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Ross man recalls New York air patrol mission after 9/11

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On Sept. 12, 2001, as emergency workers combed the rubble of the World Trade Center, everything appeared still from Anthony Bourke's vantage point.

"With no taxis on the street, with no cars coming over the bridges, with no boats coming up the river, with hundreds of airplanes parked at every major airport, with no planes in the sky, it was like the world had stopped," said Bourke, 47, of Ross.

Bourke was one of hundreds of fighter pilots who mobilized in the days, weeks and months after 9/11 as the country braced itself against the possibility of another attack. But it was only by happenstance that he found himself in a fighter jet, a thousand feet above New York on the morning after terrorists struck.

A day earlier, Bourke had been on a business trip.



Now-retired California Air National Guard pilot Anthony Bourke flies his F-16 past the Golden Gate Bridge. Bourke, on the East Coast for business, volunteered for patrols after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. (Photo by Kirk Hawkins)

needed one more who could fly an F-16 Block 25 fighter jet. It turned out that that was the exact aircraft Bourke had been trained to fly.



Anthony Bourke of Ross stands outside his Larkspur office on Sept. 9. The former California Air National Guard pilot flew patrols over New York following the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. (IJ photo/Alan Dep)

He was en route to the airport in Burlington, Vt. when he heard over the radio that an airplane had struck the World Trade Center. It wasn't until his flight was grounded shortly before takeoff that Bourke learned the gravity of the situation. A reservist at the time in the California Air National Guard, Bourke called his home base in Fresno to ask how he could help. His commanding officer said he should check with the Vermont air guard, which happened to have a base next to the airport.

The Vermont unit told Bourke it had been tapped to patrol the sky over New York City. It had only 11 pilots for the 12-person assignment, and

"He didn't have a uniform with him, he didn't have any boots, he didn't have any equipment," said Col. Larry McKoane, an air guard pilot in Fresno who served with Bourke. "He just called them and made it happen."

Bourke suited up - with borrowed gear - at midnight for his first 12-hour shift. He waited on standby, ready to take off in less than five minutes. He took off around dawn, flying over the Hudson River toward New York. As he approached New York he asked an air traffic control officer to direct him to the correct altitude and got an especially eerie response.

"He said, 'You can fly at any altitude you want,'" Bourke said. "'You're the only plane in the sky.'"

In fact, Bourke flew next to a wing man in a second jet, but it was a stark contrast from what is normally one of the nation's busiest air zones. The empty sky was just one sign that his world as a pilot was changing quickly.

One chilling reality was that fighter pilots could now be asked to shoot down a hijacked aircraft with innocent passengers on board. Prior to 9/11, the military did not anticipate such a scenario.

"If you were intercepting a hijacked aircraft your job was to get that aircraft on the ground and then let the FBI take over," Bourke said. "No one really had ever considered you'd have to blow a hijacked aircraft out of the sky."

That reality was especially difficult to swallow because many reserve pilots, including Bourke, also flew for commercial airlines. They could be faced with the possibility of shooting down a friend or co-worker.

"It was an almost unthinkable scenario," Bourke said.

Bourke returned to California after his five-day mission on the East Coast, but his role as a reserve pilot had changed. In the months after 9/11 the Air National Guard dramatically increased its hand in homeland defense. Bourke flew over football stadiums, nuclear power plants and other potential terrorist targets.

In 2003, Bourke quit the Air National Guard to work full-time with Afterburner, a consulting firm he helped found that trains business managers using fighter pilot concepts. A native of Palo Alto, he moved to Ross later that year with his wife and three children, and he recently started a new company, Mach 2 Consulting, based in Larkspur.

Bourke's wife, Mary, said the details of her experience on 9/11 are blurry. She remembers dropping off their three children - then 5, 8 and 10 - at school and picking them up quickly after watching the news. Mostly, she remember telling them they should be proud of their father.

"I remember just telling them that Dad was back there and Dad was in one of the jets flying to make sure more war wasn't done," she said.

Nearly 3,000 people were killed in the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Marin victims included:

- Lauren Grandcolas, 38, of San Rafael, who died aboard United Airlines Flight 93, which crashed in Pennsylvania. She had quit her job at Good Housekeeping magazine and was chasing a dream - writing a book - at the time of her death.
- Paul Sloan, 26, a former San Marin High School honor student and football star. He was on the 89th floor of the World Trade Center's South Tower when it was struck by hijacked United Airlines Flight 175.
- Jeffrey Collman, 41, of Novato who was a flight attendant on American Airlines Flight 11 from Boston to Los Angeles when it struck the North Tower of the World Trade Center.
- John Keohane, 41, a graduate of San Marin High School in Novato who lived in Jersey City, N.J. He had just helped a friend with multiple sclerosis escape from an office building adjacent to the World Trade Center when he was struck by debris from the destroyed towers.

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