

The Shoreline

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Onlookers render honors as fire and rescue workers unfurl an American flag over the side of the Pentagon during rescue and recovery efforts following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack.—US Navy photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

Just a Normal Day: September 11, 2001

By Robert Cox

September 11, 2001. A normal start to a normal day—in the office by 0500 on the E-ring, the outermost of the honeycomb of offices of the largest office building in the world. The aroma of coffee wafted through the corridors (the Pentagon does not have “hallways”) from the coffee kiosks scattered around the A-ring—the innermost ring of the Pentagon’s honeycomb. The activities of the hundreds of military personnel and civilian employees centered on prepping for the hundreds of meetings that day and tens of thousands of people ascending on this building from the Virginia and Maryland bedroom communities. Many of those meetings were just continuations of those already underway in the five-sided puzzle palace—a 24-hour global monolith. The meetings and those attending them would execute as planned, or simply be adjusted/rescheduled depending on how the priorities of the day unfolded—a pretty typical day in the Pentagon.

My day would shift into full execute mode in about three-and-a-half hours when the individual I supported would host a meeting of five two- and three-star flag officers and a senior civilian equivalent. All of my officemates would drift in over the next hour or so. I preferred to start early, simply to get ahead of, and remain ahead of, the power curve. I viewed my responsibility as not letting the power curve (curves, actually, as there are many in this building) get ahead of my boss. At the end of every day, we were going to be able to say that we were leading, not following. To win in this extremely competitive environment, you must know every possible angle of attack your competitors could likely use—within the Navy, and from the other services, not to mention the expanse of other government agencies, all vying for the same limited federal dollars to fund their programs.

With the meeting successfully underway in my boss’s office at 0830, at approximately 0852 I needed a copy of a document. As I exited his office, I passed my officemates looking at the TV in his reception area. A plane had just collided with the north tower of the World Trade Center. All were shocked. I suspect many of these five or six people said a silent prayer for those involved. I don’t remember if I did.

I immediately returned to the meeting and announced what had occurred. My boss and many in attendance were the senior leaders of the US Navy’s aviation community. They directed virtually every aspect of the Navy’s aviation planning, resourcing and operations. Although I was a Surface Warfare Officer (I drove ships), I felt it important for them to have this information. Surprisingly, I did not receive the level of surprise I had anticipated. These individuals had flown in

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