC) I could not believe that an American Flag pilot would do that. I don’t care if the hijackers had seven guns to his head, they would have done something to avoid loss of life on the ground. That’s the way they (the pilots) are built.”*

Sliney was the person who also made the decision to ground more than 4000 aircraft nation-wide. *“At that point we had either eleven or twelve suspicious aircraft and we had to do something...”* *“We needed to get all of the good guys out of the sky.”* *“I wondered if I had the authority to make that decision, but after “77” hit the Pentagon, I said that’s it, let’s get them on the ground.”*



### The Memorial

In 2004, when I visited the Flight 93 crash site volunteers told me that nearly five thousand people a month make the pilgrimage to that barren Pennsylvania field. In 2002, Congress had passed the Flight 93 National Memorial Act, which would purchase land and prepare the area for long-term use by the

National Parks Service. But funding to erect a proper memorial has been held up by bureaucratic red tape in Congress.

By September 2005, a final memorial design was announced and a thirty million dollar effort to generate private funding was begun. Encompassing approximately 2,200 acres, when finished, the Flight 93 memorial will be quite large. Included within, is an area of approximately 1,355 acres that contains the crash site itself, the debris field, and the area where human remains were found.

The estimated completion date for the memorial is now scheduled for September 11, 2011, the 10th anniversary of the attacks. To help further the project along, Universal Studios prior to the film's opening announced that it would donate 10% of the first weekend gross to the memorial fund.

### **Pictures Speak Louder than Words**

After several successful months in the theaters, "United 93" is now available for home viewing. Universal Home Video set a September 6, date for the DVD release. The disc version of United 93 includes audio commentary from the director and has a family section that takes a look at the real-life stories of the passengers and crew.

When listening to the family and friends of the 40 people who were killed on board United Flight 93, it is their hope that the movie itself will serve as a type of living memorial to their loved ones and their heroic deeds. Only time will tell if this movie will fulfill that long-term goal.

One thing does seem clear however. To the people most affected by this infamous moment of American history, the story of United Airlines Flight 93, was indeed right for the telling. In the words of Todd Beamer's mother Peggy, *"I think it's important to have it done now, for the generations to come, because of the history in it."* *"10 or 20 years from now, people aren't going to remember that much."* David Beamer agreed, *"Too much later and we'd perhaps lose some of the facts."* *"My general suggestion to Americans and free people everywhere is, they should see this movie."*

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A shortened version of this story appeared in Radio World magazine September 1, 2006 Page 18. The Website version was updated on August 2, 2006.

Information about the Flight 93 memorial project can be found at

<http://www.nationalparks.org/flight93/default.asp>

Information about the film United 93 can be found at

<http://www.united93movie.com/index.php>