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Lieutenant General Thomas Keck unexpectedly found himself at the president’s side on September 11, 2001, and now for the first time reveals his full inside account of those dramatic first hours when America was under terrorist attack. By Gregory A. Freeman

As in much of the country, it was a beautiful, blue-sky day in Shreveport, Louisiana. Lieutenant General Thomas Keck sat inside a windowless command post at Barksdale Air Force Base monitoring its part in a worldwide but routine drill in which ground crews were practicing all the steps necessary to get a fleet of B-52 bombers fueled, armed and on their way.

Even though it was only a drill, the command center was tense, everyone proceeding as if the planes would soon take off on bombing runs, instead of just idling at the end of the runway.

At precisely 8 a.m. CDT, an alarm sounded across the base and say, ‘Sit, this is an exercise input,’ and then you give me the information.”

“No, sir,” the junior officer replied as he pointed to a television monitor showing breaking news on CNN.

When Keck saw the smoke pouring from New York’s World Trade Center, his first reaction was the same as most people’s: How could such a terrible accident happen? And then, just as millions of others watched in horror, he saw the second plane hit. Keck realized the United States was under attack.

“Lock it down!” he barked at his staff, signaling that the drill was over and the base was now in a real-world crisis situation.

“At that point we went to Threat Condition Delta, our high-est,” Keck said later. “With the years and years of drilling and training, there wasn’t a bit of confusion. People just knew what to do.”

It was a fortunate twist of fate that the crisis unfolded on a morning when the Barksdale base was already on its best footing, ready for the worst. When Keck and his crews started out that morning, a major military crisis was imagined. As the imaginary crisis turned into reality, the general knew he was already several steps ahead: His base was secure, all bases were prepared to respond to his orders, battle staffs were up and running, and his top officers were already at his side.

The command staff immediately ended the drill but left the

The President Is Coming!
fueled and armed planes where they were. For the crews in their bombers, ready to roar off at a moment’s notice, all they knew was that something very serious was happening, and they were not being asked to stand down.

“We decided to leave the crews in the aircraft because we didn’t know what was going on, and if for some reason we had to evacuate the base, they’d already be there, ready to leave,” Keck recalled.

Keck left the command center where he oversaw the drill, and raced to the Eighth Air Force battle staff to get briefed on reports coming in from Air Force officers on the ground. "The planes that the World Trade Center: The Protectors has been attacked. Other planes are unaccounted for. Though already at Tinker Airforce Base, Keck ordered the base perimeter locked down as well. The Delta order had sent crews scrambling to erect the concrete and metal barriers that prevent vehicles from charging the perimeter gates. Keck’s additional order prompted them to enforce the highest form of checkpoint security. Armed sentries stopped everyone trying to enter or leave the base, scrutinizing credentials closely and barring entry to anyone with no explicit reason to be there. Even though many airmen on the base didn’t know exactly what was happening, they realized it had to be big to call off a worldwide drill by the Eighth Air Force.

Keck monitored all the information flowing in from military commands across the country and was bombarded by phone messages—written reporting the latest intelligence from the Air Force and status reports on base security. Among all the critical data flying at him, a seemingly innocuous bit of information grabbed his attention: A plane bound to Burbank had radiated ahead requesting 150,000 pounds of fuel, 70 box bales, 25 pounds of bananas, 40 gallons of juice, caboodles and coffee.

It was common for military planes to stop over at Burbank for fuel and other supplies, and they occasionally carried distinguished visitors, or DVSs, such as senators and congressmen. But 25 pounds of bananas? Keck paused. “I said to my people, ‘Who the heck is this?’ and they told me they didn’t know that the plane wouldn’t identify itself except to say there were DVSs on board and it was Code Alpha.”

The plane's pilot then reported that the DVSs on board were four congressmen, but Code Alpha meant top priority, and on a day like this to the Air Force pilot would send that term around casually. The supplies requested, including the 25 pounds of bananas, clearly meant this was a big plane and that the passengers might be on board for quite a while, so he was going to a remote destination. This wasn’t just a plane carrying four congressmen, Keck surmised. It didn’t take long for it to sink in that, in the wake of the most deadly attack ever on American soil, his base would soon become the temporary safe haven for the president of the United States.

Air Force One had landed at Burbank in recent years, with all the hoopla and baseline that accompanied any presidential visit. But on September 11, 2001, Keck had just 20 minutes to prepare for the commander in chief. No time to paint the grass green and roll out the red carpet. This presidential visit to Burbank would be all business—of the most crucial kind: Would there be more attacks? Was Air Force One itself targeted by the terrorists?

AT 9:30 A.M. EDT, the president addressed the nation from Emma E. Booker Elementary School, in Sarasota, Fla.; the official motorcade then rushed to the Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport. Meanwhile, a third hijacked plane had crashed into the Pentagon in Washington. At 9:54 just over an hour after the first plane hit the north tower of the World Trade Center, Air Force One left Sarasota. Taking it at high speed and then taking off at a much steeper angle than normal, the Air Force One crew’s goal was to get the president airborne as fast as possible, where the sophisticated plane could keep him safe.

At about the time that Air Force One went wheels-up, the WTC south tower collapsed. Roughly 40 minutes later, a fourth airliner went down in Somerset County, Pa. Originally the president’s plane was bound for Washington, D.C., but given the continuing information reports of disaster, the possibility that Washington might still be under attack and that there might be a threat against Air Force One, it was soon diverted westward.

The plane flew a 3,000-mile course, the Air Force crew keep ing its destination secret. Air traffic controllers passed the giant aircraft from one to another with a simple admonition that went unspoken: “Don’t ask where they're going. Just clear the airspace for them.”

The president decided that he must speak again to the American people. He ordered the 747’s crew to put the plane down somewhere, so he could go before the cameras and address a nation now gripped in crisis.

When Keck realized the president was coming, he ordered his staff to make all the arrangements for receiving a large inbound aircraft. Burbank was used to receiving “presidential” planes, those stopping over for fuel and supplies while on their way somewhere else. The only difference that morning was that the transient was Air Force One. Across the base, crews immediately began preparing the fuel delivery and other supplies for the big 747’s arrival.

While Keck felt certain it was the presidential aircraft, he and his colleagues kept a lid on the plane’s identity as much as possible. Many on the base knew only that a big plane was headed in with some DVSs on board. The command did, however, alert the base military police that the incoming plane would need a full-on security detail the moment it came to a stop on the runway. His staff reported that they had arranged for the base’s conference room to house the inbound DVSs while the plane was being serviced. Keck approved, as he knew it was the biggest
workplace available for the president and his entourage. Ultimately, Keck knew his job was to ensure that the president would have the entire base at his disposal. As soon as the 747, with its baby-blue paint and presidential seal, became visible on the horizon, everyone knew this was no more congressional delegation on its way home. President George W. Bush was landing at Barksdale in the middle of an unprecedented national crisis.

The Barksdale crew were now all basement, the usual fainter replaced with plenty of anxiety. The plane touched down at 11:40 a.m. EDT (10:40 in Shreveport) and rolled to a stop as dozens of belled-ed military police wearing flak jackets and carrying automatic weapons raced to surround the aircraft. The presidential party was hustled off the plane practically as soon as its wheels stopped. Keck, heading toward the tarmac, met the president and his aids just as they were entering the base conference room.

Skipping pleasantries, President Bush said to Keck, "I need to get to a secure phone."

"Come to my office," Keck said as he led him quickly away. "Tell me exactly where I am," the president said. "Sir, you're on the east side of the Red River, Bossier City, right across the river from Shreveport," said Keck.

With a slight grin, never breaking stride, Bush said, "I put you on the map today." "Yes, sir, you sure did," Keck replied.

President Bush looks out a window of Air Force One while on route to Barksdale. The president's plane was considered a potential target of the yet unidentified terrorist attackers.

At that point there was still a very serious concern that Air Force One might be targeted. The Eighth Air Force commander remained at Bush's side the whole time the president was at Barksdale, both of them working intensely. Keck has since stated that he was impressed by his commander in chief. "If you need some reports, they make it sound like he was a dean caught in the headlights. That's not what I saw that day. He was totally in command, very much in charge and not being led around by anybody."

At one point, the president's aids brought him a draft of the speech he was about to make to the American people. After editing the speech for a few minutes, making corrections and changes, President Bush said, "I use the word 'resolve' twice in this speech. Shall I say it twice?" No one else in the room spoke up, so Keck offered, "Mr. President, I think the American people want to hear that we have strong resolve and reiterating it is probably a good idea."

Bush replied "OK" and continued working on the speech. At that moment, Keck realized he had just contributed to what would be an historic statement by the president.

Soon after, sitting on the sofa in Keck's office amid a whirlwind of activity, President Bush watched for the first time a reply on CNN of the towers coming down. Visibly saddened and angered, he turned and spoke directly to Keck. "I don't know who this is, but we're going to find out and we're going to go after them, and we're not just going to slap them on the wrist."

clear the airspace for them."

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On the ground at Barksdale, Air Force One is protected by armed guards. "Freedom itself was attacked this morning," said President Bush in an address from the base. "The resolve of our great nation is being tested."

We're going after them.

"Yes, Mr. President," Keck said, feeling assured by the president's determination. "We're with you."

Keck recalls the moment as intensely genuine. In a room above with activity, the president of the United States was telling him, one on one, that these acts would not go unpunished. "It was not rehearsed. No one told him to say it. It just came out when he saw the tower come down. He was sitting right there on my sofa, and I knew he meant every word."

Though he was at the disposal of his commander in chief, Keck still had plenty to do that day to ensure that the air base was secure and that his crews were ready to respond to whatever the next crisis might be. As the minutes passed that morning, it seemed as if everyone in the country, including Keck and his officers, was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Of immediate concern was the big, attractive target sitting just outside Keck's office. Air Force One was parked near some B-52s as crews refueled and loaded it with provisions for the rest of its journey. Keck was responsible for protecting the plane and the president from any attack while they were on his base, which was already a prime target because of its key fleet of B-52s. Attack on the base by a hijacked airliner was never among the anticipated scenarios, however, so the base's air security was light.

Other bases might be able to put up a perimeter of fighters fairly quickly, but Keck realized that he had only the lumbering bombers to launch, and they couldn't do much against a terrorist attack by air. Something had to be done to provide cover for the base and Air Force One, so he got on the phone with Brig. Gen. Jack Ille, commander of the 917th Wing of the Air Force Reserve at the base, and asked for help.

"Jack, can you give any kind of defense?" he asked the brigadier general. "You got it!" was the immediate response.
man, and was identified as "Bob Keller" because they can deliver a devastating amount of firepower against tanks and ground forces.

"An A-10 is not fast, so they'll have to hustle to catch up with an airliner at high speed, but its gun is deadly," Keck later recalled. "That's what we had, so we parked the order at the end of the runway on cockpit alert, with crews ready to take off at the first sign of trouble. We felt better having them there, and then NORAD sent over a couple of F-16s before long."

Even though several flights departed at noon, EDT, calling for a halt to all air traffic, some commercial and private planes slow to observe the order were still in the air, along with numerous military craft. The whole time the president was on the base, Keck and the White House aides were getting reports of unidentified aircraft headed toward Burbank.

Under Threaten Delta, and what Keck's staff already knew of the day's shocking events, there was a low threshold for declaring any incoming plane or object a threat. The Eighth Air Force commander wasted no time keeping his staff; he kept them closely apprised of each questionable target.

There were no precise rules of engagement established that morning, so Keck knew that he and the A-10 pilots would have to rely on the same best judgment of the moment came.

If necessary, the commander was ready to give the order to fire on any plane that threatened the base.

"The rules of engagement would probably have been common sense if a high-speed airliner was coming in, not upwinking and not talking to anybody," he said. "You'd have to use common sense, and that morning it wasn't far-fetched to think that they'd have to contend with force."

When President Bush was finished editing his speech, Keck escorted him to the conference room where reporters who had been traveling on Air Force One were assembled. A horde of local reporters who had gathered at the Burbank gate was denied access for security reasons. Keck watched as President Bush addressed the nation, then walked with him back to the office to see the tape played on television within minutes. As they were watching the address, Bush turned to Keck and said, "You know, this country is going to go from shock to grieving to rage." He passed and then added: "Some people will even skip the grieving part. They're going to go straight to rage."

"Yes, sir, we can identify with that," Keck replied, knowing he was speaking for many men and women under his command.

The president continued wording the planes in Keck's office, talking with New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and New York Governor George Pataki. Keck heard Bush offering reassurance and whatever practical support the federal government could provide. He and his team also kept President Bush and his aides informed about the intelligence coming in via Air Force channels regarding the four hijacked airplanes and the events of that morning.

AFTER NEARLY TWO HOURS at Burbank, the president and his entourage prepared to reboard Air Force One. As Keck stepped out onto the tarmac, he heard the dull roar of F-16 fighter jets overhead and felt relieved. NORAD's planes were up there defending the base and the president. Keck joined Bush in Scaur Morn for the ride back to the waiting 747. The four commandos and most of the reporters who had arrived with the president were left behind at Burbank.

As the minimum and several other cars drove across the base, they were passed by a row of B-52 bombers, sitting where they had been left that morning during the drill. Three crewmen—men who had heard only the most basic reports about the attacks on New York and the Pentagon—were still aboard and at the ready, watching the president arrive unexpectedly and now depart. Crossing the tarmac, President Bush watched the huge bombers and saw each of the crews holding their cockpit windows, giving him a thumbs up.

Military police shoted and other Air Force crew checked as the president made his way to Air Force One. Keck, bidding farewell to Bush at the foot of the stairs, had one more thing to say: "Mr. President, you saw those thumbs up, didn't you? You know what that means, don't you?" "I sure do," the president replied.

"These troops are trained, they're ready and they'll do whatever you want them to," Keck said. Bush looked the commandant squarely in the eyes and said, "I know." Then the two exchanged salutes and the president boarded the steps.

Air Force One taxied quickly to the runway, waiting not so much getting into the air. As the big plane lifted off, two F-16s pulled alongside as escorts. No one revealed the plane's destination, but Keck had a good idea. He knew the most sensible place would be Offutt Air Force Base just south of Omaha in southeastern Nebraska, at ultra-secret location and home of the United States Strategic Command. He had been 55th Wing commandant at the base in the early 1990s. Keck was good friends with the StratCom commander at Offutt, Admiral Richard W. Min, as he went to the secure phone in his office and gave him a call.

"Rich, you've got an aircraft inbound," was all he said. His friend understood.

ON ANY PLANE THAT THREATENED THE BASE.