

Just a Normal Day: September 11, 2001



Moments after a hijacked jetliner crashed into the Pentagon on September 11, 2001.
—Department of Defense photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

Ultimately, we evacuated several hundred people into South Parking. We tried desperately to assess our personnel status. Who could be accounted for? How would we record that accountability? What telephone circuits were available for this task? Where had the other thousands of people in our Directorate gone? Who had gotten out? Who was still in the building? Who needed medical assistance? How do we ensure they can contact their families?

As circumstances would have it, our condominium was virtually across the Shirley Highway (I-395N) in Crystal City. I had crossed the local road (Army Navy Drive and all of its perpendicular tributary roads) a thousand times over 10 years in the Pentagon. Today, I would cross without traffic lights, without looking 360 degrees to see who might run me over. Today, I simply led our contingent of approximately nine people through the middle of the streets, because all of the streets were so filled with cars that all vehicular movement had stopped. It was 100% total gridlock. We could see cars in all directions, for almost a half mile. None could move. Cars were literally nose-to-nose in the middle of the intersection of Army Navy Drive and South Eads Street, stopping all movement in all directions.

We finally arrived at my condo, which was on the top floor of the building. We looked south along the Potomac toward National Airport. The Pentagon was out of view, which was perhaps fortunate. In the midst of an emergency like this, what do you do? Well, perhaps the natural course of action is to offer something to eat. I prepared sandwiches and something to drink for those who wanted it. No one was really hungry, but perhaps eating just simply says, "I need some normalcy." We turned the TV on, and after watching for approximately 20-30 minutes, we watched in fixed horror as the first of the twin towers collapsed in front of a mesmerized global viewing audience.

We set up a temporary office and coordination center in our condo for the rest of the evening. I became the central coordinator while my boss and his aide went to the Navy Annex just up the street from the Pentagon. I would make reports to him there every 30 minutes until well into the evening. The fires started by the attack on the Pentagon raged through the top floor areas for several days. That night, the wind was from the northeast. The smoke it carried literally engulfed my condo and the surrounding buildings until the next morning. The acrid smell of burning materials remained until the wind finally shifted the next day. That smell will never be forgotten.

While all of this was occurring, the nagging concern for me was how do I tell my wife Amry I am OK? While your duty is to perform your duty, my inner core says the one person in the world who means more to me than anything else will probably know what has happened, and will, like so many others, wonder. The circuits in the Arlington, Virginia, area were simply overloaded with all of the other people in similar circumstances. As luck would have it, we were the benefactors of an unexpected opening in the lines, allowing me to call her front office and convey I was OK. I knew they would let her know.

The people who did not get that fortunate call were the families of the friends and professionals who did not emerge from the Pentagon that day. LCDR Rob (I will not use his last name) and I had spoken three days before about his career and my counsel on things he should consider. He and I knew each other through our time when I was the Squadron Commodore for his ship. He was the XO (Executive Officer). He had a promising career and was very fortunate to have had the opportunity to be assigned to the Pentagon at this early stage in his career progression. He had a wife and two children, both daughters. Rob was one of those who perished instantly. He was in the office of the Army's personnel section which took the direct impact of the 757. I will always remember other Army, Navy, civilian friends and colleagues just as I will remember LCDR Rob.

In my 32-year career, I have been in live minefields in the Persian Gulf, worked with our Special Operations Forces and other intelligence operatives in clandestine environments, been through hurricanes of 45-foot seas, and countless other events which challenge an individual's emotional and physical abilities. September 11, 2001, remains the day and the moment and the event(s) which I carry with me daily—and which so many in our nation carry with them daily. An image accompanying this article is of the American flag that was draped over the Pentagon. It was actually draped over the office where I was on that historic day. Fourteen years have passed, yet it is as clear to me today as it was then. I hope that we, all of us, will never forget.

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