

The September 11 Attacks: 25 Years Later

Reflections from U.S. Generals and Admirals



“A great people has been moved to defend a great nation. These acts shattered steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve.”

— President George W. Bush

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Note from JINSA

To commemorate the 25th anniversary of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, JINSA asked retired senior U.S. military officers to reflect on what that tragic day meant to them, what it meant for our country, and what it meant for our world. JINSA thanks those flag officers for their contributions to this project, and thanks all members of the United States armed forces for their service.

JINSA also expresses its gratitude and admiration for the countless heroes of September 11, 2001. Americans from very different backgrounds united that day in courage and self-sacrifice. Firefighters, police officers and other first responders—against all odds—saved numerous lives. Their mental toughness gave the country strength.

Americans also fought back. Above quiet Shanksville, Pennsylvania, the passengers of Flight 93 prevented the unthinkable—the hijacked airplane was 20 minutes from the Capitol Building and White House. Their heroic sacrifice brought the country closer together and will inspire future generations of Americans. We are forever grateful.



September 11, 2001: The Day the World Changed

That Tuesday morning, 19 al-Qaeda terrorists hijacked four American commercial flights destined for the West Coast and intentionally crashed them.

Two planes—American Airlines Flight 11 and United Airlines Flight 175—departed from Boston and Flight 11 struck New York City’s World Trade Center North Tower at 8:46 am and Flight 175 the South Tower at 9:03 am, resulting in the collapse of both towers.

A third plane, American Airlines Flight 77, leaving from Dulles International Airport in Virginia, crashed into the Pentagon at 9:37 am, and the final plane, United Airlines Flight 93, departing from Newark, N.J., crashed in a field in Shanksville, Pa., at 10:03 am, after passengers stormed the cockpit and tried to subdue the hijackers.

In the space of less than 90 minutes ... the world changed.

Excerpt From “How 9/11 Changed the World,” Boston University Today Magazine, September 2021



Al-Qaeda Attacks the Centers of U.S. Economic and Military Power



Al-Qaeda's Planned Attack on the U.S. Federal Government in Washington Foiled by Flight 93's Heroic Passengers and Crew



A common field one day. A field of honor forever.

"Shortly after terrorists flew airplanes into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York and into the Pentagon in Virginia, the 40 passengers and crew members on United Airlines Flight 93 fought a battle in the sky over Pennsylvania. These 40 heroes voted and decided to fight back, thwarting a planned attack on our nation's capital."

-Flight 93 Memorial, U.S. National Park Service





President Bush, on September 14, 2001, stands on the World Trade Center's rubble and declares, "the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon." This prompts chants of "USA" from the crowd.



President Bush speaks with his national security team on September 20. That night, he addresses the American people, telling them the United States will be waging a Global War on Terror in response to the 9/11 attacks.

U.S. Generals and Admirals’ Reflections on September 11, 2001

Gen James Amos, USMC (ret.)
Former Commandant, U.S. Marine Corps
JINSA Generals and Admirals Program Participant



I was a Brigadier General in the Marine Corps stationed at the Pentagon at the time of the attack. I was the Deputy at Marine Aviation and my office was on the 4th floor, E Ring. I was on leave starting Monday September 10th for the remainder of the week.

LtGen Bill “Spider” Nyland was the head of Aviation at the time. I recall us discussing on Monday evening that I’d be home the rest of the week, as I was doing remodeling in my house.

On September 11, I was standing in my kitchen when my cell phone rang. It was my brother-in-law asking if my TV was on. I switched it on and saw the aftermath of the first airplane striking New York City. I couldn’t believe it, and I wondered how this could have mistakenly happened. Then, we saw the second airplane hit the Twin Towers, and we knew it wasn’t an accident. The news said two other airplanes had been hijacked, and the assumption was they were headed to D.C.

Around 9:45AM I heard numerous sirens by my house, which was 7 miles from the Pentagon and next to I-395, a main thoroughfare. I ran out and saw a constant stream of police cars, fire trucks, and ambulances. Right then, I knew something terrible had happened. Eventually the news showed footage of Flight 77 slamming into the Pentagon—in the same area where my office was located.

Cell service had shut down. I was unable to call my office, or anyone else for that matter. I only knew a plane had hit our side of the building, and I had no way to talk to anyone. I tried, but I simply could not get to the Pentagon. The roads were locked down—no civilian traffic was allowed inside the Beltway. Eventually, I became worried this was a well-coordinated attack on our government and country.

Around mid-morning, I heard jets flying low over our area. They were National Guard F-16s that had been scrambled. The armed Fighter cover was to remain overhead, 24/7, for many weeks to come. For over a month, military helicopters flew low each night, armed, with the doors open. It was a surreal time.

Around 7:00PM, I was able to reach General Nyland, my boss, to learn what exactly had happened. The left side of the Pentagon—if you're facing the building from the outside—collapsed and slid into the burning inferno. Our offices were burned and destroyed. My office was three windows down from the wreckage. Fortunately, no one in Marine Aviation was lost that day. I came to the Pentagon on Wednesday the 12th only to be directed to return home.

There are many stories of genuine heroism from that day. Assistant Secretary of the Navy Susan Livingston was in a meeting on the 5th floor, in an enclosed room with no windows, with about 20 people. Following the impact, she and her team faced pitch black conditions and heavy toxic smoke. She led her team as they crawled around, looking for an exit. They couldn't find one. Just when it seemed that all was lost, they heard, "if you hear my voice, crawl to it!" They did just that and were greeted by a gentleman who led them to safety.

Every Saturday morning for many months after September 11, I drove up to the hill by the old Navy Annex area that overlooked the Pentagon. It became a spiritual experience for my family. No one spoke; we just sat and watched the workers clearing the rubble.

I remember the Secretary of Defense and the President stating publicly the building would be completely rebuilt and reopened 12 months later, and it was! I was there with Secretary Rumsfeld the day we reopened. It was 12 months to the day.

Regarding 9/11, my friend said he will never forgive nor forget... and neither will I.

ADM Paul Zukunft, USCG (ret.)

Former Commandant, U.S. Coast Guard
JINSA Abraham Accords Policy Project Advisor



There are two events in my lifetime where I can state unequivocally that I was in a state of shock and disbelief. The first was November 22, 1963, when my third grade teacher stepped out of our classroom and returned to announce, “President Kennedy is dead.” Our young minds could not grasp how this iconic image could be no more.

Fast forward 38 years, and I experienced that second episode of shock and disbelief. I had just returned from a deployment as captain of a Coast Guard high endurance cutter homeported in Honolulu, Hawaii when I received a call at home at 4:30AM from the officer of the deck, who stated, “The tower has been hit by an aircraft.” My immediate thought was that Aloha Tower, which is in proximity to the flight path at Honolulu International Airport, had been struck. When I turned on the news, the aftershock hit me.

I told my son, who was 10 years old at the time, that the world we had known up until now has been changed forever. And it has. Our nation is no longer insulated by surrounding oceans and the sanctuary among our like-minded neighbors, Canada and Mexico. Up until 9/11, our national defense strategy had been focused exclusively upon peer competitors and was ill-prepared to confront asymmetrical threats from non-state actors and proxies whose behavior is not influenced by deterrence and kinetic actions.

25 years later, we are witness to an emboldened Russia engaged in a no-win conflict with Ukraine, the erosion of trust towards the United States among our NATO allies and a missile barrage from Iran that is holding the global economy hostage. So, harken back to those words I shared with my son 25 years ago. The world as we had known it has, indeed, changed forever. And it is a world that is currently not breaking out in tranquility.

Gen Philip Breedlove, USAF (ret.)

Former Commander, U.S. European Command
JINSA Eastern Mediterranean Policy Project Advisor



During the 9/11 attacks, I was inside the Pentagon, serving as the senior military assistant to the Secretary of the Air Force. I saw live on TV the second airplane crash into the Twin Towers and I knew we were under attack. I advised Secretary of the Air Force [SECAF], Dr. Jim Roche, to head to the bunker below the Pentagon. The Chief of Staff of the Air Force [CSAF], Gen. John Jumper, and [then-Colonel] Jack Egginton, then the Executive Officer to the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, came to our office. The SECAF and CSAF began considering our actions.

At that time, we felt the building shake. I hit the button that triggers an evacuation of senior personnel in case of a nuclear attack. The Secretary of the Air Force, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, [then-Colonel] Egginton and I headed to the bunker. There was smoke everywhere. From the end of the hall, someone screamed, “We’ve got wounded!” Every uniformed person in that hall turned around and ran towards them. I was really proud of that. But it was a tough day. It was eight hours before I could call my family and tell them I was alive, and 36 hours before I went home.

9/11 was a wake-up call. We’re a country with oceans on each side, and we had not done our homework to understand how the threat vectors had changed. The enemy used our lack of understanding to their advantage. We’re at another point where we need to reimagine the threat and prepare ourselves. Think of Operation Spiderweb, where Ukraine penetrated Russia with trucks full of drones that sprang out and struck air bases. Also, we have an acquisition system where it often takes seven years to produce weapon systems. Ukraine’s acquisition cycle is days or weeks.

We still have a lot to learn about fighting terrorism. We have developed a very efficient way to militarily take on terrorists. But we must get better at understanding how to not only win the kinetic part of the fight, but also how to win the peace.

ADM Timothy Keating, USN (ret.)

*Former Commander, U.S. Northern Command/North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD); Former Commander, U.S. Pacific Command
JINSA Generals and Admirals Program Participant*



Tuesday morning of September 11, 2001, brought a clear blue sky. I entered the Pentagon around 6:30AM and proceeded briefly to my office. I was a three-star Admiral, the Head of Operations for the Chief of Naval Operations. Every morning our staff would gather in the Navy Command Center, and this morning was no exception. Nearly 50 personnel, officers, chiefs, sailors, civilians, and contractors would run through a long list of issues our Navy was addressing that day around the world.

Around 8:45AM, someone noticed that a plane had apparently crashed into one of New York City's Twin Towers. Several minutes thereafter, we watched on the TV screens as the second plane hit the other tower. We discussed possible reasons for these disasters as we continued to conduct our daily briefing. We were on watch, and our watch stations were in our Command Center. At 9:30, I left the brief to meet, in a separate room, with the man appointed to be our next Ambassador to Yemen. My wife and I had orders to Bahrain and would be leaving in a few months.

Around 9:35AM, the Pentagon shook violently and there was a loud, low roar. It was immediately apparent that a plane had crashed into our building. I attempted to return to our Command Center, but the fire and smoke made that impossible. Several of us gathered in my office and decided to head to a more secure location that offered classified communications. We drove through traffic to the Washington Navy Yard, across the Potomac, as we watched the column of thick black smoke climb into the sky. We lost 42 of our shipmates that morning, all of whom had been in the Pentagon Command Center as we were conducting our normal briefing. They died standing the watch. I remember them every day.

GEN James Thurman, USA (ret.)

*Former Commander, U.S. Forces Korea/R.O.K.-U.S. Combined Forces Command
JINSA Generals and Admirals Program Participant*



On September 11, 2001, I was serving as the Commanding General of the U.S. Army National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, responsible for preparing the force for the next fight. I was en route to a meeting in Atlanta, Georgia when the attacks occurred — a moment that instantly shifted the trajectory of my career and the Army’s mission. What had been a period focused on modernization, training cycles, and readiness transformed overnight into the opening chapter of a new kind of war.

9/11 defined the next thirteen years of my service. It demanded a rapid reorientation of the NTC toward counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and full-spectrum operations. The attacks forced us to rethink how we trained soldiers, how we built leaders, and how we prepared units for deployments that were unlike anything the Army had faced in decades. My role became not just to command, but to help reshape the Army’s understanding of an enemy without borders, a battlefield without front lines, and a conflict that required adaptability at every echelon.

Professionally, it meant constant operational tempo, repeated deployments, and sustained responsibility for preparing America’s sons and daughters for combat. Personally, it meant carrying the weight of those decisions — knowing that every training rotation, every scenario, every standard we set had real consequences for soldiers heading into harm’s way.

The impact of 9/11 on my life was profound: it sharpened my sense of duty, deepened my commitment to the Army’s mission, and defined an era of service marked by urgency, transformation, and unwavering focus on preparing the force for a new and unforgiving fight.

GEN Charles Flynn, USA (ret.)
Former Commanding General, U.S. Army Pacific
JINSA Generals and Admirals Program Participant



On September 11, 2001, I was a brand-new lieutenant colonel serving on the Joint Deployable Training Team at U.S. Joint Forces Command. We had returned the previous Friday from Tampa, where we had participated in a joint exercise with U.S. Central Command. I had just arrived at work when the attacks began. We watched on television as the planes struck the World Trade Center. Two hours later, we were told to go home and await further instructions. I immediately began packing because I knew we would soon return to CENTCOM to help plan the military response.

Within 48 hours, we were on a flight back to Tampa, assisting with the initial planning for operations in Afghanistan. Nine months later, I assumed command of a battalion in the 82nd Airborne Division. In November and December 2002, we deployed as part of the early forces sent into Afghanistan.

The heroism of that day extended far beyond the first responders who ran toward danger. It was also reflected in the countless Americans who stepped forward afterward—military members, intelligence professionals, diplomats, law enforcement officers, and their families—prepared to serve and sacrifice.

September 11 changed the direction of my life and the remainder of my Army career. It shaped my family, my military experiences, and my journey in service to our Nation. Its lasting lesson is that freedom is never guaranteed. It must be defended by citizens who remember, remain vigilant, and are willing to serve something larger than themselves.

Gen Charles Wald, USAF (ret.)

Former Deputy Commander, U.S. European Command
JINSA Distinguished Fellow



I was in the Pentagon on 9/11. At the time, I was U.S. Central Command's Air Force Commander, and I was briefing [General] Buzz Moseley. We saw an airplane hit the World Trade Center on TV. It didn't dawn on us that it was a terrorist attack. Soon after, an airplane hit the Pentagon. They evacuated the building, and we went outside and saw the smoke billowing up. By that time, it was obvious this wasn't some accidental event. Yet there wasn't any panic. People were calm and professional. It's surreal when you think about it.

I had a team of 50 guys who were ready to go. On September 12, we flew to Saudi Arabia. America planned to retaliate against the Taliban because they were protecting Osama bin Laden. Working with General Tommy Franks, then-CENTCOM Commander, we got the mission planned by September 20.

Twelve days after the 9/11 attack, I personally briefed President Bush. At the end, he said, "Wald, this is your fight to fight. Do it as you see fit." That was the coolest thing I've ever heard. The first mission was to bomb Afghanistan, on October 7, 2001. We used six B-2 bombers, each carrying twenty 2,000-pound bombs. The bombs landed exactly on target. That was the longest-ever combat mission at the time. The Taliban was giving up by November. The counter-Taliban local ground forces, the Northern Alliance, those guys did great. They would ride around on horses with RPGs and do fantastic work.

Our response showed America's ability to strike anywhere in the world. We got command centers set up fast. We had airplanes coming and going, in and out of the Middle East. We were flying B-2 bombers for 44-hour missions. I mean, the fact we have the capability to do that is beyond belief. We were ready, and we showed that the U.S. military could respond in ways that made a difference.

VADM John Bird, USN (ret.)

Former Commander, U.S. Seventh Fleet
JINSA Iran Policy Project Advisor



Psychologists have a term called flashbulb memory. It describes significant events that are so powerful that, as the name implies, they implant a permanent image in your mind. 9/11 is the most vivid of my life's flashbulb memories. I was in the Pentagon on 9/11 and found myself in the middle of it.

It was a bright, sunny day in northern Virginia. On that morning, my team, which oversaw Central Asia for the Joint Staff, was meeting when we learned a plane had hit the Twin Towers. I thought that it must be a private airplane that had malfunctioned.

Then, within the next hour, the second airplane, an airliner, hit the towers which we all saw on the news. This was clearly a terrorist attack. I said, "Okay, guys, we're going to be very busy real soon." Soon after, the Pentagon got hit by a third airliner, which had taken off from Dulles Airport. Alarms started blaring and we evacuated.

We didn't know what was going to happen next. We were hearing reports of explosions around D.C., which turned out to be false. Secretary Rumsfeld was helping people, and Commander Kirk Lippold—who had commanded the USS *Cole* and experienced terrorism firsthand—was helping people, too.

The next day, I went back to the Pentagon, which was still full of smoke. Everyone was taking their previously full calendars and throwing them out. It was a new and different day, country, and world.

There was an incredible spirit of unification across the country. There were no arguments: this was a terrorist attack, and we needed to do something about it.

I was on the Joint Staff, and my directorate was South and Central Asia, which included Afghanistan. Nobody cared much about Afghanistan at the time. Then, 9/11 happened, and Afghanistan became a focus for everybody. For many days after 9/11, I went to the White House Situation Room daily, sometimes twice a day. We worked seven days a week.

I was very impressed with senior leadership. Rumsfeld was exceptionally capable. Richard Armitage was strong and brilliant in his leadership. Stephen Hadley had magnificent abilities in leading the NSC team. The people running the national security apparatus were smart, accomplished leaders doing their best to deal with big problems, which they did with aplomb.

The actions that we took, like going into Afghanistan, may have prevented other attacks against America. We need to reflect on that. The men and women that served during that time are great Americans whose sacrifice means so much. They are my heroes.

VADM Mark Fox, USN (ret.)

Former Commander, U.S. Fifth Fleet/U.S. Naval Forces Central Command

JINSA Iran Policy Project Advisor



On 9/11, I was Air Wing Commander on USS *Constellation*. I had assumed command about a month prior to September 11, 2001. We were going back to San Diego after a routine deployment.

We had docked at Pearl Harbor on September 7, 2001. I distinctly remember looking at the hulk of USS *Arizona*, which Japan destroyed on December 7, 1941. Several hundred Americans are entombed in that wrecked ship.

I remember thinking, “all those men went to bed the night before with complete ignorance of what was about to happen.” Then I thought, “I wonder if there’s something else coming that we have no idea about. I wonder what our blind spot is.” A few days later, we found out.

We were about 700 nautical miles east of Hawaii when we heard about the attack. It was around 4:00 A.M. local time. I turned on the TV and saw the shocking images of airplanes hitting the Twin Towers.

It was clear this was an act of war and would change everyone’s life. And it wasn’t abstract. I had a really close friend named Ken Waldie. I was on the swim team with him at the Naval Academy. He was on one of the flights that hit the World Trade Center. Another friend, Rear Admiral Wilson Flagg, was with his wife on the airplane that hit the Pentagon.

On September 14, 2001, I had a meeting in the Navy Annex, next to the Pentagon. It was very sobering to look down and see that gaping hole in the Pentagon. I knew that we’d respond with every bit of energy we could.

I led the opening strike of Operation Iraqi Freedom in March 2003. I flew in Operation Desert Storm in 1991, and this was a very different kind of fight. Most of the ordnance I expended in 1991 consisted of dumb bombs. In 2003, almost everything I dropped was a precision-guided munition. That was a major evolution in how our country fought wars.

September 11, 2001 changed the trajectory of our nation's history, in ways that are ongoing. I liked President Bush, and I worked in his administration as Director of the White House Military Office. But I always thought that the Global War on Terror was a poor label—terrorism is a tactic. It's a war against Islamist extremists. We should be forthcoming about that.

VADM Robert Harward, USN (ret.)

Former Deputy Commander, U.S. Central Command

JINSA Iran Policy Project Advisor



I was leading Naval Special Warfare Group 1 (NSWG-1) at the time of 9/11. I was responsible for all Navy SEALs on the West Coast who had responsibility for U.S. Central Command. 9/11 happened during my second week on the job. I got up at 5:00am PST to run and go to the gym.

While I was in the gym, the first plane hit. I went right to the command center. That afternoon, we got a call and were told to be ready to go to Afghanistan and hunt down the guys who attacked us. We finally hit the ground with the initial force—the Marines and the special forces—on September 29, 2001.

I just knew fate had dealt me this hand, and I knew exactly what we needed to do. I used to hitchhike in Afghanistan when I was growing up in neighboring Iran. I'd been to the Khyber Pass and Kabul. I stayed in Kandahar for a month, and I spent time in Herat. I hiked in the mountains. I knew the country. I built relationships with the locals, and that was predicated on my experience and understanding of the culture. I went into this thing as confident as anyone could be about what the mission was and how we could execute it.

Working with partners, that paid off in spades. I remember some folks questioning why we trained with the British special forces, or the New Zealand special forces, or the Canadians, or the Germans. Well, I could do six missions a night in Afghanistan with any of these entities because I already knew their tactics, techniques, planning, and communications. When we went into the fight, it was seamless, and it gave us an incredible capacity.

Let's look at U.S. foreign policy today, 25 years later. Our policies still don't fully account for our enemies' asymmetric approach. We should be very bold and very aggressive against the existential threats associated with radical Islam. That's the starting point. Then, one level up from that: do we have a stated objective for today's Cold War? What is our strategy to win it?

LTG Karen Gibson, USA (ret.)

Former Director for Intelligence, U.S. Central Command
JINSA Generals and Admirals Program Participant



I was an Army major stationed in South Korea on 9/11. Unlike most Americans, I did not experience the attacks as they unfolded. Because of the twelve-hour time difference, by the time I learned what had happened, the attacks had ended.

The images from New York were too horrific to comprehend. I'd never been to the city, and watching the endlessly repeated footage from Korea, the planes and flames did not seem real. Flight 93 was different: I still tear up thinking about the bravery of ordinary Americans who chose to take action and give their own lives in order to save others.

But the attack on the Pentagon hit my gut. My husband and I had served there, and our son had attended the Pentagon Day Care Center. I knew the building, its corridors, and the people who worked there. This was personal. That evening, I took my young children to an ecumenical memorial service on the Army base in Korea because I wanted them to understand that something consequential had happened; I wanted them to remember where they were on the day.

At the time, I believed 9/11 would mark a turning point in world history. In many ways, it did. It reshaped our government, our intelligence institutions, and our military priorities. For the next 20 years, it gave focus to my own career through deployments to Afghanistan, Iraq, and East Africa and years spent tracking terrorist threats to the United States.

What stays with me most, twenty-five years on, is not just the horror of the attacks, but the response: the courage of ordinary citizens, the service of countless Americans, and the allies who stood firmly beside us. September 11 exposed vulnerabilities, but it also revealed our capacity for courage, resolve, and common purpose.

LtGen John Jansen, USMC (ret.)

Former Commanding General, 3rd Marine Expeditionary Brigade, U.S. Marine Corps

JINSA Generals and Admirals Program Participant



I was an F/A-18 pilot and Executive Officer of Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 314 at Naval Air Station Fallon in Nevada starting workups for a deployment on aircraft carrier USS *Stennis*. Returning from a morning run, I was watching a network news story about an airplane that inexplicably flew into one of the Twin Towers in New York City in perfectly clear weather, when the live feed picked up a second airplane that flew straight into the other tower. We soon received reports about the attack on the Pentagon and about an airliner that crashed in a field in Pennsylvania.

Terror as a weapon had been deployed against the American homeland, opening a new front in generational attacks against the West and Western civilization. The next day, we launched the first combat air patrols over the Pacific Ocean in defense of the U.S. West Coast. Our pre-deployment training was accelerated and we departed Naval Air Station North Island on the *Stennis* in October 2001, arriving as the third aircraft carrier in the North Arabian Sea for combat operations over Afghanistan, where primary close air support was to U.S. Special Ops and three-letter operatives on the ground.

Acclaimed as heroes for defending the Nation – we were not. We were just doing our jobs.

The real heroes were Americans who engaged in amazing feats of courage. From FDNY firemen going above and beyond; to airline passengers fighting terrorists to deny their objectives; and Pentagon personnel pulling friends and colleagues to safety out of burning rubble – these were the true heroes. And our hearts still weep for the innocent Americans and others who lost their lives in the attacks that day. We must use these memories to recognize the real and present external threats to our Nation – and the need to defend America and Western civilization.

LtGen Sam Mundy, USMC (ret.)
Former Commander, U.S. Marine Corps Forces Central Command
JINSA Generals and Admirals Program Participant



I remember September 11, 2001, with a clarity that time has not diminished. I was a Marine lieutenant colonel who had just taken command of an infantry battalion when a member of my staff walked into my office and told me that a plane had just struck one of the World Trade Center towers in New York City.

Within minutes, we watched the unimaginable unfold. The second impact, the collapsing towers, the smoke, and the dawning realization that this was no accident, created an emphatic moment – as though history itself had suddenly shifted beneath our feet. We did not yet know how profoundly America and the world would be changed.

For me and so many others, September 11 soon became more than a date in history. Within a year and a half, I was leading Marines and sailors in combat in the Middle East. I experienced the pride of young Americans doing extraordinary things, alongside the profound pain of seeing good men wounded and killed.

Twenty-five years later, the enduring meaning of 9/11 is not simply that America was attacked. It is that ordinary people—civilians, firefighters, police officers, medical professionals, and members of our armed forces—rose to meet an extraordinary moment with courage, compassion, and sacrifice.

Looking back, I think we owe it to future generations to preserve the memory of that day. September 11, 2001, changed America forever. What we choose to remember—and what we teach future generations about that day—will help shape what America becomes.

LtGen Richard Natonski, USMC (ret.)
Former Commanding General, 1st Marine Division, U.S. Marine Corps
JINSA Hybrid Warfare Policy Project Advisor



On September 11, I was inside the Pentagon. The plane actually hit the section of the Pentagon where my office was located (B Ring) but did not penetrate that far.

I was in a meeting with some other generals around the corner when the plane hit. We felt the impact before we heard the sound.

We thought it was a car or truck bomb at first. After we did a head count and everyone was accounted for, the senior staff of Plans, Policies & Operations (PP&O) moved up the hill to the Navy Annex where the Marine Corps Command Center was located. We ended up spending months operating in the Annex until our section of the Pentagon was repaired.

A year and a half later I was in Kuwait waiting to invade Iraq.

LtGen Steven Rudder, USMC (ret.)

Former Commanding General, U.S. Marine Corps Forces, Pacific

JINSA Generals and Admirals Program Participant



On the morning of September 11th, I was a Squadron Commander and watched the Twin Towers be attacked and collapse. At the time, I was a Commanding Officer of HMLA-167 Light Attack Helicopter Squadron in Jacksonville, NC. HMLA-167 was an attack helicopter squadron comprised of Hueys and Cobras. As we assembled in the Squadron Ready Room, our pilots and enlisted leaders watched the events unfold. Emotions ranged from disbelief to eventual anger as it became clear this was an attack.

Without order, our maintenance Marines instinctively began preparing aircraft for war. No one told them to do this. It was as if they knew the future. Their instincts proved correct. The Marine Light Attack community went to war and stayed in a high deployment cycle for many years.

Looking back, I remember the resilience of the Marines and all of our servicemembers. I also remember the drive and motivation of the American people to seek revenge against those that attacked America.

We must always remember that the enemies' objective for the attack on 9/11 has not gone away. We must stay vigilant and remember there are those that will not sleep until they destroy our freedom and way of life.

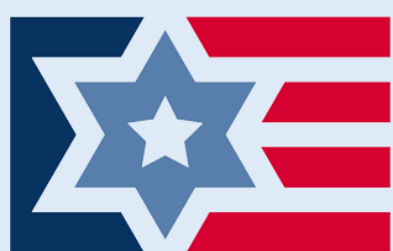
Lt Gen Thomas Trask, USAF (ret.)
Former Vice Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command
JINSA Hybrid Warfare Policy Project Advisor



On 9/11, I had recently been assigned to the Joint Staff Special Ops Division in the Pentagon. I had only been there a few weeks. On that morning, my wife and I were driving to the port in Baltimore to pick up our car which had been shipped back from Italy. Listening to the radio, we heard the weird report of an aircraft crashing into the first tower, but when the second tower was hit, I knew immediately that this was an attack. As we arrived at the port, my pager went off, and I went in to call the office. They asked how soon I could get back. Before we completed the paperwork, we saw the Pentagon get hit on TV. I called the office and was told to get to my house and that they were evacuating. The highway from Baltimore to DC immediately shut down and it took 6 hours to drive through Maryland back down to Burke, Virginia.

I turned on the TV as soon as I got home. About 30 minutes later, I got a call from a Gunnery Sergeant in the National Military Command Center who told me to report to work at 2100 that evening for the night shift. I said, “Gunny, don’t you realize the building is on fire?” He told me all he knew was I was supposed to report to work.

I normally took the Metro in, but it wasn’t running, so I drove up I-395 toward the Pentagon, surprised that it was actually open. When I arrived, the entrances to the parking lot were all blocked by police. I pulled up holding my badge out the window as they all pulled out their weapons. There were no other cars on the road. I said I need to get into the Pentagon, and they said, “Sir, don’t you realize the building is on fire?” I said, “All I know is I’m supposed to get to the military command center.” They were so excited that the Pentagon was still functioning, that the military was fighting back, they immediately moved the cars and gave me an escort directly to the River Entrance to get me in. I became the nightshift guy for the next three months.



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