

# Message

On September 11, 2001, Lt. Heather Lucky Penney in an F-16 at Andrews Air Force Base. She had her orders. She was to take down down United Airlines Flight 93. The hijacked plane was headed toward Washington, D C. Three other planes had hit targets in New York and Washington, and Flight 93 was destined to become the fourth.



Penney was the second combat pilot in the air that morning. The idea of shooting down a civilian aircraft, even a hijacked one, was troublesome enough ... but Penney had no missiles or live ammunition. All she had were her orders and her plane. She was going to take the plane down the hard way.



**"We wouldn't be shooting it down. We would be ramming the aircraft," Penney said of the surreal moment. "I would essentially be a kamikaze pilot." Ten years after the event, Penney began talking openly about that day.**



**Penney was one of the first female combat pilots. She now works for Lockheed Martin, where she helps direct the F-35 program.**

**"We had to protect the airspace any way we could," she said. "On that Tuesday in 2001, there were no planes standing by ready to defend the skies over Washington. Not a single plane equipped for a dogfight."**

**"There was no perceived threat at the time, especially one coming from the homeland like that," said Col. George Degnon, vice commander of the 113th Wing at Andrews. "It was a little bit of a helpless feeling, but we did everything humanly possible to get the aircraft armed and in the air. It was amazing to see people react."**



It would take an hour or more to arm a plane, and that process was begun, but they needed pilots in the air immediately.

"Lucky, you're coming with me," said Col. Marc Sasseville, her commanding officer.



"I'm going to go for the cockpit," Sasseville said. "Take the tail." And with that, the two skipped their pre-flight checks and took off.



"We don't train to bring down airliners," said Sasseville. He's now stationed at the Pentagon. "If you just hit the engine, it could still glide and you could guide it to a target. My thought was the cockpit or the wing." Caseville's plan was to maneuver the faster, more agile F-16 into the commercial airliner with enough time to eject. That timing, though, would require split-second perfection.



"I was hoping to do both at the same time," he said. "It probably wasn't going to work, but that's what I was hoping. If you eject and your jet soars through without impact," Penney said, thinking back. She wasn't going to try to eject. In the end, they didn't have to make the sacrifice. United 93 went down in Pennsylvania. Passengers aboard the plane fought back against the hijackers, and crashed in an isolated field.



"The real heroes are the passengers on Flight 93 who were willing to sacrifice themselves," Penney said. "I was just an accidental witness to history."



Val McClaskey-[www.shanksvillememorial.com/endofserenity.html](http://www.shanksvillememorial.com/endofserenity.html)

When asked why she was willing to fly a kamikaze mission, Penney doesn't hesitate. "Why? Because there are things in this world that are more important than ourselves. Freedom. The Constitution of the United States. Our way of life. Mom, baseball, apple pie; these things and so many more that make us uniquely American. We belong to something greater than ourselves. As complex and diverse and discordant as it is, this thing, this idea called America, binds us together in citizenship and community and brotherhood..."

I'll bet she stands when the National Anthem is played!