

To whom it may concern:

My name is Dave Nelson. I retired last year as a Navy Captain after 28 years of service. I came back to the same office in the Director of Air Warfare as a government civilian on the Chief of Naval Operations Staff.

At the time of the attack, I was in room 5D453 four floors directly over the point where aircraft penetrated the D ring and exploded.

As I remember the events, we were working on some data sheets at the table adjacent to the outer windows looking out at the E ring. People had a television on across the room watching the news about the first tower strike in New York. I thought it was some bizarre accident. I walked over to watch for a couple of moments, but shortly returned to the table as we were late with our work. At that time someone yelled out that a second plane had hit the south tower. By then I had returned to my desk adjacent to the windows looking out on the E ring and was making a phone call.

Just as I began to dial I felt the building shudder. I heard my co-worker shout "what the hell was that". At the time there had been no warning on television or radio of the impending attack on the Pentagon. In the next instant the building shook with an extremely violent second shudder that literally knocked us to the floor. All I could see looking out the windows towards the E ring was a wall of flame and thick black smoke. The windows cracked, bowed out in a spider-wed fashion but didn't appear to break out in total. The blinds flew out from the windows. I could feel the heat from the explosion. I was stunned by the impact and it took a few seconds to get my bearings. By that time, everyone was yelling to get out. People in the back of the room were streaming past. One officer held his head with his hand and I could see that he had blood running down the side of his head. I learned later he had been hit on the head by concrete blocks knocked out of the wall just 40 feet from my desk in the corner of the room. A government employee who sat just across from him was also injured by falling debris. I made my way to the front of the room and encountered a couple of people waving us out towards the fourth corridor. The smoke was really beginning fill the room.

As we entered the fourth corridor the smoke became much thicker. At no time did I see, feel or hear the sprinkler system come on. In fact, I don't remember the fire alarm announcement system coming on either. As we made our way down the fourth corridor towards the A ring, some kind of folding doors began to deploy from the right side walls at regular intervals. We were able to push them back so that people could make their way to the A ring.

Looking back towards the E ring I couldn't see the E ring end of the fourth corridor any longer because of the smoke. You could hear people yelling and getting people to move towards the A ring. There was no panic in the evacuation to this point. In fact, at no time during the evacuation, did I see any panic.

I made my way down to the A ring on the fifth floor and took the stairs to the second floor. At this point I had a choice to go into the center court or proceed down the A ring to the second corridor and south parking. I chose the south parking route as it seemed the prudent thing to do in case of another attack. At one point I regretted this decision because we came to halt in the second corridor as the crowd packed the corridor and couldn't move. I could sense great uneasiness in people as we came to a halt because of a possible re-attack. Again, I'm impressed with the control that people exhibited and the disciplined exit from the building.

As I made my way to the door and exited to south parking, I could see the clouds of gray smoke coming over the roof from the Arlington cemetery side of the building. The smell was unforgettable. I did not find out until later that an aircraft had slammed into the building. That information filtered through the crowd in south parking during the next few minutes.

Our staff had no pre-determined gathering location, so a head count was almost impossible. A couple of staff members tried to keep a list but it became apparent that that effort would be useless. Smoke became a factor and the security force that was beginning to assemble pushed us back to Army/Navy Drive. At this point I joined a couple of other staff officers and proceeded to their apartment in Pentagon City.

From there we could see the fire raging on the west side of the building. It reminded me of watching my home church burn to the ground back in 1953. It like this was one of the saddest sights I had ever seen.

It probably still hasn't registered with me just how fortunate I was. The new construction, especially the windows, saved me from certain injury or death.

Some take a-ways:

- it was an orderly evacuation....not because the security force was in charge, but because the work force was an experienced group of people used to stressful situations.
- no sprinkler system activation in the spaces
- no warning systems activation in the spaces
- no pre-determined staff muster point
- folding doors deploying across the corridors hampering the evacuation efforts
- new construction saved us from certain injury/death

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