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A Team of Heroes  
By Edward Masso  
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DOD (CEDRIC H. RUDISILL)  
Everyone left his or her rank at the door and responded as an instant recovery team after the terrorist-flown Boeing 757 slammed into the Pentagon.

As commanding officer of the Naval Reserve Navy Command Center (NCC) Detachment 106, it is my duty to assess crises in terms of potential Navy response. On hearing of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on Tuesday morning, I quickly called my N3, directing him to begin organizing his team for potential Crisis Action Team support, grabbed my coat, and departed for the Pentagon.

I was near the top of the fourth corridor escalator when what felt like an earthquake and sounds of explosion wracked the building. The Pentagon general announcement system exhorted all to evacuate the building. As

personnel flooded the passageways for departure, I ran to the NCC to see how my unit could provide assistance.

At the entrance to the one-month-old NCC, it was apparent that disaster had struck. Screams and the stench of smoke filled the air in the darkened and destroyed corridor. Broken water pipes and sprinklers showered water. As I started to access the NCC, I heard the cries of a woman from an adjacent restroom. After helping her from that dark and damaged space, I turned back to the NCC, but in those few moments, a collapsed bulkhead had blocked the front door. I decided to work my way toward a back door by way of one of the outdoor accesses between the Pentagon rings.

Once outside, I saw that a major section of the brick bulkhead had given way, leaving a gaping hole—and potential escape route—in the side of the NCC. But the hole, surrounded by the rubble of ceiling material, drywall, and furniture, also was a catalyst for the fire and smoke. A locked chain link fence extending from the C-Ring to the D-Ring prevented access to the breach in the wall.

Looking up, I saw people in the offices of the Army's Personnel Command, attempting to escape through their recently installed shatterproof windows. Desks, chairs, bookcases, and bodies slammed against the windows. Flames and smoke were clearly visible behind them.

Then, from out of nowhere, help arrived. Rear Admiral Phil Balisle, Director of Surface Warfare, appeared from a hatch with a team of officers from his directorate. As if leading a ship's repair locker, the admiral immediately took tactical charge of the scene. Keys to the lock on the chain link fence were located, and it was opened. Naval officers trained to fight shipboard battle damage armed themselves with fire extinguishers and went as far into the Navy Command Center as possible, through the debris, fighting the fire and helping people to safety.

As the Army personnel from above pushed their indestructible windows out by their frames, volunteers stepped up to form human safety nets. Of the scores of jumpers I witnessed, not one touched the ground, as their sisters and brothers, strangers moments before, prevented any additional injuries.

Fought with only handheld fire extinguishers and no emergency breathing apparatuses, however, the battle against the fire soon was lost. As the smoke billowed more powerfully and the flames appeared more violently, fewer personnel came from the spaces.

We all knew it was time to shift into the next level of crisis response. As rumors about a second plane or bomb spread, strangers became a focused and unified team—we would work through this together. Leadership and action came from all ranks; first aid was administered from all quarters. We found calm by going to that place in our hearts where duty resides.

On this most horrible of days, this team of heroes, from admiral to the most junior sailors and soldiers, ignored the announcements to leave the building and chose instead to help in any way possible. They made evident the tenets of our core values, Honor, Courage, and Commitment.

The incredible sacrifices of those who were unable to escape the onslaught; and who perished in the Pentagon, New York City, and Pennsylvania; will forever be in our hearts. Their memory will steel our resolve, and can only inspire us to greater deeds.

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