

## ***A Voice in the Darkness***

by

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11 September 2001

We were all excited. This was the Capstone course for the PMC XIII class. We had all made it through the challenging curriculum and now were looking forward to this week in Washington, D.C. A week in which we would visit the Pentagon, White House, Capitol Hill, and Old Executive Office Building. We were scheduled to receive briefings from high level officials in the DoD, the Navy, and the Federal government.

Mr. Dave Reece, the former Executive Director at Crane, is the "tour guide" for the Capstone course. Additionally, he briefed us on Monday about the Department of Defense structure and organization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Monday was the "Think Tank" day with experts from various organizations like the Woodrow Wilson Center briefing us. The most memorable briefing was the last one of the day when Charlie Nemfacus, who was the highest ranking career civilian in the Navy and recently retired, gave us some straight talk about the state of the military. During the Q & A session, one of the students asked him what it would take for the American people to understand and support the transformation of the defense establishment so America would have the weaponry, training, and strategic focus needed to move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Mr. Nemfacus said, and I paraphrase: When it hurts enough for the average American to support what is needed to transform the military. Was that prophetic?

Tuesday morning greeted us with clear, blue skies, mild temperatures, and a late bus. We were supposed to be on the Navy bus no later than 8:15 a.m. and going to our first briefing in the Pentagon.

Mr. Reece was across the street from the hotel pacing and talking into his cell phone. Finally, they asked us to cross the street as the Navy bus would be there shortly. After an uneventful ride to the Pentagon, we were processed through security easily as we had been pre-approved.

While I was waiting for everyone to clear security, I looked at pictures on the wall of Secretary Rumsfeld,

Secretary of the Navy Gordon England, the other service secretaries, and other distinguished members of the Department of Defense establishment. Finally, we were on our way, escorted by a Pentagon guide, to our conference room, 5E490. Undersecretary of the Navy Susan Livingstone, and her aide, a Navy Captain, entered the conference room within a minute or so after we arrived.

Undersecretary Livingstone asked if we had heard the news from New York. We hadn't, so she asked the Captain to inform us of what had happened. We were stunned. She told us that she would not be able to give us the full briefing as she had a meeting to attend and she asked the Captain to signal her when her time was up.

She briefed us about areas of strategic importance. She stated, "no one can articulate the whole in the DoD right now." That the "DoD had an old maze and had been trying to build a new maze, but we don't want a maze at all." The DoD is "constrained by OMB, GAO, IG, etc." Statements like; "'We can't help ourselves' doesn't mean we give up. Keep working instead of complaining." One of the Crane students asked her what was one positive element of the DoD right now. She started to answer, but the Captain must have signaled her because she held up her hand and raised her index finger and said, "just one more minute", then she said "one of the good things about the DoD right now is the dedication of the people...Boom!"

The entire room shook at the same time we heard a tremendous boom. Shook is too mild a word. It was jarred beyond anything we could imagine. Immediately, smoke came pouring out of the light fixtures.

We all stood and gathered our things listening to her say not to panic and she led the way out the door. Smoke was filling the corridors rapidly. We started down a corridor, then some of the Pentagon employees said we needed to go back and go down the stairs. I am sure this was their emergency exit plan. We stopped and turned. One of the Crane employees opened the door to the stairs and said we could not go out that way so we turned again and started down the same corridor we had first taken.

I had a Kleenex in my hand that I had used to pat my face with when we first entered the conference room. All that walking works up a sweat. I guess I had it in my left hand

during the briefing while I took notes with my right hand. How it got in my right hand and up covering my nose and mouth I don't really remember, but that's what I did. Others were using their jackets, their ties, or their hands to cover their noses and mouths to keep the smoke from being inhaled into their lungs.

The smoke was becoming denser and darker. As we started down the corridor, before the smoke totally engulfed us, I saw light fixtures on the floor, pieces of ceiling and wall in the corridor, and light fixtures hanging from the ceiling. Just then I heard a female voice say, "Watch the step. There's a step here." I looked down where I could still see the floor although the smoke was around my head and face and body, and I saw a step down. It was larger than an average step and, as I stepped down, I thought that I didn't remember a step up as we walked into the conference room.

Almost immediately, I felt heat emanating from the walls on the right. At the same time, the smoke became so dense you could not see. It was burning my throat and it crossed my mind that we might not get out of there. We didn't know if we were walking into the blast area or not.

I prayed quietly aloud, "Dear God, please help us, please help us, please help us." At that point, where the smoke was so thick that you didn't see anything or anybody, a voice came through the darkness.

"Keep coming. Keep coming. Follow my voice and keep coming. Find the wall and let your hand move along it or find someone's hand and hold onto it, but keep coming. There is a light here. Keep coming towards my voice."

I reached out my hands. I couldn't feel anything. I couldn't see my hands. I moved to my right and reached for the wall and my hand touched it. But it didn't feel right. It felt rough and uneven. I moved away from the wall and listened to the voice and moved sightlessly towards it.

I knew that if we stayed in that smoke for very long we would soon be overcome. I leaned forward to try and get lower hoping that the smoke would be less dense and finally, it began to thin. I would have crawled on my hands and knees if I had to, to get out. I don't know how long we were in that awful darkness, but it seemed like a

long time. As we moved on, the smoke cleared and we were in a place where there was little or no smoke. The voice said to run so we began running. Actually, it was more like jogging or trotting. I saw Mr. Reece near me and we ran down three escalators, then slowed to a fast walk and finally got out of the building. As we moved, we looked back and could see some of the Crane folks. Others were up ahead.

As soon as we cleared the building, Mr. Reece and Mr. Jim Buher, IU SPEA, called each of our names to be sure we were all out and with the group. Miraculously we were.

Mr. Duane Embree, Mr. Reece, and Mr. Buher discussed how to get the group back to the hotel. The decision was made that we would have to walk and if we could find taxis along the way, we would try to get to the hotel in taxis. Jim said he thought we would have better luck finding a taxi if we walked to the Marriott Hotel about three blocks away. We did, and miraculously, a taxi was there unloading its passengers. Three of the students and myself were put in the taxi because we were not sure we could walk the miles back to the hotel.

Over two hours later, after sitting in traffic jams, we reached the hotel. The walkers had arrived just before us. We had been in the gridlock in downtown Washington and were on Pennsylvania Avenue about a half-block from the White House for a long time. We could look the other direction and see the Capitol Building.

There were no horns honking; no people shouting; only silence and the wailing of emergency vehicles. At one point, a restaurant brought out sandwiches on a tray and handed them out free.

Mr. Reece and Mr. Buher arranged for a special lunch to be served in the mezzanine area away from the regular hotel guests. We had about 30 minutes before lunch so everyone headed to their rooms and telephones to contact family. While the food was being brought in, Mr. Reece stated that the agenda for the rest of the week was not feasible. We would not be able to go back to the Pentagon, or go to the White House, the Capitol Building, or the Old Executive Office Building. He said Jim Buher was on the phone right then trying to see what type of transportation could be arranged to get us back to Indiana. Shortly, Jim came up

and said he was able to charter a Star of Indiana bus which was deadheading as he spoke to Washington and would pick us up at the hotel around 10:00 a.m. the next morning. That was met with a round of applause.

Reflecting on what happened, I have no doubt that the "voice in the darkness" in the "hellish" nightmare we found ourselves in, saved our lives. We all realized how blessed we were to have gotten out when so many didn't. The plane impacted on the first and second floors beneath us. The corridor that we walked out on traversed the impact site and less than 30 minutes later collapsed. The "step" in the corridor was where the floor had split and dropped. Others saw where the corridor was separating from the walls.

We all had scratchy throats and my sense of smell took a while to return, but no one was injured.

I am very proud to be a part of this group of Crane employees. Everyone moved through that corridor with dignity, courage, and determination. No one panicked. No one screamed or yelled. No one pushed or shoved. We all know that, but for the grace of God, we could be one of those people who didn't make it out. We had "walked through the valley of the shadow of death" and lived to tell about it.

For the prayers and concern we have received from our fellow Crane associates, we are deeply touched and immensely grateful. I think all of us are proud to be Americans. Proud to be a part of the DoD and the Navy. Proud to be Crane employees.

Our class feels a deep sense of gratitude towards Mr. Dave Reece, Mr. Jim Buher, and Mr. Duane Embree, who shouldered the responsibility for our group. They experienced the trauma of that terrorist attack and calmly and decisively took action to bring us back to Indiana. I, for one will be eternally grateful.

Those who perpetuated this violence against America will not deter us from doing our jobs and from representing the Navy and Crane as patriotic Americans.

God Bless America.