

Actual Account of Fire-Fighter Alan Wallace

On the morning of September 11, 2001, I was assigned to the Heliport Station at the Pentagon. I was assigned there the day before as well. I should have been assigned to the Pentagon fire station all that week.

Fort Myer firefighters were taking a week-long class on Air Field Firefighting, given at the classrooms Building 219. Mark Skipper, Dennis Young and I had already had the training. Mike Thayer, John Pine and Ronnie Willett also had had the training. Thayer, Pine and Willett were scheduled off on 9/11. Chief George Thompson was off because his wife was ill.

Mark Skipper, Dennis Young and I were the 3 crew members assigned to the Pentagon fire station on the morning of 9/11. We arrived there about 0730. The fire station was new and we had only been using it since January or February 2001. We also had a new crash truck assigned there, an Emergency One Titan 3000. It carries 1,500 gallons of water and 200 gallons of 3% foam. Our first helicopter flight was around 10 am. But we were expecting Pres. George W. Bush to land in Marine One around 12 noon, returning from Jacksonville, Florida. (He had actually left from the Pentagon the day before.) Needless to say, neither flight arrived at the Pentagon that day because of the terrorist attacks.

Mark, Dennis, and I had our turn-out gear either on the crash truck or in the station. About 0830 I decided to pull the crash truck outside of the fire station and place it in a position more accessible to the heliport landing site. The truck was then parked perpendicular to the Pentagon, with the rear of the truck 15-20 feet from the west wall of the Pentagon, and the truck facing west, towards the heliport pad. The right side of the truck was approximately 30 feet from the fire station's apparatus door opening. (I forgot to mention the Ford Van we normally use for transport between Fort Myer and the Pentagon. It is a 15 passenger vehicle which was parked west of the fire station facing north, with its rear about 10 feet north of the apparatus end of the fire station and approximately 6 feet from the side of the fire station.)

The fire station is approximately 75 feet long, 35 feet wide and 16 feet tall. The flight control tower sits above the fire station. There were two other individuals at the heliport site: Sean Berger (U.S. Army Personnel) and Jackie Kidd, both active duty Army. As I said, we were expecting Pres. Bush about noon, which would be a Code One Standby. In such situations, one of the problems I see at the heliport is that there are too many people there. Plus there are many vehicles, including Secret Service, Pentagon SWAT, U.S. Park Police, D.C. cops on motorcycles, and the two Presidential limousines. And some of these vehicles even park in front of the fire station apparatus door, blocking the fire truck from exiting the building! That is why I wanted the crash truck out of the station and parked in a good location, for easy access to the Heliport in the case of an emergency.

After checking out the fire truck, eating a bowl of cornflakes, and cleaning the station and apparatus area, I sat in my favorite chair in the apparatus area to read a book about opera. About 0900 Mark and Dennis were inside the fire station in the day room. Mark came out to tell me that an airplane had just crashed into the World Trade Center. I then got up and went into the day room to watch the television coverage from New York City. While we three were watching, a second aircraft struck the second tower. I think we watched the TV for about 10 minutes or so.

I then went back outside. I was soon joined by Mark. We both began to work around the crash truck and were talking about the events in New York. About 0920, Chief Charlie Campbell called the Pentagon fire station to inform us of the attacks on the WTC in New York. He actually talked to all three of us: first Dennis, then me and then Skip. He wanted to be sure we were aware of the WTC disaster and that it was definitely a terrorist attack. He wanted to be sure we were aware of everything going on around the fire station. He also said Washington D.C. could very well be a target and if that happened, our fire truck could be dispatched to an incident.

Let me say this. After the NYC attack, I began to have "second thoughts" about having the fire truck parked where it was. Would it be better for the time being to return it to the fire station until around 1100 or so? But I decided not to move it.

Mark and I continued to mess around the fire truck. The last minute or two before the plane hit the Pentagon, Mark and I were working in the right rear compartment where the foam metering valves are located. Mark told me how, if you had to, you could get as much as 50% foam solution out of the roof turret and discharges. We laughed about cheating the government out of some foam! Mark and I then walked toward the right front corner of the truck. We were side-by-side, always within an arm's reach of each other. We had walked past the right front corner of the crash truck (Foam 161) and were maybe 10-15 feet in front of the truck when I looked up toward my left side. I saw a large frame commercial airliner crossing Washington Blvd, heading towards the west side of the Pentagon! The plane had two big engines, appeared to be in level flight, and was approximately 25 feet off the ground, and about 200 YARDS from our location. I later said the plane approached the Pentagon at about a 45 degree angle but later drawings showed it was closer to 60 degrees. The airplane appeared to be a Boeing 757 or an Air Bus 320 - white, with blue and orange stripes. Mark later recalled the plane was silver and even identified that it was American Airlines.

So many people think Mark and I watched the plane hit the building. We did NOT. We only saw it approach for an instant, I would estimate not longer than half a second. Others didn't understand why we didn't hear it sooner. We did not hear it until right after we saw it. I estimate that the plane hit the building only 1/2 a second after we saw it.

What I am saying is, immediately after we saw it we heard the noise, the engines, I'm sure. I described that as a terrible noise - loud, scary, and horrible.

At the time we saw the plane, I said "LET'S GO!" and Mark and I ran away from the area. I turned and ran to my right, going north. (I do not remember which way Mark went, since I did not see him until I crawled out from under the Ford Van.)

As I recall, I had several clear thoughts and feelings as I was running:

- 1) the noise from the engines of the airplane
- 2) awareness that now WE are being attacked
- 3) planning to run until I catch on fire, then maybe dive to the ground and then figure out what to do
- 4) hearing the sound of the plane crashing into the Pentagon, which I later described as a "crunch"
- 5) sensation of a lot of pressure
- 6) feeling very, very hot very quickly
- 7) "we're certainly not going to bum up!"

Later that morning when I began to look at the distances of everything from the fire truck, I thought the plane hit the building 200 feet south of the front of the fire truck. I had only apparently run about 20 feet when the plane hit the building. I ran another 30 feet or so until I felt I was on fire. I thought I had done everything I could do for myself. I decided to get down below the fire and fireball. So I dove face first to the blacktop. At this time, it just happened that I was right beside the left rear tire of the Ford van. (I presume that the debris from the Pentagon and airplane was being propelled away from the impact site.) I immediately crawled very quickly under the van for cover and safety. At this time, I noticed a lot of heat and decided to crawl to the end of the van. Very soon the heat was unbearable and I decided to get out from under the van and get farther away from the impact site. It was then that I saw Mark Skipper to my left - out in the field 50-75 feet away. He was standing, looking back to the impact site and seemed to be swinging his arms. I immediately ran over to him to ask if he was OK. He said he was, and then said "I'm glad you saw that airplane!" I said "get your gear on - we have a lot of work to do; I'm going to the fire truck."

It was probably at this time that I first noticed the damage to the Pentagon and the crash truck. A lot of smoke was in the sky above the Pentagon. The rear of the crash truck was on fire with a large blaze. But most noticeable was that everything around the fire truck on the ground was on fire. Also the west side of the Pentagon was on fire, from the first to the fifth (top) floor.

I ran about 30 yards back to the damaged crash truck, stepping carefully, not to slip on the burning debris covering the ground. I arrived at the right cab door, opened it and climbed in. I grabbed the radio and put the head set on, then jumped over the radios into

the driver's seat. I immediately pushed the 2 engine start buttons and the engine started, to my amazement. I thought if I could pull the fire truck away from the Pentagon and put it in a left turn, I could direct the roof turret nozzle into the impact site using the foam and water on board the truck. I then pushed off the emergency brake and pulled the transmission selector into the drive range and tramped on the accelerator (I still couldn't believe the engine had started.) However, the accelerator would not make the engine run any faster and the truck would not move. (I later found out from Mark then whenever I tramped on the accelerator, the flames on the back of the truck would flare up.) The window in the left door was open and I had left the right cab door open as I entered the truck. There was a lot of smoke coming up along the left side of the truck, and blowing through this open window and filling the cab with smoke, as well as exiting the right door. There was a fire in the left side of the driver's seat back. That must have produced a lot of the smoke in the cab as well. At some point when I was in the cab, I looked to my right and saw Dennis Young walking through the apparatus area, so I knew he was OK. At another point, I called Fort Myer Fire Dispatch on the fire radio and gave the following message:

"Foam 61, Fort Myer: we have had a commercial airliner crash into the west side of the Pentagon at the heliport, Washington Blvd. side. We are OK with minor injuries. Aircraft was a Boeing 757 or Air Bus 320." It also seemed like I mumbled something else before I removed the head set, shut off the truck engine and began to egress the vehicle. The fire station was to my right and I noticed it was trashed and there was burning material inside the apparatus area. I see Mark outside the right cab door signaling me to shut off the engine.

{NOTE: I feel I had the fire truck engine running in 20 seconds after the plane hit the building. This time included running, crawling, checking on Mark and running back to the burning crash truck.}

Just as I was about to get out of the wrecked truck, someone appeared at the cab door asking for a breathing apparatus. He may have been a Pentagon cop. So I handed him one of the S.C.B.A.'s and then handed another one to Mark. Before getting out of the cab, I grabbed my helmet, radio, face piece (for my S.C.B.A.). I carried these items over to the rear of the van, an area I thought would be out of the traffic and easy to find later. Dennis was attempting to use a fire extinguisher on the truck. Mark was removing some of the EMS equipment from the truck. At this time, we all probably thought the truck would be consumed by the damaging fire.

At this point, I went into the fire station through the open apparatus door area and attempted to get dressed in my turn-out gear (coat, pants, boots and helmet.) I noticed my boots and pants were covered with debris, with numerous wood, rock and metal fragments filling the boots. One of my elastic suspenders was on fire, which I stamped out (or so I thought). When I was considering how best to empty the debris from my

boots, I heard a voice back outside saying “we need help here”. I think it was at this time that Dennis, Mark and I began to assemble at the first floor windows of the Pentagon (behind the crash truck).

I was later told by a civilian rescuer that I helped him climb into the window of the Pentagon where most of the victims exited the building. I don't remember helping him up. But I definitely remember him being there. I feel he was instrumental in organizing the rescue effort at this area of the Pentagon. At the time, I described him as a civilian 35-40 years old wearing black jeans, black polo shirt with a red logo on the shirt.

In April, 2002, I learned that the identity of this ‘civilian’ was Blair Bozek. He turns out to be a Lt. Col. USAF, (Ret.). He was one of the SR71 Spy plane pilots. Ha! Mark and I always felt 10-15 people may have exited the Pentagon at our location. Most of the victims were big ladies. All were terrified, most were burned. They had had varying amounts of clothing burned from their bodies, and some were missing shoes. We were assisted in rescuing them by several civilians as well as Armed Forces people who, having been uninjured in the attack, had come to aid their fellow employees.

I would like to describe how very hostile the working environment was following the airplane attack. We were directly up against the Pentagon building, which was on fire with smoke pouring heavily from all of the windows. The ground was burning all around us. A magnolia tree was burning, which gave a strange sensation of flaming “things” floating in the air—I later realized they were magnolia leaves. There were several times the heat was so intense that I thought my pants were on fire. It was especially difficult to breathe because of the smoke and fumes. These conditions definitely limited how long we could assist in the rescue.

I do remember helping three men carry an unconscious man all the way out to the guard rail beside Washington Blvd. While carry him, I noticed the 4 inch fire hose from our Fort Myer Rescue Engine #161. That meant our fellow firefighters were on the scene. This was a relief, because after I called them on the radio, I was certain it would be difficult for them to get to the Pentagon because of traffic. But I learned later that R/E 161, RJE 162 and the Asst. Chief did not have difficulty getting to the Pentagon. A further comment about my radio message: I should have followed it up with a call from one of the portable radios or possible a phone call to Fort Myer from the heliport station phone. I had not waited for a reply from Dispatcher Bob Connelly. (more on this subject later)

Unknown to me, before my radio message, Arlington Dispatch was receiving numerous 911 calls from all around the county. Reports were varied: helicopter crash into east side of the Pentagon, tractor trailer on fire on Washington Blvd, possible airplane crash on or near the 14th Street Bridge. Many of the 911 callers could see smoke but could not determine its source. Some likely saw a low flying aircraft or heard the impact of the

crash. Arlington Dispatch advised all listening stations about some of these reports, but of course couldn't confirm exact location, etc. In fact, it is quite possible that one of these callers, recalling Air Florida flight #90 crash into the Potomac River many years ago, was instrumental in causing National Airport to dispatch the first big crash truck. According to the firefighters from the classroom at Fort Myer, immediately after the communication from Arlington, they heard my radio message. Therefore my message was successful in informing my fellow firefighters of the exact location.

After victims stopped appearing at the Pentagon windows, Mark, Dennis and I began assisting the arriving Fort Myer companies on the fire ground. My next task was to get into my "fire turn gear". Returning to the hind the crash truck, again I looked at my fire boots and pants. They were still full of debris, but now the left suspender had completely burned off down to the end where it had been attached to my pants! I picked up my gear and dumped out the rocks, etc., stepped into my boots and pulled up the fire pants. With only one suspender, I must have looked like Jethro Bodine from the Beverly Hillbillies. I also got on my nylon sock-hood and fire coat. I grabbed a big lantern and two fire extinguishers (one C02 and the other 20# PurpleK, potassium bicarbonate).

I pulled the safety pin on the C02 and placed the lantern under my left arm, walked around the burning end of the crash truck, sprayed some of the C02 on it and under it. The extinguisher seemed only about half full, so it was quickly discharged and I threw it aside.

Pulling the pin on the purple K bottle, I walked behind the truck and into the Pentagon. Holding the illuminated lantern in my left hand, I immediately noticed how poor the visibility was. Keep in mind I still had no gloves, no helmet and no S.C.B.A. I do not think I went into the building any further than 20 feet. I would see fire and spray the extinguisher on it. It makes a very loud noise when being discharged and I did so several times. Out of nowhere, I heard the clear voice of a woman yell "hey!" She had heard the sound of the fire extinguisher and realized she was near another person. She did not sound panicked. I yelled back "I can't see you" and she clapped her hands. I was waving my flashlight. I did not go after her, and later I questioned my courage about why I hadn't.

Several days later, I noticed an article in the Washington Post which mentioned me. It also described a woman, Sheila Moody, who heard the swoosh of a fire extinguisher from someone, called out, and was answered by and rescued by a firefighter. I do not remember making contact with her. I believe it was my fire extinguisher she heard, but I also believe she was intercepted by another firefighter. But had I not had the fire extinguisher but had taken the garden hose attached to the fire station, she might not have known she was very near the outside of the building and near rescuers.

I then began to assist the fire fighting crews. I got a larger nozzle tip for the attack team and got 50 feet of 4 inch hose off Engine 161 so we could move the deluge gun closer to the Pentagon. Another project I undertook was to begin removing all the equipment off the crash truck: the third S.C.B.A., all the extra air bottles, power cords, floodlights, all the 1 1/2" hose (200 feet of it), tools, and fire extinguishers. At this point, the truck was still on fire and a lot of fire was right behind the truck in the Pentagon. I also noticed that the two personnel vehicles that had been parked near the impact site, belonging to the two Army Flight Control Tower personnel. Both had been completely destroyed by flying debris and fire.

About this time hose line crews from Fort Myer were entering the building with a 2 1/2" hose with a 1 1/4" solid nozzle. We added 50 feet of 4" hose to the deluge gun. Capt. Dennis Gilroy noticed the first collapse of a cornice above the fifth floor windows, just above the impact site. Dennis Young and I were at the deluge gun and were told to pull back and allow the deluge gun to operate un-manned.

About the time Gilroy ordered our people to get out of the building, there was report of another hijacked airliner, allegedly heading toward Washington D.C. During this period of waiting, Capt Gifroy was assigning firefighters to hand line teams to attack the fire, which was beginning to spread to the third and fourth floors of the Pentagon.

By now, I was feeling the effects of exhaustion from the frantic pace and severe shortness of breath from the lack of air at the impact site where we had assisted victims. I thought Mark and Dennis were in the same shape. Mark and I both told Gifroy not to count on us for the hand line crew. Our fellow Fort Myer firefighters had become aware of our injuries and Gilroy called an EMS crew to tend to us.

Our injuries were primarily second degree burns on our necks and forearms. In addition, Mark had a laceration on his hand, Dennis had a sprained ankle, and I had left shoulder pain. (Note: Mark, Dennis and I were only wearing T-shirts, work trousers and boots or heavy shoes at the time of the attack.) A medic unit arrived, Arlington, I believe. They bandaged our burns with wet dressings and wrapped them with gauze. I was given oxygen to breathe; the others weren't experiencing difficulty breathing. We were delivered to the triage area at approximately 1100.

There, we three saw Jackie Kidd and Sean Berger from the Control Tower. They looked to be OK. Jackie was really shaking and Sean had his forearms wrapped, much like us. When I saw them, I realized I had not thought once about them after the attack. I felt bad about this. Later I thought I would have at least told Dennis Young to "check on the people in the Tower" but I guess there was just far too much to think about in the immediate response to the attack.

Sean and Jackie were both given a ride home by a nurse-bystander named Victoria Brunner, who had been working in Triage. (She now works at Fort Myer- Rader Clinic as a counselor.)

Mark, Dennis and I had a welcome opportunity to rest in the Triage area, and were given water, bananas, apples and plums. There were probably 50 health care people there. Triage was located in the tunnel under Washington Blvd. on Columbia Pike.

By now word of our experience had spread to the FBI who interviewed us, as well as Kidd and Berger, while we were in Triage. After our interview, I wanted to return to the fire ground to see all the people from Fort Myer. We did so and spent about 2 hour there. Mark, Dennis and I stayed around Triage for about two hours. During this time, I had a chance to use a cell phone to call my Mother in Ohio. She was very relieved to learn I was OK. I also called Donna Houle at the Women's Memorial in Arlington Cemetery and asked her to contact some of my friends. In the next few days, I think I called everyone in my address book.

After all the other victims had been removed to hospitals, Mark and I were taken via ambulance to Arlington Hospital by Army Chase-Bethesda Rescue Squad #1. A young medic trainee named Sandra Melnick drove the medic unit. There were 6-8 people in the back of the squad, with one patient placed on a cardiac monitor. I sat in the front with her to give directions to the hospital.

After being released from the hospital, I contacted one of the hospital security officers to request a ride back to Fort Myer. He provided a driver within five minutes. Just as we were leaving the hospital, we were questioned by one of the local TV news channels, Fox I believe. We told them about seeing the airplane approach in time to run away from the Pentagon building.

Our driver took us as far as the Iwo Jima Memorial, just 200 yards from one of the gates into Fort Myer. Of course by now security had been increased significantly since my arrival there at 0530 earlier in the day. (The MP's had shoulder arms, a vehicle with machine gun mounted on top was nearby.) I was wearing a hospital gown, my fire boots and carried my fire pants in a plastic bag and had no I.D. But fortunately one of the MP's recognized me and allowed us to pass. (Mark did have some I.D.)

As soon as we were allowed to pass through the gate, an Air Force Major gave us a ride back to the fire station in his Jaguar. Ha - we were home!

We immediately began to tell our story and help out at the fire station. Dennis was there when we arrived. Soon after, Howard Kelly gave Mark a ride home. Dennis drove himself to his W.Va. home. I stayed at the fire house that night.

I enjoyed being back with my fellow firefighters and helping get the equipment back on the truck. Our people were exhausted, some were still frightened. I think all were glad they were working that day.

Remember the three firefighters who were scheduled off the day of 9/11? Willett, Pine and Thayer all came back in when they heard the news. Thayer told me later “from 25 miles from the Pentagon, I could see smoke, and I knew you three must be dead”. He also said he felt bad because he was the person who had assigned us to the Pentagon heliport.

I was grateful –and am now amazed—that my injuries were minor. The bums on my forearms and neck healed quickly. My shoulder pain persisted and ultimately required surgery in November, 2001. The surgery went well and the surgeon and I were pleased with my recovery from it.

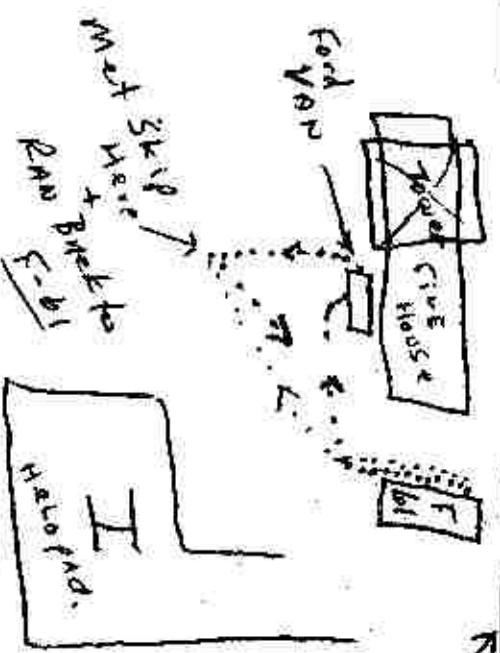
I returned back to work in February, 2002, glad to have a good job. I am very proud of Dennis, Mark and myself. I am SO grateful that none of our firefighters were seriously injured or killed.

ALAN WALLACE
ARW/rmh
8/15/02

Pentagon

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WALKERS

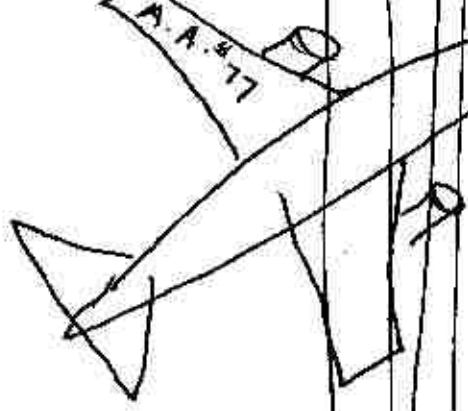
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