

*Doris Richardson*

Ours is the 13th class from Crane that has gone through the Public Management Certification IUPUI SPEA curriculum, so we are known as PMC 13. Early on some teased that was impending doom, but I told them I don't believe in that stuff (and I still am not superstitious).

Our Itinerary included Tuesday, September 11th, 2001 at the Pentagon with briefs provided by Department of Defense officials. We were instructed to meet at 0800 sharp in the hotel lobby and that the NAVY Bus provided would pull out at 0815. My day started when my alarm failed to go off. I made my plan for how I could make it on time, I could shower but not wash my hair. I could grab some breakfast on my way to the lobby. As I headed out the hotel room door I remembered I had not yet read scripture this morning, but that is why I've tried to memorize some versus (for those times when a Bible or time is not available). As I headed out I began to go over Isaiah 55 "Seek the Lord while He may be found; call on Him while He is near."

There was no need to hurry so ... the bus was late. We finally pulled out for the Pentagon at 0830. As we came across the bridge I noticed a plane flying by. Through the guards at the North entrance we gained access and a guide was provided to show us to the conference room 5E490. We had a brisk walk around the main corridor that over looks the center courtyard of the pentagon. Then up 3 escalators until we came to the 5th floor. Then down the 4th corridor to the "E" hall which goes down the outside ring of the Pentagon. We found room 490. A map of the Pentagon reveals 5E490 to be top floor outside ring near the center of the southwest side. Let's see that would make this room right behind the Helicopter Pad outside. Indiana Limestone would separate us from the outside first, then brick, then poured concrete making the outside wall 2' thick. As we turned to enter the conference room I noticed the stairway door ahead of us, that would be near the center of this side of the Pentagon.

Our first brief was scheduled with the Under-Secretary of the Navy, the Honorable Susan Livingstone for 0900 . We entered 5E490 at 0910 and Ms. Livingstone entered immediately behind us. She asked if we had heard any of the news reports that morning and we told her no. She asked her Aide, a Navy Captain to please fill us in and he proceeded to tell us about the first plane that had hit the NY WTC. When the second plane hit the Twin Towers shortly after that it was presumed to be a terrorist attack. It was so hard to accept this news as true and yet here we set at the center for the Department of Defense. Ms. Livingstone went on to state that they were monitoring the situation and that our meeting would be cut short due to an important meeting she must attend shortly. She stated that her Aide would ensure she left promptly for that meeting when the time came and she continued on with the information she was to provide. I know I was not the only one in the room that stopped to say a prayer at that time. Mine went as it always does "Lord, not my will but Thine be done." I returned my focus to the Under-Secretary. She continued with her brief and then wrapped it up with Q&A. She was ready to conclude when...

BOOM!!! It sounded like a bomb had gone off!

What I didn't know was that moments before hijacked Flight 77 had passed over DC full throttle headed for the White House. When the pilot over shot his target he banked the plane like you would see a fighter plane do and as the 757 made a 270 degree turn it began to dive for an alternate target. The explosion I heard was not a bomb but the 757 crashing into the pentagon at ground level. I heard the explosion first then as the plane continued to

barrel into the floors below the percussion shook our room like a severe earthquake. With the earthquake drills we have in this area, I moved over to the support column near by. I feared the roof would cave in. When the shaking stopped - for a moment I thought we were safe - until the smoke began to come in through the ceiling tiles. The Under-Secretary slammed her folders down on the table and said, "This is a Terrorist Attack. We have to evacuate!"

I heard someone say they could smell fire. As I realized how insignificant I was here, I told the guys, "Keep up with the Under-Secretary. They're going to get her out of here." The 32 of us in the room headed for the door. One of the first ones out opened the stairway door only to find the stairs destroyed and leading only to smoke below. Others from our group turned to try to exit the hallway the other direction only to be meet by other personnel trying to get to the stairway door.

I finally made my way out of the room and into "E" hall only to find the smoke was getting much worse. I watched as another opened the stairway door and confirmed that the stairs were impassable. I could see a pillar of smoke rising from the stairwell so thick and heavy, like no smoke I had seen before, and the door was quickly shut before it entered our hallway. Now in the hallway I could smell the fire too. The hall was filling with smoke. I squatted down in hopes of finding fresher air down low, but it seemed that the smoke was filling up all available space. As my eyes burned and my throat and lungs hurt from the smoke I reached into my briefcase and pulled out Kleenexes to hold over my nose. They gave little relief. I saw the guys pulling off their jackets and placing them over their faces. I considered doing the same with the top I had on.

I could hear the discussions. "We can't take stairs, they're not there." "But down the hall the other way was the severe damage." And as the smoke thickened and we choked I thought that, okay, this is not happening to somebody else this is happening to me. This is my reality. This my here and now, and it looks like here and now is my time to die. And I prayed, "okay, Lord, I have said I am prepared to die when the time comes and if that is now I can accept that. Lord, please let me die by the smoke and not the fire." And in that time of great distress I had peace and acceptance of God's will.

Everything was happening very quickly and we all knew we could not stay where we were. As I arose I heard Dusty say, "okay there is damage that way, but is there a way through?" and those around me began to head down the hall back toward the 4th corridor that we had entered on. I quickly followed suit, keeping an eye on the floor that was covered in debris. Ceiling tiles were down. Light fixtures were down. There was a step down where part of the floor had dropped. I heard someone say grab on to the person in front of you; and I found a gray coattail that was still on someone's back and I held on tight. And then we began to run, as the situation seemed oh so urgent. I prayed I wouldn't hold back the one in front of me, and prayed that I would not pull the coat off of him if I fail behind. The line then slowed as the hallway got darker. Soon we were in total darkness with extreme heat to our left. I knew I could close my burning eyes here because we could not see anything in this darkness. I wondered if we were going to find an exit or if we were moving into a trap. Then I heard a voice up ahead "Keep coming. There is light at the end of this tunnel." I opened my eyes and I could see a flashing light ahead. There was someone standing up ahead directing us in the way we should go. His words were so encouraging as he said, "You guys have a good line formed. Keep together and keep a comin'." He directed us

to turn left where he was and to continue down this dark hallway. We had found the 4th corridor. We continued on in darkness, soon I heard voices ahead saying, "The air is clearing. We can breath easier." Soon I could see a little more light and a soon there was fresher air. Everyone ahead was saying, "Watch your step. You have to step down here." From behind I heard Eric say, "I don't remember any step coming in." and I agreed. There was no step coming in on the 5th floor. As I took a big step down, I continued on "Watch your step. Watch your step." Here we stepped down onto the main corridor. We were on solid structure and continued down the escalators.

We filed in with others that were evacuating and continued on the main corridor. Here is when I could tell how shaken I was. We gathered around to see if all were accounted for. That was the last point I saw the Under-Secretary. She believed we were all out safely and she had to get about her business.

Guards kept telling us to move on, move on at every location when we tried to stop for a head count. We finally found our selves out on the northwest side and read through our roster of names. It is truly a miracle that in our group we all got out alive and without any injuries. As we later looked over maps we had of the Pentagon and compared them to the news reports we realized that our exit passage had collapsed within 30 minutes of impact. I am thankful that this is the group I went through this with; without each of them I don't think I would have made it out.

I believe what helped me through this time is my philosophy that God's children are in His hand. Since I belong to Him and He is in full control of what happens in my life, then what He allows to happen to me I must accept. I pray that others will find the faith that will give them peace that transcends understanding when they face death. - Doris Richardson, Code 091P