

On board Flight 93

A film about the ill-fated 9/11 flight brings the horror to life as not even a documentary could, writes Shaun de Waal

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When asked if he felt it was “too soon” to make the story of United Airlines Flight 93, or any project about 9/11, Greengrass says: “I’ve been asked that a lot by journalists, but never by any of the families [of those who lost their lives]. Some of them said, ‘Why did it take so long?’”

Greengrass, however, had his own way of doing the film. He approached the families of the passengers who died on the flight and got their support and direct assistance. Through the families, he and the cast researched the characters of the passengers on the plane as fully as possible. Each actor absorbed as much as he or she could about the person in question. They established the sequence of events that could be known -- when phone calls were made by passengers to family members, when officials on the ground began to feel something was wrong, and so forth.

These moments provided a structure; what happened between them, and how precisely events unfolded, is not known. So Greengrass required his actors, in character as the various passengers, to workshop and improvise to fill the gaps, and between them they worked out what was most likely. Shot in long, continuous takes to allow the situation to develop naturally, the flight’s last half-hour, from hijacking to crash, are filmed in real time, minute for minute.

“The whole film is an act of research,” says Khalid Abdalla, who plays Ziad Jarrah, the leader of the hijackers on Flight 93. Certainly, this research and the subsequent improvisation out of it got the actors fully immersed in their roles. United 93 barely feels acted at all. The sense of real people in a real situation is extraordinary; the effect is one of harrowing realism. You feel that it really must have felt and looked very much like this. “I wanted to make a film about ordinary people,” says Greengrass, “not kings, princes and presidents. One of the central truths of 9/11 is that the further up the ladder you were, the less you knew about what was going on and the less you could influence it. But, when it came to United 93, he felt he couldn’t just go off and dream up his own version of events. He was always going to make what was very much his own film, but it was important that it be responsible both to the events themselves and to the families involved.

The film itself is the best proof of his integrity. This, he says, was Greengrass’s pitch to the passengers’ families: “Let me make my film as best I can, but you must be the judge, and if you don’t like it you must denounce it.” None of them has.