The September 15-16 weekend brought the best weather of the year for much of the U.S.: blue skies, light winds and mild temperatures. But across a country bloodied by the first strike of a new war, there were no five-minute calls, no jump runs, no long swoops—only quiet skies, eerie in their stillness.

One Silent Weekend

by kevin gibson

Just a bike ride away.

Just after the attack on the Pentagon, a member of the Parachutist staff rode his bicycle from USPA Headquarters and captured this shot.
n the days following the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the nation reorganized its priorities. While President Bush called for a return to life as normal in America, no group outside New York City, Pennsylvania and Northern Virginia felt the sting as much as civil aviation.

"Civil aviation" means different things to different Americans: It’s airlines, commuters, crop dusters, flight training, pleasure flying, ballooning and more. To skydivers, it’s how to get enough altitude to jump out. During peacetime, they all compete for fair use of the skies. Just as skydivers have USPA, most aviators have associations with contacts at all levels of aviation authority, ranging from local airports to the FAA to the U.S. Congress.

"This Ain’t No Foolin’ Around" — David Etienne

At 9:38 a.m., shortly after a terrorist-piloted airliner hit the Pentagon, all aircraft in the national airspace system were ordered to the ground. Suddenly, the rules changed. Now, for the first time, each of the various aviation interests had to justify its ability to use the airspace in a way that would not enable another terrorist to attack. But the FAA was not in charge. For the time being, the National Security Council was making all the calls about who would fly and who would wait.

The NSC includes the President, the Vice President, the Secretaries of State and Defense and the statutory advisors, who include the chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the director of the CIA. These people and their staffs are not common contacts for most aviation associations. However, until the NSC felt that an aircraft would pose no immediate threat, none would have access to the skies.

So, for the aviation interest groups, influence was no longer a matter of calling the familiar Washington politicians on Capitol Hill and their bureaucratic associates at FAA Headquarters. The NSC was the new sheriff in town with a very serious job to do. Meanwhile, everyone in the industry was stuck on the ground losing money, and that included drop zones. Providing no schedule, the NSC announced through the FAA and the news services that air travel over the U.S. would be restored in increments. The implication was that for some, it would be later rather than sooner.

Tuesday afternoon, only a few hours after the attacks, the first call came into USPA from a drop zone in California asking what USPA was going to do to get jumpers back in the air.

With the smoke from the Pentagon attack still visible from the north windows at USPA Headquarters in Alexandria, Ed Scott, USPA Director of Government Relations, met with Chris Needels, USPA Executive Director, on how to proceed. Anne Davies, USPA’s Communications Associate and webmaster, established a hot link on USPA’s home page for the latest airspace updates in hopes of preempting many calls and e-mails from skydivers and drop zones about when jumping could resume. On Wednesday, Scott broadcast the first of more than two dozen communiques to his e-mail list of USPA Group Member centers with the latest developments. His job included translating the FAA’s “Notices to Airmen,” or NOTAMs, so jumpers and drop zone owners could understand them.

In the electronically transmitted “DZO Incoming” on September 12 at 1:30 p.m., Scott gave his best assessment: “So far, there is no official indication of how, when or under what conditions general aviation flights can resume.” But he also announced the FAA’s prediction that airlines might be released to fly as early as 6:00 that evening. Then things went from bad to worse.

Three hours later, at 4:30, Scott sent out a second memo, and Davies posted it on USPA’s home page. “As a result of yesterday’s series of terrorist attacks by aircraft, the FAA has grounded all non-emergency civil flights.” Again, there was no indication from the FAA about when flights could resume, but it wouldn’t be 6 p.m. Finally, later that night, the airline flights ordered to land in the U.S. and Canada after the attacks were released but allowed only to finish their trips.

On Thursday morning, September 13, two days following the attacks, Scott found a surprise in his early-morning communications with the FAA. Drop zone owners and skydivers woke to his 7:39 memo that said, “At 15Z [11 a.m. Eastern time], the [national airspace system] will resume normal ops . . . VFR flights may proceed under normal VFR without a discreet beacon code to the airports of their choice.”

“VFR” stands for visual flight rules, which is how any pilot may fly who first gets his license. No clearances or radio contact with air traffic control are required. The message warned that not all airports may be open. But incredibly, it seemed that for aviation, the crisis was over for now.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KEVIN GIBSON

The American flag hangs from the second-story window of USPA Headquarters, facing busy Duke Street.

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Then suddenly, just minutes before the scheduled release, the FAA announced an almost complete reversal. Scott and Davies posted it immediately: "[General aviation] not to enter ATC system until further notice."

"General aviation" is a broad term that includes just about everything except airliners and military aircraft, which continued to fly. Among the many divisions and distinctions in general aviation is skydiving. Airplanes that had taken off were again ordered to land immediately. It was going to be a tougher battle than USPA and many other general aviation groups had first thought.

Meanwhile, the big airports began to open for scheduled airline service as soon as their security measures could be approved. By Thursday evening, only Reagan National, ten minutes from USPA Headquarters, remained closed to arriving traffic. The stranded airliners and business jets on the field were instructed to fly south away from Washington, D.C., until they were 25 miles from the city and to not return until further notice. Soon, the field was devoid of planes. Except for birds, the only sounds to be heard in the skies over Washington were high-flying military aircraft.

The first type of general aviation to take off after September 11 included passenger and cargo flights that operated under FAA Part 135 and that followed instrument flight rules (IFR). They began flying Thursday evening, September 13. Part 135 includes operations with FAA-approved pilot training and maintenance manuals. And IFR means the pilot files a flight plan that he must follow. Each aircraft must be cleared for takeoff and continuously broadcast its identity and position using a transponder. The pilot must maintain continuous radio contact with air traffic control.

By Thursday evening, with the weekend rapidly approaching, nobody could tell how far the NSC and the FAA were willing to go to let others back in the air. But at 6:30 Thursday evening, Scott and Davies sent the last word of the day over the internet: "At 6:30 p.m. EDT on Thursday, September 13, the FAA released a new announcement stating that the agency is using a phased approach to return normalcy to the national airspace system. However, there was no mention of their plans to restore Part 91 operations." Part 91 includes the FAA rules that govern corporate and private aviation, in which maintenance and pilot training follow a looser schedule. Part 91 includes skydiving flights.

At 10:08 Friday morning, September 14, Scott was told that the FAA might consider Part 91 flights under IFR. It provided the first hint of a window of opportunity for skydivers in a confusing flurry of reactions to the September 11 attacks.

USPA quickly drafted its position for resuming skydiving operations. Skydiving flights, although operating under visual flight rules, operate exactly like IFR flights, with discrete transponder codes and requirements to remain in communication with air traffic controllers. In addition, skydiving flights remain local at small airports away from major population centers. Thirdly, skydivers and jump pilots know everyone on board, except the students, who are supervised by instructors. Anything is possible, but skydiving flights, light on fuel, present a very remote security risk, at least for now.

Meanwhile, a hurricane was threatening the southern coast of the U.S. The NSC and the FAA were getting a lot of pressure from aircraft owners concerned about their planes parked in the storm's projected path.

At 5:38 p.m., Friday, September 14, came USPA's last, sad words for the week: "This afternoon, the FAA allowed Part 91 operators to fly on IFR Flight plans . . . The agency indicates the VFR operations may be phased in over the weekend. USPA will continue to monitor the situation over the weekend and send e-mail updates to DZOs and post updates on the USPA website.

All flights still had to operate under IFR, so operations under visual flight rules (VFR), including skydiving, were still prohibited. On Friday afternoon, a few creative skydiving operations filed and were approved for IFR clearances, and some even dropped jumpers. But the FAA stopped that by Friday evening.

The weekend had arrived, but not for skydiving. On the East Coast, a troubled Ed Scott left the USPA office long after closing time, with messages in to just about everyone who could help. Davies was asked to remain available to post any news on the website. If anything happened over the weekend, skydivers would be the first to know. Nothing did.

In addition to skydiving, thousands of aircraft and pilots remained on the ground for security concerns. Hundreds of aviation businesses with millions of dollars in gross revenues could open their doors. These included robust businesses with representation by influential manufacturing and membership organizations that could not convince officials to let them operate. That
a very scary thought for a relatively tiny organization of 35,000 sport aviation enthusiasts whom many people already think of as crazy. Most people would say that nobody really needs to skydive.

"This is the End of the Innocence" — Don Henley

Considering the circumstances, it seemed almost reverent to sit out a weekend to reflect on the meaning of what had happened in New York, Pennsylvania and Northern Virginia on September 11. A letter was sent across the internet from one skydiver in reply to jumpers who complained. Where jumpers had lost their freedom to skydive, others in America and around the world had lost parts of their families. The letter's author reminded those who complained that what jumpers value most might not seem very important in the big picture.

But by Monday, September 17, even people in downtown Manhattan were returning to work, and skydive lovers, along with the other stranded aviation businesses, demanded action. Nobody wanted to sit out another weekend.

In Alexandria, USPA was also back at work. Scott and Needels had made a lot of calls the previous week, and now it was time to follow up in earnest. The shock of September 11 gave way to the reality that America needed to get back to business. USPA needed every resource it had.

Unfortunately, not all the association's technical resources would be available. On Monday morning, anyone calling the association heard two rings and then got the following chilling message: “Please enter your security code.” It was an irrelevant malfunction of the office phone system that couldn’t have come at a worse time. Immediately, office manager Jean Mason and her assistant, Mary Kay George, dropped what they were doing to get the phone techs in and worked with them until early afternoon to solve the trouble. What else could go wrong? Plenty, as it turned out.

DZOs, who could get through by e-mail, began asking for pressure at the congressional level, but USPA was told by its own key contacts that pressuring Congress would be poorly timed and not well received. USPA was encouraged to continue taking its message to those currently in charge, the NSC through the FAA.

An uninformative source started a rumor on an internet chat group that USPA had done basically nothing and that another aviation association was carrying all the weight for skydiving. While far from true, explaining what was going on to irate believers slowed the progress toward a solution.

Relief for Grounded Drop Zones?

On September 28, USPA testified in a hearing before the House Aviation Subcommittee on the impact of flight restrictions on skydiving and DZs. USPA had requested to testify the previous week, before skydiving was allowed to resume. During the five minutes allotted on September 28, USPA’s Ed Scott let the subcommittee know that jump planes could have been released earlier due to the communication and transponder requirements.

USPA also emphasized the financial losses experienced by DZs due to the nine-day grounding for all drop zones and the seven USPA Group Members that remain grounded, citing specific estimates many DZs supplied on USPA’s request.

Subcommittee chair John Mica, whose congressional district includes Skydive DeLand, Florida, said that Congress is formulating a new bill to offer financial assistance to general aviation businesses and agreed that skydiving centers should be eligible.

Drop zones should expect to hear more about how to participate as the bill progresses.

It's Who You Know

USPA hired Scott from his job as the executive director of the National Association of State Aviation Officials. Before NASAO, he worked for the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association in the Government and Technical Affairs Division, which lobbies the FAA. Scott’s contacts within AOPA, the FAA and the general and sport aviation communities run broad and deep.

USPA’s Needels also has a strong background in sport aviation. He has served for seven years on the board of the National Aeronautical Association, USPA’s parent organization in the aviation sports community. During his term, the NAA Board hired Steve Brown as its executive director. Brown participated at several USPA meetings as an ex officio member of USPA’s board, according to USPA’s constitution. He understands skydiving and how it works. Brown’s connection is important, because he left the NAA and is now the Associate Administrator for Air Traffic—the top air traffic job at the FAA—serving as one of the agency’s chief liaisons with the NSC following the September 11 attacks.

Because of USPA’s continual development of aviation contacts, developed through Scott, Needels and a long list of USPA officials before them, the FAA, ordinarily controlled by Congress, knows who USPA is and what the organization represents.

The evening of September 11, police cars swamped Capitol Hill, usually filled with pedestrians.
Afterburner

However, to get back in the air after the attacks, USPA needed to convince those in charge beyond the FAA. Fortunately for USPA, Needels served in the White House as a member of the NSC staff in the previous Bush administration. In fact, Needels was the advisor on counter-terrorism and aviation security. Some of his associates serve again under President George W. Bush. Through these contacts, USPA was able to inform key people at the NSC about the nature of skydiving operations and how they can be conducted safely during an alert. They heard skydiving's side of the story from someone they could trust.

Scott presented USPA's position paper to FAA's Brown, who the previous week had spent three nights between NSC meetings on the couch in his office at FAA Headquarters. Brown replied shortly before noon on Tuesday, September 18, one week and a few hours after the first strike on the World Trade Center: "Ed, thanks, this is timely." He indicated that it couldn't have come a minute sooner or later, as Brown had another meeting with the NSC that afternoon regarding which of the Part 91 operations would next be allowed to fly.

It was one of the last e-mails that USPA received on Tuesday. Shortly before noon, Michelle Garvin, USPA Director of Membership Services, began wrestling with a new threat: USPA's computer system had been badly infected with the Nimda virus, worming its way that day through the internet. Garvin ordered all of USPA's work stations shut down. At least the phone lines were up. The door to Needels' office remained uncharacteristically closed most of the afternoon while he made some necessary phone calls.

Using off-site access through a laptop computer USPA owns, Davies was able to keep the website updated all day Tuesday. At the close of business, Scott sent the following notice to Group Members: "DO NOT OPEN ANY ATTACHMENTS FROM USPA!" warning recipients of the virus. He couldn't provide a better progress report than to say, "Meanwhile, as of 5 p.m. EDT, there is no change in the airspace status. USPA continues to work with others on influencing the NSC and the FAA."

The USPA staff knocked off at the end of a very frustrating and unproductive day, still mindful of the inconveniences being felt all over the country from the attacks, the computer virus, the news from Wall Street and the war.

Wednesday looked a little better. Microsoft had issued a patch for the virus, and Garvin and her assistant, Toni Burkhart, began deleting thousands of useless files that had multiplied themselves on the server and the work stations. Scott and Needels waited patiently with some reassurance that USPA's message had made it to the right people. Finally, shortly after lunch, Brown gave Scott advance notice on what skydivers had been hoping to hear.

Scott issued a memo Wednesday afternoon that some Part 91 operations might be released by the close of business. Everyone sat on pins and needles. DZOs were growing more nervous about a second weekend of no revenue, and the seven-day-a-week operators were losing faith in USPA's effectiveness. Unfortunately for all, the day ended without the expected NOTAM releasing more VFR flights.
No Shows

In the days following the September 11 attacks, speculation abounds about unleashing biological and chemical weapons on large gatherings of people just about anywhere. In response, subsequent FAA NOTAMs described prohibitions against flying over assemblies, including major sporting events. Subsequently, the FAA said that event sponsors could apply for exceptions that appeared to include skydiving exhibitions. Then, late Friday afternoon on September 28, the FAA changed its mind. Skydivers were not to perform exhibition jumps into crowds anywhere. USPA continues to seek relief.

U.S. (see illustrations). The size and shape vary, but it generally assumes the shape of an irregular upside-down wedding cake, beginning with a tier on the surface extending five miles from the center and from 1,500 to 2,500 feet high. On that tier sits a bigger cylinder and, often above that, an even larger one usually extending 20 miles around the airport. In normal circumstances, VFR flight is allowed below the upper tier(s). Planes can fly by low within five or ten miles of big airports, and skydiving can occur by special arrangement. The new enhanced Class B airspace rule prohibited skydiving and any VFR flight below the upper tiers. Six of the seven grounded DZs lie under Class B airspace, with one too close to operate practically. Along with those DZs, still grounded were many other planes and pilots represented by bigger associations than USPA. An estimated 41,000 aircraft remained earthbound at 282 airports under the enhanced Class B, unless they could be flown IFR from their home airports or relocated.

As Parachutist goes to press, USPA continues to press hard to restore full operations for all skydivers and joins with other associations, like AOPA, to restore previous operations within Class B airspace. But for jumping itself, the resources that skydivers have developed during more than 50 years of continuous association provided the sport with the right people in the right places at a critical time.

Class B airspace surrounds 32 of the busiest airports in the country.
Class B Drop Zones Back in the Air

At press time, five of seven drop zones grounded by enhanced Class B airspace restrictions since September 20 have finally been allowed to resume normal skydiving operations. Most DZs were allowed to resume skydiving on September 20 after a nine-day shutdown by the FAA (see the related article on page 28). However, seven remained restricted from operating in Class B airspace, along with most general aviation flights conducted under visual flight rules. Class B airspace typically surrounds the 30 largest metropolitan areas in the U.S. out to a distance of 20 miles from their major airports, though the distance can be greater.

The five released DZs are part of 15 Class B areas that the FAA finally restored to VFR general aviation flight in mid-October. They include Kapowsin Air Sports and Skydive Snohomish, both within the confines of the Seattle Class B; Ogden Skydiving Center and Skydive Utah, both within Salt Lake City’s Class B limits; and Skydive Spaceland, which is just on the limit of Houston Hobby’s Class B. Skydive Spaceland was allowed to resume operations on September 20, but it lies so close to Hobby’s Class B airspace that the necessary jump runs to avoid it caused many off-DZ landings.

Only two drop zones, Skydive San Diego and Skydive Las Vegas, are still restricted from conducting normal skydiving operations at their established sites, though both are able to operate under temporary conditions. Skydive San Diego and Skydive Las Vegas are both within the Class B airspace of their respective cities. The FAA is expected to restore VFR flight to all remaining Class B airspace soon, though a timetable had not been announced at press time. Updates are available on USPA’s website, www.uspa.org.

FS Awards Updated

At its meeting last July, the USPA Board approved updates to the skydiving performance awards for formation skydiving. The changes reflect the continuous development and improvement in skydivers’ abilities.

The current requirements for the Falcon, Eagle and Silver Falcon awards have become less challenging compared to their debut in 1983. USPA plans to retain the names of the Falcon and Eagle awards but increase the requirements for earning them.

After March 1, 2002, jumpers will need the same performance currently required for a Double Falcon (eight points on a 4-way with complete breaks) to earn a Falcon. And the same requirements currently for a Double Eagle (four points on an 8-way with complete breaks) will apply to earning an Eagle. The names “Double Falcon” and “Double Eagle” will be retired.

Also going away is the Silver Falcon award for a 36-way formation, but any skydiver who qualifies may apply for one until March 1. The Golden Eagle (64-way) remains unchanged.

Send comments on the awards program to membership@uspa.org or by mail to Membership, USPA, 1440 Duke Street, Alexandria, VA 22314.
A Special Thanks
messages from members

I just wanted to drop you a line to say thanks for all the hard work you are doing to get skydiving back in the air amidst this horrible atrocity. It’s times like this that we as USPA members really learn the value of having USPA represent skydiving and skydivers alike. There were those who said the government could never shut down skydiving. Clearly, we all know that just is not true now. The importance of having USPA has never been more defined. I’m sure I speak for many when I send my best wishes.

Daniel Chisom, C-28534
Houston, Texas

Thanks for all of your hard work in restoring VFR operations for DZs across the country. I know the effort continues for those DZs in enhanced Class B airspace, but it is clear to me from the latest NOTAM that the skydiving lobby succeeded in making itself heard. Keep up the good work.

David Brussin, C-31722
Playa del Rey, California

I am the DZ manager for little, teeny Crete Skydiving Center in Nebraska. I just wanted to write and express appreciation for how well you have kept us informed of recent events. We have all been concerned about the future of our operations—whether we are a large or small DZ.

Sharon Cochrane, B-23887
Lincoln, Nebraska

This is to let you know that we are skydiving in Hawaii. We flew our first flight yesterday, September 20. There are restrictions, but nothing we can’t handle. We do a lot of tandems out here, and the tourist numbers are down, which means that there are less customers. It was great to make a jump yesterday. Thank you for your updates and assistance.

Clarence Lopez, D-3201
Aiea, Hawaii

I generally don’t read the rec.skydiving newsgroup, but while skydiving operations were suspended because of VFR flight restrictions, I monitored the websites of AOPA, USPA, EAA and the FAA, as well as the rec.skydiving newsgroup. I was astonished to see a posting on the newsgroup titled, “AOPA opens up skydiving,” Say what? Do they really think that AOPA went to the FAA and the NSC and said, “What this country really needs is to get skydivers back in the air?” I read the NOTAM allowing some VFR flight, and when I saw skydiving specifically listed as being permitted, there was no doubt in my mind as to who got it on the list. Anyone who believes that skydiving was reinstated because USPA was swept along on the coattails of AOPA should seriously rethink that idea.

I support USPA, and I would be a member even if drop zones never required it. Why? Because I know damn well that without USPA, skydiving would have been reintroduced much later, if ever. In fact, without USPA, the VFR restrictions most likely wouldn’t have made any difference, because skydiving in the U.S. probably would have ended years ago by government decree.

So, thanks to all the USPA staff for keeping me airborne.

Joe Wasser, D-6365
Ramona, California

I just wanted to say thank you to the USPA for the work you did to get us back in the air. We own a small skydiving operation in Texas, and we would not be able to go very long without flying. Thanks to AOPA and the USPA for the work and the late nights. I only hope our freedom to fly the great skies of this country never changes.

Tom Brewer, D-9331
Westsport, Stanton, Texas

Thank you for all the work the association has done to open up our skies again. It is obvious that if it were not for USPA, we would still be grounded.

Butch Crook, D-16728
Rowley, Massachusetts

I am glad you guys are on our side. Thank you.

Cindy Gibson, D-8801
Austin Skydiving Center, Lexington, Texas

Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!

Bob and Judy Celaya
California City Skydive Center and High Desert Skydive
California City, California

Thanks for the efforts and the updates during this whole mess with restrictions on VFR flights. I was lucky enough to be the bearer of good news to several close friends who just returned from military training and after six weeks were itching to jump. Saturday morning will dawn with jumpers hitting the skies again!

Laura L. Parker, D-22551
Holland, Texas

I wish to thank both USPA and AOPA for their efforts to restore the VFR airspace for skydivers. The recent terrorist attack was designed to not only kill Americans but to strike fear into the hearts of all Americans and to cause us to give up some of our cherished freedoms. All of us should learn to appreciate our freedoms and to pray for America.

Jim Bell, D-23520
Greenville, South Carolina

Thanks for your lobbying efforts aimed at keeping us in the skies and for your postings to keep us informed. The part of me that values this sport as my most cherished recreational activity causes me to thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Harry Q. Higbie, B-22527
Chicago, Illinois

I would like to thank you folks for the work you’ve done to get us back in the air. I’m DZO of Atlanta Air Sportz along with Ron Green. We feel the work you have done for us and all skydivers alike is why we truly need USPA.

Sandor Vall, D-19338
Chasworth, Georgia