

REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION FOR THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY

THE ONLY PLANE IN THE SKY

Pulitzer Prize Finalist

GARRETT M. GRAFF

AN ORAL HISTORY OF 9/11

*New York
Times
Bestseller*

"This is history at its most immediate and moving." —JON MEACHAM

READING GROUP GUIDE

TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. September 11, 2001, is a day that many people remember well, and though more than two decades have passed, it is still a sensitive topic and difficult to discuss in-depth. What made your book group choose *The Only Plane in the Sky*, and were there any members who had reservations about revisiting the event in book form? If so, why?
2. How did each member of the group initially respond to reading about this particular event through oral history? What are the strengths or benefits of experiencing this story through this particular format? The difficulties?
3. Reading a work of historical nonfiction is unique because, unlike fiction, we often know how an event plays out and how the story ends before we even open the book. What was it like to read the opening chapters knowing what was about to happen next?
4. Whereas the typical 9/11 narrative is often centered only on New York City, *The Only Plane in the Sky* covers the events as they unfold in all three areas of impact and across the United States. What did you learn about the reactions and experiences of people in different locations? How were they similar or different?
5. As you read *The Only Plane in the Sky*, did you feel compelled to consume any other media about the day (articles, YouTube clips, etc.)?
6. A running theme throughout *The Only Plane in the Sky*—and all 9/11 stories in general—is heroism, and the active choice a person makes in the face of chaos and tragedy to step up, whether they are in the Twin Towers or on a hijacked aircraft or running back into the Pentagon to help wounded coworkers. Discuss what makes a hero; are they born? Are they made? Are we all capable of heroic acts?
7. Were there any chapters or moments in *The Only Plane in the Sky* that were particularly difficult to read? Were there any moments or memories that surprised, touched, or impacted you, or enhanced your understanding of what it was like to live through the day on the ground?

TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

8. The 9/11 attacks were unprecedented and unexpected, a fact that is underscored in *The Only Plane in the Sky* as we see officials across the United States—President Bush, Secretary Rumsfeld, Vice President Cheney, Mayor Giuliani, Governor Ridge, and more—scrambling to figure out what is going on and what is going to happen next. What would you do if you were in a position of power and an event like this occurred? Did you agree or disagree with any decisions that were made?
9. As noted in the book, an interesting thing to remember about 9/11 is the lack of communication options; the Internet was barely up and running, social media did not exist, and many people did not have cell phones. As a result, many people outside of the impacted areas did not know what was happening, or if more attacks were coming. How would the response and dissemination of information be different if an event like this were to happen today?
10. The attacks resulted in a war overseas, heightened security at home, changing views of race and ethnicity, and a fundamental shift in how we view humanity. How did 9/11 change the way you looked at the world or lived your life from day to day?
11. Most of the people quoted in *The Only Plane in the Sky* were adults at the time of the attacks, but it also features the perspectives of children, both on the day and those who came of age in the years after. How do you think the experiences of 9/11 are different or similar between the generations?
12. Are there any lessons or takeaways to be learned from the people and experiences depicted in *The Only Plane in the Sky*?

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. Take turns within the group sharing each person's experience and memory of 9/11. If everyone is comfortable, collect and record those memories to create your own oral history of the day.
2. A range of books have been published about 9/11 in the years since the attacks, including the non-fiction accounts *The Looming Tower*, *In the Shadow of No Towers*, and *102 Minutes*. There've also been novels such as *The Good Life*, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, and *Falling Man*. Choose one of those titles to read as a group, and compare/contrast it with your experience of reading *The Only Plane in the Sky*.
3. September 11 is now a federally-recognized holiday, called "September 11 National Day of Service and Remembrance," with the mission of inspiring civilians to dedicate time to others in the "spirit of service, unity, and peace, in tribute to the victims of 9/11 and terrorism worldwide." Choose a charity or organization in your local area that fulfills this mission, and volunteer there as a group, either on 9/11, or in honor of it on another day.

A CONVERSATION WITH GARRETT GRAFF

Before we get into specifics about *The Only Plane in the Sky*, it seems the most appropriate place to start is with the question that works its way into every conversation about September 11, 2001: Where were you? What do you remember?

My own 9/11 story is not particularly interesting—I was in college, at breakfast when I first heard of the attacks. But the memories of that day are burned into my mind vividly. Today, I could walk into that dining hall and walk directly to the seat where I was sitting that crisp September morning. I could recount too where everyone I was sitting with was seated, where my friend who told me that two planes had struck the World Trade Center was standing when she said it, precisely how her hand was resting on the dining table as she told us the news. Similarly, I can tell you precisely where I was standing when I realized the first tower had fallen—it fell while I was racing from my dorm to the campus newspaper—and where I was when I first saw a photo of Osama bin Laden on CNN and how confused I was: I'd never heard this name before. *How was everyone on TV so confident this was who had attacked us?* As I've now learned, my experience, memories, and waves of emotion that day are hardly unique—we all felt the surprise, which morphed into fear and then into strength.

I do remember one important personal reaction to 9/11: I was the crime reporter for the campus paper at the time, and I spent the day covering how the university was reacting to the attack. I remember being grateful for being a journalist that day, because it gave me something to do in the midst of the horror—a place to channel my energy and to focus my work rather than just sitting there as a passive observer. So many people that day had such a sense of helplessness watching that day; I was relieved I had something to do.

***The Only Plane in the Sky* is an expansion of an article you wrote for *POLITICO* in 2016, which was an oral history of 9/11 from the perspective of those aboard Air Force One. How did you come to write that article in the first place, and what made you decide it should be part of a larger narrative? Did experience writing your previous two books, *The Threat Matrix* and *Raven Rock*, contribute in any way to this project?**

Through one lens, almost all of my writing over 15 years has been trying to make sense of 9/11 and how it changed our country. I primarily cover federal law enforcement, national security, and intelligence—and nearly every story there is shaped by 9/11. Much of what I’ve written about in my magazine work, the Department of Homeland Security and the Director of National Intelligence, for instance, were direct creations of the government’s response to 9/11. And two of my books, *The Threat Matrix* (about the FBI’s counterterrorism efforts) and *Raven Rock* (about the government’s Doomsday plans), turn in large part on the events of 9/11.

In writing my last book, *Raven Rock*, about the Cold War and the U.S. government’s secret plans for doomsday, I became fascinated with the story of President Bush on 9/11—how at the moment of the nation’s greatest need for leadership, he spent much of the day hidden aboard Air Force One, stuck in a metal tube seven miles above the earth with little communication and little understanding of what was transpiring to his nation below. And so when I found myself weeks before the 15th anniversary sitting next to the wife of the colonel who piloted Air Force One that day, I set out to do an oral history centered on that flight and that day. I wasn’t interested in the facts of the day, which have been well-documented and are familiar to all of us, but instead about simply what it was like to live through the day—the surprise, the fear, the chaos.

The reaction to the story when it published in September 2016 was immediate—and overwhelming. Within days, “We’re The Only Plane in the Sky” had become *POLITICO* Magazine’s most-read article of all time. As people read, they wrote. That first day it published, a Friday, dozens of readers began to send me their own stories and memories of that day, then it was scores, then by the end of the weekend, hundreds. I heard from people across the United States, naturally, but also from readers from every continent but Antarctica, from readers in Spain, Poland, Egypt, Russia, Thailand, Korea, and Australia, among other places; I had never contemplated until then what 9/11 was like for those in the Pacific, for whom “9/11” was actually 9/12—that when they awoke, all of this tragedy had unfolded overnight, the attacks, the collapse,

everything. Similarly, I'd never imagined how the events might have struck someone far removed in a country like Poland—how the attack on us felt like an attack on them.

Two reactions from readers, though, stuck in my mind in particular: One came from a mother, a veteran, who wrote to say that she had two children, 7 and 9, and that she had printed out my article and set it aside so that when her children were old enough to read, she could use it to explain why Mommy went off to war. Another young veteran of three deployments, two to Afghanistan, one to Iraq, wrote in to tell me that he'd only been in middle school on 9/11, and had fought in the two wars that spawned that day without ever fully grasping the trauma the nation felt on 9/11. I was dumbfounded—what must it be like to be one of the servicemen or servicewomen fighting overseas today who has no memory of September 11th itself?

The totality of that reader reaction—and the idea of helping current and future generations understand this day—led me to expand that article into this book.

How did you select the stories to feature in *The Only Plane in the Sky*? Where are they all from? Were there narratives, memories, moments, or aspects of the day that you wanted to include in the book that you could not? Was there anything you were hesitant to focus on but felt you should anyway?

Numerous institutions had the good sense to go out and capture personal stories of 9/11 soon after that attacks, from national efforts like StoryCorps and the National September 11th Memorial and Museum, to more specific ones like the New York fire department, which did oral histories with several hundred firefighters, EMTs, and paramedics as part of its own after-action report. Most of those documents and archives, though, turned out never to have been used—many had never even been read or transcribed since they were originally recorded—and I spent months just wrapping my head around the archival materials available.

To assemble this book, I worked for two years with Jenny Pachucki, an oral historian who has dedicated her career to stories of 9/11; we located about five thousand relevant oral histories collected and archived around the country. We closely read or listened to about two thousand of those stories to identify the voices and memories featured here, and to supplement those archival primary sources, I've also collected more than one hundred unique interviews and stories myself. The finished book includes about 480 voices, some of whom you follow straight through the day and some of whom appear only once.

In the years since 9/11, certain names—Welles Crowther, Father Mychal Judge, Lisa Jefferson, John O'Neill, Todd Beamer—have become near-iconic representations of the day's bravery and heroism. While these people appear in *The Only Plane in the Sky*, the majority of main narrators are names that may not be as familiar as theirs. Was it a deliberate choice to feature potentially lesser-known people and stories in this book?

One of the most limiting factors in writing an oral history is you're entirely reliant—almost by definition—on those who survive. I would have loved to feature more of the day and thoughts of Mychal Judge, John O'Neill, Todd Beamer, and other victims like them, but we don't know as much about their days as we would like. I supplemented the survivors' stories throughout with contemporaneous recordings—voicemails, phone calls, and cockpit voice recorders—but even that gives us only the smallest inkling of the experiences in or above the impact zones or on board the planes. (Part of what is strange today is thinking about how different our understanding of 9/11 would be with modern technologies—with tweets or videos from on board the plane, with Facebook Live recordings or Instagram photos in the impact zones, and so forth.)

More broadly, though, part of what makes 9/11 such a powerful moment in our history is how it affected ordinary people. As Navy SEAL Rob O'Neill, who was part of the Bin Laden raid in 2011, says in the epilogue of *The Only Plane in the Sky*, no one signed up to fight in the battle of 9/11, it wasn't a war zone where drama and heroics might be expected. It was an ordinary Tuesday in America, a work day like a thousand before and a thousand after, a day when people went to work or boarded a plane expecting more boring routine. Only the 19 hijackers had any idea what was in store for the day instead. The people thrust into the middle of the drama that day did their best amid unprecedented events, and the story of 9/11 is really their story. I remain fascinated that for most of the day President Bush really didn't know much more than the average American sitting at home watching CNN. It was a day when we were all left to our own devices to sort out the events as best we could.

Was there any additional research that you did to understand the broader picture of 9/11? Were any books, documentaries, or other resources particularly helpful in your understanding of how to depict the day and the aftermath?

I voraciously consumed an incredible amount of the literature on 9/11 to help put this book together, in part to understand what story lines and events over the course of the day were most important to include. Oddly, two of the first books written

about 9/11—Mitchell Fink and Lois Mathias's own collection of oral histories, *Never Forget*, and Jim Dwyer and Kevin Flynn's *102 Minutes: The Untold Story of the Fight to Survive Inside the Twin Towers*—remain today among the best books ever published on that day. The standout book on the Pentagon is *Firefight: Inside the Battle to Save the Pentagon on 9/11*, by Patrick Creed and Rick Newman, and there are two terrific books about that day in the air over America: Jere Longman's *Among the Heroes: United Flight 93 and the Passengers and Crew Who Fought Back* and Lynn Spencer's *Touching History: The Untold Story of the Drama That Unfolded in the Skies Over America on 9/11*. Two of the books I found myself most moved by, though, both focused on the maritime evacuation from New York, which remains a little-known Herculean effort by ordinary citizens to save their fellow Americans: I highly recommend Jessica DuLong's book, *Dust to Deliverance: Untold Stories from the Maritime Evacuation on September 11th*, which mixes fascinating NYC maritime history with wrenching stories of the water evacuation from Lower Manhattan, as well as Mike Magee's *All Available Boats: The Evacuation of Manhattan Island on September 11, 2001*.

In terms of documentaries, I also recommend watching the one made by two French filmmakers, Jules and Gédéon Naudet, entitled simply *9/11*, which grew out of a project that summer of 2001 where they were following a new FDNY firefighter through his first year. They were with Chief Joseph Pfeifer that morning and actually filmed the first plane hitting the North Tower. They captured an incredible film of the horror of the day, which later aired on CBS in 2002.

Lastly, particularly as a new generation comes of age who doesn't remember 9/11 at all, there are three books worth reading to understand the events that led to the attacks in the first place: Steve Coll's *Ghost Wars*, Lawrence Wright's *The Looming Tower*, and the 9/11 Commission report, which remains perhaps the best-written government report in history.

Though we all know 9/11 changed and redefined our modern world, you realize as you read *The Only Plane in the Sky* how we take that awareness for granted; today, if we think there is any potential for danger, we leave where we are. We go through extra security in airports. It seems unbelievable that someone would allow a person with knives on a plane, or not leave their office when they hear there's been an explosion. We also know what happened and how, while people in the moment didn't know if more planes were coming, or which target was next. Did writing this book with hindsight affect your process?

I tried to capture as best I could the confusion of that day; I think it's easy today to look back and think the whole thing was over in the 102 minutes from the first crash to the collapse of the South Tower. Yet Americans living through that day didn't know when the attacks were over—and we didn't know if there was another wave of attacks to come that afternoon, the next day, the next month, or the next year. It's a remarkable testament to the work of our government, intelligence, and law enforcement that al-Qaeda effectively was never able to attack the homeland again after 9/11, but we also now know there weren't more sleeper cells hidden around the country ready for another attack.

The most fascinating moment to me on 9/11 comes between 8:46 a.m. and 9:03 a.m., the time between when American Airlines Flight 11 crashed into the North Tower and when United Airlines Flight 175 crashed into the South Tower. America looked at that first crash—and shrugged. As Brian Gunderson, chief of staff for Majority Leader Richard Armey (R-Texas), says in the book, “As we walked into our morning staff meeting, I could see on the TV screen—like any congressional office, there were a lot of TV screens around—that a plane had struck one of the World Trade Center towers. We assumed it was a small plane. I thought it was going to be more along the level of like a bad school shooting somewhere—the kind of event that dominates national news, but it doesn't really change what Congress does that day.”

America's innocence didn't end at 8:46, it ended at 9:03, when the second plane crash made clear it was a coordinated attack. The attacks transformed our daily lives in America. We forget that before 9/11, it wasn't common to see men with big guns in the course of an ordinary commute. We forget how lax airport security was. How open and welcoming so many of our public buildings really were until then. Today, we default to the opposite of our reaction at 8:46 a.m. on 9/11: We default to terrorism until proven otherwise. A helicopter crashes into a building in New York City, a car veers off the road and into a crowd, a loud sound goes off in a crowded place. At moments like these, our first thought is to flee.

As you wrote the book, how present was the issue of balancing out the three locations most impacted by the attacks—New York, Shanksville/Somerset County, and the Pentagon? At one point in *The Only Plane in the Sky*, a person says that it frustrates them that people conflate Arlington—where the Pentagon is located—and Washington, D.C.; how aware were you of the protectiveness of those spaces and experiences?

I tried to be deeply respectful of balancing this story, not just of the physical locations, but of mentioning as many of the agencies, companies, and organizations that were affected or were involved in the response. Many of the first responders are rightly quite proud of their own heroic efforts that day, and while I certainly couldn't tell every story, I tried to ensure a well-rounded narrative.

Were there any moments or memories that surprised, touched, or impacted you as you collected the material for this book?

I've never worked on any project as emotional as this one, and even knowing how wrenching the day was, I was unprepared for how emotional writing this book turned out to be. I cried most days while I was compiling the first draft of the book, poring over the oral histories and the words of those who lived through the day. My wife and I had had our first child just as I was starting writing, and, man, I just wept over the stories of children losing their parents that day. But there were all manner of moments I found myself moved by—the undocumented immigrants who wanted to show up at the Pentagon, the coworkers who carried their colleagues down the stairs of the Twin Towers, the phone calls from those trapped to their loved ones. At the same time, I'm always amazed at the bravery of the firefighters and first responders who went up the stairs of the Twin Towers even as everyone else fled. I don't know that we've ever seen a more perfect distillation of what heroism and duty really means.

Though the United States has seen other moments of tragedy—Pearl Harbor, Columbine and other mass shootings, the Boston Marathon Bombing—there is something about 9/11, no matter how much time passes, that is hard to talk about. Why do you think this day is still so difficult for people to revisit?

I think that the answer is simple, actually: 9/11 was the first modern global catastrophe. We watched it unfold, for hours, on live television; hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers saw the attacks first-hand and millions more Americans watched the attacks in real-time on TV. Anyone who was in front of a TV on 9/11 lived through that day and was traumatized by the scale of the tragedy. People remember hearing the news of other events—Pearl Harbor, the Kennedy assassination, the Challenger explosion—but we've never before or since witnessed such a monumental event collectively as a nation.

Over the years, 9/11 has often been politicized or invoked for larger cultural messaging purposes, for better and worse. What do you think is the lasting legacy of the day? Did your view of it change as you wrote *The Only Plane in the Sky*?

One of the sad parts of looking back at 9/11 from so many years on is realizing how the tragedy of that day continues to unfold—the distrust and hate it stirred up in our society, the still-ongoing wars that it launched, the collective global unity that was squandered. I still stop in wonder when I read over the parts of this book about how America had no better friend on 9/11 than Vladimir Putin, for instance. We forget today, too, that the one time NATO has ever invoked “Article 5,” declaring an attack on one member an attack on all, was in the wake of 9/11 when it stepped up to support us.

I look back and think about all the paths not taken from that day—and the transformative good that could have unfolded but didn’t. There was a *Wall Street Journal* article earlier this year about how the U.S. Marines have started training recruits in the events of 9/11, because kids today are too young to remember it, and one private in the story told the reporter he didn’t know much about 9/11 before arriving at Parris Island except that “it was a turning point in our nation’s history.” The reporter asked, what kind of turning point? “I would have to say negative,” he said.

What role do you hope *The Only Plane in the Sky* plays in our national and historical conversations about 9/11? What would you want a reader to take away from their reading experience?

For years, our mantra on 9/11 has been “never forget” but while I think we don’t forget, I’m not sure we remember either. We know the facts of the day without remembering what it was like to experience the day with all its confusion, fear, and tragedy. We don’t remember—and many of us never knew in the first place—what it was like to go down the stairs in the Trade Center. We don’t know what it was like to stand on the plaza outside and realize people were jumping. We don’t know what it was like to feel the rumble of the Towers’ collapse, to pry the loose concrete from our mouths, to search for people we didn’t know whether we would find. We don’t remember how scary it was to see smoke rising from the Pentagon, the center of our military, nor the fear in the faces fleeing the White House or Capitol Hill. We don’t remember the profound silence that had settled over America by that afternoon, as all of the nation’s aircraft were grounded, as schools and businesses let out early, and the country convened around television sets from coast to coast.

My hope for the book will be that we remind Americans—and particularly a new generation that doesn't remember it at all—how much 9/11 affected and shaped those who lived through it. We're still living everyday with the consequences of the decisions made amid that fear and confusion; 9/11 was the separation point, in many ways, between the 20th Century and the 21st Century. Understanding everything that's come since requires first understanding where everything began.

