

Key Pentagon Official Hailed For 9/11 Role

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By [Fredrick Kunkle](#)

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After a frenzied day spent working the telephones to set up a center for victims' relatives after the attack on the Pentagon, the time came for Meg Falk to listen.

A woman whose sister was missing was among the first to arrive at the family assistance center the morning after Sept. 11, even as people were still setting it up in an Arlington hotel. The woman stood before Falk wanting answers that no one could give.

"She was just so distraught because she could not locate her sister, who she had seen probably 10 to 15 minutes before the plane slammed into the Pentagon," said Mary Margaret "Meg" Falk, director of the Office of Family Policy for the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense. "I just comforted her. I just sat down with her and let her tell me what had happened and did the best I could in terms of listening."

Falk also tried to impart a simple message, she said: "We're going to walk through this together."

Normally a policy-oriented person, Falk had taken it upon herself in the chaos of Sept. 11 to get the center organized. For her service in setting up and operating the center, Falk, 58, was honored yesterday with a \$25,000 public service award. The Women in Government awards -- sponsored by Good Housekeeping Magazine, the Council for Excellence in Government and the Center of American Women and Politics -- single out women for their innovation and dedication to public service.

Nine other women were also honored yesterday at a luncheon at the Library of Congress, including Sens. Barbara A. Mikulski (D-Md.) and Olympia J. Snowe (R-Maine).

The practice of setting up family aid centers has become well-established after such military disasters as the attack on the USS Cole in 2000. But until Sept. 11, Pentagon officials such as Falk had not themselves been the targets of violence.

That morning, the former schoolteacher was in a staff meeting at the Pentagon when hijacked American Airlines Flight 77 slammed into the building, killing 189 people.

"All of a sudden, there was a big thud, and the building shook," she said. After the order to evacuate was given, she told co-workers to call loved ones first to let them know that they were all right. Then she turned to the task of organizing a family assistance center.

With part of the Pentagon in flames, she and her staff found desks at a military command center in Arlington and began calling key people up and down the chain of command. They worked with county officials to select an appropriate site, politely declining the offer of a vacant elementary school -- not enough parking, Falk thought -- in favor of the Sheraton Crystal City Hotel. They rented computers, arranged for telephone lines and coordinated public affairs staff members as they worked with media and shielded the families' privacy.

Falk said she also asked that a top military official be given command of the center, someone with enough rank to cut through the red tape and have credibility with the victims' relatives. The Defense Department gave her Lt. Gen. John A. Van Alstyne, deputy assistant secretary of defense for military personnel policy.

In the days that followed, representatives of government agencies, religious organizations, nonprofit groups and others called or showed up bearing food, clothing and offers of help. Personnel from the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Social Security Administration walked families through the process of obtaining government benefits. American Red Cross officials wrote checks to cover financial emergencies.

"I guess the best way to describe how the center grew was, it was very organic," Falk said. Likewise, a spontaneous memorial of family photographs, prayers and flowers was set up.

At one point, even the Pentagon's graphic designers were called in to help. "One of the important things that the families really wanted was to know exactly where their family member was when that plane attacked the Pentagon," Falk said. So graphic artists created a floor-by-floor map showing the location of the offices and commands that were struck by the plane.

The center closed on Oct. 12. Chief Warrant Officer Craig Sincock, whose wife, Cheryle, died in the attack, praised Falk for her work at the center but faulted the government -- not Falk -- for not following up more with the families after the center closed.

"Meg Falk is the one who was responsible, who made it happen. For the first 30 days, that place was the lifeblood for the families," he said. "She was there every day."

Falk said: "I just really planted the seed the afternoon of 9/11. The way it grew and the way . . . needs emerged from the families, there would be these caring and competent people to make it happen at the center."

Mary Margaret "Meg" Falk, head of Pentagon's Office of Family Policy, has won a public service award.

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