

Remembering 9/11

M. Acuna

9/11/12

Eleven years ago today I was standing, staring out the window from my office on the 9th floor of 701 South 12th Street, Arlington Va in Pentagon City.

I had just heard of a plane that had flown into one of World Trade Center towers. It was early and details were still sketchy. Initial reaction amongst my co-workers was it was a small plane, maybe a Cessna that had lost control. Not long after news broke of another plane flying into the second tower. At this point we knew it was more than a small plane that had flown off course, much more was going on.

We headed to the lobby of our building to watch the news on the TV's near the elevators. It was crowded and still not a lot of details were coming in. I decided to go back upstairs and see if I could get updates online. Within a few moments after getting back to my desk the building shook, this was no surprise as being across the street (i.e. I-395) from Arlington Cemetery we were use to the occasional F-16 fly over as part of the military funeral services at Arlington Cemetery. However, when I stood to look out the window expecting to see an F-16 I instead saw what appeared to be a large commercial plane flying over the building. The plane then banked right towards 395 and Arlington Cemetery, making a u-turn to aim itself at the Pentagon. In what must have only been seconds played out for what seemed like an hour as I watched as the plane came in lower just above Washington Blvd, engines going full thrust as it neared the helipad, and then disappear into the side of the Pentagon. There was a very eerie silence that was quickly broken by an explosion that shook our building followed by a fireball that then came towards our window.

My first thought was that we were going to die; the fireball was going to hit our building. My second reaction was to look at my co-worker standing on the other side of the cube wall to see if she saw what I just saw. I will never forget the expression on her face; shock, eyes and mouth wide open, speechless, white as a ghost. Apparently I had the same look. I looked back toward the Pentagon, everything had gone quiet, there were some cars stopped along the side of 395 and Washington Blvd, and then came the sight of one ambulance, as if it didn't realize the magnitude of the carnage and death it would soon witness. One ambulance was on its way to save all those people I had just seen die.

My co-workers that had gone to the lobby had returned to see what caused the explosion that shook the building for the second time that morning. People were asking and couldn't understand or wouldn't believe when I told them a large plane had flown into the side of the Pentagon. My boss kept asking, asking if I was sure it was a commercial jet as there was no news yet on the attack of the Pentagon and when there was the first reports were not clear on what had struck the Pentagon. I knew what I had seen, I saw a commercial flight, and I saw passenger windows.

In the short aftermath of the attack, explosion, one ambulance, and confirming what I had just seen was real; I called my wife who was at work. Her office located two blocks from the White House bordering Farragut Park on one side and Lafayette Park on the other. When she first heard my voice she knew something was wrong, I told her what had happened and for her and everyone in her office to get out of the city. She told her boss who responded that I was wrong; the attacks were in New York. She told him “no, Mike just saw this”, he told everyone to get out now.

We were told to go home, though looking down at the street there was nowhere to go. The streets were jammed in every direction. Roads around the Pentagon were blocked, Washington Blvd was closed, and I needed to find a different way back to Maryland. The Metro was also closed and there were concerns and rumors that Metro stations might also be attacked.

Eventually I pulled out of the parking garage and made my way around Fern Street. Smoke was billowing from the Pentagon, people were everywhere, roaming about, stuck in their cars, and crying. I eventually made it to Army/Navy Drive and went west from Arlington, not that I knew where I was going but it seemed to be the only way out of Pentagon City. My sunroof was open and I could see fighter jets circling the city, I turned on the radio and for the first time had heard that the towers were gone.

Speculation of unaccounted flights was rampant, cell signals were down, and I had no way of reaching my wife to see if she had made it home. Our son was just six months old, our daughter three, and my parents were watching them on Mondays and Tuesdays when my wife and I were at work. At least I knew (..assumed) they were okay.

Despite the terror and sadness that everyone felt that day I will always remember the kindness that was offered by the people, complete strangers, that lived along Army/Navy Drive. Sitting in our cars in the hot sun, not moving, people came out of their homes to offer us water. No one asked they just felt there was a need and came out to help. There was unity amongst destruction.

I will and can never compare what I went through that day to the loss that so many suffered as a result of 9/11. I will share though that until the last few years that my experience with 9/11 was not something I was willing to talk about. People that knew what I had seen would sometimes ask and I might give a few words, some asked if I was okay, but bringing this experience back to the surface was not, and sometimes still, a comfortable task. That said there were some affects from what I saw.

We were told to return to work on Thursday 9/13. I really didn't want to go back to my desk to look out at what had once been a beautiful view of northwest Washington that had now become a view of where hundreds had died just days before , but I did. I remember feeling anxious and eventually terrified of the thought of pulling into my building. My boss asked if I wanted to move my desk, I declined. For the six months following the vision of flight 77 crashing into the side of the Pentagon played in my head on an endless loop. At some point it started to seem normal; I might be having a conversation with someone, seem engaged, but the only thing going through my head was a plane crashing into the side of the Pentagon over and over again. Eventually that stopped, but there are always reminders. The oddest

reminder, even to this day, is I somehow manage to be walking by a digital clock either on an oven, microwave, DVD, bank, watch, etc. when it's reading 9:11.

I will never forget 9/11/01, I wish it never happened, but out of evil must come good, otherwise evil has won. Since 9/11 I have made it a point to volunteer my time to help others, something I never did before. I've been a soccer coach, baseball coach, scout leader, a director and volunteer for kid's fun runs and other road races. I've donated money and raised money for various efforts. Basically, trying and wanting to make a difference. Maybe I would have done these things anyway, but I like to think that being on the 9th floor that day pushed me in this direction.

The last thing I remember about that day was finally getting home to see my wife, kids, and my parents who were over. As horrible as this was, my dad was calm and eventually said that when he was young they got through the attack on Pearl Harbor and we'll get through this. He was right, he still is, and together we got through this.