

wars around the world (some were Aces), and some had seen tragedies almost as incomprehensible as what would continue to unfold. They were not unconcerned or heartless people. They were individuals whose careers were founded on compartmentalizing data in order to execute the most demanding of missions at fractions of a fraction of a second. They took the news simply as data.

I don't know why I did, but I decided to turn on the TV in the office and swing it around for them to actually see the live feed coming from NBC. When they saw the smoke from the north tower, all literally jumped to their feet, leaving the conference table to view the TV much more closely.

It had now been approximately 10 minutes since American Airlines Flight 11 had hit the north tower. At 0903, United Airlines Flight 175 hit the south tower. The first comment from one of the two-stars was, "It's a terrorist attack." As this sunk in to the assembled viewers, I said, "We're next."

We watched for some time trying to understand what had occurred. Was it a terrorist attack? Was there an algorithm flaw in the air traffic control system governing air traffic in one of the busiest air spaces in the world? That's a stupid question. Well, what is happening in the rest of the US? Should we alert the Navy's Senior Admiral? I had a direct line to his executive assistant, and they were watching exactly what we were watching. Yes, they knew; everybody knew. They just didn't quite understand it.

At 0945, as we continued to watch, an angle of attack was perpetrated on us which we had not planned for. Today I would not be successful in keeping my boss ahead of the power curve. Thirty feet below our office and approximately 20 feet clockwise around the E-ring honeycomb, colleagues and friends—who moments earlier had been contemplating their continuing daily schedule, or thinking about last night's dinner, or a soccer game they would attend with their son or daughter that afternoon if the puzzle palace would permit—lost their lives to a massive explosion, a fireball and mass of careening concrete, steel, aviation fuel, engine parts and unrecognizable bodies within the disintegrating fuselage of American Airlines Flight 77 as it

mercilessly tore its way from the E-ring to the A-ring of the first deck of the Pentagon. The massive tube of steel broke through all five concrete-reinforced honeycomb rings, finally stopping when its kinetic and potential energies had been expended.

In our office, at that moment, the exterior windows looking directly at Arlington Cemetery were assaulted with the shrapnel from the impact point 30 feet below our office. We heard a dull thud, and then about two seconds later debris hurtling at tremendous speed and with tremendous force lashed against these windows. The windows had been replaced with reinforced shatter-proof glass only two months before. Those surreal moments shifted, in a split second, to action. While the action was not planned, it simply was executed: account for everyone—understand their status (injured/not injured/functional/not functional/cognitive/not cognitive)—and lead everyone to a safer place. As we raced to the corridor just 90 seconds after the impact of the Boeing 757, smoke had filled from the ceiling level to waist level, causing us to quickly run in a crouched position counterclockwise away from the area engulfed in the conflagration.

At this point, our objective was to account for all personnel who could be found and get them out of this building. My boss, a war-seasoned Navy Ace, virtually turned into a person I did not recognize. His only objective was to get to the CNO (Chief of Navy Operations, the senior Admiral in the US Navy) and ensure he was safe. I argued that the CNO has his own team to ensure his safety, and that our responsibility was to our own people, and to get them out to a safe location. I literally pulled him back at one point from attempting to proceed further, and we left to coordinate our own recovery efforts and to take stock of our situation. Just as with the twin towers, my greatest fear was that this was the first of two attacks. Taking anyone to "Ground Zero," the nickname of the center courtyard of the Pentagon would be sheer suicide, as it would be the likely strike point of the next attack. This would later prove not to be the case, as the terrorists had a much larger objective in mind, and because of other extraordinary American heroes, they would not be given the chance to execute that objective—the White House.

In the immediate vicinity, there were screams of horror, the natural reaction to the shock of surprise and fear, and there were screams of those who were literally on fire or were being crushed by the falling debris, or those being sucked into the chasm which took those directly next to our office whose concrete floors were no longer there. While on a fractional scale compared to the World Trade Center, our situation was no less real, and no less horrifying.

Because the Pentagon is a 24-hour operation, its corridors are always lighted; it looks the same at 3 a.m. as it does at 3 p.m. This was the first time in 10 years I had ever seen the Pentagon completely darkened. As the smoke chased us, we ran where we could and doubled back when our path was blocked by the collapsed building and remains of the 757's fuselage. We sought the path that would least restrict our objective of achieving safety in the massive parking lots surrounding the Pentagon. South Parking was our goal.

Because of the natural training in the face of great peril, there was not mass hysteria, and in some areas people not close to the impact simply asked what was happening. It can best be described as an "organized rush" to a broadly defined objective—get everybody out safely. We gathered as many people as we could.

The Pentagon, while actually laid out in a logical and methodical way, can be enormously confusing to those who have not developed the required internal "puzzle palace GPS" to get from one location to another. For those with years of experience, that internal GPS served us well as we navigated past the unlit and smoke-blocked corridors and alternate passageways. Because of the circuitous route required simply to keep moving forward, we actually ended up at Ground Zero.

I pulled my boss to the side and said this is the last place we or anyone else wants to be. If they hit us again, the people here would be sitting ducks. He jumped onto a bench and started yelling at those who occupied that space that they needed to leave immediately. There were people who were stunned—those who were not able to comprehend, those who were bleeding and severely injured and those who were rushing back into the carnage to save as many lives as they could.

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