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The Last Watch

By Richard Lei
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"Flash precedence message."

It's something big, Navy Cmdr. David Radi thought when those words reached his highly classified station in the Pentagon. He turned to his watch officer.

"What have you got?" Radi asked. "What do we know?"

For Jonas Panik, a young lieutenant who'd been on the job only a few weeks, this was one of those white-hot moments that gave the office its nickname: the Crucible. Things were blowing up and it was his job to find out why. The Pentagon brass were waiting.

Was this an act of war? An accident? What about terrorism?

Radi, a veteran intelligence officer, hadn't known Panik long, but he trusted the kid to get answers. Find the contacts in Bahrain. Pick up the gray-line phone to the CIA. Reach out to Joint Staff sources.

As dawn broke in Washington that day -- Oct. 12, 2000 -- Panik raced to assemble reports about an explosion 7,300 miles away, in the harbor of Aden, Yemen. The blast nearly sank the USS Cole as it refueled. A small skiff loaded with explosives had pulled alongside, a white fiberglass craft that blended in with the garbage scows arcing in the harbor. Unsuspecting American sailors returned waves of greeting from the men on board.

Now the billion-dollar destroyer was listing dangerously with a 40-foot hole in its side. Several American sailors were dead or missing.

Panik quickly pinned down that the explosion originated outside the warship. He fed facts to his commander, Radi, who then briefed the admiral in charge of naval intelligence and the chief of naval operations. This briefing would supply information to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, then move onward to the National Security Council, which would advise President Clinton, who would tighten his jaw and announce later that day:

"If, as it now appears, this was an act of terrorism, it was a despicable and cowardly act."

Once again, a handful of self-described "intel geeks" working behind triple-locked doors came through. But the public would never hear of the role they played in this crisis -- or in any other, for that matter. Only those with the highest security clearances, above top secret, are privy to their work. Even in the acronym-happy Pentagon, the term CNO-IP is obscure.

It stands for Chief of Naval Operations Intelligence Plot. Its small, typically young staff keeps a round-the-clock watch on geopolitical developments and military movements that could threaten American forces. "We keep an eye on the bad guys," those assigned to the unit would tell outsiders, batting away further questions.

That morning, the Cole bombing alerted the watch-standers, briefers, analysts and technicians of the CNO-IP to a new threat, an unpredictable bad guy who didn't require armies or navies to wreak havoc. Officials did not know yet that the al Qaeda network had carried out the Cole suicide attack. Or that a terrorist named Osama bin Laden would eventually go before a video camera, wearing a traditional Yemeni dagger, and recite one of his poems to honor the attackers: "And in Aden, they charged and destroyed a destroyer that fearsome people fear, one that evokes horror when it docks and when it sails."

Thinking about the Cole bombing, Dave Radi couldn't shake a bad feeling. In nearly 20 years in the Navy, he'd never known anybody to put terrorism at the top of the agenda. Al Qaeda wasn't even on his scope until the Cole. Now protecting sailors against such attacks had to become a priority. Fast.

"They caught us with our drawers down," he told his crew. The terrorists would strike again, he knew, and in this new war, the young men and women of the CNO-IP would have to become the sentries. They were on the front line. It was their job to peer into the darkness.

"My friend" . . . "A devoted family man" . . . "A true leader" . . . "Full of life and love" . . . "Dedicated patriots" . . . "They were all young" . . . "May God bless all of them" . . .

The admiral spoke of courage, commanders wept, colleagues recited tributes and the bugler played taps. Mourners consoled each other and later nibbled cookies over red, white and blue napkins.

It could have been any one of the scores of memorial services held after the Sept. 11 attack on the Pentagon, but no reporters were supposed to know about this one. Only later was a videotape of the ceremony stamped "unclassified." It revealed just a sliver of the story of the CNO-IP, which had lost its entire chain of command.

"Our magnificent seven," Rear Adm. Richard Porterfield, the director of naval intelligence, called the dead. On an October morning outside the gleaming headquarters of the National Maritime Intelligence Center in Suitland, they were mourned as typical members of the Navy intel community: officer and enlisted, civilian employee and contractor, male and female, black and white, Jew and Christian.

They stood watch on freedom's walls, said the commander of the Office of Naval Intelligence, Capt. Tom Bortmes. Their mission: "To recognize the night's terrors for what they are and, when necessary, raise the alarm."

When hijacked American Airlines Flight 77 hit the Pentagon at more than 500 mph, slamming through concrete and corridors, spewing fuel and fire, it destroyed much of the Navy Command Center. It smashed directly into the offices of the CNO-IP.

For the watchers, terror had arrived, right before their eyes.

Steven was home! And he'd brought his cool Navy "jammies" -- his flight suit -- and this shiny black helmet that looked like something out of "Star Wars." Darin just had to try on that helmet. Please . . .

Sure, his big brother said. Try it on, put the visor down. Steven Pontell, training to be a naval aviator in late 1980s, soaked in Darin's admiration. The brothers were nine years apart, but shared a dream of becoming "Top Gun" fighter pilots.

Their father turned the basement rec room into a hangout for Steven and his fellow midshipmen from nearby Annapolis -- complete with beer signs, a pool table and pinball machines. As Darin Pontell came of age, he told everyone he wanted to be a Navy flier, too, just like Steven.

At his bar mitzvah, Darin couldn't help idolizing his big brother, dressed in crisp Navy whites. It was hard to tell who was more excited after Steven graduated in 1988 and later called to say he'd qualified to fly jets.

On an October day in 1989, Navy casualty assistance officers arrived at the door of the Pontells' home in Columbia. They came to inform Marilyn and Gary Pontell that 23-year-old Steven had died attempting to land a T-2C Buckeye trainer jet on an aircraft carrier off the Florida coast. The plane smashed into the USS Lexington's central tower and cartwheeled in flames. Four others were killed. Though coming in "too low and too slow," Ensign Pontell failed to heed radio transmissions to abort. It was his first attempt at a carrier landing.

When the reporters came later, 14-year-old Darin tried not to cry as he told them that he'd always wanted to become a pilot, too. Until that day.

The Pontells created a shrine to Steven on one of the rec room's wood-paneled walls. They proudly displayed commendations, medals and mementos from his brief career.

Darin never really gave up his goal. In 1994 he earned appointment to Annapolis. After being disqualified from pilot training because of asthma, he decided the next best thing was to become an intelligence officer. He would help keep the pilots informed -- and safe. When he deployed to the carrier USS Eisenhower, he hung out with the Top Gun guys, grilling them about their aircraft and missions over Iraq, living vicariously.

The pilots assigned Darin a call sign: "Mini-Me," a reference to his diminutive height. Darin, 5 feet 5, was honored.

After he wrapped up that tour, he married Devora Wolk, a friend since sixth grade, when they competed for the best marks. They never dated until she reached law school and he was finishing up at the academy. At their wedding last March he wore his own crisp whites and spoke of his hero.

"Just so you know," he told guests, "the sword that was used in the cake-cutting was my brother's sword, Steven's sword. And we needed to have him here in spirit."

Within a month he was off to the Pentagon to train to be a briefer in the CNO-IP. His parents were grateful. He told them how secure the unit was, a locked compartment within a locked compartment.

What could be safer?

"Hey, Jackie."

Angie Houtz heard that chipper voice and had to grin. What was it with Cmdr. Radi and the "Jackie" thing? He'd gotten her first name wrong a couple times when they met years ago, and they decided to let it stick. The in-joke quickly spread: Angie became "Jackie," never mind any confusion it caused.

In Navy culture, a nickname meant they'd claimed her -- a 26-year-old civilian analyst -- as one of their own. Houtz, a petite brunette with warm brown eyes, didn't wear the uniform, and she'd never served at sea, but even senior officers accepted her as a shipmate.

And now Radi, her ex-boss, was welcoming Jackie back to the Pentagon in the fall of 2000, after the Cole bombing. The CNO-IP could use her quick mind, her patient willingness to train newcomers, and her growing expertise in assessing developments in the Middle East.

Houtz had worked those crazy IP hours for a year, as a watch-stander, before transferring to an analyst's slot at the Office of Naval Intelligence in Suitland. She didn't hesitate to return. The IP might be a pressure cooker, but she bonded easily with the other twenty-somethings there. While Washington snoozed, she and her friends tracked the crisis du jour in Iraq, Indonesia, China, Russia, Chechnya -- learning things they could share only with each other.

Houtz and her colleagues lived with secrets and worries they were forbidden by national security law to discuss even with their parents or spouses. In the small Southern Maryland town of La Plata, where Houtz grew up, her mother and stepfather learned not to ask about Angie's work.

She never imagined ending up at the Pentagon. She earned an English degree at the University of Maryland's Baltimore County campus. She loved the water, but never thought about the Navy until a friend from church told her about internships at the Office of Naval Intelligence.

Brilliant futures were forged in the CNO-IP. Adm. Bobby Ray Inman, later deputy CIA director, served there; so did Sen. Richard Lugar (R-Ind.). Radi, who stood the Intelligence Plot watch in his twenties, later moved to

the White House Situation Room. He knew what to look for in IP leaders: an aggressive curiosity about everything happening in the world.

"You need to be a mile wide and a little more than an inch deep," Radi, a trim and charismatic officer, liked to say. He saw a remarkable career ahead for Angela Houtz.

Colleagues noticed that she always wore two things: an engaging smile and a cross of sapphires on a gold necklace. But she wasn't the type who pushed salvation on you. She quietly raised donations for Thanksgiving baskets. She tutored and babysat for poor kids. She coordinated her church's program for the homeless, driving the van to deliver meals every other Thursday in downtown Washington.

Out dancing with her IP friends, Houtz was a typical single: "Work hard, play hard," as she put it. She craved her escapes to Jamaica, where she could laze on the beach by day and move to the pulse of dancehall reggae at night.

In her apartment in Rockville, she posted inspirational Bible verses on her bedroom and bathroom mirrors. She jotted down an 11-point list to herself titled "Things I learned in CNO-IP."

"Always strive to be of service," she wrote. "Care about each other . . . Be loyal. Support your boss. Think ahead. Always give 100 percent."

What more could a commander ask? Eventually Radi would recommend Houtz as the senior day analyst at the Intelligence Plot, the third-ranking job in the 28-person unit. No one that young had ever held the post.

Houtz didn't immediately jump at the promotion. She prayed about it, then decided to take the job. She told a friend that God was leading her back to the Pentagon.

The code word for the operation was "Buttercup." It required a stealth insertion and extraction after midnight. It was spearheaded by Bill Dunn, a civilian watch stander newly arrived from Suitland, and another fresh-faced IP member, Lt. Darin Pontell.

The pair moved briskly through the Pentagon's hallways. Ahead was the target: a cadre of vending machines. One machine had eaten their dollar bills yet refused to disgorge their Ben & Jerry's ice cream bars. Which now hung suspended in the machine, taunting the two top-secret intelligence gatherers.

They secured a yardstick. They posted a Navy reservist in the hallway and instructed him to yell the code word should anyone approach. Pontell fed the machine another dollar. Dunn maneuvered with the stick until he liberated the ice cream.

They caught a glimpse of themselves in the plexiglass: Dark-haired Darin, 26, in his khaki uniform. And Dunn, 23, standing taller in his shirt and tie, his blond hair spiked upward in a modified crew cut. They laughed at the sight.

We're just kids, Dunn thought. Kids setting aside, for a moment, all the weight of the adult world.

Vince Tolbert stirred from sleep, reluctant to surrender the comfort of his bed and radiant warmth of his wife, Shari. It was way early, and just hitting the floor could be a vexation to a big man with bad knees.

The clock read 2:45 a.m. But at least at this time of morning, he had a clear shot up I-95 and 395 to the Pentagon.

He dressed quickly, and would punch in his cipher codes at the IP before 3:30, beginning a 12-hour shift.

It was a grueling schedule but Tolbert had requested the post. It sweetened his re{acute}sume{acute} and allowed him to get home early to watch the kids.

When leaving for her part-time job, Shari handed off the three of them to Vince: Anthony, not yet 2, their cannonball of a son; Amanda, 9; and Brittany, 7, who had cerebral palsy and used a wheelchair. The family lived in a cramped, 1,200-square-foot apartment in Lorton -- Vince set up the kids' computer in a dining room closet and his own workstation in the baby's room. They missed the home they'd purchased near Tampa, when Vince was stationed at the U.S. Central Command's Joint Intelligence Center.

Florida: That was a good time. They felt settled, having put down roots for nearly four years after criss-cross postings to Guam, California and Virginia. The girls had loved their school and friends.

Anthony was just five weeks old when the USS Tolbert headed north. It was the Navy way of life, and Shari understood. She just wished Vince could have more time for himself. He loved fiddling with electronic gear and parking himself in front of the widescreen Toshiba in the living room, which received all the sports in the cable universe.

He had met Shari, a tall, willowy volleyball player, when she was a high school senior. She was working the candy and ticket counters at a movie theater where he was manager.

"Big O," friends called Otis Vincent Tolbert Jr. when he was growing up in central California. A barrel-chested 265-pounder with huge biceps, Tolbert played for Fresno State as a running back and defensive end, leading his team one season in sacks. He said he hadn't gone pro because he wanted to be a Navy pilot like his father. Vince became an officer, but his football-battered knees disqualified him from flight.

Now, at 38, he was co-piloting the Intelligence Plot, supervising the watch and responsible for its morning "product": a one-page, two-sided classified document that distilled world and Navy events for the admirals.

Others would joke about how they worked in the most secure place on Earth, but the lieutenant commander took a stoic view: No one in the military was ever far from danger. Vince often told Shari he didn't see himself as an old man.

"Babe," he said, "I'd rather burn out than fade away."

In mid-August, people boxed up their office files and family photos. Finally. The CNO-IP was moving to renovated offices in the Navy Command Center, on the first floor of the D-Ring, on the Pentagon's west side.

By then Cmdr. Radi had moved up to an E-Ring office with a view of the Potomac, working for the vice chief of naval operations. The IP's new commander, Dan Shanower, 40, was a private, single man who liked to spin sea stories at gatherings, enjoyed mentoring younger officers, and adhered to the old Navy adage: "The only thing better than cold beer is free beer."

Securing brand-new space in the crumbling, rat-infested Pentagon was cause for celebration, but junior officers needed no particular reason to let off steam. On weekends they would rendezvous at restaurants, pubs and clubs.

Darin and Devora Pontell were regulars, as were Jonas Panik, Bill Dunn and Angie Houtz. Friends from the National Military Joint Intelligence Center, also located in the Pentagon, joined in. A dozen of them would hit the Tel Aviv cafe in Bethesda for Middle Eastern food. Then maybe they'd try a techno club in the District. Maybe even a country music place, though Angie couldn't stand country and western no matter what Jonas said.

Out in the clubs, they'd joke about those sorry souls back on the watch. Shifts rotated weekly: You'd get mornings one week, 6:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Then 2:30 to 10:30 p.m. the next. Then the overnight shift. Forget developing a sleep pattern.

Weekend shifts ran 12 hours. Standing those long watches in the Crucible, trying to discern any patterns or deviations that signaled a shift by the enemy -- you could never cry wolf, but you were expected to rouse a senior admiral at 4 a.m. if necessary -- you came to rely on your shipmates like brothers and sisters. The IP wasn't just your professional and social life. It was your family, too.

On Sept. 6, Angie Houtz turned 27 on a Navy frigate off Florida, during a week meant to familiarize her with at-sea operations. It was her first deployment. That weekend, celebrating her birthday with her mother, stepfather and other relatives in Ocean City, Angie announced that she now understood why people joined the Navy.

Her best friend, Stacey-Ann Baugh, caught up with her after work Monday, Sept. 10. "I've got your present," Baugh said over the phone, stifling a giggle. They always exchanged gag gifts. In the past Stacey had given her a pair of tawdry leopard-print hot pants and a hideous orange polka-dot bridesmaid dress.

Stacey sensed that her ex-roommate needed cheering up. They'd spent a week in Kingston, Jamaica, in August, visiting Stacey's family, and Angie seemed tired, stretched by work and church commitments. She fretted about her ability to do it all.

They said they'd see each other later that week. Then Stacey would give her a kitschy gift as well as a real one: a pair of gold earrings harboring tiny dolphins.

On Tuesday morning, Sept. 11, Angie awoke early -- she liked to reach the Pentagon by 5:30 to polish the morning briefing. Inspirational verses greeted her at the bathroom mirror. "You, O God, are my fortress, my loving God" -- Psalm 59.

And from the Book of Nehemiah: "I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down."

Information for the Sept. 11 briefing was, as usual, transferred from PowerPoint slides to pages in a black binder that could be set on a desktop and quick-flipped for the admirals. America's old Cold War foes -- the "red forces" marshaled by China and Russia -- still earned a mention, as did Iraq. Terrorism didn't have a color yet. There was no attack in the forecast.

True, ever since the bombing of the Cole, terrorism was more aggressively tracked in the IP. But it was never the unit's mission to send out spies and infiltrate cells. They watched for developments, sifted and prioritized reports, making sense of what others knew. From an office wall, a portrait of Gen. Colin Powell offered this maxim: "Tell me what you know, tell me what you don't know, tell me what you think. Always distinguish which is which."

By now, Lt. Jonas Panik, 26, was a master briefer, able to recite sources from memory in his booming voice -- never a bluffer, but capable of serving ham. Showmanship was part of the job. An affable behemoth who stood 6 feet 6, Panik marched through the Pentagon, making his early-morning rounds to brief the admirals.

He towered over his pal Darin Pontell, the UI, or under-instruction briefer. Lt. Pontell had not yet flown solo and proved himself to the bigwigs. He was due to fly solo that week -- perhaps as soon as the next day.

At 8:30, the morning videoconference between the IP and Office of Naval Intelligence in Suitland got underway. Contractor Jerry Moran, 39, a former Navy combat photographer, tweaked the broadcast's production values with the expertise of a Hollywood lighting technician. In fact he'd worked on several movies, including "Contact" and "Along Came a Spider." To Moran fell the daunting task of making sure all the newly installed high-tech equipment operated glitch-free. But he was a perfectionist everyone could count on.

From a room away, Brady Howell studied the scene with an eager smile. Howell, a 26-year-old from Idaho, had arrived at the IP just a couple of weeks ago. After earning his master's degree in public administration from Syracuse University, he was serving as a prestigious Presidential Management Intern assigned to the Navy. A fan of Tom Clancy and James Bond spycraft, Howell was training on the overnight shift, and getting to know Bill, Darin, Angie and the others.

After the briefers brought the Pentagon's admirals up to speed, the commanders and analysts at Suitland watched their video screens to get the fill. Around 8:50 they saw Dan Shanower enter the conference room and tap a participant on the shoulder. CNN was reporting . . .

The video conference quickly wrapped up. Time for the "hotwash" -- the cleanup session to review the morning's briefing.

Tolbert, Houtz, Panik, Pontell and Howell followed Shanower into his office and convened around a small table. On a normal morning, they would critique their own performance, chew on the admirals' requests for more information, and start planning the next day's briefing. Within moments, events in New York would overtake everything.

After the second hijacked plane hit the World Trade Center, Radi picked up the phone and speed-dialed the Intel Plot, about 100 yards from his E-Ring office. Tolbert answered.

"What do we know? Is anybody claiming responsibility?"

"We're working it, Commander," Tolbert said.

Soon, Radi heard fragmentary reports: Another hijacked plane was headed toward Washington. They were scrambling fighter jets.

Radi went back to the phone. Then he heard a loud thud. He looked out the window. Debris rocketed past. Chunks of concrete.

Drinking coffee and editing a speech, Bobby Charles squinted against the morning sunlight blazing through the airliner's window. The lawyer was heading to Phoenix to address a law enforcement group.

The captain came on, sounding incredulous. Every plane in the sky has just been ordered to land. The plane would have to put down at Wichita, 122 miles away.

Charles had worked in the White House and as staff director of a House national security subcommittee. He knew the grounding command had to come from the very top.

The president has declared a state of national emergency, the captain confirmed as the plane pulled to the gate. There'd been terrorist attacks on New York and Washington.

Charles rushed to the rental car corrals, got a car and started driving east. Two years earlier, at the unlikely age of 38, he had entered the Naval Reserve. His security clearances quickly landed him at the Intelligence Plot. He knew exactly where he had to go now.

Somewhere in Ohio, his cell phone service kicked in again and a fellow reservist reached him. Several CNO-IP staffers were missing, probably dead. Could he take shifts at the Pentagon?

"Absolutely," Charles said. "Count me in."

After being blown from their chairs and watch stations, about half a dozen survivors got up and headed toward the wall of flame that sealed off Shanower's office. The hotwash -- it was at ground zero.

"We tried to get to them, Commander," Lt. Megan Humbert, 28, said later, when Radi found her and a few others, dazed in the parking lot. "We tried." Her uniform was seared. Other sailors' white jumpers were scorched black.

Amid the chaos, many Pentagon workers fled the disaster zone, heading home. But Radi and other senior staff immediately went to work reconstituting the intelligence unit at the nearby Navy Annex.

Humbert, that day's watch officer, and other young survivors relocated to the annex. Nobody had relieved them. They were still on watch.

"Where'd I put my cell phone? Where is it?" Marilyn Pontell, Darin's mother, grew frantic looking for her purse. Her Nokia was chiming "Take Me Out to the Ball Game."

Marilyn would be sick if she missed that call. Maybe it was news about her son. Maybe it was Darin himself.

Two days later, Marilyn and Gary Pontell still hoped that their youngest boy had been spared. Gathered at Darin and Devora's apartment in Gaithersburg on Thursday afternoon, they could barely process the idea that he was dead. There were still wedding presents piled in a corner on the carpet.

Navy officials gave garbled reports: One person said someone who looked like Darin walked from the scene. Somebody else claimed he was working far away, in the A-Ring. And officials said they couldn't find his Acura Integra in the Pentagon lot . . .

The Nokia sang again, then silence. Too late. When she finally got to the phone, Marilyn scrolled through the menu. One missed call: 1:57 p.m. No message. But the incoming number was clearly identified. It was Darin's.

My God, maybe he was alive.

For five more days, they waited. On Sept. 18, the Navy informed the Pontells that Darin's body had been positively identified. His cell phone was never returned to the family. They presume it was never found. Perhaps the flip-phone had somehow dialed Marilyn's number when the rubble shifted. But . . . Didn't all cell phones have to be turned off upon entry to the CNO-IP?

The FBI offered a one-word explanation for that call: "anomaly."

The Pontells still had Michael, their middle son, a 32-year-old who'd never considered the military. They had grandkids.

They had a letter from the president, medals and mementos from Darin's Navy career, pictures and news clippings. They'd make a memorial wall for him now, down in the rec room, with a large flag mounted in a way that made it seem to be waving.

Visitors coming down the stairs would see Steven's wall first, and they could linger there, before moving on to Darin's memorial to learn about the little brother who followed him.

One hundred twenty-five Pentagon workers were killed that day. Forty-two died in the Navy Command Center. Seven served in the Intelligence Plot.

Four months later, those who survived when the plane plowed into the CNO-IP still decline to publicly discuss it. Navy officials say Dan Shanower, Vince Tolbert, Angie Houtz, Jonas Panik, Darin Pontell and Brady Howell were last seen together in Cmdr. Shanower's office. Jerry Moran was at his nearby technical post.

Bill Dunn was on the other side of the Pentagon when the plane hit. At around 8:45 he left the videoconference to attend a meeting. Today he works at the IP as a day analyst.

Reservist Bobby Charles went on active duty for two months in the Intelligence Plot. He helped to rebuild the unit, which has added five watch-standers devoted to terrorism. His father and grandfather were both Navy men, buried at Arlington. He felt he'd honored them, and his fallen shipmates.

The movers came to Shari Tolbert's apartment in December, a few days after what would have been the couple's 12th anniversary. They took down from the wall a Japanese screen depicting Mount Fuji that Vince had bought overseas. The children watched as Elmo, Barbie and other toys were packed and beds disassembled.

Cmdr. Tom Barry, a Navy casualty assistance officer, took Anthony to play in the park and fetched cheeseburgers and french fries for lunch. The cable man came to disconnect service.

A widow at 32, Shari Tolbert was headed to Tampa, which felt more like home.

Julie and Joe Shonteres -- Angie Houtz's mother and stepfather -- felt lucky to get back a body to bury, and they never expected what came later. It arrived in a sealed plastic bag bearing an FBI number, a reminder that what happened was not an accident, it was murder. Inside was her cross. Jewelers refurbished the necklace's gold and sapphires. Angie's younger sister, Jamie, wore the cross when she took her wedding vows in November.

It satisfied all the requirements of the old bridal superstition: Something old. Something new. Something borrowed. Something blue.

When Adm. Porterfield visited, they gave him a Post-it note from Angie's mirror. It bore a quotation from an Old Testament leader who set about rebuilding a great wall to protect Jerusalem, who put watchers on his wall, and refused to leave it.

The admiral said that quote would appear on a memorial at the Suitland intelligence facility. But that place is not open to the public. When Julie and Joe Shonteres ordered Angie's gravestone recently, they told the

carvers to put the same quote on it, Nehemiah 6:3. "I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down."

The Sept. 11 terrorist attack on the Pentagon devastated the super-secret naval Intelligence Plot, whose staff tracked threats against the United States. Casualties included, clockwise from bottom left, intern Brady Howell, Cmdr. Dan Shanower, contractor Jerry Moran, Lt. Jonas Panik, analyst Angie Houtz, Lt. Darin Pontell and Lt. Cmdr. Vince Tolbert.

Gary and Marilyn Pontell hold a portrait of their three sons, from left, Michael, Darin and Steven. Darin was 12 when Steven graduated from the Naval Academy in 1988. An aviator, Steven died the following year while attempting his first landing on an aircraft carrier. Darin died Sept. 11.Shari Tolbert, the widow of Lt. Cmdr. Vince Tolbert, amid moving boxes in their Lorton apartment. In December, Shari moved with their three children back to Tampa, where they still owned a home.Naval reservist Bobby Charles spent two months on active duty in the Intelligence Plot, helping it to rebuild.Angie Houtz's hallmarks were her smile and sapphire cross. Above, a grief-stricken Cmdr. David Radi after eulogizing Houtz at a memorial service the evening before her funeral in La Plata. A civilian, Houtz worked for Radi when he commanded the Intelligence Plot.