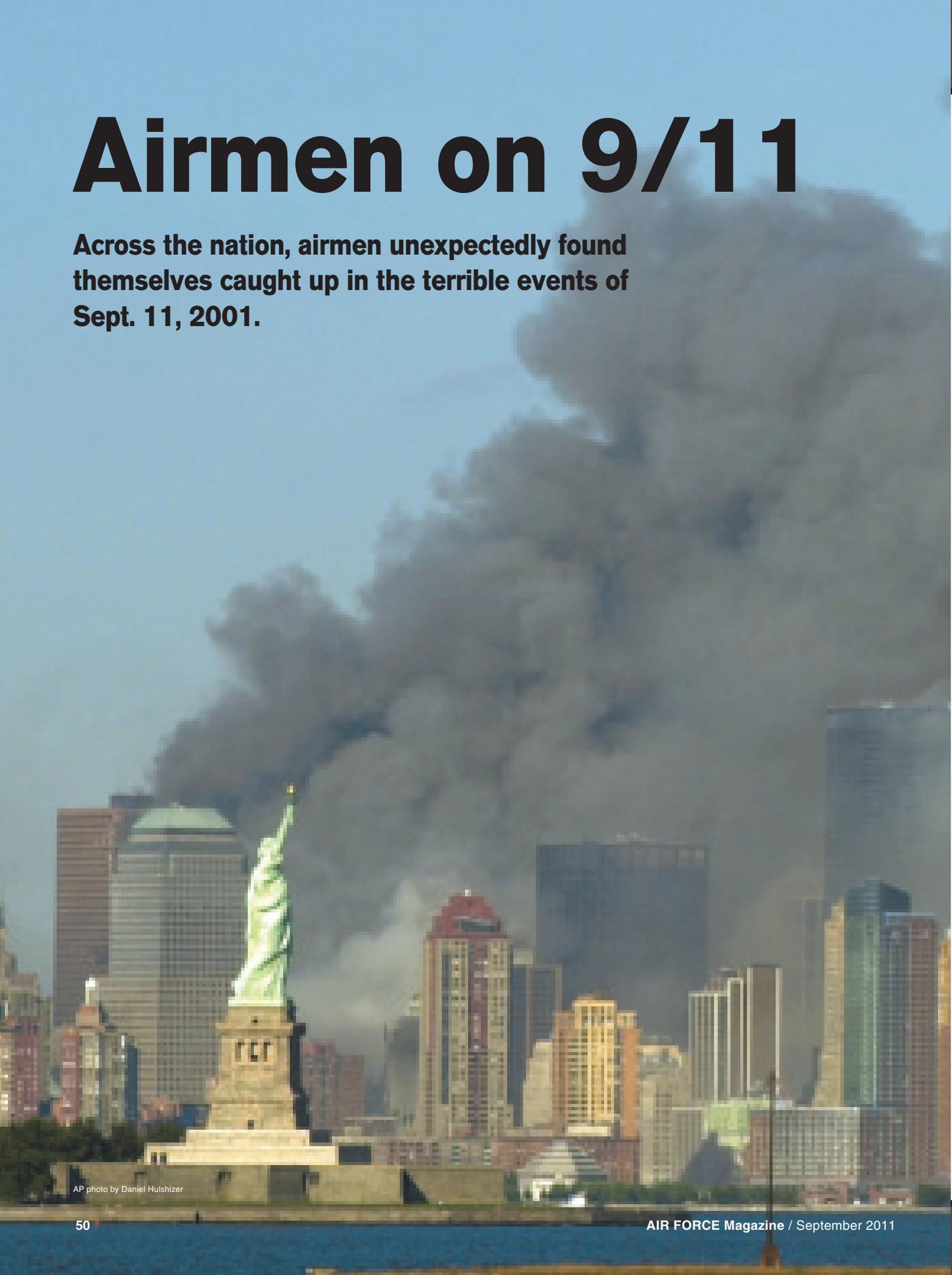


Airmen on 9/11

Across the nation, airmen unexpectedly found themselves caught up in the terrible events of Sept. 11, 2001.



AP photo by Daniel Hulshizer



On Tuesday morning, Sept. 11, 2001, al Qaeda terrorists hijacked four commercial airliners and used them as weapons against the United States. In a series of coordinated, horrific attacks, two of the aircraft destroyed the World Trade Center towers in New York City and a third was flown into the Pentagon. The fourth airliner crashed in rural Pennsylvania after passengers learned of the other attacks and revolted against the hijackers, preventing them from reaching their final target.

The attacks killed everyone aboard the aircraft, thousands on the ground, and caught a shocked and saddened nation by surprise. Many airmen unexpectedly found themselves caught up in the day's events, either in their official capacities or while off duty.

The following accounts were compiled through interviews during the summer of 2011. They are representative, firsthand accounts of the day's events. We would like to thank the participants for sharing their sometimes-difficult stories, and the various public affairs offices that helped coordinate the interviews.

There are countless stories of dedication, perseverance, and heroism from that terrible day. Here are 10 of them.

Blair Bozek



USAF photo

Blair Bozek narrowly escaped death in an SR-71 Blackbird crash. Twelve years later, he was at the Pentagon on 9/11.



DOD photo

A fire truck at the Pentagon was incinerated by the exploding 757.

For Air Force defense contractor Blair L. Bozek, the morning of Tuesday, Sept. 11, 2001, began with some fairly mundane tasks for his ground-floor D Ring office in the Pentagon.

Arriving around 8 a.m., he mulled over how he and his office mates were going to move all the boxes in 1D543 up to a new Air Force Test and Evaluation directorate office. “The room wasn’t quite ready,” Bozek recalled.

“Our office mates came to work prepared to move boxes. I was in ... jeans and a sport shirt, packing boxes and starting to move.”

Bozek was not the first in the office that morning, and those on scene were soon aware something was not right that day. “The mother of [one of] our office mates called her up and said, ‘Turn the TV on,’ so we were well aware of the Trade Center being hit,” he said.

Bozek had served almost 25 years in the Air Force, primarily as a navigator and weapon systems officer. He flew first in the F-4 and then as a Blackbird reconnaissance systems officer, surviving the last crash in the program’s history. In 1989, he and his pilot survived a catastrophic engine failure while flying at Mach 3 at 75,000 feet on a mission out of Okinawa, eventually bailing out on approach to Clark AB, Philippines, to be picked up by fishermen in the Philippine Sea.

After his retirement in 1998, he eventually landed in USAF’s Test and Evaluation directorate in the Pentagon.

His desk sat in the back, close to the C Ring, and Bozek was on the phone when there was a loud explosion and the line went dead. The lights went out, and in an instant, the office was seemingly turned inside out, with the ceiling and walls “coming down on top of us,” he said. Drywall, the ceiling, office furniture—all came cascading down around him. “I had my briefcase, right at my right leg. I couldn’t even get to it,” Bozek said.

Despite emergency lights, the office plunged into darkness and smoke. “There was classified [material] all over the place, and there were aircraft fragments on fire in the office, small bits” of molten aluminum, Bozek said. His office, it was later determined, was 450

feet from the impact point, and no more than 75 feet from the path of destruction American Airlines Flight 77 carved through the Pentagon that morning. In an office next door, seven people were killed.

“I remember distinctly having one small bit of daylight through all that building and I literally padlocked on it. ... Once I saw where there was daylight, then I kept that in my peripheral vision the rest of the time.”

Events unfolded rapidly. “We couldn’t see, but we could ... hear [people] saying, ‘Come this way’... towards D Ring,” he remembered. His branch chief, Melody Johnson, was “bounding over the wreckage like a cat,” and he helped her escape to the outside. All of this transpired in not much more than a minute. He and his office mates escaped to the outside.

Confusion reigned. A few survivors gathered not far from the impact point. Bozek looked around at everyone, and the scene, trying to reassess. “Eight of us went out the same way; the ninth person went out through the courtyard; and we counted noses. As I looked around, ... I was shocked at how few people were around,” he said. Moving away from the building, his office mates turned right, near one of the security gates for the distinguished visitor parking areas at the time. Bozek looked back.

His section was near the intersection of an “old” and “new” wedge—the Pentagon had been undergoing renovations section by section—and many offices were vacant or under construction. Hence there were relatively few people out and about.

But looking back at the side of the building and seeing a huge “bullet hole” in it, his thoughts immediately turned to his brother, Gregory, a retired Army lieutenant colonel who worked on the third floor in the C Ring. “So my first thought was, where are all the people? Then my second thought was, ‘Holy shit.’ ... My brother worked very close to the impact point.”

“My initial reaction was: He’s dead. His initial reaction was: I’m dead.”

Bozek ran back to look for survivors. He passed by a



Fires raged in the E, D, and C Rings of the Pentagon. Bozek escaped, then helped lead others to safety.

burned-out DOD fire truck, on duty that day to prepare for President Bush's return from his Florida trip. A mere three minutes had elapsed from the airplane crash, and as Bozek looked at the scene near the impact point, he noted three ground-floor windows still intact next to the hole.

As he came closer to the smoldering building, one of the firemen from the team prepping for the President yelled at him. "He's going, 'Hey, get out of here. It's dangerous,'" Bozek recalled, laughing at the absurdity of it. The fireman's name was Alan Wallace, a now-retired Fort Myer, Va., DOD firefighter. They later became friends.

"He and I are kind of like having a discussion. Before we get very far, I see a hand waving in the window"—the fourth one over from the impact hole, Bozek said.

Getting a boost from Wallace up to that first floor window, Bozek knelt on the windowsill, surrounded by broken glass, and saw two women trapped by debris. "I'm calming them down. ... I'm reaching down to pull out material and free up their legs," when "a third woman walks out of the smoke. She apparently heard my voice," he said. Her left arm was burned.

Bozek dragged her across his lap, pushing her through to the other side of the window frame, knowing Wallace was waiting to grab survivors on the other side. She fell on top of Wallace, who was injured both by having his arms pinned against the hot metal window frame and by the fall.

"I went back to the other two women. The smoke [was] even lower, ... very, very heavy," Bozek said. The room, despite its exterior window, was dark and littered with wall studs, metal ceiling suspension, and wreckage. He pulled sheet metal and tile off the women and moved them out the window.

At this point, Bozek felt hypoxic from smoke inhalation. An office mate guided him away from the building to get oxygen at a triage area near the Washington Boulevard overpass next to the Pentagon's South Parking area.

Bozek spent the rest of the day at the triage point. Survivors volunteered to look for others, help with stretch-

ers, and even assist the FBI with picking up pieces of the Boeing 757 littering Washington Boulevard. Bozek found "big pieces" all over the place.

Bozek borrowed a phone eventually, to call his missing brother. He later discovered Gregory had left a business card on Bozek's car windshield to let him know he had made it out of the building. They had parked next to each other that morning. Gregory survived the attack because Flight 77 had gone underneath his third floor, fourth corridor, C Ring office. He made it up to the E Ring before his damaged floor collapsed.

Late in the afternoon, the on-scene commander sent everyone home.

Getting home was problematic that day, Bozek recalled, as he had no keys. He wandered around the Pentagon City area until he found a cab to take him to Alexandria, Va. Locked out of his own house, he stayed with his neighbor for dinner until his brother showed up to take him back to the Pentagon to get his car. "The locksmiths were pretty busy that day," Bozek quipped.

"I don't recollect actually sitting down and saying, 'That was close,'" Bozek said of his feelings at the end of the day, as information about the "surreal" events finally caught up to him. "It was an attack. Luckily I survived it. I had been lucky to have survived [the 1989 SR-71] ... ejection. On that particular day, we did some good decision-making. ... Everything panned out properly."

Sept. 11, in retrospect, was far worse.

"I obviously felt glad to be alive, and running [back] to the window, ... I'm just hoping I don't screw up anything. ... I don't want to cause somebody to be hurt by what I'm trying to do," Bozek said of his actions after the attack. "That was sort of my wish for the day." ■

Retired Lt. Col. Blair L. Bozek is a senior defense analyst for the Air Force headquarters at the Pentagon. He was interviewed by Marc V. Schanz.

Col. Philip Breedlove



USAF photo by Gary Eil

Philip Breedlove arrives at McGuire AFB, N.J., on Sept. 12, 2001. He was there to support Air Force medical response to the terrorist attacks.

Air Force Secretary James G. Roche had a meeting scheduled with several congressmen early in the morning of Sept. 11, 2001. In the Secretary's Pentagon office that day was to be a discussion about Islamic Fundamentalism.

Once the meeting began, Col. Philip M. Breedlove, Roche's senior military assistant, returned to his nearby office and "settled down into sort of my normal routine of working e-mails and staff work," he said.

Behind him was a television that was always on, tuned to a news station.

One of Breedlove's staff came running in. "Sir, you've got to look at the TV," he said. The colonel looked up and saw the first World Trade Center tower burning.

"I decided I've got to go interrupt the breakfast and tell the Secretary that we've had a horrible accident." Breedlove returned to Roche's office and momentarily kneeled beside him.

"He excused himself a minute and followed me back into the office to get a glimpse of the TV, to get a feeling of what was going on," Breedlove said. As soon as he and Roche returned to the office, "we were turning up the volume to listen," as the second hijacked aircraft hit the trade center.

"We both looked at each other and I said, 'Sir, this is not an accident.' He looked at me and said, 'My God, we've got a big problem here.'"

Breedlove and Roche made arrangements so the congressmen could return to their own offices, and immediately began planning for what they and the Air Force headquarters should do.

"It was real clear to us that our nation had been attacked," he said. "It was real clear that this was deliberate. What was not clear immediately is the scope and scale. Were there other attacks under way?"

Shortly thereafter, Roche, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. John P. Jumper, Breedlove, and Col. Jack B. Egginton were in Roche's office. "The two bosses were kind of with their backs to the window looking at us, and Egg and I were looking at them, and we saw an airplane go by really close to the building," Breedlove said. "It was kind of like, 'Whoa, that was close.'"

Anyone who worked at the Pentagon or visited it regularly was used to seeing airliners fly almost uncomfortably near the building. The approach path into Washington's Reagan National Airport took aircraft along one of the Pentagon's sprawling parking lots, so people were "a little desensitized to that," he said. "But that one seemed closer than any other."

The terrorist now piloting American Airlines Flight 77 missed the Pentagon on his first pass, looped back around, and flew the aircraft into the building a few minutes later.

"We felt a tremor in the building and then alarms start flashing." Breedlove hit the duress button and security forces were almost immediately in the room. "We said we need to get to the bunker; we need to get down to our operations area."

As the group turned toward the interior of the building, they were faced with hundreds of people going the other direction, trying to get out of the building.

It was like "swimming upstream through people. I can remember the faces," he said.

Through the crowd, someone yelled out, "We've got a fire and we've got people in trouble."

A large group of military personnel and some of the civilians immediately turned around and "headed back into where the mess was," Breedlove remembered. Among those who responded were Air Force medical officials, including the Air Force surgeon general, Lt. Gen. Paul K. Carlton Jr. "Those doctors literally ran to the sounds of the guns, and they went in there and became doctors as opposed to surgeon generals."

When USAF's leadership group reached the bunker, the airmen who had arrived first were "already starting to try to get the intel picture together; they were trying to get the air picture up on the walls. ... While there was a certain amount of, I would call it, healthy tension, there was no panic," he said.

"Airmen were doing what airmen do, and ... this operation center was going from zero to crisis mode very quickly and very smoothly."

Then the communications networks went down. Breedlove said shortcomings in the comm systems at



Breedlove saw the hijacked airliner pass by a window shortly before it struck the Pentagon.

the Pentagon were a hard lesson to learn in the midst of a crisis.

The problem didn't come from damage; it was system overload. People in the Pentagon and throughout the National Capital Region were attempting to call home and say, "I'm alive," while, simultaneously, military officials were on the networks attempting to get their jobs done.

"There was a short period where literally the only comm we had was the Blackberry device, because it communicates differently across the lines," said Breedlove.

This Air Force group was not the command authority at the time. Operational control resided primarily with NORAD in this situation, but officials needed to do what they could to inform and support the operational units.

"We all begin to gradually become aware that there was a fourth airplane that was not responding, and that it had turned and was headed towards the capital region," Breedlove recalled. Over Pennsylvania, United Airlines Flight 93 was not responding to the FAA, and "it doesn't take an imagination to decide that there are several lucrative targets here in this area" that could come under attack.

There was a tense time as officials looked at the last known speed and track of Flight 93 and the expected response times of the air defense aircraft on their way. "It was going to be a mathematical problem," he said, but "we all know how that resolved."

The operations center was close to the impact area. As the Pentagon burned, there were continuing problems with communications, and there was beginning to be a major problem with acrid smoke as well.

"We needed to relocate," he said, so officials decided to set up a temporary Air Force headquarters at nearby Bolling Air Force Base.

Rather than having a panicked exodus, "we sat down and laid out a plan for an orderly departure," and "when it was all good to go, we moved the senior-most leadership over there." Breedlove accompanied Roche by helicopter to Bolling.

The Pentagon amazingly represented the day's smaller disaster, so officials decided to focus on what could be done to help in New York.



Debris from Flight 77. Acrid smoke eventually forced USAF officials to relocate their command post to Bolling AFB, D.C.

On their authority, Roche and Jumper moved an emergency Air Force medical hospital north to support New York City. USAF moved the unit up to McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey, "and they got up there and set up almost overnight."

Unfortunately, "the sad and somber truth is, New York didn't need a lot of medical help," Breedlove said. "What they needed was mortuary help." Still, "America would have expected our Air Force to be there." Although the expense would never have been a concern, the operation had almost no additional cost because "we didn't use any of the perishables."

Breedlove finally got a call through to his house that night, at about his children's bedtime. He told them and his wife that he was OK, but 36 hours would pass before he made it home.

"There was a lot of work to do," he said, and eventually he "crashed on a couch in ... the public affairs office down the hall somewhere. I found a couch, crashed for a couple of hours, got up, had things going again."

Finally, midafternoon on the 12th, "I told the boss I need to go home and get a shower and change my underwear."

The attack on the Pentagon was horrific. All 59 passengers and crew aboard the airplane died in the attack, as did 125 people on the ground and the five terrorists—but the devastation could have been much worse.

If the terrorist pilot had hit the Pentagon "where he intended that day, it's my supposition that we would have lost a lot of senior leadership," Breedlove said. "When he missed and went to the south and came back," he ended up hitting a just-renovated section of the Pentagon that was not fully staffed.

Breedlove praised what he saw that day from both the Air Force's leadership and the rank-and-file at the Pentagon. Seeing ordinary people doing something extraordinary—turn around and run back into a burning section of the building—has clearly stayed with him. ■

Gen. Philip M. Breedlove is the Air Force vice chief of staff. He was interviewed by Adam J. Hebert.

Maj. Dawne Deskins



Dawne Deskins



Officials at the Northeast Air Defense Sector had not trained for what unfolded on 9/11.

The button for the hotline that connected NORAD's Rome, N.Y., "battle cab" to the FAA's Boston Air Traffic Control Center was flashing. At 8:37 a.m. on Sept. 11, 2001, Maj. Dawne Deskins pushed the button.

"Hi. Boston Center. ... We have a problem here," said the controller on the other end of the line. "We have hijacked aircraft headed towards New York, and we need you guys to ... scramble some F-16s or something up there; help us out."

"Is this real-world or exercise?" asked Deskins, who had been serving as the aircraft control and warning officer during NORAD's Operation Vigilant Guardian, an ongoing, week-long air defense exercise that simulated attacks on the United States.

"No, this is not an exercise, not a test," replied the controller.

The controller gave Deskins the last known coordinates for American Airlines Flight 11, which had taken off from Boston's Logan Airport at 7:59 a.m., en route to Los Angeles. The aircraft was now believed to be heading toward New York, but Deskins couldn't find it on her scope because its transponder had been turned off.

She theoretically had the ability to pick up a search return from the aircraft even without the transponders, but Deskins said that was almost like trying to find a "needle in a haystack"—especially in a crowded airspace such as that around Manhattan.

It was the second day of Vigilant Guardian and the Northeast Air Defense Sector (NEADS) was fully manned and alert. Because of the exercise, the entire command structure was already in place inside the battle cab when Deskins hung up the phone.

She ran into the clear glass office overlooking the command floor to tell battle commander Col. Robert Marr that a commercial airliner had been hijacked and the FAA wanted "to scramble fighters to escort the plane."

Langley AFB, Va., and Otis ANGB, Mass., were the only two East Coast bases with fighters on alert that day. At 8:46 a.m., the exact time Flight 11 struck the North Tower, NEADS scrambled two F-15s from

Otis, which was 153 miles from New York City. It was already too late for the 81 passengers on board Flight 11, but no one knew that yet.

The FAA was still showing the aircraft in the air and NEADS continued to search the radars for the hijacked airplane.

The Otis fighters were airborne at 8:53 a.m., three minutes after NEADS was notified that an airplane had crashed into one of the towers of the World Trade Center, according to interviews and radar data cited in the 9/11 Commission report.

"We just thought it was a weird coincidence that some plane had hit the World Trade Center at the same time while we're trying to find this hijacked aircraft," said Deskins.

Back then, NEADS protected all airspace from Virginia north to Canada and then west to the border of North and South Dakota. The most recent previous hijacking requiring coordination between air traffic controllers, the FAA, and the military had occurred in 1993. NORAD was still training to Cold War-type scenarios and the idea of turning an aircraft into a weapon had not yet infiltrated military doctrine.

NEADS' mission remained "outward focused," said Deskins. The command center didn't even have radar feeds that tracked aircraft flying in the interior US that day, she said. The focus was on identifying aircraft entering the US and ensuring they were friendly, she said.

"If you remember, the hijacked mindset back then would have been that they're going to land the plane, [and] they're going to have some sort of demands. So, it was really an escort-type role that we would be in," said Deskins.

NEADS had learned that Flight 11 had been hijacked nine minutes before the aircraft struck the North Tower; however, it did not learn that United Airlines Flight 175 also had been hijacked until seconds after it struck the trade center's South Tower. The Otis fighters were still more than 100 miles away.

"We were not aware that there was ... another hijacked aircraft. And, again, we went back to the whole, 'OK, was that American Airlines Flight 11?'" Deskins



NEADS scrambled two F-15s from Otis ANGB, Mass., but they couldn't reach New York fast enough to stop the attacks.

said. "Now, we're seriously getting a sense that this is something very dire. We've got a hijacked aircraft out there somewhere. We have two planes that have hit the World Trade Center. Now our mindset, at that point, is shifting from defensive, of trying to find a hijacked aircraft, to we're under attack."

It wasn't until the FAA had cleared the airspace after 9 a.m. that officials at NEADS started to feel in control of the situation, she said. The identification section in New York was working with Boston Center to figure out Flight 11's most likely flight path, taking into consideration things such as the last known speed of the aircraft and its last known coordinates. That's when the focus shifted to D.C.

Around 9:30 a.m. NEADS was notified that there may be a problem with American Airlines Flight 77, but it was not immediately clear that it had been hijacked and no one knew it was heading directly toward the Pentagon.

"I saw a blip on the radar that looked like an aircraft kind of spiraling down into D.C. and I thought that that's what that was," said Deskins. But, again, the aircraft's transponder was turned off and she couldn't be 100 percent sure.

Langley's fighters also launched around 9:30 and were heading toward D.C., but they wouldn't make it in time. Flight 77 struck the Pentagon at 9:37, killing everyone on board and more than a hundred inside the building.

In the meantime, the focus in the battle cab was centered on getting as many fighters airborne as possible—not an easy task considering only two bases were on alert. The battle cab bustled as leaders reached out to bases throughout the northeastern US, trying to find pilots available to fly and aircraft that could quickly be loaded with weapons and launched into the air.

Unlike most Americans who were glued to their TVs that day, no one in the command center actually saw the footage of the airplanes hitting the towers until much later. Still the mood was somber, as NEADS methodically tracked down reports of hijacked aircraft and scrambled jet aircraft to New York and Washington, D.C.

"I think most of the frustration was just that we didn't have enough airplanes to respond. We didn't have the



NEADS later coordinated combat air patrols over both New York and Washington.

air picture we needed to find the airplanes," said Deskins. "The assets we had available and the system was just so limited, we just couldn't, or just didn't have, the resources to do what we felt we needed to do."

NEADS was not notified about the hijacked Flight 93 until after 10 a.m. By that time, the aircraft had already crashed into a Pennsylvania field. Still a military liaison at the Cleveland Center had given NEADS the aircraft's last known location and asked them to keep searching. Flight 93 never did show up on the radars.

The gravity of the situation really hit home in the battle cab when the nation went to Defcon 3. "I have been in the air defense system since I was a second lieutenant and I've never seen that for real," Deskins said. "We felt like we were going to war. It really did."

By the end of the day, things had started to calm down. Fighters were flying combat air patrols over New York and Washington, AWACS aircraft were on scene to identify and direct traffic, tankers were available to refuel, and a plan was in place.

At 9 p.m., 15 hours after starting her shift, Deskins was told to go home and try to get some sleep.

"The toughest thing that day was for the people who had been there from the beginning ... to leave. It was very, very hard to let it go," she said.

"Things were just written down on scope shelves, on pieces of paper, and you were just really concerned that you were going to forget to pass something along to the next person. And I think there was an emotional tie for a lot of people, too, that they just wanted to stay."

Back at home, Deskins talked with her husband for a while, "and then I said that I've got to go to bed because I've got to be back at work in four hours," she said. "I don't remember it being a very good sleep."

The command center would remain on high alert for weeks after the attacks. ■

Col. Dawne Deskins is vice commander of NORAD's Eastern Air Defense Sector in Rome, N.Y. She was interviewed by Amy McCullough.

SMSgt. Edward Metcalf



Screenshot via The History Channel



Screenshot via The History Channel

Ed Metcalf confers with fellow firefighters at the World Trade Center just before the South Tower collapsed. A long-time New York Air Guardsman, Metcalf survived the collapse of both towers.

New York City Fire Department Capt. Edward C. Metcalf's workday was set to end at 9 a.m. He and the firefighters of Marine Company 1 had nearly completed their shift along Manhattan's lower west side waterfront when he noticed a pedestrian trying to get their attention.

"I happened to be looking out the window of the firehouse and I saw a walker on one of the docks on the waterfront pointing and jumping up and down," he said.

Metcalf, who was also an HH-60G Pave Hawk maintenance supervisor with the New York Air National Guard's 106th Rescue Wing at Francis S. Gabreski Airport on Long Island, ran outside the firehouse. "I looked down south and I saw a heavy volume of smoke pushing from the North Tower of the World Trade Center. At that particular junction, I just surmised that there had been an explosion. I didn't know that there had been a plane crash."

A veteran firefighter, Metcalf was covering for the company's normal captain who was on vacation. He quickly mobilized the crew of Marine 1, a FDNY fireboat, to get under way. The fireboat's main role is to supply water from the river to help extinguish fires. It was docked at Pier 53 at West 14th Street, about 20 blocks north of the World Trade Center complex.

Within minutes, Marine 1 was steaming south on the Hudson River toward the towers. "When we were a couple of hundred of yards offshore, I made a couple of radio reports en route. Because of our unique vantage point, we had a pretty good view," he said.

As the fireboat approached the shore, "I noticed a low-flying aircraft approaching from the south. It turned out to be the second hijacked aircraft. It struck the South Tower while we were approaching the bulkhead," explained Metcalf.

It was 9:03 a.m., and "I knew then that the [North Tower explosion] must have been a plane crash, also," Metcalf said.

The crew picked out a position on the riverfront from where they would be able to stretch water hoses to the WTC complex, located about four blocks away.

Metcalf told the crew to set up the water lines while he went to a command post at the site of the burning buildings.

There were a lot of people running away from the buildings, "so I had to fight through the crowd to get there," he said.

The command post was on the west side of West Street, alongside the WTC complex. The post was less than a quarter-mile from the towers, said Metcalf. He reported in and awaited instructions.

It was at this time that some of the people trapped in the upper floors of the burning towers decided to jump to their deaths rather than suffer any longer. "I could see and hear the jumpers from the North Tower," said Metcalf. "There was a lot of that going on in front of us."

By this point, officials at the command post "knew that four planes had been hijacked," including the two that hit the towers and the one that struck the Pentagon, Metcalf said. "What they didn't know was that the [fourth] one had gone down" in Shanksville, Pa.

Absent that knowledge, the firefighters and rescue personnel were told to prepare for the potential of another airplane coming in.

It was now 9:59 a.m. Metcalf was still at the command post when the South Tower came crashing down.

"I actually thought it was the third plane because that is what it sounded like," said Metcalf. "We all kind of just turned and ran."

He and others dove for cover inside an underground parking garage opposite the WTC complex. The rumbling was over within about 11 seconds.

"There wasn't much visibility," recalled Metcalf. He gathered himself and made his way up the parking garage ramp to street level. "You were in the middle of that cloud of dust, ... so I had no idea, really, that the South Tower had come down. I just knew something bad had happened."

When he reached the top of the ramp, FDNY Chief of Department Peter J. Ganci Jr. was there. "I remember him saying, 'Calf, do me a favor,'" recounted Metcalf.

Ganci wanted the firefighters to muster up about



Smoke billows from the World Trade Center's towers. Metcalf sought cover in a parking garage when the South Tower collapsed.



four blocks north. Metcalf went back down into the garage and relayed the chief's message. When he came up the ramp again, he met up with two senior FDNY colleagues.

"The three of us started looking south, down West [Street], for survivors," he explained. They found one victim and assisted him.

"Then I heard a terrible roar again," said Metcalf. It was 10:28 a.m. and the North Tower was collapsing. At that moment, Metcalf thought he was going to die for sure.

"I was in the middle of West Street, and I realized that God had called me home," he said. "I was knocked down by the blast of air. ... I covered my head with my arms—like that was going to do something. And I prayed. I said, 'God, take care of my family, please. And if it is in your will, make this quick.'"

Ten to 15 seconds later, it was over.

"I survived," said Metcalf. (He learned later that Ganci, with whom he had spoken only minutes before the North Tower collapsed, was killed when the building came down.)

Metcalf began to reorient himself. "The debris was unreal," he said. "I remember crawling around looking for survivors and then for whatever reason, something in the back of my head said, 'Get back to the boat.'"

"I was in a state of shock," he continued. "As numb as I was, it just kicked in. ... The only thing I had in my head was, I've got to get back to the river and I've got to supply water. That was my job that day."

He made his way through the chaotic yet abandoned streets to get back to the fireboat, walking when possible, crawling when debris made walking impossible. By the time he reached the boat, the crew had begun establishing the water supply lines. He assisted.

Metcalf said Marine Company 1 provided "the first water" that day to battle the fires at street level, such as burning cars, caused by the falling tower debris. The local hydrants were largely inaccessible.

After a while, Metcalf went on the boat for a brief respite.

"The guys looked at me and said, 'You look like hell.' And they ended up sending me to the hospital," he recalled. "I had some small bumps and bruises."

After a couple of hours of treatment and getting cleaned up in a Brooklyn hospital—his eyes were essentially glued shut from the debris dust—medical personnel released him. Other than aggravating an old back injury, "there was nothing wrong."

Policemen drove Metcalf, who was wearing only a yellow hospital gown, back to Manhattan. At the fire station, he donned proper clothes. As he was preparing to walk back down to the towers, an off-duty firefighter from the marine company showed up in his private boat. The two put surplus hose on the boat and then headed south.

They pulled up alongside Marine 1 to the surprise of its crew, who hadn't expected to see their captain again that day. It was by now early evening.

"We went back to work," recounted Metcalf. "We went back to supplying water and then, obviously, the search and recovery. We still thought it was a rescue operation at that point. We were looking for our brothers."

At about 11 p.m., Metcalf realized that he hadn't been in contact with his wife, Janet. Since cell phone service was still out, he decided to drive home. He took a boat back to the fire station, got his car, and made the hour-plus drive to his home on Long Island.

Upon arriving, "I went inside. I hugged and kissed my wife," he continued. Although he didn't wake up any of his seven children, "I went into each room ... and gave them a kiss."

Then, "I said to Janet, 'I am alive. I am well. I am going back to work.' So I went back to my car and I drove back into the city," he said.

Metcalf spent the next several months at the WTC ruins, helping to recover bodies. ■

SMSGt. Edward C. Metcalf retired from FDNY in September 2003 and is now chief of the 106th RQW fire department. He was interviewed by Michael C. Sirak.

Capt. Rob Pedersen



Photo via Lt. Col. Rob Pedersen

Rob Pedersen was the flight navigator on USAF's only C-135C on 9/11, flying Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Henry Shelton.



Photo by Michael Foren

Shelton ordered the Speckled Trout back to the US when the second tower was hit.

It was a perfect day to fly. The early morning sky at Andrews AFB, Md., was crystal clear and the Speckled Trout crew was laughing and joking around with each other as they whittled down their lists of must-see sights in Budapest, Hungary. Capt. Rob Pedersen, Speckled Trout flight navigator, and the members of the 412th Flight Test Squadron at Edwards AFB, Calif., had flown distinguished visitors to hundreds of locations around the world, but this was his first trip to Hungary. Everyone was excited.

In September 2001, the white and chrome C-135C was a one-of-a-kind airplane. It was equipped with a secure communications console and its own defensive capabilities. There was a private suite in the rear of the aircraft where the DVs could relax in oversize leather airline chairs or lounge on a couch along the wall of the aircraft. For overnight trips, there were two bunk beds and a small bathroom.

Half the time Speckled Trout was used to test state-of-the-art systems the Air Force was considering entering into its inventory, and the other half of the time it was tasked by the Chief of Staff's office to fly distinguished passengers. On Sept. 11, 2001, its mission was to fly Army Gen. Henry H. Shelton, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to a NATO conference.

The crew had arrived at Andrews two days before the scheduled takeoff and on 9/11 was wheels up around 5 a.m.

The first three hours went smoothly. The crew listened to the BBC as they went about their regular duties, said Pedersen. Speckled Trout was flying over the North Atlantic between Greenland and Newfoundland when the BBC reported that an airplane had hit one of the World Trade Center towers in New York City.

As the aircrew stayed tuned, Shelton's assistant tapped on the private suite's door to tell him the news. When the second airplane hit the South Tower at 9:03 a.m.,

Shelton ordered that his airplane return to the US. Then he learned they'd been denied permission because US airspace was closed.

"Tell the pilot we'll ask for forgiveness instead of permission, so have him turn us around. We're going home," Shelton told his assistant, according to his memoir, *Without Hesitation: The Odyssey of an American Warrior*.

"I knew there was no way they were going to shoot down a 707 with United States Air Force emblazoned along the side," wrote Shelton.

The airplane did turn, but it didn't head directly back to the United States.

For the first couple of hours, the crew didn't have clearance to return—or a destination—"so we went into a holding pattern near Greenland," Pedersen said. As the navigator, it was his job to come up with a list of alternative landing sites. Thule AB, Greenland, and NAS Keflavik, Iceland, were possible divert locations.

"It was a solemn moment. We were very aware that our country had been struck, but we were also very busy trying to plan all the different options," Pedersen said. "I remember just thinking about a billion different places we could go and things we needed," such as air refueling, he added. "In the beginning, just like any military guy, you are thinking about getting the job done."

The Speckled Trout crew had made the decision to head back to the US, but it wasn't easy getting a security clearance, even for such a high-profile passenger, Pedersen said. All the bases were at Threatcon Delta, and circling combat air patrol fighters had authority to shoot down hostile or threatening aircraft.

Speckled Trout made it back to Canada, but was initially denied entry to US airspace. The crew started holding once again.

"In the beginning we had a few problems convincing [the air traffic controller] to allow us back into the country, [even though] we were ordered at a significantly high



The Speckled Trout flew past New York City on its way back to Washington. This photo was taken by Pederson with an underwater camera he happened to have with him.

level to come back,” Pedersen said. “You can’t say over the radio who you are carrying because they don’t have secure communications at the FAA. ... We had to tell them over an open line that we had a DV Code 2, which is a ranking that a lot of DVs fall under. It took a little bit of time, and I’m sure there were a lot of phone calls made, before they let us back in,” he said.

It turns out, the crew not only received permission to fly back into the US, but their flight path back to Andrews took them directly over New York City, giving everyone on board a firsthand look at the destruction below.

The two tiny windows in Shelton’s suite were smaller than those on the typical commercial airliner, so he made his way up to the cockpit before the crew flew past Manhattan.

Even from five miles away, the devastation was obvious. The famous New York skyline was blocked by a billowing black cloud of smoke that hovered thousands of feet in the air. Not a single building was visible downtown. Other than the combat air patrol aircraft that had flown up to check them out and the search and rescue aircraft looking for survivors below, there was no air traffic at all.

Pedersen snapped a photo with an underwater camera he used for snorkeling and then sat in the silence as they flew by.

“There was nothing out there. It was a clear day and it was a very, very clear shot of smoke pouring out of New York City,” Pedersen said. “On any given day, especially in big cities, the radio is nonstop because there is a ton of aircraft out there and everybody is talking to the tower or [an air traffic control] center or some air traffic controllers. There was nothing. We were the only aircraft there. It was the one time in your life when you are flying, and you don’t hear anything, unless you are over the ocean, so it was very eerie and very quiet.”

The fly-by was quick. No one wanted to get in the

way and Shelton needed to get back to the Pentagon.

By early afternoon, they had made their way to Andrews. Shelton wasn’t the only VIP trying to get back into the US that day. Secretary of State Colin L. Powell had also been out of the country.

Speckled Trout had better defensive capabilities, so Powell’s aircraft was flying circles above Andrews, waiting for Shelton’s airplane to land first.

Within minutes, the Secretary’s aircraft had also landed. Shelton and Powell were whisked off in armored caravans while Pedersen and the rest of the crew remained with the aircraft.

They remained on standby for six days and though a few DV airlifts were planned, the flights never actually left Andrews, Pedersen said.

“We weren’t anything special that day,” Pedersen said. “The guys did a phenomenal job on a pretty stressful day,” but “big picture, we were flying a great airplane, with a great mission, with the Chairman on board, and we did our job.”

The experience “was definitely something that sticks with you. ... A lot of us wanted to go back to operational flying as opposed to DV airlift,” he said.

After 9/11, many of the crew “went back to line flying, back to the mission, everything from C-130s to Compass Calls,” Pedersen said. “There was an urgency among everyone to get back to the nuts and bolts of being in the military.”

None of the Speckled Trout’s crew from that day ever separated from the military, Pedersen noted. “Everyone is either retired or still in.” ■

Lt. Col. Rob Pedersen is executive officer for the Air Force Strategic Deterrence and Nuclear Integration Division at the Pentagon. He was interviewed by Amy McCullough.

1st Lt. Heather Penney



A security camera captures Flight 77's impact at the Pentagon.



Penney did not know if hijacked airliners were still inbound.

USAF photo by SSgt. Gary Copping

The first day back at work wasn't supposed to go like this. The 121st Fighter Squadron had returned on Saturday from a Red Flag deployment in Nevada; Monday was a day off. Now, on Tuesday, District of Columbia Air National Guard squadron leaders were meeting at Andrews AFB, Md., to set training priorities.

Heather Penney, a green first lieutenant, was in the meeting because her secondary duty was squadron training officer.

The session was interrupted when someone opened the door a crack to let the assembled officers know an airplane had flown into the World Trade Center.

"And we all looked outside, and it was a crystal-clear, blue September Tuesday morning," Penney recalled. The weather was likely the same in New York, and the pilots speculated that either "someone totally pooched [fouled up] their instrument approach," or some small aircraft sightseeing on the Hudson had made a really bad turn. The group returned to its meeting.

A short while later, the door was opened again, this time wide, and an NCO said a second aircraft had flown into the WTC, "and it was on purpose."

With urgency but professionalism, the group looked at each other and asked, "What do we do now?"

Over the following hour, unit leaders tried to get orders to act. While state Air Guard units get instructions from their governors, D.C. has no governor, so the Guard takes orders directly from the President. Further, the base was not an alert facility, so it was not tied in with NORAD. The Secret Service has a heavy presence at Andrews, however, because it is the operating base for Air Force One.

Brig. Gen. David F. Wherley Jr., 113th Wing commander, ordered his airmen to begin preparing for a possible launch. He called his Secret Service contacts, seeking authorization for an improvised combat air patrol mission.

As they hurried to pull on their flight gear in the life support shop, Penney and her flight lead, Maj. Marc Sasseville, had a perfunctory conversation about what they would do if they found the inbound airliner they had been told was on its way toward Washington.

They would be launching with nothing on board but about 100 rounds of training ammunition—simple bullets with lead tips, not the usual 20 mm high-explosive incendiary rounds used in combat. AIM-9 Sidewinder air-to-air missiles were

being unpacked and built up at Andrews' weapons area, but it took time to assemble the missiles, and the cart that transported them from the far side of the base moved at a top speed of just nine miles per hour.

The Sidewinders would have to wait for a second flight.

Penney, remembering an accident investigation that her father had participated in, recalled that 737s simply dropped from the sky if they lost their tails, leaving "a very tight debris field."

The mission here would be to bring the airliner down causing as few casualties as possible on the ground, but primarily to make sure that it did, indeed, crash without reaching its target. The training ammunition wasn't going to be enough to do the job, Penney explained, "even if you're a perfect shot."

There was really only one way to take down a large airplane under these circumstances.

"Fly into it," Penney said.

Sasseville said he would ram the cockpit; Penney intended to take out the tail. "I know for sure that if I take off the tail, that it will just go straight down," so she intended to "aim the body of my airplane" at the empennage.

Penney was hoping to have enough time to eject after the impact, but was keenly aware that she'd have to stay with the F-16 until it struck the airliner.

"It was very clear that, yeah, this was"—Penney declined to finish the thought—probably going to be a one-way mission.

Wherley soon received orders from the Secret Service to intercept any approaching aircraft and keep them away from an eight-mile circle around downtown. "That allowed an ROE-build," said Wherley in a 2004 interview, referring to rules of engagement.

Penney and Sasseville powered up immediately.

Normally, an F-16 preflight took 10 to 20 minutes. Now, she and Sasseville were rolling within seconds; the crew chiefs were "still under the jet, pulling pins" even as the fighters surged forward, she said. In two minutes, at full afterburner, they were airborne.

It was about 10:40 a.m., just an hour after American Flight 77 had struck the Pentagon, and Sasseville and Penney knew they had a grim mission. At least one airliner was still believed inbound toward Washington, D.C. Their job was to get over the city as soon as they could and act



North Dakota and D.C. Air National Guard F-16s set up a high-low CAP.



Heather Penney in the cockpit of an F-16.

as the “goalie” CAP: to bring down any aircraft ignoring orders to turn away.

As Sasseville and Penney screamed skyward, banking toward the Potomac River and Washington, Penney said the whole scene was dream-like.

In the center of an extremely congested triangle of commercial airports—Reagan National and Dulles in Virginia, and Baltimore-Washington in Maryland—D.C. was typically abuzz with airliners, business jets, and general aviation airplanes. Sometimes, it could take two minutes to get departure clearance from Potomac Control—an eternity in a gas-guzzling F-16.

By midmorning on 9/11, however, nothing else was up. “It was eerily silent,” Penney recalled. “That part was very surreal.”

Sasseville and Penney flew over the Pentagon, then proceeded west-northwest, as instructed, looking for the inbound airliner. In the confusion of the morning, they were looking for United Airlines Flight 93, which, unknown to them, had already crashed in Shanksville, Pa.

F-16s from the North Dakota ANG soon arrived and also took up station, having flown up from Langley AFB, Va. The D.C. and North Dakota F-16s set up a high-low CAP, with the Fargo jets staying above 18,000 feet, looking for inbound threats from over the ocean, while Penney’s flight stayed low, on the lookout for threats trying to sneak in at low altitude, as the previous attacks had done.

Because they had been dispatched by NORAD, the Fargo Vipers were joined by a tanker, and all the F-16s over Washington took turns refueling.

They remained up for four hours, and when Penney and Sasseville landed back at Andrews they left plenty of other interceptors over the city. Upon landing, they were whisked to a room “with more generals than I’d ever seen in my lifetime,” Penney said.

“We stood at the head of an oval table in front of the entire group, and it was standing room only, and they asked us all sorts of questions about the morning and the sorties, and what we had seen,” she said. It was heady stuff for a first lieutenant who had only been assigned to the base for nine months.

Almost immediately, the two F-16s relaunched—now fully armed—to fly another four-hour mission over the capital.

During this second sortie, they received instructions over the encrypted radio to escort Air Force One, which was inbound on its way to Andrews. “I then flew point, leading the package back,” Penney said.

“The first sortie, we were far more focused on doing the task at hand,” she said. Hours later, it was still “hard to believe” what had happened. Penney spent some of the time on the second sortie above the Pentagon, looking down at it with her jet aircraft’s infrared targeting pod, trying to get the events of the day to seem more real.

The D.C. Air Guard served as Washington’s CAP resource for the following two weeks, but of the 32 pilots assigned to the unit, only about eight were full-timers. Many of the traditional Guard pilots were airline pilots “stuck in different parts of the country” when air travel was abruptly halted on 9/11. For the D.C. Guard, the air defense mission represented “24-hour operations with decreased manpower,” Penney said, “very work intensive.”

The situation didn’t leave much time for reflection. While it was a “dramatic experience,” she became turned off by “the melodramatic media attention,” and postponed much personal reflection.

“I really didn’t process or think through all of that until a couple of years ago,” Penney said.

However, as to the notion of having to take down an airliner with innocents aboard, “it was so abundantly clear in the moment that, while it would have been tragic and unfortunate, the moral choice was obvious.” She said that at no point “did I feel conflicted, like, ‘Could I really do this?’”

The “total heroes” of the air action, she said, were the passengers on Flight 93 who ultimately made the goalie CAP unnecessary.

“What they did was courageous,” Penney said. “And I think for them it was also obvious, once they realized what was going on.” ■

Maj. Heather Penney flies DV aircraft for the D.C. Air National Guard and is an air superiority requirements analyst for Lockheed Martin. She was interviewed by John A. Tirpak. Additional information came from Maj. Gen. David F. Wherley Jr., interviewed by Adam J. Hebert in 2004. Wherley and his wife, Ann, died in a 2009 Washington, D.C., Metrorail crash.

MSgt. Jeff Rosenthal



USN photo by JO1 Mark D. Faram

Smoke pours from the center of impact. Jeff Rosenthal's C-130 crew saw Flight 77 hit the building.

The Minnesota Air National Guard C-130H, designated Gofer 06, took off from Andrews AFB, Md., shortly after 9:30 a.m. Sept. 11, 2001. In the flight engineer's seat was MSgt. Jeff Rosenthal. The next 35 minutes would soon be seared into his memory—and the memories of all the airmen aboard.

Andrews had been a stopover. The day before, the crew of Gofer 06 had returned from a mission to the Caribbean, transporting soldiers in St. Thomas and St. Croix in the US Virgin Islands.

"We'd been at Andrews for the evening," Rosenthal said. Waiting on the runway for clearance, "it was a morning like any other morning." Once airborne "we flew over the Woodrow Wilson Bridge" and up the Potomac River. As flight engineer, Rosenthal's crew station was in the cockpit of the C-130H sitting behind the pilot and copilot in a seat about six inches higher, giving him excellent visibility.

Then the routine of the morning flight snapped. Air traffic control asked Gofer 06 to turn a little to the east. "It's rare if ever that air traffic control asks you to deviate," said Rosenthal. "It was very peculiar."

Controllers at Dulles Arpt., Va., had spotted an erratic aircraft about 38 miles out from Washington, D.C., but could not identify it. They asked Gofer 06 to look for an airplane coming toward them, saying it was "fast-moving, type and altitude unknown."

The eight airmen aboard Gofer 06 were a standard mix. They had not been monitoring civilian communications and were unaware of the events that had already taken place in New York.

The crew was led by Lt. Col. Steve O'Brien, pilot and aircraft commander. Maj. Robert Schumacher was the copilot. Lt. Col. Joe Divito was navigator. Also on board were Rosenthal the flight engineer; TSgt. Corey Berg, crew chief; MSgt. Steve Stafford, loadmaster; TSgt. Tony Pacheco, maintenance specialist; and maintainer SrA. Robben Todd.

"A little over Reagan National Airport, we noticed the other aircraft," said Rosenthal. "We thought we'd just do an identification."

It was American Airlines Flight 77, hijacked after takeoff from Dulles that morning. The 757 moved from left to right across the windows of the C-130 cockpit, too quickly for the crew to react, or even to fully process what they were seeing. "We saw it crash into the Pentagon," Rosenthal said. He thought it was "just an outright accident." It did not occur to the crew that this was an attack, a planned event.

"Washington, this is Gofer 06. That aircraft is down; he's in our 12 o'clock position. ... It looks like that aircraft crashed into the Pentagon, sir," the crew told Reagan National controllers.

"We circled. We loitered briefly," said Rosenthal. Gofer 06 was turning in a circle over the Pentagon at about 2,000 feet when air traffic controllers "released us to the northwest."

Said Rosenthal, "When you fly and see another aircraft crash, it takes you to a state of mind you aren't normally in." The flight crew was stunned, but coping with the shock. Rosenthal described it as a "huge distraction that takes a lot to overcome."

"Being trained to do our job under the most difficult situation, the habits are: Do your job, pay attention to the checklist, and be safe," he explained.

On board, the crew quickly talked over what they'd just seen. "We did a crew assessment. Processing that type of incident manifests itself in conversation," Rosenthal said. They were asking themselves, "What was that all about?"

Rosenthal said pilot O'Brien "did a good job of staying focused on flying."

Gofer 06 was monitoring the standard VHF and UHF radios. Now they tuned in the backup radios to try to find out what was happening. The AM airwaves reported the crashes into the World Trade Center



An engine from Flight 93 is pulled from the ground near Shanksville, Pa.

towers in New York. "It didn't take long to put things together," Rosenthal recalled.

Gofer 06 began a climb to 3,000 feet as assigned by air traffic control. Originally the crew of Gofer 06 planned to return to their home station in Minnesota. Now after a quick crew assessment, they decided "the prudent thing to do was to get to a safe haven and take a time out."

By 10 a.m. the C-130 was well on its way, flying over western Maryland and on into Pennsylvania. At 10:02, Gofer 06 gave air controllers at Cleveland Center, Imperial radar, the routine report that they were leveling off at their assigned altitude of 24,000 feet.

Their second shock was moments ahead.

Air traffic controllers had been tracking errant United Airlines Flight 93 as it turned off course and seesawed east at various altitudes. Frantically, the controllers worked to figure out the status, altitude, and heading of what they feared was the day's fourth hijacked airliner.

As controllers feared, UA 93 was already in the hands of hijackers. The struggle by passengers to take back the cockpit had been under way for several minutes. Hijackers rocked the airplane's wings and pitched it up and down in the battle. As Gofer 06 was leveling off, the hijackers realized the passengers were about to overtake the cockpit and were going to keep them from reaching their target in Washington.

The terrorists deliberately dove the airplane into the ground at 10:03.

Gofer 06 had just been vectored north as UA 93 plummeted. Air traffic control talked with the C-130 and a civilian business jet at lower altitude hoping to pick up a sighting of UA 93 as it approached the margins of the sector's radar coverage.

O'Brien and crew scanned outside the windows of their C-130.

As Rosenthal remembered it, Todd "came over the



The C-130H that was first over the D.C. and Pennsylvania crash sites is still in use.

interphone and said he'd seen something." Gofer 06 banked slightly to get a better look.

They had spotted the remains of UA 93. "Black smoke in sight at nine o'clock," they relayed to air traffic control just two minutes after the airliner went down.

"Once again we were at the wrong place at the wrong time," Rosenthal said. "No one would ever wish that on anyone, to see the demise of so many people."

In the span of a half-hour that morning, Gofer 06 had been—by sheer chance—on an unbelievable eyewitness route. They were the first to confirm the third and fourth crashes to air traffic controllers, and these eight airmen were the only Americans to see both crash sites in real time.

Gofer 06 landed at Youngstown Air Reserve Base in Ohio. The FBI met the crew and debriefed them. After crew rest, they went back on alert in case they were needed for missions in support of the extraordinary air defense efforts over the US. Two days later, they were cleared to complete the flight home.

Ultimately, the crew had to draw on their training and resist dwelling on what they had seen. "They tend to compartmentalize, close down, and move on," Rosenthal said of professional military aircrew. "Life demands that."

Aircraft tail No. 006 "is still alive and well," he said. Rosenthal has flown in it many times since Sept. 11.

Remembering the events 10 years later, it was the sudden change that stood out. Nothing like 9/11 could have been further from their minds a day earlier. "One day we are in the Caribbean and life is good, then the next day it's 180 degrees out," Rosenthal recalled. "Life can change so quickly." ■

SMSGt. Jeff Rosenthal is standardization and evaluation flight engineer for the 133rd Operations Group, Minnesota Air National Guard. He was interviewed by Rebecca Grant.

MSgt. William Scarfuto

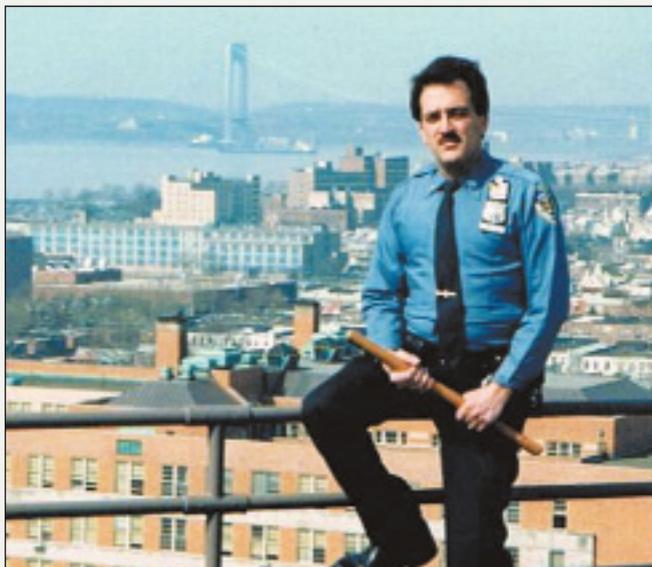


Photo courtesy William Scarfuto

William Scarfuto in New York City. He and other police officers hailed a merchant marine vessel to get from Brooklyn to the WTC site.

Air Force Reserve master sergeant and New York City policeman William Scarfuto took his children to school that Tuesday morning. At home in Brooklyn before work, he did a few chores, enjoying the day's more relaxed pace.

"I remember it being an extremely beautiful morning—September 11th," he said. "I hadn't been at work yet. I remember it was just an exceptionally beautiful day." A few minutes later the telephone rang. Scarfuto's wife, also an NYPD officer, called him from work.

"She instructed me to turn on the television, that a plane had hit the World Trade Center." After staring disbelievingly at the television Scarfuto stepped outside his home.

With an unobstructed view of the Manhattan skyline, he could see the top half of the World Trade Center clearly. "I said, 'It can't be.' Of course I can see the flames and everything coming out the sides and all the smoke. ... Right in my mind, I knew something happened. I knew it was no accident."

When a second aircraft hit the South Tower of the World Trade Center, Scarfuto called his parents. "I told them, 'You get the kids out of school, pack a bag, and I'll let you know if I need you to leave the city.'"

Just over the Brooklyn Bridge from Manhattan is the New York Police Department's 88th Precinct headquarters in Brooklyn. Four miles from work, Scarfuto pressed through commuters and residents already beginning to stream out of the city.

Arriving at work, he found the station in a frenzy, bracing for another attack from any direction. "By now we all know it's some type of a terrorist attack" and NYPD was mobilizing officers, but as yet, no one was allowed into Manhattan.

With fires burning in both towers and firefighters in Manhattan already on the scene, there was little officers could do but watch helplessly.

"Watching those people suffer, hoping they would get out of there, ... in my mind, I was like, 'Geez, how do you fight the fire?' From one building to the other,



Photo via Flickr user TheMachineStops

The moment of impact for the South Tower. From his home, Scarfuto could see the towers burning.

you could probably fight it, but now both buildings were ablaze." An NYPD helicopter hovered nearby, but crews were unable to reach the trapped survivors.

"The worst ... was the people jumping. ... You have nowhere to go, and it's either, I guess, you burn or you die," Scarfuto recalled. "The people chose to jump as opposed to melt—that was the worst thing."

Shortly before 10 a.m., with an unexpected rush, the World Trade Center's South Tower structure succumbed to the strain, telescoping in on itself.

"I'm watching the buildings and before you know it, they start collapsing," Scarfuto remembered. "Death. That was what you were looking at—death." The people who had been trapped in the upper portions of the building, "they just disappeared. They disintegrated. They're gone—forever," he said. "The things just collapsed with everybody on it."

Driven with tremendous force from the far side of Manhattan Island, a wall of smoke and debris surged over the East River into Brooklyn. "Everything got covered in the soot and the grime and the asbestos, whatever else was disintegrated," he said.

Ordered to establish a mass-triage and emergency morgue at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, located a few blocks from precinct headquarters and on the river separating the city from Manhattan, Scarfuto set to work. "I shot right into the Navy Yard. They gave us a brand-new building, and it was perfect for everything we needed."

Scarfuto said that by this time, a thousand New York City police officers had assembled at the Navy Yard awaiting orders. "Everybody was lined up there and waiting, and I'm like, 'We've got to get over there.'"

Eager to establish contact with police cut off from communications in the city, Scarfuto and two NYPD detectives convinced a merchant marine crew to take them over to Manhattan. Stepping off the boat, it "was like being in a war zone," he said. "You couldn't tell where a street was. You didn't know if you were on West Street, if you were on Chambers Street."

FEMA photo



Pieces of the airliners lay mingled with human remains.

Stepping through the rubble with dazed New Yorkers stumbling past, Scarfuto was thinking, “This just couldn’t have happened. This is New York City. This is my home.”

“It was just total devastation,” Scarfuto said. “There were body parts all over. ... Arms, legs, fingers, clothing—everything was just all over.”

“I’m glad I’m alive. I’m glad I didn’t get killed there,” he said. “I’m glad I wasn’t working in the morning that day because ... I definitely would have gone up in the building trying to help, and that would have been it. I wouldn’t have left.”

Searching for a way to assist victims or other police, the three came upon a fellow NYPD officer. “He had a leg in his arms. ... He’s like, ‘What should I do with this?’” At the time, Scarfuto had 17 years in the police department and 21 years in the Air Force. “I’ve been around a lot of tragedy,” Scarfuto explained, “but this was just like—I’m trying to focus; I don’t even know what to tell the guy.”

The situation was worse than the slaughter and devastation left behind by the Iraqis that he had witnessed when reopening Kuwait Airport with the 49th Aerial Port Squadron, after the Persian Gulf War in 1991.

Scarfuto collected himself. “You know what,” he told the police officer holding the leg, “just lay it down and mark it that you found it. Maybe you can find a survivor.”

Blocks away from the towers, pieces of the airliners lay mingled with human remains. “I’ve seen aircraft accidents before, but they were accidents; they weren’t intentional,” Scarfuto said remorsefully, with a tinge of anger in his voice.

After he had been in the city for an hour-and-a-half, police in Brooklyn established backup communications, recalling Scarfuto to the Navy Yard. Divided into groups of 50 to 100, Scarfuto returned again with a police team to search for survivors.

“The area down there was so large” that with the smoke and debris filling the air, he saw only his own

USN photo by Chief Photographer's Mate Eric J. Tilford



An aerial view of the damage in NYC. Scarfuto spent weeks aiding the cleanup and recovery effort.

team. Scarfuto never returned home that day. “I just stayed at work. ... We had a report time and you went there in brigades, ... maybe 20, 30 people on a pile.” Filling five-gallon buckets with debris by hand, Scarfuto joined officers and volunteers working around the clock.

“There were a few people who got rescued. Unfortunately I didn’t get to rescue anybody. I wish I did. That sort of thing keeps you going,” Scarfuto said. “I was just hoping there was a pocket under something. There were maybe 500 people stuck, but most of them died.”

Recalling one of the most heart-rending moments, he said, “We hit a car, started clearing it away, and under the car was a guy.” Scarfuto’s voice trembled. “He was dead. He got crushed. I guess he was looking at his family: ... He had his wallet out with a family picture. That was probably one of the worst things I saw.”

In the days and weeks that followed, “it was automatic 12-hour shifts” digging at Ground Zero or working at the command. “There were no days off.” For Scarfuto, the work was intensely personal. As a five-year-old in Manhattan, his tooth fell out and his parents told him, “Throw the tooth in there.” Scarfuto said, “I threw my tooth in that hole” where the World Trade Center was under construction.

Like many rescuers who stayed at Ground Zero for weeks, Scarfuto later suffered severe respiratory problems linked to toxic exposure at the site. “My esophagus fell apart,” he said.

Today, “if I drive by, ... I get sick to my stomach,” said Scarfuto. “I see the planes hitting. I see the explosions. I see those people jumping. ... That’s just a vision that’s locked in me forever.” ■

CMSgt. William Scarfuto is a 27-year NYPD veteran and an Air Force Reservist assigned to the 35th Aerial Port Squadron at JB McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, N.J. He was interviewed by Aaron Church.

Lt. Gen. Norton Schwartz



DOD photo by R.D. Ward

Norton Schwartz commanded Alaska's NORAD region.



USAF photo by MSGt. Scott Wagers

At Elmendorf, a pilot sprints to an F-15 on air defense alert.

Alaska Time is four hours behind Eastern Time, so the deadly events of Sept. 11, 2001, began to unfold rapidly around 5 a.m. local time at Elmendorf Air Force Base, headquarters for NORAD's Alaska region.

Lt. Gen. Norton A. Schwartz, a self-described "morning person," typically goes for an early morning run. On 9/11 the commander of 11th Air Force and the NORAD region did just that.

Schwartz headed out at about 5 a.m. and ran his normal route, which took him past his headquarters building about 45 minutes later. At that point, he found Col. Bob Otto, his operations group commander, directing traffic in the parking lot. "It's before 6 o'clock in the morning," Schwartz noted, so he asked what was going on.

"Haven't you heard?" Otto replied.

"No, I've been out running," Schwartz responded.

Otto told his boss about the developing situation in New York City.

"I'll be right back," Schwartz said. He ran home, quickly changed into uniform, and was soon back at the office.

By this point, al Qaeda terrorists had already seized and crashed each of the four aircraft they commandeered that day. The attacks had just happened however, and quickly. The full scale of the day's events were not yet known, and Schwartz felt "it was plausible that if something of this nature happened on the East Coast," there could be a similar situation in the West.

A potentially serious problem soon came to light. NORAD's FAA counterparts at the Anchorage air control center passed word that Korean Air Flight 85, inbound from Seoul to Anchorage, might have been hijacked. The Boeing 747's crew had transmitted an "HJK" code, indicating a hijacking.

Air traffic controllers asked Flight 85 to "confirm squawk 7500," another hijack code. The Korean crew repeated the squawk: 7500.

"This was serious business," Schwartz said. "We thought we had a problem."

In 2001, Elmendorf was one of the few remaining NORAD alert bases, and a pair of F-15s were ready to go, armed with both missiles and guns. Two Eagle pilots quickly scrambled and "understood what they were doing, understood that this was a potential hijack," and knew they could be facing a threat similar to what had already been seen on the East Coast.

As a precaution, civil authorities ordered some of the buildings in downtown Anchorage evacuated.

Schwartz informed the F-15 pilots that an order to shoot down the 747 would come from him. "It was clear, explicitly clear, that there was only one person who could declare that target hostile. In other words, authorize our aircrews to engage the target with lethal force—That was me," the general said.

"I did believe that this was a real possibility and I had begun to try to steel myself on the possibility that I would have to authorize the shutdown of a passenger-carrying aircraft."

"We had trained for Russian bombers," Schwartz continued. "That was the NORAD staple." Intercepting an airplane was "not unusual, and certainly was a well-refined procedure." Intercepting a commercial airliner, however, "that was not normal."

The fighters located Flight 85 and were ordered to trail it from a location where people in the cockpit of the 747 would not see the F-15s. "I wasn't prepared to make it known to the crew, visually, that he had missile-carrying fighter aircraft on his left and right wing," Schwartz said.

NORAD worked with the civilian air traffic controllers to figure out exactly what was going on. With the air defense fighters in place, officials suggested a way to "see what's happening on this machine," he said. Through the FAA, Flight 85 was instructed to perform a series of maneuvers, such as left and right turns, to see what sort of response came from the airliner.

The mystery deepened: The aircraft executed its directed maneuvers flawlessly. As Schwartz recalled, "You



Korean Air Flight 85 (background), thought to be hijacked, arrives at Whitehorse Airport, in Canada's Yukon Territory.

have a suspicion [of a hijacking], confirmed by a second indication of a hijack, and yet the crew is responding promptly, precisely, professionally, to ATC instructions.”

Still, military officials did not want to take the airplane into Anchorage, its destination, or on to Fairbanks, the other major metropolitan area in Alaska. “So we decided that we would take the airplane down to an airfield called Yakutat, which is in the southeastern part of the state, a 747-capable airfield.”

Officials checked the weather, which seemed acceptable, then asked Anchorage ATC to move Flight 85 down toward Yakutat via a route that first took it midway between Anchorage and Fairbanks, well clear of both urban areas. “We were able to get the [Anchorage] mayor to discontinue the evacuation, based on our assurance that the city was not threatened,” he said.

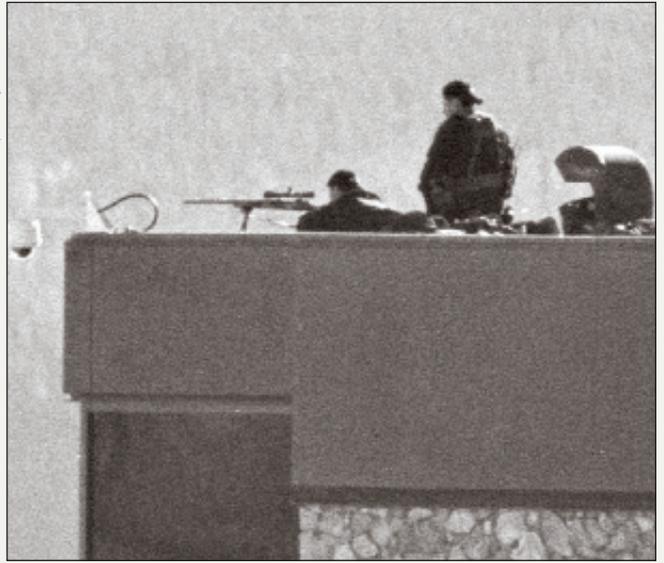
At that point, “I had a young captain in the cab [command and control center] who said, ‘Why don’t we call the airfield manager at Yakutat?’ because sometimes weather reports in Alaska aren’t quite accurate,” Schwartz explained. Calling ahead proved to be a wise decision. Conditions were not clear at Yakutat, and the Korean crew would have been forced to arrive, low on fuel, at an unfamiliar, remote airport in bad weather.

“We came to the conclusion that Yakutat wasn’t such a good idea,” he said. “It became clear at about that same time that this airplane didn’t have enough gas to make it back to Anchorage.”

KAL Flight 85 needed a new destination, and fast. Officials quickly settled on Whitehorse, in Canada’s Yukon Territory, an airport that would receive several other 9/11 diversions, including a KAL 747 freighter. Whitehorse wasn’t really large enough for jumbo jets—their wings and engines hung over the gravel and grass on the sides of the runway—but it would have to do.

The next call went to Angus Watt, Schwartz’s Canadian counterpart.

“I said ‘Angus, I’ve got an airplane I need to take to Whitehorse,’” Schwartz recalled. “Angus said something



Members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police prepare to shoot, if necessary, as Flight 85 is investigated.

along the lines of, ‘You are trailing this airplane. It’s a potential hijack right? ... And you want to bring that to Whitehorse?’”

Watt, who later became the Canadian Air Force Chief of Staff, went off-line, checked with his superiors, then returned to say, “Bring them on.”

Elmendorf’s F-15s trailed Flight 85 into Whitehorse, hooked up with their tanker, and began their return to Alaska. On the ground, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police took over, checked out the crew and the aircraft, and verified that the day’s tension had been because of a mistake and not an actual hijacking.

While the origin of the flight’s first HJK warning squawk is unknown, the crew may have misinterpreted the later request to *confirm* the 7500 hijack code as an *instruction*.

All air traffic in Alaska was grounded for a day-and-a-half or so. This proved to be “very problematic because in Alaska, aviation is really essential,” Schwartz said. People were out in the field, near the end of hunting season, with limited communications and provisions—and they were expecting aircraft to come and pick them up.

At one point before the ground-stop was lifted, NORAD fighters intercepted a light aircraft equipped with pontoons. “He’d come out of the field. He didn’t know,” Schwartz recalled. “Got intercepted by an F-15. It kind of made his morning, I’m sure.”

The Alaska NORAD Region stepped into 24/7 alert operations, but after the abrupt start to the day, Schwartz made it home for dinner on 9/11. The commander and his Canadian deputy “went on 12s” for the next several weeks.

“I never again ran in the morning without my cell phone,” Schwartz said. ■

Gen. Norton A. Schwartz is the Air Force Chief of Staff. He was interviewed by Adam J. Hebert.

MSgt. Noel Sepulveda



USAF photo by TSgt. Jim Vanhegry

Noel Sepulveda, with bullhorn, receives instructions from Paul Carlton (r), USAF surgeon general.

The most evil of days began in banal fashion for MSgt. Noel Sepulveda—with a staff meeting. He was a Reserve program manager in an Arlington, Va., Air Force office, but at 7:30 a.m. on Sept. 11, 2001, he was at nearby Bolling AFB, D.C., attending a routine meeting of first sergeants.

He left the meeting early because he had to be at the Pentagon for a 9:30 promotion exam. At about 9 a.m. the Vietnam and Gulf War medic jumped on his Honda 1500 Goldwing motorcycle and sped away.

Sepulveda reached the Pentagon late, at 9:25. He cajoled a cop into letting him park near the building rather than in a faraway motorcycle lot. “It was right by a light pole” near US Route 27, he said.

As he ran toward the Pentagon, police cars turned on their lights and sped off. This puzzled Sepulveda. To him, the police cars seemed to be forming “some kind of secure area.”

Sepulveda entered the building via Corridor 2 on the Pentagon’s south side. There, however, he was immediately stopped and pushed out by a policeman, who warned “they were going into lockdown; the building was going into Threatcon Delta.”

He was ordered to leave the building, and Threatcon Delta indicated to him an attack was under way.

“I’m thinking, ‘What in the world is going on?’” said the airman. “And then somebody said, ‘Haven’t you heard? Two aircraft have struck, you know, the Twin Towers, and it seems like some sort of an attack.’”

Sepulveda returned to his motorcycle, not far from the building. It was about 9:37 a.m.

Then he saw the airplane.

A Boeing 757 was coming in from the west, flying over a Sheraton Hotel on a nearby rise, beyond where the Air Force Memorial stands today. “That’s what caught my attention—the fact that there was a plane coming from that area,” said Sepulveda. “Their flight paths are supposed to be down the Potomac, and they’re not supposed to overfly the Pentagon. And this guy ... was going to overfly the Pentagon.”

His anxiety grew with each second. “It just didn’t seem right,” said Sepulveda. The airplane dropped lower and

lower, flying faster and faster. The pilot lowered his landing gear. The right gear struck a light pole, broke off, and fell onto a taxi. The left wing struck another pole. American Airlines Flight 77 passed overhead.

“I think that, if I had jumped, ... I probably would have been able to touch the plane,” he said. “That’s how close he came to me.”

Sepulveda could tell that the pilot “full throttled” the engine, but instead of bringing the nose upward, he pitched it down. In a flash, the giant aircraft sailed right into the side of the Pentagon.

“You know how everything kind of goes into slow motion?” asked the airman. “That’s what it seemed like.”

Sepulveda was gripped by utter shock. “At that moment, I said, ‘My God, he just did that purposely.’”

Time seemed frozen. The jetliner’s wings disintegrated, but for a moment, Sepulveda saw the fuselage sticking out of the side of the Pentagon. He noted, “It was like the building was just starting to suck it in, you know? Then, all of a sudden, you see the ball of fire.”

It boiled out from the innards of the Pentagon. In its first milliseconds, the fireball was an ugly yellowish orange. And then it went completely red as it mushroomed into full view.

The blast flung Sepulveda backward like a rag doll. He recalls feeling “like somebody has just punched me, twice, in the chest.” He was thrown against the light pole, with the back of his head and his lower back taking the impact. Sepulveda said he had “a wicked, wicked pain” in the back of his head.

Though injured, Sepulveda picked himself up, shook off the dust, and took the kind of action one expects of a medic. “All I could think of was, ‘Run to the impact site and see how I [can] help,’” he said. “As soon as I got there I heard people screaming and yelling. I just started pulling people out.”

He went in through the hole in the building, “and you could not see two inches in front of you. ... The smoke and the fire were so thick. I was just kind of feeling my way, feeling for people,” he said. “I started pulling them out and bringing them back out.”



On Sept. 10, 2006, 184 beams of light rose from the Pentagon, honoring those who died there on 9/11.

In Corridor 4, adjacent to the impact point, Sepulveda saw a woman's body. "She started screaming," he said. "Her whole back was burned, completely burned. She handed me what I thought was a coat. I thought, 'Why was she handing me a coat?' I was ready to toss it ... when she screamed to tell me her baby was inside it."

Evidently, the woman had come to enroll her infant in day care and gotten caught in the attack. The baby was not breathing when Sepulveda took him.

The airman performed baby CPR—mouth-to-mouth and compressions. He reached the hole in the wall and handed over the baby to another volunteer. "When I handed him off was when I heard him gasping and start crying," said Sepulveda.

He went back to get the mother. She came out just before the Pentagon wall collapsed at 9:57 a.m. All told, he probably rescued eight persons.

Sepulveda ran to another section of the damaged area where he'd heard that people were coughing and screaming. He and others from police agencies and military services formed a human chain to help trapped persons find their way out of the Pentagon.

The scene was "chaotic," Sepulveda recalled. Not long after the attack, a helipad fuel bladder exploded. Adding to the terror and disorder were repeated announcements that another hijacked airliner was inbound, due to arrive in minutes.

"They actually started counting it out: We have 30 minutes, we have 20 minutes, we have 15 minutes," said Sepulveda.

Nearby was an overpass for US Route 27 on the Pentagon's western rampart. Sepulveda rushed there to create a triage area for victims.

He obtained a bullhorn from a firefighter and began trying to bring order from chaos. "I'm Sergeant Sepulveda," he shouted. "I'm a medic. We need to get organized." He rounded up those with medical training and put them to work.

One of the last victims brought out was an older woman, burned over 90 percent of her body. Sepulveda, though lacking in normal burn treatments such



In 2007, a memorial flag hangs near the point of impact at the Pentagon.

as silvadene, had some success in keeping her stable with saline solution.

"She looked at me, and said, 'Why did they do this to us? Who is doing this to us?'" said Sepulveda. "How do you answer a person like that?" She died two days later.

While he was busy trying to organize the effort, Sepulveda heard this question: "Sergeant, what the hell do you think you're doing?" The speaker was the Air Force surgeon general, Lt. Gen. Paul K. Carlton Jr., standing behind him.

"I said, 'We need to get things better organized. So, I'm getting things organized.'" Carlton replied. "You're in charge. You're the on-scene commander from now on." Sepulveda coordinated all the medical assets after that.

Sepulveda worked straight through that day and late into Wednesday, without stopping to eat or sleep. It was after 4 p.m. on Wednesday when a colonel finally ordered him to leave.

It had not occurred to him that he had not slept. "What they told me was that the adrenaline was what kept me going," he said.

Nor did he realize the extent of his injuries. Sepulveda carried out the grim duty of retrieving the dead for many days afterward. Not until a month later did doctors discover that the head blow had caused a subdural hematoma, which required surgery and a 10-day stay in Walter Reed hospital.

On April 15, 2002, Gen. John P. Jumper, the Air Force Chief of Staff, awarded him the Airman's Medal, the highest decoration for valor outside of actual combat, and the Purple Heart.

Sepulveda says he is "still struggling" with 9/11 memories. "If I get a little too stressed out, I'll come down here," to a ranch he owns in rural Florida, he said. "[I'm] trying to be out here as much as I can. It's therapeutic." ■

SMSgt. Noel Sepulveda was medically retired in 2006, and now divides his time between his home in Bethesda, Md., and his Florida ranch. He was interviewed by Robert S. Dudley.