

Flying Elephant or Routine Takeoff?

Evidence for Involvement of a Third Jet in the WTC Attacks Evaporates Under Scrutiny

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The article "The Flying Elephant: Evidence for Involvement of a Third Jet in the WTC Attacks" was published in the *Journal of 9/11 Studies* (<http://JournalOf911Studies.com>). [1] The premise of the article is that two videos and a photograph show a jetliner "orbiting in close proximity to the towers for several minutes while the North Tower burned and the South Tower was struck." After asserting, without any analysis, that jetliners shown in these visual records were close to the Twin Towers, the article provides several items to support its case that there was a suspicious third jet circling the World Trade Center prior to the South Tower crash:

- "At 9:04am, Diane Sawyer of ABC News made remarks on-air about the 'circling' jet she and her colleagues 'all saw' prior to the second strike."
- "... the phenomenon, acknowledged but unexplained by the Commission of the 'phantom Flight 11'."
- "... reports by FDNY personnel that they received a warning about a third aircraft. Deputy Chief Peter Hayden [...] explained 'We had a report from OEM that there was possibility of a third plane coming in.'"
- "... in the Naudet's documentary *9/11*, a firefighter is filmed explaining what caused the collapse of the South Tower: 'The FBI thinks it as a third plane.'"
- "On one NORAD drill, 'Vigilant Guardian', is admitted by the Commission to have been in progress but is dismissed in a footnote as being unrelated to the hijacking scenario..."

The article concludes by highlighting in bold blue text a theory, posed as a question, that the alleged third aircraft was part of the military exercises underway on 9/11/01, and that it was involved in the attack in some way.

Examination of the visual evidence cited by the article shows that its premise is wrong. Below, I use simple geometric calculations to demonstrate that the aircraft shown in the videos are far from the World Trade Center and probably on normal flight paths. As for the other items the article uses to corroborate its theory, each has a simple explanation that doesn't involve a suspicious third aircraft.

Features of Article

The article has several features which are commonly seen in misinformation that plagues the citizens' investigation of the 9/11 attack, including an appeal to mistaken intuitions, an illusory cumulative case, and an appeal to pity.

Mistaken Intuitions

The article's unsupported claim that the visual records show a plane close to the Twin Towers is similar to other claims promoted as 9/11 truth that invite the viewer to jump to conclusions on the basis of fuzzy images. One example is the suggestion that photographs of the plane approaching the South Tower show a missile pod under its fuselage. [2] Another is the contention that security camera footage released by the Pentagon shows a missile or Global Hawk rather than a jetliner.

Mistaken intuitions are a staple of flimsy claims presented as 9/11 truth, such as the idea that large intact pieces of a Boeing 757 should have survived the Pentagon crash and been visible outside of the building, or that the crash should have punched a cartoon-like profile of a 757 into the Pentagon's facade. One needs only study the aftermath of other high-speed plane crashes to disabuse oneself of such notions. [3]

The Illusory Cumulative Case

The fact that the article adduces five points in addition to the two videos and one photograph to support its conclusion gives the impression that it makes a substantial cumulative case for the involvement of a third plane in the attack on the World Trade Center. The fact that each of these five points readily admits to an explanation not supporting the article's conclusion can be easily overlooked by a reader who has accepted the article's assertion that the visual records show a plane circling the Twin Towers.

This, again, is similar to the case made by advocates of the Pentagon no-jetliner theory, whose long list of claims provides adherents of the theory with a menu of reasons to avoid re-evaluating their acceptance of the theory. [4]

Alleged Threats

The article is attributed to "Scholars for 9/11 Truth", and references a footnote alleging that the author received "threats against himself and his family for having written this article." The footnote further states that "it would be a huge mistake to allow this organization and its journal to be manipulated by external threats." [5]

Appeals to pity in the form of unsubstantiated claims of threats and censorship are frequently used to bolster nonsensical theories about the 9/11 attack. Is this article another example? Perhaps the allegation of threats is merely a ploy to compromise the objectivity of the Journal's reviewers.

In this review, I show that the article provides no "evidence for Involvement of a Third Jet." However, it is easy to find evidence that the article has been used as a tool to discredit the *Journal of 9/11 Studies* by providing a target for ridicule and distraction from the Journal's more substantial contributions. For example, the *Journal of Debunking 911 Conspiracy Theories, Volume 1, Issue 1* features as its first article a 10-page debunking of the *Flying Elephant* article entitled "Fleas under a Microscope." [6]

The Article's Flawed Premise

The article does not provide any analysis to support its claim that the aircraft seen in the videos and photograph are close to the Towers -- the underpinning of its alleged evidence of involvement of a third jetliner. In the following, I'll do the math that the article doesn't, and show that the apparent jetliners in the videos are miles from the Twin Towers and are likely on normal flight paths for jetliner traffic -- traffic that was not disrupted until after the South Tower was hit.

I will examine the three pieces of visual "evidence" that the article provides to support the idea that a jetliner was flying close to the towers:

- [The first video](#)
- [The photograph](#)
- [The second video](#)

The article asserts that the aircraft "cruises slowly near the stricken North Tower, seemingly unconcerned its behavior makes it a logical target for these fighters." Putting aside questions about the veracity of the imagery in the video segments, what do they show about the flying object or objects?

I'll examine the first video segment carefully, and extrapolate my conclusions about it to the other video and the photograph.

The First Video

The article provides the following source for the first video:
<http://terrorize.dk/911/wtc2hit13/911.wtc.yet.another.plane.wmv>

What can be determined about the position of the plane in the first video? If the position of the camera and length of the plane is known, then the plane's position can be estimated using triangulation.

There is enough foreground imagery in the latter part of the video clip to establish camera's position to within a few feet, if necessary. But even without going to that trouble, it's obvious that the video was taken in a residential location in Brooklyn directly southeast of the World Trade Center, and therefore, at least 7,000 feet from the Twin Towers.



The video shows a what appears to be a twin-engine jetliner like a Boeing 767, 777, or 737, or Airbus 320 or 330. When the plane first emerges from behind the North Tower, it appears to be flying on a heading approximately parallel to the North Tower's southeast face, so its fuselage is visible almost in profile. At that point the fuselage is about 25 percent as long as the tower's face.

Even the shortest of jetliners that are reasonable candidates have fuselages that are more than half of the width of a Tower. Thus, for the jetliner's fuselage to appear one-fourth as long as the Tower's width from a vantage point 7,000 feet to the southeast, the jetliner would have to be at least 7,000 feet to the northwest of the Tower. For larger distances of the camera to the Tower and for jetliners with longer fuselages, the distance of the plane from the Tower would increase. More reasonable estimates for the camera distance and jetliner length are 12,000 feet and 190 feet, respectively. To compute the distance of the plane to the camera, we can use the following formula:

$$\text{tower-to-plane-distance} = 4 * \text{plane-length} * \text{camera-to-tower-distance} / \text{tower-width} - \text{camera-to-tower-distance}$$

Plugging in the values of 12,000 and 190 feet, we get:

$$4 * 190 * 12000 / 210 - 12000 = 31428$$

That puts the plane six miles to the northeast of the Twin Towers.

Newark International Airport is located eight miles southwest of the World Trade Center. An aircraft taking off in a northeasterly direction from the airport's main runway and flying toward Europe could easily pass within 6 miles of the World Trade Center. The figure below illustrates such a route, and the line of site from a location in Brooklyn where the camera might have been to the North Tower, and to the jetliner emerging from behind it on that route.



The Photograph

The article provides no source information for the photograph. The photograph shows a horizontal patch near the top of the frame that is about 30 percent of the angular width of the North Tower. The article asserts that the photograph shows an aircraft "flying another pass almost directly above WTC2 at an altitude of approximately 2,000 feet, judging by its size and position relative to the smoke plume, to which it appears recklessly close."

Given the lack of sourcing for the photograph, and the fact that editing in the alleged plane would have been trivial, it has no value as evidence about flights on 9/11/01.



However, even if we assume that the photograph has not been edited and that it shows a jetliner, simple geometric calculations would again show that the jetliner is miles behind the Towers.

The Second Video

The article provides the following source for the second video:

<http://www.areadownload.com/video/wtc/WTC%20-%20Amateur%20Video%2004.mpg>

This video, like the first one, was clearly taken from a position in Brooklyn, though from a slightly closer and more southerly location. Once again, simple geometric calculations would show that the plane, if a jetliner, would be miles behind the Twin Towers.



Conclusion

I have shown that the article "The Flying Elephant: Evidence for Involvement of a Third Jet in the WTC Attacks" is based on the flawed premise that visual records show a plane flying close to the Twin Towers between the times of the first and second plane crashes. I leave it to the reader to evaluate the other "evidence" that the article cites to support this premise.

I have also shown that the article bears several features commonly observed in promotions of flimsy claims that have helped to discredit citizens' investigations of the 9/11 attack. This does not imply malicious intent on the part of the article's author, but it does expose a lack of scientific rigor which makes the article an easy target for ridicule.

Notes

[1] See: <http://www.journalof911studies.com/letters/ThirdJet.pdf>.

[2] The 'missile pod' claim was introduced in 2003 and promoted in the video *In Plane Site*. See "ERROR: 'A Pod Was Attached to the South Tower Plane'" (http://911review.com/errors/phantom/st_plane.html).

[3] See "ERROR: 'Aircraft Crashes Always Leave Large Debris'" (<http://911review.com/errors/pentagon/crashdebris.html>) and "Jetliner Crash Debris: Examples of Jetliner Crashes Leaving Little Recognizable Debris" (<http://911research.wtc7.net/pentagon/analysis/compare/jetcrashdebris.html>).

[4] See the list of claims listed on page "Pentagon Attack Errors" (<http://911review.com/errors/pentagon/index.html>) and the presentation "The Pentagon Attack: The No-Jetliner Claims" (<http://911research.wtc7.net/talks/noplane/index.html>).

[5] The *Journal of 9/11 Studies* amended the "Flying Elephant" article critiqued by Version 1.0 of this review to indicate that James Fetzer was the author of the footnote describing the alleged threats.

[6] See "Fleas under a Microscope: Evidence there was no third jet involved in the World Trade Center attacks" (<http://www.jod911.com/thirdjet.pdf>).