NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

USA TODAY, TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 2001

22,000 feet above New York, F-16s keep wary eye out

For one pilot safeguarding our airspace, the mission is personal

Cover story

By Larry Copeland
USA TODAY



By Bill Perry

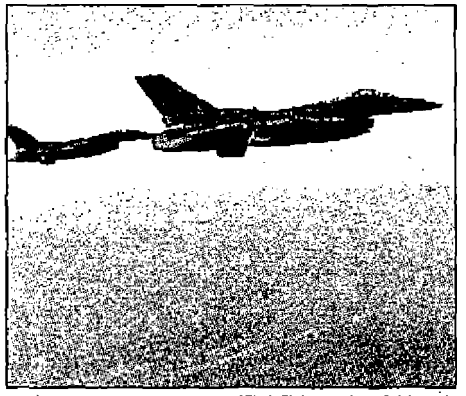
Pilot: Webster

OVER MANHATTAN — Lt. Col. Brian "Spyder" Webster banks his F-16 fighter jet into a left turn and dips the wing slightly to give a clearer view of the city below.

"You see that big, empty space in Manhattan, where there's nothing there?" he says as a trace of bitterness slips through over the roar of the jet's engine. "That's where the World Trade Center was." From that distance, the spot looks like a gaping hole amid the skyscrapers.

Webster, a member of the 177th Fighter Wing of the New Jersey Air National Guard, is a vital part of America's new reality. He is flying patrol as part of Operation Noble Eagle, the federal government's effort to protect the homeland in its war on terrorism.

I'm sitting behind him, getting an up-close look at one of the pilots charged with keeping our skies safe, and at the awesome $20 million machine he uses. Webster, who's also an American Airlines pilot, is one of about 35,000 guardsmen and reservists mobilized since Sept. 11 to defend the homeland. His job is to fly air sovereignty missions for the North American Aerospace Defense Command, or NORAD.



177th Fighter Wing Multimedia

The view: F-16s monitoring the skies fly in small groups. This photo was taken with an onboard video camera.

This is his job. But it's personal, too.

Webster was close friends with the captain and three crewmembers of the hijacked American Airlines jet that crashed into the Pentagon. "I would be doing this regardless," he says. "But that adds meaning to what I'm doing."

What he's doing this afternoon, along with two other fully armed F-16s from his unit, is patrolling the skies over New York. For the next 4 hours, they will check out potential threats around the city and be available for instant response to any emergency.

They would respond, for instance, if terrorists hijack another passenger aircraft and try to use it as a missile. Webster knows he could be ordered to shoot down a commercial airliner, possibly even one being flown by someone he knows.

Could he do it? Yes, he says, but only because he knows the order would come after higher-ups had determined for certain that the plane poses a threat. "You have to do what you have to do," says Webster, 47.

F-16 pilots on NORAD missions usually fly alone. Journalists are being invited along on some flights in two-seater training jets to give

Please see COVER STORY next page ▶

CITY_21MC100_01336784 6

NYC-WTC_000416577