

DARKEST DAY

TERROR HITS HOME

Passengers on Flight 77 phoned in final farewells

Before crashing into Pentagon, Bush official's wife described the hijacking

By Marc Fisher
and Don Phillips

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WASHINGTON — There was not even the grace of instant death. Instead, there was time to call from the sky over Virginia to loved ones, fingers pumping cell phones, voices saying quick, final goodbyes.

Herded to the back of the plane by hijackers armed with knives and box-cutters, the 64 passengers of American Airlines Flight 77 — including the wife of Solicitor General Theodore Olson, a Senate staffer, three District of Columbia schoolchildren and three teachers on a field trip, and a suburban family of four headed to Australia for a two-month adventure — were ordered to call relatives to say they were about to die.

About an hour after takeoff from Dulles International Airport on Tuesday morning, Flight 77, a Boeing 757 headed for Los Angeles, became a massive missile aimed at the White House. The target would change suddenly, but the symbolism was equally devastating.

By 9:45 a.m., when the diving plane carved out a massive chunk of the Pentagon, its passengers had experienced unspeakable terror, untold dozens died and the nation's greatest symbol of security lay shattered, thick plumes of smoke camouflaging a gaping hole in its heart.

Barbara Olson, the former federal prosecutor who became a prominent TV commentator during the impeachment of President Clinton, called her husband twice in the final minutes. Her last words to him were, "What do I tell the pilot to do?"

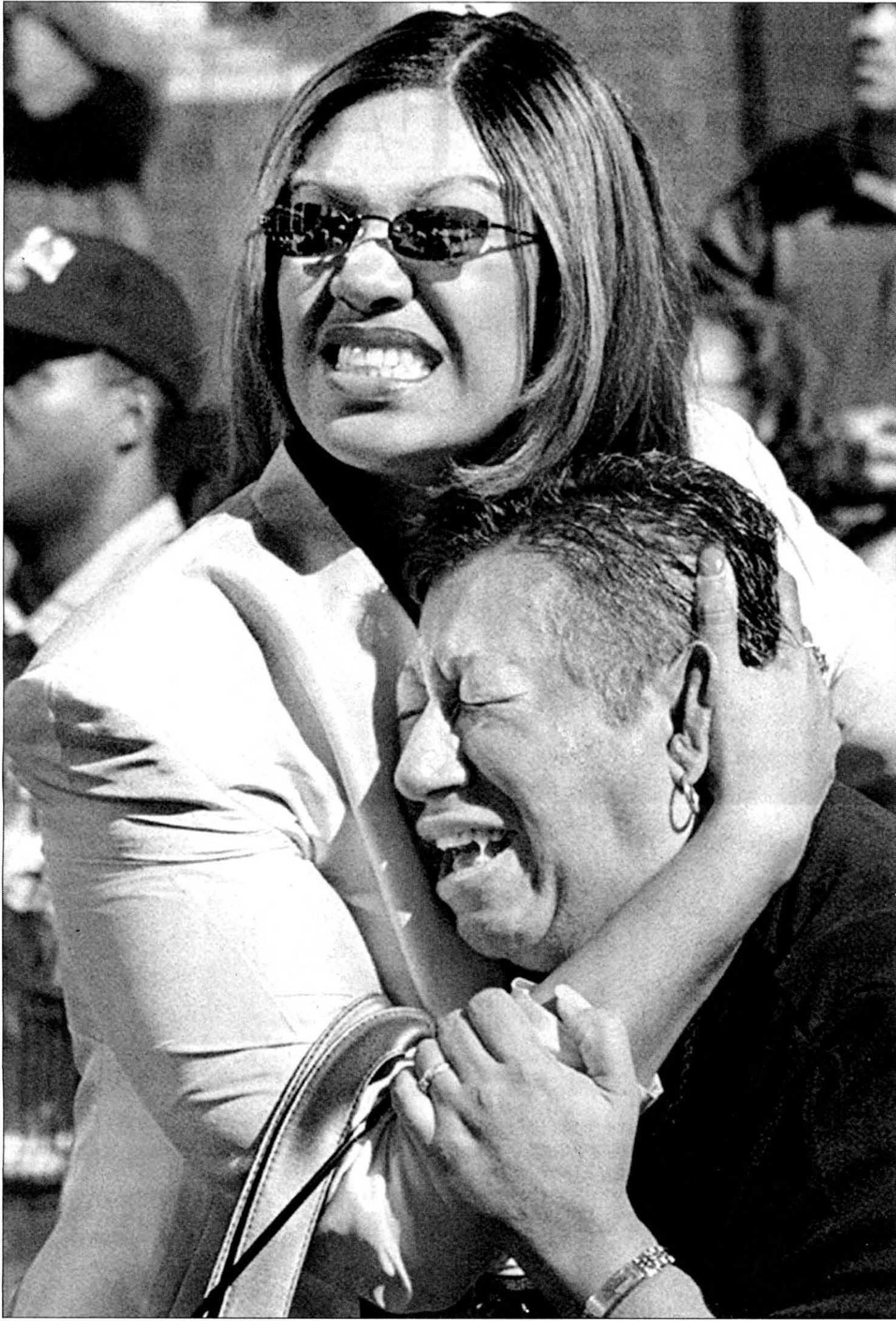
"She called from the plane while it was being hijacked," Theodore Olson said. "I wish it wasn't so, but it is."

The two conversations each lasted about a minute, said Tim O'Brien, a CNN reporter and friend of the Olsons who is acting as family spokesman. In the first call, Barbara Olson told her husband, "Our plane is being hijacked." She described how hijackers forced passengers and the flight's pilot to the rear of the aircraft. She said nothing about the number of hijackers or their nationality.

Olson's first call was cut off, and her husband immediately called the Justice Department's command center, where he was told officials knew nothing about the Flight 77 hijacking.

Moments later, his wife called again. And again, she wanted to know, "What should I tell the pilot?"

"She was composed, as composed as you can be under the circumstances," O'Brien said.



AP PHOTO

Two women clutch each other as they watch the World Trade Center burn Tuesday. Meanwhile, the 64 passengers of American Airlines Flight 77 were saying goodbye to loved ones with hasty cell phone conversations before their hijacked plane crashed into the Pentagon.

But her second call was cut off too.

"Incidentally, she wasn't even supposed to be on this flight," O'Brien added Tuesday on CNN. "She was booked on a flight yesterday, but today is Ted's birthday, so she wanted to be here this morning to have breakfast with him before she left."

On the ground, air traffic controllers watching Flight 77's

progress westward suddenly lost touch with the plane, which disappeared from radar screens and cut off radio contact.

Someone aboard Flight 77 had flipped off the transponder, the tool that sends a plane's airline identification, flight number, speed and altitude to controllers' radar screens.

But soon after losing contact, Dulles controllers spotted an unidentified aircraft speeding

directly toward the restricted airspace that surrounds the White House. Federal aviation sources said Dulles controllers noticed the fast-moving craft east-southeast of Washington Reagan National Airport and called controllers there to report that an unauthorized plane was coming their way.

Controllers had time to warn the White House that the jet was aimed directly at it and was

traveling at full throttle.

But just as the plane seemed to be on a suicide mission into the White House, the unidentified pilot executed a pivot so tight it reminded observers of a fighter jet. The plane circled 270 degrees to the right to approach the Pentagon from the southwest, whereupon Flight 77 fell below radar level, vanishing from controllers' screens, the sources said.

Less than an hour after two other jets demolished the World Trade Center in Manhattan, Flight 77 carved a hole in the nation's defense headquarters, a hole six stories high and 200 feet wide.

Aviation sources said the plane was flown with extraordinary skill, making it highly likely that a trained pilot was at the helm, possibly one of the hijackers. Someone even knew how to turn off the transponder, a maneuver that is less than obvious.

Details about who was on Flight 77, when it took off, and what happened on board were tightly held by airline, airport and security officials Tuesday night. All said the FBI had asked them not to divulge details.

But some passengers on the flight were identified by friends and family.

Flight attendant Michelle Heidenberger had been trained to handle a hijacking. She knew not to let anyone in the cockpit. She knew to tell the hijacker that she didn't have a key and would have to call the pilots.

None of her training mattered. "I'm just so heartbroken," said Ruby Ramer, Heidenberger's neighbor in suburban Chevy Chase, Md., where she lived with her husband, Tom, a pilot for U.S. Airways, and their 11-year-old son and college-age daughter. "I just can't believe she won't be one of our neighbors."

Flight 77 was to be the first leg of a long, happy journey for Leslie Whittington and Charles Falkenberg, both 45, and their two young girls, of suburban Prince George's County, Md. The family was on its way to Australia, where Whittington, a Georgetown University professor of public policy, was to work as a visiting fellow at Australian National University. Her husband, a software engineer and nature buff, was looking forward to exploring Sydney and encountering the wildlife — kangaroos, koala bears, scorpions and snakes, said James Gekas, a neighbor who hosted a farewell dinner for the family Sunday night.

Three District schoolchildren and three teachers were on Flight 77, headed to Santa Barbara for an ecology conference sponsored by National Geographic. School Board President Peggy Cooper Cafritz said the students and educators, whose names weren't released, attended elementary and middle schools.

At the Dulles Airport Marriott, which American Airlines used Tuesday night as a bereavement center, families of passengers began arriving about 11 a.m.

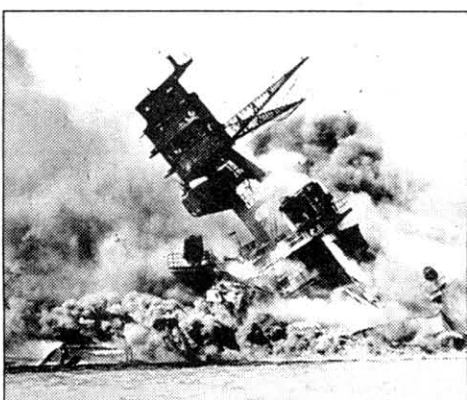
In the lobby, dozens of frantic travelers whose flights had been diverted watched news programs solemnly.

Kathy Foley, 49, a United Airlines flight attendant from Chicago, was stranded in the hotel lobby after mechanical problems delayed her 9 a.m. flight. "This is not what our country was about," she said. "As horrible as it is to say it, I want revenge."

PEARL HARBOR ATTACK, 1941

About 2,400
Americans killed

On Dec. 7, 1941, the U.S. Pacific fleet, stationed at Pearl Harbor on the island of Oahu, was attacked by Japanese submarines and aircraft. Eight U.S. battleships and 13 other naval vessels were sunk or badly damaged.



WAR OF 1812, 1812-1815

2,260 battle deaths

MEXICAN WAR, 1846-1848

1,733 battle deaths

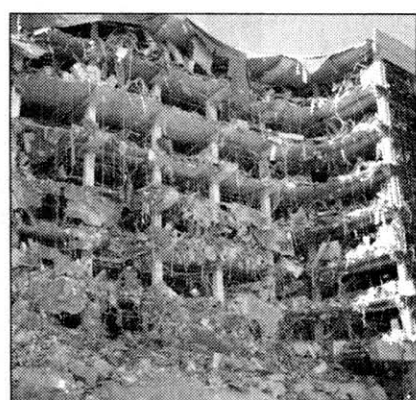
SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR, 1898

385 battle deaths

OKLAHOMA CITY BOMBING, 1995

168 people killed

On April 19, 1995, the Alfred P. Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City was blown to bits by a terrorist bombing, killing 168 people. At the time it was the worst act of terrorism on American soil. Timothy McVeigh, a decorated Persian Gulf War veteran, was convicted and executed this year for his part in the bombing.



PERSIAN GULF WAR, 1990-91

148 battle deaths

Iraqi forces invaded oil-rich Kuwait in 1990. The United States was the leader of an international coalition of forces that drove the Iraqis from Kuwait in 1991.

Source: The World Almanac, 2000