

MEMORANDUM

October 2, 2001

From: LCDR Michael C. Agresti, USN (Ret)

To: Naval Historical Center and Naval Reserve Navy Combat Documentation Detachment 206

Subj: EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT OF PENTAGON ATTACK AND SUBSEQUENT EVENTS

1. This memorandum is written in response to the e-mail solicitation of this date for eyewitness accounts of the September 11, 2001 attack on the Pentagon and the search, rescue, and recovery efforts.
2. I was not present at the Pentagon during the attack but I was at the Washington Navy Yard. Also, as Commander of the Arlington, Virginia Post 3150 of the Veterans of Foreign Wars I was a volunteer assisting in the manning of Salvation Army mobile canteens within the security perimeter commencing on September 12.
3. Having been in combat before, I was accustomed to the chaos and crush of activity in the hours when live rescues were still considered possible amidst the continuing fire suppression efforts. My observances include both pros and cons and are provided below:

The Pros:

- **The People:** Heroic and tireless efforts by all rescue and relief workers, including volunteers. We went days with just cat naps.
- **Coordination with local officials and public agencies:** I believe that Arlington County did a superb job in meeting the needs of the myriad agencies, organizations, and stakeholders present and in need of support. Similarly, I believe that Metro responded well by extending their hours of operation.
- **Family Assistance Center:** Bravo Zulu for the rapid and effective establishment of the Family Assistance Center. One caveat: There were telephone numbers disseminated for those seeking information on victims. There was no number for those wishing to provide services (e.g., we provided several hundred pre-paid VFW Operation *Uplink* telephone cards to the Center but did so simply by stopping by. There was no number to coordinate their delivery.)

The Cons:

- **Information Dissemination:** While not at the Pentagon during the attacks, I was at the Washington Navy Yard. Information dissemination at the Yard was non-existent. When the radio stations announced, at approximately 1030 on September 11,th that the Federal Government was shutting down many workers tried to leave only to find all of the gates secured. This created gridlock within the Yard and exacerbated the angst among the work force. Word was never passed officially regarding our status and without evacuation/contingency plans or guidance, many were left to wait out the next potential hit in their offices. I spent considerable time trying to calm co-workers. When the gates were opened for egress at approximately noon, that word was also passed informally by word of mouth. **Solution:** Establish contingency plans that account for civilian personnel and establish notification procedures/capabilities.

- **Sailors with knives:** Working alongside several Sailor volunteers, I was amazed to learn that I was the only individual with a knife (and that was just a 1” pen knife) of any kind with which to cut banding, shrink wrap, lines, or performing other necessary chores for which an edged tool was required. When I expressed my surprise - since Sailors of my day *always* had a blade - I was informed that Navy Uniform Regulations restrict knives for Sailors in uniform to Leatherman ® tools and the junior Sailors expressed that they cannot afford these \$40.00 instruments. **Solution:** I suggest that this decision be reviewed and rescinded since I doubt whoever made it ever UNREP-ed a destroyer in rough weather. While attacks on the Pentagon are rare, in time of need, a quick opening knife is a life-saver especially at sea where running tackle can kill a man in the blink of an eye. A Leatherman-type tool that must be opened, have the proper implement selected, closed, and only then utilized does not fit that bill.

- **Logistics in general:** Contingencies must be established and reinforced periodically. No organization was prepared logistically but many performed admirably when faced with challenges. Despite this, the following general issues remain:

- **Communication:** The inability to communicate the need to replenish food, drink, and ice in a timely manner lead to temporary shortages. **Solution:** Emergency coordinators should have radios and (pre-programmed) telephones to communicate with an established cadre of support agencies.

- **Who’s on First:** I never learned who was in charge of the scene. Anyone with a radio was fair game for any request, whether within his/her purview or not. **Solution:** Much as we color code flight deck crew in accordance with their respective duties, so should on-scene coordinators be garbed so that information can be passed to appropriate individuals only once.

- **Peacetime Mentality in a Wartime Environment:** When the weather turned cold over the first weekend many of the assisting troops were caught unprepared. Donations of sweatshirts and other warmer clothing went unutilized because commanders refused to permit non-military clothing to be worn - including by those simply catching a few winks of much needed rest. **Solution:** In time of crisis, one makes do with what one has, therefore reward those who show initiative. Those who would rather conform at a parade ground standard than care for troops should be weeded out. It won’t happen but I’ve been fighting this for the better part of 25 years.

- **It was the Best of Times, It was the Worst of Times:** Despite the general sense of camaraderie among the tenants of “Camp Unity,” the desires of some organizations to take credit for the efforts of all, or refusal to share supplies when received on-site was disquieting. This same organization never responded to the VFW’s offer to assist, which is why we ended up helping the Salvation Army instead. **Solution:** Probably none.

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