NO PREP

Timeline of the 9/11 Attacks

Before the First Crash: The Morning Begins

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key



Name: Period: Date:

Timeline of the 9/11 Attacks

Before the First Crash: The Morning Begins

The morning of September 11, 2001, started with ordinary routines at airports along the East Coast. Between 7:59 and 8:42 a.m., four passenger jets took off from Boston, Newark, and Washington Dulles airports, all bound for California. Most travelers would never have imagined that ordinary cross-country flights could

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Before the First Crash: The Morning Begins

The morning of September 11, 2001, started with ordinary routines at airports along the East Coast. Between 7:59 and 8:42 a.m., four passenger jets took off from Boston, Newark, and Washington Dulles airports, all bound for California. Most travelers would never have imagined that ordinary cross-country flights could be chosen as weapons, but the nineteen men who boarded those planes had picked them deliberately: long flights carry heavy loads of jet fuel, which the hijackers planned to turn against their targets. Aboard each plane, teams of hijackers used knives and box cutters to overpower crews and seize control of the cockpits, striking Flight 11 within fifteen minutes of takeoff and the final plane, Flight 93, only after it had flown west for three quarters of an hour. Two of the hijackers, including the plot's operational leader, Mohamed Atta, had actually begun their morning before dawn in Portland, Maine, catching a connecting flight to Boston and passing through security screening without difficulty, a detail later investigations used to show how unprepared the aviation system was for this kind of attack. The first sign of trouble came at 8:19 a.m., when flight attendant Betty Ong aboard American Airlines Flight 11 used an air phone to alert the airline that her plane had been hijacked, that people had been stabbed, and that the hijackers were flying the aircraft erratically. Her calm, detailed call gave investigators their earliest picture of what was happening. Air traffic controllers in Boston realized the plane's transponder, the device that broadcasts a plane's identity and altitude, had been switched off, and they watched the jet turn sharply south toward New York City.

8:46 to 9:03 a.m.: New York Under Attack

At 8:46 a.m., Flight 11 flew into the North Tower of the World Trade Center at hundreds of miles per hour, cutting through floors 93 to 99. Thousands of gallons of jet fuel exploded on impact, igniting fires and filling stairwells above the crash zone with smoke. Everyone above the 91st floor was trapped, because the impact destroyed all three stairwells at those levels. Television networks broke into their morning programs within minutes, and millions of viewers watched smoke pour from the tower, most assuming they were seeing a horrible accident. At 9:03 a.m., United Airlines Flight 175 banked hard and crashed into the South Tower between floors 77 and 85, live on television. One stairwell in the South Tower remained passable, and a small number of people above the impact zone managed to escape through it. The second crash removed all doubt about what was happening. Within minutes, the Federal Aviation Administration shut down every airport in the New York area, and at 9:26 a.m. it banned all civilian takeoffs nationwide, the first order of its kind in American history.

9:37 to 10:03 a.m.: The Pentagon and Shanksville

At 9:37 a.m., American Airlines Flight 77 crashed into the west side of the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia, killing 125 people inside the building and 59 passengers and crew aboard the plane, 184 victims in all. Minutes later, at 9:42 a.m., the FAA took the unprecedented step of ordering every aircraft over the United States, more than 4,500 planes, to land at the nearest airport. Controllers cleared the skies in a little over two hours without a single accident, an achievement aviation experts still study today. Aboard the fourth plane, United Airlines Flight 93, passengers and crew made phone calls and learned that other hijacked jets had been flown into buildings. Realizing their plane was a missile aimed at another target, they voted to storm the cockpit. Passenger Todd Beamer was heard over an open phone line saying the now-famous words, "Let's roll." At 10:03 a.m., during the passengers' assault, the plane crashed into a field near

Shanksville, Pennsylvania, about twenty minutes' flying time from Washington, D.C. All forty passengers and crew died, but no one on the ground was harmed.

9:59 to 10:28 a.m.: The Towers Collapse

The fires inside the twin towers, fed by jet fuel, paper, furniture, and office materials, burned at temperatures high enough to weaken the buildings' steel supports. At 9:59 a.m., fifty-six minutes after it was hit, the South Tower buckled and collapsed in roughly ten seconds. A churning gray cloud of dust and pulverized concrete rolled through the streets of Lower Manhattan, turning day into night. At 10:28 a.m., the North Tower followed, one hundred two minutes after it had been struck. Hundreds of firefighters and police officers working rescue operations inside both buildings were killed. By 10:30 a.m., barely one hundred minutes after the first crash, the attacks themselves were over. The human toll was staggering: 2,977 victims across New York, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. That evening at 8:30 p.m., President George W. Bush addressed the nation from the White House, declaring that the United States would make no distinction between the terrorists who committed the acts and those who harbored them, a statement that previewed the war in Afghanistan launched the following month. The collapses were survivable for far more people than most Americans realize. Because the North Tower stood for one hundred two minutes and the South Tower for fifty-six, an estimated twenty-five thousand people walked out of the complex before either building came down, most of them descending dozens of flights in crowded, smoke-filled stairwells while firefighters climbed past them in the opposite direction. Engineers who later studied the collapses concluded that the impacts alone did not doom the towers; it was the fires burning afterward, stripped of their sprayed-on insulation by the crashes, that softened the steel until the floors above gave way.

The Government Scrambles

While the attacks unfolded, the government's own timeline was a story of improvisation. President George W. Bush was reading with schoolchildren in Sarasota, Florida, when his chief of staff, Andrew Card, leaned in at about 9:05 a.m. and whispered that a second plane had hit the towers and that America was under attack. Within the hour, the Secret Service put the president aboard Air Force One, which spent the day zigzagging between military bases in Louisiana and Nebraska while officials tried to determine whether more attacks were coming. Vice President Dick Cheney was rushed to a bunker beneath the White House, and congressional leaders were flown to secure locations, emergency measures designed to keep the government functioning. Military commanders scrambled fighter jets over New York and Washington, but the morning moved faster than the defenses built for a Cold War world; the fighters that reached Washington arrived after the Pentagon had already been hit. Adding to the confusion, the military happened to be running a training exercise that morning, and some officers' first question on hearing the reports was whether they were real or part of the drill. The destruction in New York was not finished either. At 5:21 p.m., a third skyscraper, the forty-seven-story 7 World Trade Center, collapsed after burning unattended for hours, though it had been evacuated and no one was killed. At 8:30 p.m., the president, back in Washington against the advice of his security detail, addressed the nation from the Oval Office. Studying the timeline of September 11 reveals how quickly the day unfolded and how people made life-and-death decisions with almost no information. Only seventeen minutes separated the first crash from the second; only twenty-six minutes separated the Pentagon attack from the crash of Flight 93. The passengers of Flight 93 are the clearest example of the timeline's power: because their flight took off forty-two minutes late, they had time to learn what the hijackers intended and to act. The sequence of events also shaped every investigation that followed, including the 9/11 Commission, which used the timeline to identify warning signs that had been missed and to recommend reforms. Historians often note that the entire attack, from

first impact to final collapse, took less time than a feature film, which makes the number of life-and-death decisions packed into those minutes all the more remarkable.

Key Information: Timeline of September 11, 2001

Fact	Details
8:19 a.m.	Flight attendant Betty Ong alerts American Airlines that Flight 11 has been hijacked
8:46 a.m.	Flight 11 strikes the North Tower, floors 93-99
9:03 a.m.	Flight 175 strikes the South Tower, floors 77-85, live on television
9:37 a.m.	Flight 77 crashes into the Pentagon; 184 victims are killed
9:42 a.m.	FAA orders all 4,500+ aircraft over the U.S. to land immediately
9:59 a.m.	South Tower collapses, 56 minutes after being struck
10:03 a.m.	Flight 93 crashes near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, as passengers storm the cockpit
10:28 a.m.	North Tower collapses; the attacks end 102 minutes after they began

Case Study: Clearing the Sky

Frank Delgado had worked as an air traffic controller for eleven years, but nothing had prepared him for the order that came across his screen at 9:42 a.m. on September 11: land every plane in American airspace, now. His sector alone held dozens of aircraft, from regional jets to international flights heavy with fuel. "We trained for one emergency at a time," he later told a colleague. "That morning, every plane was a question mark." Frank began issuing instructions in a steady voice, spacing out descents, rerouting jets to airports that had never handled widebody aircraft. One pilot pushed back, saying his airline hadn't confirmed the order. Frank replied, "Sir, this comes from the FAA. You are landing in Pittsburgh." By early afternoon his radar scope, normally crowded with green blips, was empty for the first time in his career. He sat back, hands shaking, and realized he had no idea whether any of the planes he had just landed carried hijackers.

1. Frank says that on that morning, "every plane was a question mark." Using the narrative and the reading, explain what he meant and why the nationwide grounding order was such a drastic step.

_____

_____

2. What does Frank's exchange with the reluctant pilot suggest about the challenges of carrying out emergency orders, and why was the controllers' calm execution so important that experts still study it?

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Multiple Choice

1. Why did the hijackers deliberately choose cross-country flights to California?
    a) They carried heavy fuel loads that could be used as weapons
    b) Those flights had the fewest passengers aboard
    c) Security screening was weaker on cross-country flight routes
    d) Those planes flew at lower altitudes near cities

2. What was significant about the phone call made by flight attendant Betty Ong?
    a) It reached the president directly and triggered a military response
    b) It caused the FAA to close all airports immediately
    c) It gave investigators their first detailed view of the hijacking
    d) It allowed passengers on other planes to fight back

3. Why did Flight 93's passengers have a chance to fight back when the other planes' did not?
    a) Their plane carried fewer hijackers than any other flight
    b) Air traffic controllers warned them directly by radio
    c) The hijackers on their plane surrendered without any real struggle
    d) Their late takeoff gave them time to learn the hijackers' plan

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Transponder	A) Investigation that used the timeline to identify missed warnings and recommend reforms
2. ___ Betty Ong	B) Cockpit device that broadcasts a plane's identity and altitude, switched off by the hijackers
3. ___ Todd Beamer	C) Flight attendant whose air-phone call first alerted the airline to the hijacking
4. ___ FAA	D) Flight 93 passenger heard saying "Let's roll" before the assault on the cockpit
5. ___ 9/11 Commission	E) Federal agency that ordered every aircraft over the United States to land

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Only _____ minutes separated the two tower strikes.

2. The North Tower collapsed at _____ a.m.

3. Flight 93 crashed near _____, Pennsylvania.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Why was grounding every civilian plane so difficult, and why is it considered a success?

_____

_____

_____

2. Why could some people above the impact zone escape the South Tower but not the North Tower?

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3. Trace how Flight 93's forty-two-minute delay changed what its passengers were able to do.

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