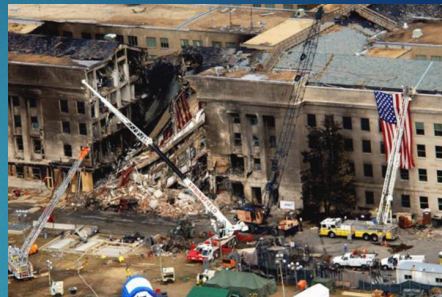


A Ring Side Seat at History: September 11, 2001

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Remember...9/11



“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”
~ George Santayana

Introduction

Twenty-five years ago this month, before this generation of Serteens was born, I had a ring side seat to history being made. September 11, 2001, would be a date remembered in American history. It brought back memories of December 7, 1941, and the attack on Pearl Harbor.

On September 11, 2001, terrorists crashed civilian airliners into three buildings, the North Tower (Tower 1) of the World Trade Center, the South Tower (Tower 2) of World Trade Center, both in New

York City and the Pentagon in Washinton, D.C. A fourth civilian airliner¹ crashed in a field near Shanksville, PA and did not make it to the intended target. The passengers on this plane fought back and caused the terrorists to crash the plane.

Background

I was on my second consecutive assignment in the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. I was previously assigned to the Directorate for Freedom of Information and Security Review (DFOISR), Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs from January 1996 to January 1999.

On September 11, I was assigned to the Joint Operations Division (JOD) European Command Division (EUCOM), part of the J33 (Current Operations), of the J3 (Operations Directorate), in the Joint Staff, in the Pentagon. Our primary responsibilities included the U.S. European Command area of operations which included most of Europe and Africa. I was focused mostly on operations in Bosnia, Kosovo and NATO operations.

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The day started out like most other days. I had my first meeting just after 0530 in the morning where we received an update from the on duty Watch Team in the National Military Command Center (NMCC). Our 0600 meeting with the J33 laid out our work for the day. At 0700 the next meeting included the Director of Operations. At 0800, I was back in our JOD (EUCOM) office to distribute the workload for the day. As in most places, we were short of several people. Our JOD (EUCOM) Division Chief was in processing as was the other Army Officer assigned to the section.

When I returned to the office, we discussed the tasks that had to be completed and assigned responsibilities. Everyone else returned to working on their specific areas of responsibility and upcoming requirements. We normally had the TV in the office tuned to CNN with the volume on low. Suddenly, one of my coworkers drew our attention to the TV. The first plane had crashed into the North Tower.² The tower was on fire. As we were watching, the second plane crashed into the South Tower.³ We all looked at each other and said, "One may be an accident. Two means something is going on." We all began to search for more information by phone, on our computer systems and from open sources/news.

At 0937, we were struck. American Airlines Flight 77⁴, a Boeing 757, slammed into the West Wall of the Pentagon destroying most of the 1st and 2nd floors from the E Ring to the inside of the C Ring. In the office, it sounded like someone had dropped a heavy box on the floor above us. At 0957, an alert went out to evacuate the building. The news showed pictures of the Pentagon on fire.

¹ The fourth airplane, United Airlines Flight 93, left Newark Liberty Airport for San Francisco at 0842 and crashed into the field near Shanksville, PA at 1002. The passengers, understanding the situation, fought back to regain control of the airplane causing the terrorists to crash the plane.

² American Airlines Flight 11, a Boeing 767, flying from Boston to Los Angeles, left Boston Logan at 0759 and crashed into the North Tower (Tower 1) at 0846.

³ United Airlines Flight 175, a Boeing 767, flying from Boston to Los Angeles, left Boston Logan at 0814 and crashed into the South Tower (Tower 2) at 0903.

⁴ American Airlines Flight 77, a Boeing 757, flying from Washington Dulles to Los Angeles, left Washington Dulles at 0820 and crashed into the Pentagon at 0937.

I went into the National Military Command Center (NMCC) to see if help was needed. I was told they were going to establish a Crisis Action Team (CAT). Knowing that we were short of people and having served on the CAT before during Operation ALLIED FORCE (Kosovo), I started helping to set up the CAT and started the duty log. As time went on, members from the different staff sections began reporting in for CAT duty. I also went back to the office, and we implemented our continuity of operations and started to prepare for 24-hour operations.

The rest of the day went by quickly as information continued to flow in. Meetings were held. I had the opportunity to be a “fly on the wall” during meetings between our national leaders. Listening to the discussions, many over issues that have never been faced before, posed to our national leaders with moral and legal questions. We were there when the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) ordered all planes to land at the nearest airport. Answering the question of who did this, why, and how do we fix things were at the top of everyone’s minds. Time passed quickly and I finally wandered back across the hall around 0200 in the morning and got a few hours of sleep before starting the day all over again.

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We continued with meetings and looked for more information. During the rest of the day, more information continued to come out. A lot of information about the attack would come out in the next few months. Around 2130, I left the Pentagon to go back home to my apartment. As I stepped outside, I noticed the changes. There were armed guards on patrol. Floodlights lit up the area. I could still see the search and rescue operations going on around the crash site. I finally got back to my apartment around 2200. I had been away for almost 41 hours. The phone was full of messages. Many of the messages were from Serteen Alumni and family trying to find out if I was okay. I was.

Epilogue

Although I lost some friends in the attack, we were lucky in the Pentagon.⁵ The section of the Pentagon hit by the airplane was not fully occupied. It had recently been renovated and the occupants were still moving back into that section. (A normal “wedge” of the Pentagon would have some 4,000 to 5,000 occupants.) That section had also been structurally reinforced so that most of the people not in the immediate areas of the impact were able to escape before the structure collapsed. I knew people who worked on the 3rd Floor in the D Ring who were able to evacuate that part of the building safely before it collapsed.

September 11, 2001 caused many changes to how our government works and how it is organized. The Department of Homeland Security was established. Transportation Security Administration (TSA) was established. Now you know why you must go through such security screenings at airports. Changes were made to our Intelligence system. The 9/11 Report provided additional recommendations to prevent events like this from happening again.

⁵ The crash of AA 77 into the Pentagon caused 189 deaths. 64 were on the plane - 6 crew and 58 passengers. 125 in the Pentagon – 70 civilians and 55 military.

If you are interested in learning more about the events of September 11, 2001, here are some recommended readings:

The 9/11 Commission Report

Without Precedent: The Inside Story of the 9/11 Commission, Thomas H. Kean and Lee H. Hamilton

What We Saw: The Events of September 11, 2001 – In Words, Pictures, and Video, CBS News, Introduction by Dan Rather

102 Minutes: The Untold Story of the Fight to Survive Inside the Twin Towers, Jim Dwyer and Kevin Flynn

Heart of A Soldier: A Story of Love, Heroism, and September 11, James B. Stewart