

October 19, 2001

Narrative of the events of September 11, 2001 (9/11) as recalled by CDR Jeff Stratton

Here are the events of Tuesday, 11 September 2001 as I remember them.

While returning from grabbing a cup of coffee shortly after 0900 with some co-workers, a female petty officer told us that a plane had crashed in NYC. We hurried back to the N3/N5 office, a large space (4D377) located on the 4th floor, between the 3rd and 4th corridors. After locating a TV that worked, we watched the events unfolding in New York, including the 2nd plane crashing into the World Trade Center. My brother, LCOL Marc Stratton, USAF, a Special Tactics Squadron officer assigned to the AF Staff on the other side of the Pentagon, called me to ensure that I had seen the NYC events. He told me that the Joint Staff was standing up a Crisis Action Team (CAT) and that he had been assigned the 2100-0900 watch. He was on his way home to run some errands and get some sleep.

Ten minutes later, there was a loud impact and the floor shook. I wasn't sure if it was a bomb or an airplane. I looked out our only windows, which afford a view inward toward the C Ring, and saw heavy black smoke wafting over the building toward the center, and flying debris. We started an orderly egress of over fifty people from the office into the 3rd corridor and out to South Parking. Someone shouted, "Hurry up, we only have 18 minutes," correctly assuming that the impact was an airplane and surmising that another plane would follow as it had in NY. I stayed behind until everyone had left and locked the door with the watch section. I hooked up with CDR Mike Spence, a fighter pilot stationed at Fallon with me years ago, and waited for him while he checked to see that the smoke-filled 4th corridor on the 4th floor, near his office, was clear of people. I knew that my three-star boss, VADM Keating (N3/N5), was in a meeting with VADM McGinn (N7), whose office is on the outer E-Ring. I stood outside the N3/N5 office until I saw the two admirals walking down 3rd corridor, and I informed VADM Keating that the N3/N5 office was clear. CDR Spence and I then proceeded down the stairs, heeding the Marines' warnings to be careful, but ignoring their directions to head for the parking lot. Talking about it afterward, we were more pissed off that someone had attacked the Pentagon than we were scared that something else might happen.

We arrived at the center courtyard and learned that it had been a plane that crashed into the Pentagon, but we did not learn exactly where it had hit the building. We saw five or six wounded personnel that were being helped by medics or other volunteers. CDR Spence went to see if they needed help. Since the Corridor 3 and 4 entrance on the ground floor was smoke-filled, I ran to the Corridor 5 and 6 entrance and made it out to the outside breezeway between the B and C Rings and turned left toward the 4th corridor. There was rubble strewn all over and several inches of standing water, and I could see smoke pouring from the building. There were people grouped about and someone yelled down to me that they needed some way to move some wounded personnel. I raced back the other way toward the 8th corridor, where the medical dispensary was located. Between the 7th and 8th corridors, I encountered two medics with an electric cart and a rolling cabinet of medical supplies. We were able to drag the cabinet all the way to the wounded personnel, stopping twice, so I could clear a path through the water and rubble, which included a severed male left foot. I left them there (Corridor 5) and ran back to find another cart and anything else I thought might be needed. I returned and drove past them in another cart as they removed wounded personnel to North Parking, but the rubble and the water made it difficult to get much closer to the 4th corridor. I think it was at that point that I saw CDR Craig Powell and LT Olin Sell (fellow SEALs from N751). I was immensely proud that they had also stayed around to help. SEAL training, I guess. At that time, we were all told that another plane was inbound and to return to the center courtyard.

There were 75-100 people in the courtyard, mostly those who had refused to leave, several who got stuck there and decided to stay. We formed into litter teams, five personnel to each stretcher (four to carry and one to stabilize a wounded person) and were given masks with charcoal filters (helpful with all the smoke) and rubber gloves (pretty useless). I found CDR Spence again and some other familiar faces from the Army and Air Force. After it was decided that another plane was not inbound, we returned to the breezeway between the 5th and 6th corridors and stood by to help. The firefighters did not allow us to move any closer to 4th corridor. An individual whose cell phone had e-mail capability read off news items that were extremely unsettling, but later proved untrue: a car bomb had gone off at the State Dept, a bomb had exploded at the Old Executive Office Building adjacent to the White House, and so on. Again it was passed that another plane was inbound and again we returned to center courtyard.

By this time, a significant number of additional firefighters had arrived both from Arlington County and DC. Three of our litter teams were directed to follow a group of firefighters back out to the breezeway and stand by with our litters. The firemen entered the smoking building where they could, but I overheard one say that it was “an inferno on the lower floors.” After quite awhile with nobody being pulled from the building, we were told to return to the courtyard and stand by for any additional casualties. As each group of firefighters returned to the courtyard, exhausted from the heat and smoke, I could see the frustration of what must have been an overwhelming task, and the disappointment of not finding any survivors.

We stayed in the courtyard and helped any way we could. Around noon, a small group of us assisted the FBI in locating pieces of the aircraft that had been blown all the way into the courtyard, the largest a dinner tray-sized piece of the fuselage. All pieces were tagged as evidence and mapped. The dispensary and the café in the courtyard were pillaged, mostly for bottled water, soda and juice to keep everyone hydrated, as well as chips and pretzels to chew on.

At 1430 we were led by the Defense Protective Service through a tunnel between 1st and 2nd corridors and around the outside of the building to the proximity of the crash site. It was my first view of where the plane had impacted the building. We were told that the site would be turned over to an Army unit from Ft Myers at 1600, so we helped where we could until then. It was there that I again ran into LT Sell and CDR Powell. We watched a fire engine cherry picker rescue a female civilian worker from the 4th floor E Ring, above the crash site. It was the first and only person I saw rescued since that morning.

At 1645, we walked to my car in the South Parking lot. It took us twenty minutes to clear the checkpoints that had been set up, but we didn't care. I dropped CDR Powell and LT Sell off in Arlington and headed home in a daze. Fortunately, my brother Marc had spoken to some of my office mates that left the building in the morning, and at noon had notified my wife and family that I was safe. I later found out that the Navy Command Center, manned exclusively by N3/N5 personnel, was hit especially hard. Of 33 personnel in the NCC, only six escaped. Owing to my extended tour in the Pentagon, these were all acquaintances; some were close friends. One LT was badly burned and is still in a DC hospital in critical but stable condition. I ask your prayers for him and those lost.

I am proud of the way the military personnel and civilians that were in the Pentagon on 11 September reacted to this horrible act of terror and cowardice. The orderly exit of people from the building, the efficiency in accounting for people, the actions of those inside and outside that stayed to help - all these things contributed to a more than appropriate response to a sudden, tragic and senseless act.

GOD BLESS THE USA AND GOD BLESS THOSE IN THE NAVY AND IN NSW THAT ARE CALLED UPON TO FIGHT THE WAR ON TERROR.