

OPINION

Real Heroes, Fake Stories

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It is one of the most stirring accounts of heroism to emerge from 9/11: a fighter pilot from Andrews Air Force Base near Washington returns from a training mission, finds out that a plane, United Airlines Flight 93, has been hijacked and is heading for Washington, then takes off without refueling and low on ammunition in pursuit.

According to “Touching History,” Lynn Spencer’s recent account of what “unfolded over the skies” on 9/11, the pilot, Maj. Billy Hutchison, took off and flew over the Pentagon, asking the civilian air traffic controllers to give him a vector from his current location along with a distance to the target.

“This method works, and Hutchison quickly spots the aircraft on his radar,” writes Ms. Spencer. “He quickly comes up with a plan: he will try first to take the plane down with practice rounds fired into one of the engines, and then across the cockpit. ... If that does not sufficiently disable the aircraft, then he will use his own plane as a missile. He thinks again of his son and prays to God that his mission won’t end that way.”

It is hard to imagine a more thrilling, inspiring and detailed tale of fighter-jock heroism. There is only one problem with it: it isn’t true. It is about as close to truth as the myth of the Trojan Horse or the dime-store novels about Billy the Kid.

As we pointed out in the 9/11 commission report, the radar records of the day indicate that Major Hutchison did not take off until more than a half-hour after United 93 had crashed near Shanksville, Pa., and a good 20 minutes after the wreckage had been located. He could not have seen United 93 on his scope, and could not have intercepted

it. Like thousands of others that day, he did his duty. He was brave. But his tale isn’t true.

The Billy Hutchison story is an example of a phenomenon that the 9/11 commission staff encountered frequently: heroic embellishment. If something good happened that morning, an amazing number of people took credit. Take, for instance, the decision to land all civilian aircraft. As the report notes: “This was an unprecedented order. The air traffic control system handled it with great skill, as about 4,500 ... aircraft soon landed without incident.” But whose idea was it?

In the aftermath of 9/11, Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta claimed that he ordered all civilian aircraft to land: “I said ... ‘get the damn planes down,’ ” he told ABC News. Richard Clarke, the National Security Council’s antiterrorism director, has written it was he who prompted the order, by saying to Jane Garvey, the Federal Aviation Administration’s director, “O.K., Jane, how long will it take to get all aircraft now aloft onto the ground somewhere?”

In fact, the commission established that the order was issued by Ben Sliney, the aviation administration’s national operations manager, on his own initiative, after hearing that the Pentagon had been hit.

Most of the exaggerated claims from 9/11 are harmless, springing as they do from some combination of the unreliability of witness recollection, the psychological need for consolation after a defeat, and the human love of a good story. They are, more than anything else, a commentary on human nature.

Others, however, are not harmless, not innocent, and cannot go unchallenged. In fact, they fuel distrust of the government, give rise to conspiracy theories and threaten to set back America’s efforts to avoid future 9/11’s.

Take, for instance, the tale of Major Hutchison, which is part of a larger and totally discredited story. After 9/11, military and government officials undertook an aggressive public relations effort. In testimony before Congress and the 9/11 commission, in numerous interviews, and in an official Air Force history, these officials told the country that by the time United 93 turned toward Washington, President Bush had issued the shoot-down authorization, Vice President Dick Cheney had passed it on, fighters were standing by over Washington and, as the military’s commander at the Northeast Air Defense Sector headquarters in Rome, N.Y., told ABC News of the authorization to shoot down the planes: “We of course passed it on to the pilots. United Airlines Flight 93 will not be allowed to reach Washington.”

Yet the commission established that none of this happened. Once we subpoenaed the relevant tapes and other records, the story fell apart. Contrary to the testimony of retired Gen. Larry Arnold, who on 9/11 was the commander of continental defense for the North American Aerospace Defense Command, fighters were not scrambled that morning to meet the threat posed by United 93. In fact, the fighters were sent up in response to an unrelated and mistaken report that General Arnold and others had not disclosed to the commission. Flight 93 hadn’t even been hijacked when the planes were ordered scrambled, and General Arnold’s command found out the plane was hijacked only after it had crashed. The authorization to shoot it down came after it had crashed, and was never passed on to the pilots.

No one is telling that tale anymore, but the damage was done. Because the story couldn’t withstand scrutiny, the public was left free to believe anything, and to doubt everything. Many still believe that a cruise missile hit the Pentagon; that 9/11 was an “inside job” by American and Israeli intelligence; that the military actually did shoot down United 93.

Worse still, by overstating the effectiveness of national command and control by the time United 93 was heading for Washington, the government obscured the central reality of that morning: that the Washington establishment talked mainly to itself, disconnected from the reality on the ground and in the air. Because bureaucrats obscured that disconnect, they didn't fix it, in terms of national security or any other complicated federal emergency response. Thus the whole world got to see a very similar reaction in 2005, when Hurricane Katrina hit, and residents of New Orleans struggled to survive on their rooftops while officials in Washington issued reassuring statements.

The afterword to "Touching History" was written by General Arnold, despite his having been forced to retract his testimony to the 9/11 commission. ("I was wrong," he told the panel at its final hearing. "I was wrong.") He praises the book's "corrections to the record" because they recognize the heroism of people like Major Hutchison and expose the "political agenda" of the commission.

Yes, the commission staff looking into these events did have an agenda. Our team included a retired military officer who was badly burned in the Pentagon attack, and a former federal prosecutor whose wife lost both her brothers in the World Trade Center. We believed that telling misleading stories about what happened undermines the public's confidence in government, spawns conspiracy theories and compromises efforts to prepare for future events. Truth, not wishful thinking, is the most enduring memorial we can leave.

There were heroes on 9/11, people whose split-second decision-making saved lives. All too frequently, as in the case of many civilians and first responders in New York and the passengers and crew aboard United 93, those heroic deeds cost them their lives.

America lost that day. At critical moments, our nation was undefended — something the passengers on United 93 realized when they decided to work together to bring the plane down. We should not allow such real heroism of that day to be diminished, or the grim reality of that day to be obscured, by the self-serving agendas of would-be heroes.

John Farmer, John Azzarello and Miles Kara were staff members of the 9/11 commission.

Mineta's claim was used by Alex Jones to form the basis of his "Truther" conspiracy, that George W. Bush and Dick Cheney planned and executed the 9/11 attacks.