

Report of the Events of 11 September 2001

As seen by

CDR Ronald William White, Jr

I arrived at the office at approximately 0715, intending to review my email and CIMS accounts for any new time- critical taskings, and then continue on to the POAC. I departed my desk at approximately 0810, advising two of the personnel in the office that I was going to the POAC. These were Ms. Marable and MAJ Deguzeman, I believe.

After changing into my PT gear and performing a warm-up and stretching routine, I walked into the Cardio Vascular machine room. I began working on an elliptical machine, and saw that everyone in the room was intently watching the CNN News report on the TV monitor. One WTC tower was furiously burning; the others in the room told me an aircraft had struck it. We all watched it and talked about it, certain that it was just a horrible accident. A short time later another aircraft flew into the second tower as we watched; there was now no doubt in the CV room that these aircraft strikes were intentional! Many crowded into the now hushed room, a few murmuring prayers or curses as we watched the buildings burn. I continued to exercise, and prayed for the people who were trapped or suffering.

A short time later we began to hear the POAC staff running through the spaces and screaming, "Get out!! GET OUT NOW!!! They've hit the Pentagon, GET OUT!!!" I grabbed my towel and joined the crowd exiting the POAC, per the directions shouted at us. Outside in North Parking, small knots of us from the POAC crowded around the few of us who had radios or had cars opened up with news reports playing on the radios. We could see intense smoke and some flame leaping from the opposite side of the Pentagon from where we were, and could see the FPS Police rushing personnel across the bridge between the POAC and the Pentagon building. A few of us asked the FPS officers nearby if we could go back inside to help our shipmates; we were ordered to stand fast. I knew that my office was in the area that appeared to have been hit, but I also knew that most of my Division was in San Diego at that time. Still, I was terribly concerned for the N75 and other personnel who might have been hurt or killed in the building.

I searched the growing crowds in the parking lot for any N75 or senior N7 personnel; finding none I returned to the parking lot area closest to the POAC. At that moment we clearly heard two detonations from the direction of the intensifying smoke and flame; I supposed these were sympathetic to whatever the initial blast was (it still was not clear that it was an aircraft vice a bomb of some sort). The police then began to order us to move towards the river, away from the building, saying that 'another aircraft was inbound'. (This was the aircraft that eventually went down in PA, I think) We now knew that it was an aircraft strike, like the WTC strikes, and all there began moving towards the far side of the parking lot and the river. I continued to scan the again moving crowds for anyone else from N75 as I jogged towards the bridge over the river, seeing nobody from our Division.

The crowds evacuated from the POAC and the Pentagon into North Parking were now widely dispersed. I spotted a USMC Lt. General standing in the shade alongside the road, with a few of what seemed to be his staff. He was doing nothing at that time but watching the smoke and flames leap from the building, so I reported to him, identifying myself as CDR White of N75, under Maj Gen Whitlow. I asked if there were any orders; he smiled and said he had none, and knew of none for any of us. He then began speaking with what I assumed to be his staff, and I excused myself. I saw a couple of US Army Colonels trying to organize a group closer to the building; walking up I heard that they were asking for volunteers to form up ad hoc litter teams. Taking a last look around for any N75 personnel, I volunteered.

I was assigned by one of the Col.'s to Litter Team Five (of ten Teams, at that point), with three other personnel from different offices and Divisions. None of us in Team Five were in uniform; none of us in any Team had any equipment or really knew what we were about to walk into. One member of our team identified himself as a nurse, the Col. assigned him as our Team leader. We formed up into a small company, each rank a litter team, and marched through the now very tight police and fire dept line towards the building. We came to a halt on the road opposite the site of the aircraft impact, and received plastic litters from one of the fire companies that had arrived. We were moved off the road onto the grassy area of the heliport, approximately 75 yards from the now roaring flames. We were ordered to stand by, waiting for the signal from the fire fighters to come forward. Side by side the various teams began a course joking about how 'well done' our exposed arms- and my exposed legs- would be by nightfall, but not one person moved out of line. I heard quite a bit of quiet prayer for those trapped inside.

At that time a Medical Officer from the Pentagon De Lorenzo Clinic began moving through our ranks, pulling out any and all who had any sort of formal medical training. He said he needed them to organize an on-site emergency medical reception facility. My litter team lost two members to this effort; other teams lost more or less. In any case, the litter teams were reorganized, this time by an Air Force Col. I was now assigned to Litter Team 'Green', for the odd lime color of our litter. A Catholic Priest appeared from somewhere, in full (civilian) vestments. He was assigned to lead our team.

At this point a military Chaplain began moving through the Litter Team companies, trying to prepare us for what we might see. He spoke of the respect that we owed the dead as well as the living, and the care we should take not to further injure or step on anyone in trying to get to somebody else, regardless of how thoroughly dead they appeared to us. He cautioned us to stay hydrated, and reassured us that it was perfectly OK to emotionally react to what we would see, so long as we kept our heads and continued doing what needed to be done.

A Medical Service Corps CAPT then appeared, to ask again if any of us had any formal medical training. He appeared disgusted by the negative response, then asked if any of us had ever been a litter team member before. None of us had. He disappeared; a short time later some other Medical Service Corps officers appeared and started giving us on-the-spot training on how to get a person on the litter from different starting positions, how to lift, verbal signals to your team, etc. We were again told that it was expected and perfectly ok for us to excuse ourselves and be sick, but please don't leave our Teams without a replacement. It seemed to me the Teams were getting more nervous; and still the building furiously burned.

The Navy Exchange convenience mart between the Pentagon and the Annex opened its doors and cleared its shelves; a small mountain of drinks and food began building up between the road and us. We drank a lot and ate a little, not willing to leave our ranks or weigh ourselves down. After a few hours of waiting in the sun we were ordered to the far side of the road, to the tree line beside the Arlington National Cemetery, for some shade. It was at that time I spotted CDR Milkovich, working around the medical tents that had been pitched on the road. I told my team I had spotted a member of my office, and ran down to him. He told me he had seen some others of our Division, and that he had been grabbed to help due to his medical training. I told him where I could be found; he told me he had been ordered to go home and rest, and return at 1800 for the 'night shift'. After a little more water and rest in the shade, my team returned to the line.

After more hours of 'standing by', a Lt. General from the Third Infantry walked up to us and informed us that a company from the Old Guard had arrived. He said that company, and more troops en route, would relieve us (and similar litter teams in the interior courtyard, where I later learned LT Sell, a SEAL from my Division, was employed) in place. He thanked us profusely, saying he didn't know who all we were or where we were from, but that when the SECDEF and other VIPs had earlier arrived on scene for a quick tour, he had invited their attention to us. He told us he used us as an example of 'what this Department is made of' when he was speaking with the VIPs. He said he knew that we never were allowed to actually 'do' anything, but that we had stood ready for many hours to charge into that burning building to get our buddies out. "It's not what you did, but what you were ready to do, at your own peril", he said, that was so meaningful. He then ordered us all home; saying he was certain our families would be thrilled to see us.

My team, litter team 'Green', surrendered our litter to the newly arrived soldiers and we shook hands all around, one by one departing. On the way out of the area I discovered several previously unknown pieces of debris obviously from the aircraft, as well as a single lady's shoe- from a passenger? I pointed these out to the FPS police; they marked them with little ribbon flags and radioed their locations to the FBI teams that were trying to collect all such material.

I am very thankful to report that my only injuries from these events were a moderately severe sunburn and a skinned wrist (from a clumsy fall over some shattered cement).

My wife and daughters met me at the Residence Inn across the Interstate Highway from the Pentagon. As soon as she drove up, my daughters dove out of the van and wrapped me in very tight and very teary hugs. We all made it home at approximately 1900.

I am:

CDR Ronald William White, Jr.

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I was attached to OPNAV N75 at the time of the attack, serving a 364-day ADSW.

I am now released from that period of active duty, presently attached to the Navy and Marine Corps Reserve Center, Washington.