

This report is dedicated to Betty Ong who was a brave and true professional as history will now, correctly record, thanks to the Ong family's untiring efforts.

William Langewiesche's *American Ground*

PLAGIARISM

Report compiled and designed by Sarah Charlton from research and editorial assistance provided by the WTC Living History Project Group; with gratitude to the Ong family and the UFOA.

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FROM THE WALL STREET JOURNAL 15 OCTOBER 2002

On 15 October 2001, Scott McCartney and Susan Carey of the *Wall Street Journal* released breaking news regarding an emergency call made by Betty Ong, a flight attendant on American Airlines flight 11. This early account, based on exclusive interviews with Mr. McCartney and Ms. Carey's personal contacts at American Airlines, featured memory recreations of the call by those who had heard it. Key employees interviewed included Craig Marquis, a supervising manager at the Fort Worth, Texas, Systems Operations Control center, who overheard the call. Mr. Marquis has indicated to our group that he has not been contacted—by Mr. Langewiesche or by the fact-checkers of the *Atlantic Monthly*—either before or after the story originally broke in the *Wall Street Journal*.

In fact, Mr. Marquis never did speak with Ms. Ong directly. He merely overheard the conversation she held with two women, Vanessa Minter and Nydia Gonzales, who spoke with Ms. Ong in a conference call based in Raleigh, North Carolina. Mr. Langewiesche's entire passage is thus entirely stolen from the Wall Street report.

While Mr. Marquis initially indicated to the *Wall Street Journal* that Ms. Ong was "shrieking and gasping for air," a later four-minute long recording would reflect her remarkably collected demeanor. Though not released to the media or the general public, the tape of the conversation has been heard by members of the Ong family, as the result of Senator Ted Kennedy's personal intervention. The Ong family was permitted to take notes of the conversation, notes that were unavailable when the *Wall Street Journal* initially broke the news.

The Ong family reports that *Atlantic Monthly* fact-checkers never contacted them. Moreover, Langewiesche's, Nov. 26, 2002 letter to the Ong's only follows a trail of their persistent phone calls and letters to *Atlantic Monthly* and Langewiesche, that began Aug. 31, 2002. The Ong family demanded that factually inaccurate and damaging characterization of Betty Ong be immediately removed from the *American Ground* text.

Later press reports were based upon the July 18, 2002 ABC News report, which benefited from interviews with Ms. Minter and Ms. Gonzales. Ms. Minter, who first spoke with Ms. Ong (and the Ong family, who heard the four-minute tape), would indicate that Ms. Ong was composed and calmly reporting on her extraordinary circumstances, and not panicked as earlier reports had indicated.

FROM THE LOS ANGELES TIMES 20 SEPTEMBER 2001

In early September 2001, Eric Lichtblau of the *Los Angeles Times* obtained exclusive access - a journalistic coup - to a confidential FBI document detailing the phone call made by flight attendant Madeleine Amy Sweeney to a Michael Woodward, a flight services manager at Logan Airport. This second call, made from American Airlines flight 11, was not recorded. Rather, the FBI had reconstructed the call through interviews with Mr. Woodward—who had taken notes during his conversation—and other associated employees. Mr. Lichtblau's report was based on his reading of this confidential FBI report, a report that, apparently, has not been either read or reported on since.

Both the FBI and American Airlines employees were instructed not to talk to reporters following the *LA Times* article, due to the ongoing investigation and prosecution of other possible terrorists. Subsequent articles which mentioned Ms. Sweeney's call were thus based solely on the original *LA Times* publication, and attributed Mr. Lichtblau as their source. In a 21 September 2001 AP article, "Flight Attendant's Phone Call Provides Valuable Details," the particulars of Ms. Sweeney's phone call were correctly cited as "according to an FBI investigative document obtained by the *LA Times*."

On 18 July 2002, nine months after Mr. Lichtblau's initial report, ABC News provided additional, though slightly differing, information regarding the phone call. In particular, quotes from Ms. Sweeney, recreated from Mr. Woodward's nine-month-old memory, varied slightly in phrasing from the original *LA Times* article. The *LA Times* and ABC news versions of Ms. Sweeney's last moments remain the only ones available in the press; because of the difference in phrasing, it is easy to track which of the two versions a subsequent reporter has followed.

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2 From the *Wall Street Journal*
Only the *Wall Street Journal* reported the call was patched through to Forth Worth, Texas; later reports would confirm that the call was received in Raleigh, North Carolina.

From the *Wall Street Journal*
This version of events is directly rephrased from the *Wall Street Journal* and is not related in the later ABC report: "Fearing a hoax, he called up her personal record and asked her to verify her employee number and nickname. She did. This was real."

The scene inside American 11 was very rough. There were five hijackers aboard, Islamic militants armed with box cutters and small blades. They were led by the now notorious Egyptian named Mohamed Atta, the chief conspirator behind all four of the attacks that day. The cabin of American 11 was less than half full, with seventy-six hapless passengers and nine flight attendants. One of the flight attendants, a forty-five-year-old woman named Betty Ong, dialed a seatback flight phone and reached a reservation agent on the ground. In terrified tones, gasping for air, Ong reported the hijacking. The agent passed her to a supervisor, who patched her through to American Airlines' national operations center, in Fort Worth, Texas. The manager on duty there, an airline veteran named Craig Marquis, pulled up her records and, concerned that the call might be a hoax, asked for her employee number and nickname. This she managed to give him. She said that two of the flight attendants had been stabbed.

From the *Wall Street Journal*
This exact phrase is plagiarized from the *Wall Street Journal*, "In the background Mr. Marquis could hear the flight attendant shrieking and gasping for air." (emphasis added)

From the *Wall Street Journal*
Only the *Wall Street Journal* implied that Mr. Marquis was the one who pulled up the records. As ABC reported, "Ong's call came through to Vanessa Minter, an agent at the airline's reservation center in Raleigh, NC. Minter conferred in Nydia Gonzales, whose responsibilities include dealing with security issues."

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In a private email to the Ong family, Mr. Langewiesche has admitted that his only source about Betty Ong for his account was the *Wall Street Journal* report.

Dear Mr. Ong...

While it is true that my brief reporting on the subject of your sister was based on the *Wall street Journal's* first-person account, I believe you may notice that my writing was more subdued, and in no way cast aspersions on her memory...

-William Langewiesche's email to Harry Ong, 26 November 2002

Since he describes his use of a single and completely unattributed source, Mr. Langewiesche is guilty of plagiarism by his own admission. Moreover, because he plagiarized an earlier breaking report, and not a later revised version, Mr. Langewiesche has propagated an unfair mischaracterization of Ms. Ong. In representing the journalistic work and interviews of Mr. McCartney and Ms. Carey of the *Wall Street Journal* as his own, Mr. Langewiesche breaks the journalistic code of ethics demanding recognition of the unique research and hard work done by one's colleagues.

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2 From the *Wall Street Journal*
“[Ms. Ong] said that the four hijackers had come from 1st class seats 2A, 2B, 9A and 9B...the hijackers had hit people with some sort of spray that made her eyes burn. She was having trouble breathing, Mr. Marquis recalled.”

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one so severely that she was on oxygen, and that a business-class passenger had been killed by having his throat cut. She counted four of the hijackers, and reported their seat numbers. She said they had used a chemical spray that burned her eyes and made breathing difficult. Marquis could do nothing but keep her company. He asked Ong if there was a doctor on board. “No, no doctor,” she said. As the airplane approached New York, he asked her if it was descending. She said, “We’re starting to descend! We’re starting to descend!” By then she may have felt more hope than horror. It was natural to assume that they were descending to land.

From the *Wall Street Journal* **1**
Nearly this exact phrasing is stolen from the *Wall Street Journal*, “ [Ms. Ong] said two flight attendants had been stabbed, one was on oxygen. A passenger had his throat slashed and looked dead, and they had gotten into the cockpit,’ Mr. Marquis recalls.”

3 From the *Wall Street Journal*
“ ‘Is there a doctor on board?’ Mr. Marquis remembers asking. ‘No. No Doctor, Ms. Ong said.’”
Alternatively, ABC reported, “The flight attendants gave the injured people oxygen, and made an announcement over the PA system asking if there was a doctor or nurse on board.”

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From the *Wall Street Journal* **4**
“ ‘Is the plane descending?’ Mr. Marquis asked [Ms. Ong]. “We’re starting to descend.” ABC reported different dialogue: “Ong said the plane was flying erratically, and Sweeney said it had begun a rapid descent.”

PLAGIARISM DEFINED

According to *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Paper* (5th edition, 1999), “To use another person’s ideas or expressions in your writing without acknowledging the source is to plagiarize. Plagiarism then constitutes intellectual theft. Forms of plagiarism include the failure to give appropriate acknowledgement when repeating another’s wording or particularly apt phrase, when paraphrasing another’s argument... “You may certainly use other persons’ words and thoughts in your research paper, but the borrowed material must not be seem your creation. Suppose, for example, that you want to use the material in the following passage, which appears on page 625 of an essay by Wendy Martin in the book *Columbia Literary History of the United States*.”

“Some of Dickinson’s most powerful poems express her firmly held conviction that life cannot be fully comprehended without an understanding of death.”

“If you write the following sentence without documentation, you have committed Plagiarism”.

“Emily Dickinson strongly believed that we cannot understand life fully unless we also comprehend death.”

“But you may present the material if you cite the source.”

“As Wendy Martin has suggested, Emily Dickinson strongly believed that we cannot understand life fully unless we understand death (625).”

LANGEWIESCHE USED NEWSPAPER SOURCES

It’s important to note that Langewiesche’s lack of attribution cannot be said to be stylistic, as Langewiesche properly cites newspapers as his sources in two other passages of *American Ground*. Langewiesche writes,

“ The Unions threatened privately to hold a news conference and accuse the mayor of being ‘anti-American’, but apparently thought better of going public with such a foolish claim. Instead, more accurately, a union spokesman said to *The New York Times*, ‘The mayor fails to realize that New York is not a dictatorship, where if you don’t like what a union is doing you can just go and lock up a union’s president. The message being sent from City Hall is that you don’t agree with this administration, we will get you.’”*American Ground*, Book p.154

Langewiesche also states,

“ Two days before the fighting broke out, a fire captain and union trustee named Matty James presented the situation starkly to the *Daily News* as if retrieval of the bodies were an all-or- nothing affair. He said, ‘The city may be ready to turn this into a construction job, but we’re not. We want our brothers back....’”*American Ground*, Book p.147-148

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1 **From the *Wall Street Journal***
“A few minutes later, [Rich] Doc Miles, the SOC [System Operations Control] shift manager, heard from United’s maintenance center in San Francisco, which has a system to take in-flight calls from flight attendants about cabin items that need repairs.”

That was United 175’s final call. The time was 8:42. Just afterward a team led by a twenty-three-year-old citizen of the United Arab Emirates named Marwan al-Shehhi invaded the cockpit. It is obvious that, as in American 11, they busted through the door. The attack was so sudden that the pilots had no chance to alert the world. Nonetheless these 767s were big things with hidden spaces and lots of telephones, and word quickly got out: a mechanic on duty at United’s San Francisco center for in-flight complaints got a call from a flight attendant on board who, before the line went dead, blurted, “Oh, my God! The crew’s been killed, and a flight attendant has been stabbed! We’ve been hijacked!”

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From the *Wall Street Journal*

“The mechanic had gotten a call from a female flight attendant on flight 175, who had said, ‘Oh my God, the crew has been killed, a flight attendant has been stabbed. We’ve been hijacked.’ Then, the line from the phone went dead.”

2

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1 From the *Los Angeles Times* paraphrased from the events as related in the *LA Times*:

“Sweeney... called American flight services manager Michael Woodward on the ground at Logan. She displayed remarkable calm as she related numerous details about the unfolding events...investigators noted that Sweeney even had the presence of mind to relay the exact seat numbers of the four suspects in the ninth and 10th rows.”

Yellow highlights indicate text Mr. Langewiesche paraphrased from the original text

Green highlights indicate text or quotes directly plagiarized from the original source.

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The airplane held five hijackers, two dead pilots, seven flight attendants, and fifty-one passengers. United 175 turned and dove toward New York.

At about the same time, American 11 passed low over the George Washington Bridge. As best the last moments inside the cabin can be reconstructed, few passengers if any were looking through the windows, or were aware of the airplane's ominous flight profile—the combination of ultra-low altitude and high speed that characterized its final bombing run. The mood aboard must have been fearful but quieter now. In the back of the airplane another flight attendant was on the phone. Her name was Madeline Amy Sweeney. She had gotten through to an American flight-service manager in Boston, and with exceptional cool had given him a running account of the hijacking, fingering the terrorists and confirming much of Betty Ong's account, including the slaughter of the passenger in business class. It is likely that she added important details about the terrorists' techniques—for instance, how exactly they got into the cockpit or controlled the passengers—which for security reasons have not been made public. Seconds before 8:46 and the impact she looked through a window to give a position report, and to her surprise saw the city flashing by. She said, “I see water and buildings!” She may have been the first person to understand the hijackers' intentions. At the last instant she said, “Oh, my God! Oh, my God!”

From the *Los Angeles Times*

This is one of the key points of dialogue where the *LA Times* report differs from the later ABC report. The *LA Times* reported: “Woodward asked Sweeney to look out the window and see if she could tell what was going on. ‘I see the water. I see the buildings. I see buildings,’ she told him.” The ABC report differed and reported that Ms. Sweeney spoke as follows, “‘I see water and buildings. I see buildings. Oh my God! Oh my God!’ Madeleine Amy Sweeney told a ground manager in Boston.”

2

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By his use of an unattributed source, Mr. Langewiesche is guilty of plagiarism, once again. In representing the journalistic work and interviews of Eric Lichtblau from the *Los Angeles Times* as his own, Mr. Langewiesche breaks the journalistic code of ethics demanding recognition of the unique research and hard work done by one's colleagues.

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Conclusion

We are further left with the question, if the *Atlantic Monthly* claims to have double- and triple-checked its facts, what were they double- and triple-checked against? Only the *Wall Street Journal's* early report relied on Mr. Marquis's recollections; all later updated reports would focus on Ms. Minter and Ms. Gonzales, who had actually spoken to Ms. Ong. Only the early *Wall Street Journal* report would characterize Ms. Ong as panicked; the rest, provided with updated information, indicated she was calm. Mr. Langewiesche has indicated that he plagiarized from one source. What is the *Atlantic Monthly's* excuse for allowing such a passage to go uncorrected? It is difficult to take their fact-checking seriously in such an event. This discovery should lay question to the validity of their fact-checking in other, more questionable circumstances.

As a forum for literary content, all the *Atlantic Monthly* has to sell is its journalistic integrity. The failure of Mr. Langewiesche himself to acknowledge his sources is plagiarism; the failure of the *Atlantic Monthly* and North Point Press not to thoroughly have checked and double-checked both the sources and citations of Langewiesche's writing, as they have consistently claimed, is editorial negligence.

Both Langewiesche and *The Atlantic Monthly* have provided variant stories regarding the fact-checking that went on behind the scenes at both the *Atlantic Monthly* and North Point Press.

In November 19, 2002, *Publishers Weekly* printed comments from North Point Press editorial director Becky Saletan, including the admission that they had not checked over *The Atlantic Monthly's* work. "[Had we published it first,] we would have given it a full legal read, which typically concentrates [only] on potentially sensitive legal matters. But *The Atlantic* checked every fact" *Publishers Weekly* reported Ms. Saletan stated. In the October 21, 2002, the *New York Observer* ran Ms.

Saletan's further comment "I know [Mr. Langewiesche's] sourcing is impeccable." In the same article, Mr. Langewiesche further stated "Everything in there--and I mean every word--is fact-checked."

In a November 18, 2002 statement, *The Atlantic Monthly's* deputy managing editor Toby Lester indicated the editors of *The Atlantic Monthly* would back up all Mr. Langewiesche's claims. "The fact checking took five months of full-time work, by an experienced team of two, who sought to trace every detail to its source," Mr. Lester asserted, "they spoke to eyewitnesses, to people being quoted, to city officials; they tracked down every detail through independent channels, and in the most sensitive cases through more than one."

However, as the evidence presented here indicates, the fact-checking could hardly have been as thorough as Mr. Langewiesche and Mr. Lester represent. Fact-checking would have revealed the plagiarism of the *Wall Street Journal* story, and would have corrected the many errors in Mr. Langewiesche's retelling of the three flight attendants' phone calls. Basic fact-checking would have revealed the truths made evident by this report.

Mr. Langewiesche and Mr. Lester have both admitted that fact-checking may have been less than thorough. "I'm not a truth squad as far as 9/11 goes...I am a reporter" Mr. Langewiesche told *New York Newsday* on November 18, 2002. In the later January/February 2003 *American Journalism Review*, Mr. Lester would claim that his "fact-checkers 'deliberately didn't want to pin down, 'Was it Ladder 4?' ' or other such details, but rather they sought to confirm 'that this story was circulating'--and they did." Mr. Langewiesche's and *The Atlantic Monthly's* joint editorial negligence led to the plagiarism and misleading errors detailed in this report.