

## Fireball (TWA Flight 800)

by James K. Kallstrom (1970-1997)

It was a hot evening in New York City on Tuesday, July 17, 1996. Most of the heads of Law Enforcement were at the Friars Club for a dinner to honor Ray Kelly, who was leaving the NYPD to become the head of U.S. Customs Service. As the Assistant Director of the NYO and long-time veteran of the office, I had known Ray well and respected him. It was a festive occasion among good friends. As coffee was being served and the speeches were about to begin, my pager screeched its familiar sound. It was the phone number of the NYO duty supervisor with the added suffix "911." Suddenly, other pagers started chirping. The two telephones in the lobby were in use so I called from my Bureau car parked outside. What I learned was chilling! The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) had notified us that their radar contact with a 747 jetliner en route from JFK airport to Paris, France had disappeared just minutes after take-off. Other aircraft over the Atlantic Ocean near Long Island's Moriches Inlet reported seeing a large fireball in the sky.

It was TWA Flight 800. Hours later, we learned that the passengers included grandparents, the Executive Producer of ABC Sports, a noted American musical composer, 16 members of a high school French club from Pennsylvania, newlyweds, children from 6 months to 16 and a deadheading flight crew — all bound for the City of Lights. All 230 souls from 16 countries were presumed dead. So began one of the largest, gut wrenching and complicated investigations ever conducted by the FBI.

My mind was racing as I drove to 26 Federal Plaza. I told the duty supervisor to begin an established call out and to have all the SACs meet me in the Command Post. The only exception was Lou Schilliro, the SAC of the Criminal Division, whom I sent to the Coast Guard Station at Moriches to assist in search and recovery efforts, open a local FBI command post and begin assigning leads covering Long Island and the surrounding waters. I also dispatched a technical team to assist him with needed communications.

The NYO Command Post was already gathering steam when I arrived. As more and more Agents assembled, they immediately began answering phones, which were ringing off the hooks. The whole world seemed to be calling. The media clamored for any information; state, local and federal officials demanded answers; citizens offered tips; eye-witnesses had stories to tell and — most heart wrenching — stunned family members sought anything the FBI could offer on the fate of their loved ones. For me, that first hour still remains a blur today. I spoke with FBI Director Louie Freeh, Attorney General Janet Reno, the head of the FAA, the president of TWA, as well as the Admiral in charge of the Coast Guard Atlantic. Jim Hall, the Chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) informed me that a ten-man GO Team led by NTSB Vice Chairman, Robert Francis, would depart from Washington for Long Island the next day. I called Assistant Director Bob Bryant, requesting his help in establishing a Navy point of contact at the Pentagon.

The FBI rightly prides itself on its history of pursuing the truth wherever it leads. Our job is, and always has been, to follow every lead wherever it takes us in a professional and "dispassionate" manner. Yet today, more than 20 years after the TWA 800 disaster, I still vividly recall how the FBI/NYO family struggled mightily with "dispassion" in this case. It began with a call from my wife, Susan, as I pulled into the underground parking garage. My dear friend and fellow Agent, Charlie Christopher, had just telephoned our home. He was frantic. My heart sank when I learned that his beloved wife, Janet, was aboard the plane, serving as the senior flight attendant. In a terrible twist of fate, she had switched shifts with a colleague so that she could attend her son's Eagle Scout induction ceremony the following weekend. Charlie's was one of my first calls. For the NYO, this case was now personal.

But what could I tell them? At that point, I knew very little. The plane had arrived at JFK Airport from Athens, Greece that day at 4 pm. After a gate delay of more than an hour, it took off at 8:19 pm bound for Paris, France. At 8:25 pm, the Boston Air Traffic Control Center took over the routine tracking from the JFK Center. Six minutes later, the blip on the radar screen that was TWA 800 disappeared at an altitude of 13,700 feet about 50 miles east of New York City. At 8:38 pm, Boston Center called Boston Coast Guard Command Center confirming aircraft sightings of a "fireball" in the sky. At 8:49 pm, when my pager popped to life at the

Friars Club, nine Coast Guard cutters and patrol boats along with two helicopters and a C130 airplane were already scouring the Atlantic in search of survivors.

Despite the remarkable improvements in air travel safety in recent decades, commercial and private aircraft still crash. The causes span the spectrum — mechanical problems, human error, negligence, weather and even the occasional bird strike. Normally, the NTSB investigates aircraft accidents in the United States. But this case was different. Because jet liners don't just explode at 13,000 feet, a suspicion of terrorism quickly engulfed everyone's mind. Fueling these fears was a steady stream of ominous calls coming in from residents along Long Island's South Shore. They described lights trailing in an upward direction as if someone had fired a ground to air missile. Perhaps a bomb had been carried into the passenger compartment or was concealed in check-in luggage. Every person and thing that had access to the plane at JFK or Athens, Greece would have to be investigated. That would include all airport personnel, all passengers on Flight 800 to Paris, as well as the inbound flight from Athens. Every item of freight placed on the aircraft and the investigation of every freight company employee associated with packing and delivering items to the plane would have to be scrutinized.

These suspicions led to an FBI break with normal protocols by launching a criminal investigation under Title 18 USC, "Crime Aboard American Flag Aircraft" or "Destruction of American Flag Aircraft." The NTSB commenced a parallel inquiry with both agencies working together as partners under their own jurisdiction. From the start, we agreed that if NTSB found clear and conclusive proof of a mechanical/electrical/structural failure, then the FBI would cease investigation. But if we found the "Eureka" piece that proved to our standards — terrorism — then NTSB would close its investigation. I also agreed to Hall's request for the presence of one of his investigators at any FBI interview. NTSB sent only five people (later doubling to ten) to Moriches. By week's end, the Bureau had close to 700 Agents on site rendering Hall's request pointless.

The awkwardness of our partnership soon displayed itself in another way. The NTSB is a truly professional government agency made up of highly talented and dedicated experts. Their mission



Tom Pickard, Director Freeh, Jim Kallstrom and Joe Cantamesa

is to determine the cause or causes of a crash and make recommendations for future correctives. But the NTSB is not the FBI. For them, the Rules of Criminal Procedure, Chain of Custody and the much higher standard of proof, demanded in federal criminal investigations, do not apply. Furthermore, the NTSB, through long standing agreements, includes representatives of the aircraft manufacturer (Boeing), the airplane company (TWA), the engine manufacturers (Pratt and Whitney), the pilots' union and the flight attendants' union in their investigative team. This set-up would later cause me all sorts of personal headaches.

Within hours of the crash the Coast Guard had begun the dangerous task of moving about the flaming wreckage recovering floating bodies for removal to a temporary morgue at their Moriches station. By the following morning, the outlines of our investigative structure were in place. Tom Pickard, the SAC for counterintelligence and counterterrorism, took overall charge of the investigation. Operating from the command center in New York City, Tom oversaw all aspects of the case while continuously updating me on the work produced by Agents assigned to the FBI's Moriches command center. Based on overnight developments, it was clear that an immediate neighborhood-type investigation would be needed along a 15–20-mile southern coastline section of Long Island. There were 75 potential eyewitnesses, who had called in to the Command Post by 4 AM, who had to be located and interviewed. All marinas, as well as any and all vessels, large or small, on the ocean near Moriches (within twenty four hours before and after the disaster) had to be identified and their passengers questioned. If a missile had brought the

plane down, then that crime scene would take up a large part of Nassau and Suffolk counties, and the ocean area south of Long Island, an area of hundreds of square miles. Another nagging question focused on whether any U.S. military assets in the area, carrying ordinances, were capable of bringing the flight down.

After a long night, SAC Joseph Cantamesa left for Moriches the next morning. Joe first coordinated the Coast Guard and dive teams from the FBI, NYPD, New York State Police, as well as, Nassau and Suffolk county police depart-



Bob Francis, VC, NTSB, Kallstrom, Two Unknown, Joe Cantamesa



News media satellite trucks

ments. Later, he served as the FBI's point of contact with the U.S. Navy. For a most crucial yet thankless task, I turned to SAC Carson Dunbar. In the days and weeks ahead, he took control of the massive details associated with administrative support issues. The arrival of forensic teams, evidence response teams, requests to headquarters for Agents with aeronautical engineering, metallurgy, aviation expertise (military or civilian) as well as finding lodging in Queens, Brooklyn, Nassau and Suffolk counties for the ballooning number of Agents arriving from around the country — these were just a few of the challenges Carson faced on an hourly basis.

Although it would be close to a week before the debris fields were even located, it was apparent that evening that we needed a very large facility to lay out what was expected to be thousands of pieces of debris. As luck would have it, Schillero's team soon found a huge and, thankfully, vacant building in Calverton, Long Island about 15 miles from Moriches. Owned by the Grumman Aircraft Company, it had been used in the manufacture of the U.S. Navy/Marine Corps F14 Tomcat fighter plane.

Our attention also turned to JFK airport, where, sadly, the sorry state of security at U.S. airports soon revealed itself. Poor record keeping and the absence of adequate screening of employees working at JFK food courts, newsstands, gift shops, etc. complicated our job, as did the flimsy vetting of freight forwarding company workers who were supposedly part of a so-called trusted network. Digging deeper, we found few, if any, personnel security procedures in place. Worse still, was learning that company officials had virtually no knowledge or manifest confirmation showing which employee packed which crate or what was actually contained in the freight they loaded on the plane.

By week's end, side scan sonar had located the debris fields, allowing recovery operations to begin in full force with the arrival of the Navy flotilla led by Rear Admiral Ed Kristensen from his command ship the USS Oak Hill, and combat salvage ships USS Grasp and USS Grapple. Seventy-five courageous hard-hat divers soon began risking their lives daily in an inky black world hundreds of feet underwater in an effort to recover bodies and evidence amidst jagged and razor sharp pieces of the plane. The black boxes were quickly found and flown to NTSB headquarters in

Washington, where an examination produced little of value. Both the data and voice recorders functioned normally to the end. The only anomaly, interestingly enough, was a millisecond of sound from the voice recorder similar to one heard on Pan American 103, which blew up over Lockerbie, Scotland eight years earlier.

Over the next several months, the Grumman hangar seemed to bulge with the staggering volume of recovered plane parts. What had been an empty cavernous building, steadily morphed into a crazy-quilt of twisted debris — all bearing the unmistakable signatures of sudden violence and death. Metal and plastic pieces — both large and small — airplane tires and landing gears mixed with thousands of miles of wires and cables strung out in long rows or bundled like plates of spaghetti began filling the entire floor space. It was a jigsaw puzzle of staggering dimension which ASAC Ken Maxwell and dozens of other Agents working around the clock seven days a week, began to methodically reassemble. On-site forensic experts from the FBI Laboratory, working with Ken and his team, carefully examined every item — often sending questionable pieces to Washington for more detailed examination — all with negative results. We did, however, learn one thing for certain. The center fuel tank exploded. But we didn't know why. Was it a bomb? Was there an electrical/mechanical failure? Did a missile hit the tank?

One anxious moment came in August, when laboratory technicians found traces of PETN and RDX, chemicals used in plastic explosives, on pieces of two-sided tape that attached carpet tile squares to the floor near Row 22/23 directly over the center fuel tank. Still, despite the uniqueness of this new evidence, there was insufficient proof of a bomb in that particular section of the aircraft. But why was it there?

Then there were the more than 200 eyewitness reports of something in the sky, streaking in an upward direction near the aircraft. Some believed it was a missile. For the next year, while investigators tracked down and interviewed every eye-witness and scientists analyzed every plane part for tell-tale signs of a missile strike, Bureau and military ballistics experts worked feverishly to determine if a land-based projectile could have taken down the plane.

A vast assortment of shoulder-fired missiles were shot at graveyard airframes at the Navy's ballistic testing center at China Lake, CA. The idea was to create a record of warhead strike patterns for identifying unusual damage on the TWA 800 fuselage. Along the way, we were surprised to learn that no missile damage database existed in the FBI or anywhere else in the world. The exercise, however, produced one crucial conclusion. No shoulder-fired projectile, in any arsenal in the world, had the range to engage the aircraft from the Long Island shoreline. If (a big "if") a missile had struck the aircraft, then the killer would have had to have fired the shot from a boat in the ocean directly under the plane as it



Freeh, Bryant and Kallstrom

moved through the sky at hundreds of miles an hour in a easterly direction more than two and a half miles above the earth.

Then, what did those witnesses see that evening? It's all about simple physics — in this case — the speed of sound and the speed of light. There were two explosions that occurred that night. When the center fuel tank exploded, it broke the front of the plane off near the first class cabin section. Most of the witnesses instinctively looked up to the sky when they heard the explosion. Depending on where they were located, however — on the coast or in a boat on the water — the sound of that explosion reached ground level between 40-63 seconds after it occurred. During this window of time, the plane's four engines, powered by the continued flow of fuel, drove the craft another one thousand feet higher before the second and final explosion blew it apart. In fact, what witnesses actually observed was the final seconds of the hulk continuing its upward trajectory amidst burning fuel and debris already blown off the airframe followed by the final explosion. They could not have, under any circumstance, seen a missile hitting the airplane.

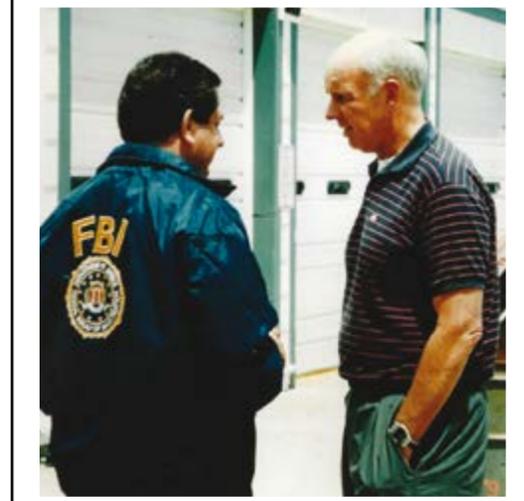
In his 2014 political memoir, *Worthy Fights*, Leon Panetta described a conference he had with FBI Director Bob Mueller about Al Qaeda, while serving as President Obama's CIA Director. No AQ cells had been found in the U.S., Mueller explained, but there was no guarantee that they did not exist. Mueller "warned me," Panetta wrote, that "we didn't know what we didn't know — and that we should assume that Al Qaeda was trying to recruit operatives who would operate in the West."



Pieces of TWA 800

The FBI faced a similar dilemma during this case. With only 70% of wreckage recovered, Jim Hall recommended an end to the investigation with a public announcement. The NTSB's theory was that while the plane sat for hours at the JFK gate, its air conditioning equipment, situated directly under the center fuel tank, gradually vaporized forty gallons of fuel. Shortly after take-off, an electrical spark jumping from the high voltage wires to low voltage wires that powered the fuel pumps, ignited the vaporized fuel in the center fuel tank. The wires were the one thing that were never replaced, as the older planes were recertified by the FAA for continued service. This particular 747 airframe was 25 years old with 16,000 flights to its record. Over time, the sheathing on the wire bundles wore thin, and in some places wore completely off. The NTSB's theory, which had wide agreement, was that this deadly confluence of events caused the horrific explosion.

Thus far, no evidence of a bomb had been found. But as 30% of the airplane was still missing, I insisted that the FBI investigation continue until as much of the aircraft as possible had been recovered and tested. Our thinking was influenced, in part, by our extensive knowledge of the principal conspirator behind the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, Ramzi Yousef. We knew he had constructed a small shape charge bomb from components, which he individually smuggled through airport security and onto a plane in the Philippines. After reassembling the device in the bathroom, Yousef placed it next to a bulkhead seat on the bulkhead with the timer set to go off on the next leg of the journey after he departed the plane. This effort, as we were well aware, was part of a larger plan to bomb 12 aircrafts simultaneously.



Kallstrom and Francis



Coast Guard Operation



Kallstrom, two unidentified, Bob Bryant, Director Freeh and Bob Francis, Vice Chairman of the NTSB

Facing down the head of NTSB meant insisting on a meeting with White House officials. On two occasions, Hall and I met with Leon Panetta, then serving as President Clinton's chief of staff. Hall explained his electrical spark theory as the most likely cause of the explosion, even with only 70% of the aircraft recovered. And as one of the costliest accident investigations ever undertaken by the NTSB, he insisted on ending it, rather than face a further drain on his agency's already depleted budget. When Panetta turned to me, I urged him to reject Hall's plan. Publicly announcing an end to the investigation with only 70% of the plane recovered would not only cause worldwide outrage, but would further enflame the suspicions of the French victims' families that the Clinton Administration was trying to cover something up. Compounding this uproar, I said, was the fact that the FBI would continue its investigation making no final judgements until as much of the plane as could be located was recovered and examined. Panetta saw the political handwriting on the wall. Ignoring Hall and his budget concerns, he simply looked at me and said "Jim, continue to do what you're doing." Over the next five months, scallop trawlers recovered another 27% of the aircraft which we rebuilt and microscopically examined. In the end, much to our great relief, the NTSB conclusion held up. Considering what followed, Panetta's decision to continue the investigation proved to be a wise one.

The TWA 800 investigation experienced everything from bizarre conspiracy theories and baseless claims to outright criminal behavior. Pierre Salinger came up with the most outrageous story. A journalist, then based in Paris for ABC News, Salinger gained

notoriety in the 1960s as the Press Secretary for both Presidents Kennedy and Johnson and later filled a vacancy for a short time in the U.S. Senate. Pierre's "ready, fire, aim" approach to journalism had gotten him into trouble before. In 1988, he claimed that a botched DEA operation caused the explosion of Pan Am 103. Now, here he was once again, only this time he had proof in the form of a confidential document purported to be from French intelligence sources. Waving the document before a worldwide audience, Salinger announced that a missile fired from the USS Normandy, a US Navy frigate, brought down the jumbo jet. As it turned out, the "document" was a hoax that had been making the rounds on the internet for weeks. (A key aspect of our investigation from the start had been the identification and elimination of all military vessels which may have been in the vicinity that evening.) We could have all dismissed such stupidity as a humorous side note to a terrible catastrophe, except for the fact that grieving French families believed his rants. As a result, FBI Agents devoted hundreds of man hours and other resources putting the myth to rest. The captain of the Normandy and every crew member aboard the ship that night were located and interviewed. All missiles were verified and accounted for. Lastly, all records relating to the ship's movements confirmed that TWA 800 was well outside the range of the ship's ordinance that fateful evening.

One of the NTSB's investigators was Robert Terrell Stacey, TWA's chief 747 pilot. Possessing no scientific credentials or experience, Stacey, on his own, concluded that a reddish-brown substance on the backs of passenger seats was explosive residue

or rocket fuel. Working with ex-police officer turned investigative journalist James Sanders, and his wife, Elizabeth, a TWA flight attendant, Stacey stole samples of seat fabric and investigative documents which Sanders incorporated into his book, *The Downing of TWA Flight 800*. Sanders theory — TWA 800 was destroyed by a Navy missile which the government covered-up, in order to prevent a public panic.

We wasted no time with Stacey. After his arrest, he quickly pled guilty to a misdemeanor theft charge. On December 5, 1997, federal prosecutors also charged the Sanders couple with theft of government property. Their defense attorney, Bruce Maffeo, described the prosecution as "extremely vindictive," insisting that the couple had a First Amendment right to expose a cover-up. Both were convicted in the spring of 1999 and sentenced to probation. Later that year, Sanders offered the public *Altered Evidence*: a fairy-tale screed charging that a Navy missile downed TWA 800 during an exercise, while White House officials watched on closed-circuit television.

We never found the leaker, but someone slipped erroneous information to Don Van Atta, an investigative reporter for *The New York Times*, who then called me with a claim that I was about to publicly announce that our discovery of the RDX and PETN had confirmed that the explosion was due to terrorism. Because Don was a friend, I gave it to him straight, acknowledging that we had, in fact, found minute traces of the chemicals but insufficient to cause any explosion. Furthermore, an analysis of that section of the plane produced no evidence of a bomb. I then warned him that publishing such bogus charges would only end in embarrassment for him and the paper. The story, nevertheless, broke the next day, causing further anguish for the victims' families and major headaches with Congress and the White House. It would take months for the FBI team to steady the ship from a public relations standpoint.

The RDX and PETN riddle was resolved when a St. Louis, MO airport police officer came forward with the answer. Years earlier, as part of a training exercise on that plane, designed to familiarize bomb sniffing dogs with the scent of certain chemicals, he had placed detonation cord in the overhead compartment directly above Rows 22/23. What he then told us closed the matter. The detonation cord was defective. It had cracks which caused the RDX and PETN to leak out of the storage bin and onto the floor of the plane. Over the ensuing years, the tiles had been replaced. But

the two sided tape holding them down remained in place.

I gave 157 press conferences over the 15-month life of this case. In every instance, the FBI advised the families of any significant developments before press releases were issued. My public briefing, held in New York City on November 18, 1997, formally ended the pending status of the TWA 800 investigation. Given the magnitude of the tragedy and the fears it provoked, we wanted the victims' families and the world to know with substantial detail that the FBI team left no stone unturned and in most cases — unturned twice!

All 230 victims were recovered and turned over to their families and loved ones for burial along with 39,000 personal items. Ninety-seven percent of the plane was recovered over a 45-square-mile ocean area. (Some pieces were found as far south as Cape May, NJ and as far north as Nantucket Island, MA.) Ninety-six percent was reassembled. More than one million pieces of the aircraft were doubly inspected. We conducted more than 7,000 interviews here and abroad, covered more than 3,000 leads and chemically swabbed 3,000 plane parts looking for traces of explosive evidence. FBI laboratory technicians and independent metallurgy experts conducted secondary inspections of more than 2,000 pieces of wreckage. In addition to tracing every piece of cargo aboard the flight from its point of origin to the 747's cargo holds, FBI Agents investigated every worker who touched the aircraft or placed anything onboard; there was even a box containing human organs for a scheduled transplant in Paris, which was delivered to the pilot a minute before the plane pushed off. Everything was fully documented. In the end, both the FBI and NTSB, were totally satisfied that everything humanly and scientifically possible had been done. The cause of the TWA 800 disaster was an electrical malfunction — not a bomb or missile.

As I close, I want to single out for special appreciation the divers from the NYPD, Nassau and Suffolk county police departments, the New York State Police and the FBI who then, as always, selflessly risked their lives in the service of others.

I end with my heartfelt thanks for the professionalism and tremendous work ethic of all those FBI men and women who assisted in this noble effort. I hope you are as proud of our humanitarianism as I am.

A wise man once said, "Your attitude determines your altitude." You were ALL flying high!



30% of TWA 800



Rebuilding of TWA 800



TWA 800 reconstruction

Like every American of a certain age, the morning of September 11, 2001 will forever remain fixed in my mind. In my case perhaps even more so.

Two months before the attack, I was reassigned from Cleveland to the Washington Field Office as the Assistant Director in Charge. I had been the SAC in Cleveland for five years and it was our home, as both my wife and I are from Toledo. Moving on for us was a tough decision, which our many friends and Bureau colleagues puzzled over. Many of my friends and colleagues, particularly in the Bureau, questioned why I was leaving.

This was my tenth Bureau transfer and as many of you know, they never get easier. Moves to a new office are filled with a huge assortment of challenges both professional and personal. Equally daunting was the fact that as the new guy, I was taking charge of one of the Bureau's largest and most important offices located within shouting distance from headquarters. I was lucky to have a few friends there and I knew others by reputation.

Those first few weeks were very fast-paced for me. When I was not getting up to speed with the office routine and making introductions to the staff, I was in my car traveling through the District, Virginia and Maryland, meeting the many local, state and federal leaders with whom I would be working. Time also had to be set aside for discussions with the many intelligence community officials in the nation's capital and the military district of Washington, DC.

All of this work was interesting and essential but, at the same time, I still had to handle routine personal matters like finding temporary quarters and a home for my family, while relentlessly searching for the shortest commute and a safe parking spot where I wouldn't be towed away. The Harp clan, like thousands of federal law enforcement families, had sacrificed much over the years. I was then a 31-year Bureau veteran with ten transfers under my belt. During those years, our children continued to grow and pursue lives of their own. Our three older children Brad, Sara and Ben were married with their own families. Dean, our youngest was also on his own working for a chemical company in Philadelphia. That summer, looking back on seemingly countless scheduling conflicts, my wife Patty and I suddenly realized we had not taken a "real" family vacation in four or five years. So, as fate would have it, our family — all fifteen of us including six tiny grandchildren — gathered together at a spacious vacation house on Hilton Head Island in South Carolina with plans to relax, unwind and simply enjoy some precious time together. It was Saturday, September 8, 2001.

We were all up early that gorgeous Tuesday morning, laughing and joking and readying ourselves for a great beach day without a care in the world when my phone suddenly rang. It was Donna Cummings, my executive assistant, with some disturbing news. An airplane, she calmly told me, had just crashed into one of the towers at the World Trade Center in New York City. There were no details, but she said she would keep me updated as more information became available. We all gathered around the television in time to stare in amazement as the second airplane, United Airlines flight 175, plowed into the South Tower at 9:05 am.

I called Donna back for any details. Nothing new. Suddenly, she called me twice in rapid succession: a "news helicopter" had just crashed into the Pentagon and rising smoke was visible from the windows of WFO; it was an airliner — not a helicopter. The PENTBOM investigation had begun.

My family quietly packed up and drove home the next morning. For the next year, I saw my wife only on holidays, when she visited from Cleveland, where we still owned a home. Amidst all the chaos, WFO obtained clearance for the FBI's plane to fly to Hilton Head Island to pick me up. The full impact of the disaster struck as we were landing at Washington Dulles Airport. President Bush's order for the immediate grounding of commercial and private aircraft came home to me as we landed. There were no other planes landing, nor any lined up for takeoff. I was overwhelmed when I gazed out the plane's window to see what seemed like thousands of planes of all sizes and varieties parked every which way as far as I could see. Nor were there any signs of ground crew activity. My uneasiness only worsened when I deplaned and entered the terminal. It had a hollow, almost ghostly atmosphere. Here and there the occasional cluster of security personnel and airline ground personnel with nothing to do stood in stark contrast to the thousands of unattended suitcases and packages neatly stacked in rows in front of gates and ticket counters.



Van Harp

# 9/11

## A Personal Reflection

by Van A. Harp (1970-2003)



An awaiting car drove me in “record” time to WFO’s Emergency Operations Center (EOC), where I received an updated report. Watching the cool professionalism of the men and women working around me in the EOC, most of whom I didn’t know, it was immediately apparent from the energy, disciplined activity and a focused hum that they had been here before and knew what they were doing. As the new guy who would have to lead this investigation, I drew strength from their almost iron will, intensity and drive, not to mention the focused sense of purpose on display that day and for the weeks and months to come. Working with my senior staff over the next few hours we addressed basic issues typical of major cases such as leadership and investigative structure, manpower, personnel rotation and adequacy of communications. With these questions settled for the moment, I then left for the Pentagon, which was still a raging inferno. There, amidst the chaos, I struggled to introduce myself to key local, state and federal “on-scene commanders,” then operating under the “unified command system” in a massive search, rescue and recovery effort. Like my impression of WFO’s EOC, I marveled at the professionalism and seamless coordination of all the agencies as they battled the fire, rescued trapped victims, triaged the injured on site and then quickly rushed them to local hospitals where dedicated doctors and nurses were waiting. Over the next few days, hundreds of courageous fire and rescue workers, under the leadership of the MDW and Arlington Fire Department, finally extinguished a stubborn fire and then stabilized the ceilings, floors and walls.

The nature of the attack dictated our approach to the crime scene investigation. American Airlines flight 77, according to *The 9/11 Commission Report*, struck at a speed of 530 miles per hour, killing all 64 passengers and crew members on board and dozens of military personnel and civilian employees at work inside. Hundreds of others were also injured. Crash impact damage and the subsequent fire produced a contained, yet, massive debris field, measuring in the thousands of tons. Larger pieces like the plane’s fuselage were quickly recovered and removed off site. Smaller particles were taken to sift-sites where everything from finger tips to drivers’ licenses were scrupulously extracted, labeled, catalogued and archived as evidence. While the PENTBOM investigation continued well into 2002, the grisly work of our courageous crime scene crews formally ended at a discrete ceremony early one morning in November, when the WFO team returned control of the site to the MDW for their reconstruction.

From the start of the case, I established a strict personal routine, from which I rarely deviated. I had rented a room in Alexandria’s Del Ray area which minimized my commute into WFO. Early every morning, I visited the crime scene, conferring with the on-scene leaders for updates and ensuring they had everything they needed. Over the next hour or so, I walked around simply watching and trying to offer comfort and encouragement to evidence recovery teams, who calmly and professionally went about their sad and grisly task. Then it was off to the office for regularly scheduled conference calls and meetings — first with the heads of all FBI field offices, local law enforcement agencies, the US Attorneys for Washington, Northern Virginia and Maryland as well as emergency responder agencies and the

intelligence community. Next, came lengthy meetings with the PENTBOM team for updates on overnight developments. As I still had a major field office to run, a large part of my day also centered on staying current on significant ongoing reactive criminal, white collar, public corruption, cyber and counterintelligence investigations. To this day, I still tip my hat to the Agents and staff who picked up the huge amount of “slack” and filled the gap, resulting from their colleagues’ responding to the entire PENTBOM crisis.

At the end of each work day (most of us were working seven days a week), usually around 9 pm, I returned to the Pentagon. I wanted not only progress and situation reports, but assurances about the physical and emotional health of our personnel, as well as any pressing personal or family issues they may have been facing.

Over the days and weeks after the attack, I came to find these evening site visits oddly comforting. This feeling came from the large number of civilians, who stood silently every night along the perimeter of the Pentagon, as if maintaining a silent vigil honoring the murdered, the injured, the Pentagon employees who would suffer emotional scars for the rest of their lives and the millions of veterans who served this country from its founding. The number and variety of their incredible tributes was incredible — flags, flowers, medals, crosses, food, prayer letters and a continuous solemn presence.

One of those silent evening sentinels will always stand out in my memory. I never spoke to him personally, nor did I ever learn his name, but I’ll never forget him. He had that special look of a “biker” with long hair, wearing black leather boots, blue jeans and a vest cut off at the sleeves. Night after night, he stood alone ramrod straight in an endless salute as if guarding the American flag planted next to his Harley.

Officially, I was the boss leading WFO’s real heroes. But in reality, my mission gradually changed to become one of reestablishing a sense of stability, predictability, confidence and continuity that had been terribly shaken by this unthinkable horror. I first sensed this feeling of gloom and anxiety in the voices I listened to during the initial meetings, briefings, conference calls as well as telephone talks with my family. It began to dawn on me that those four human psychological pillars issues had been shaken to the core of so many people. It all came home to me one day following an early field office conference call. Before the actual call, a Cleveland staff member told me that the Cleveland office now understood why I accepted the promotion to WFO. Hearing my voice during those conference calls, she said, “reassured them and gave them confidence in the future.” I was never more humbled in my life.

I was truly blessed to be the Assistant Director in Charge of the FBI’s Washington Field Office at that moment in history. I represented, coordinated and led the finest group of men and women this country has to offer — not only from the FBI, but from each and every responding agency and department.

The victims of the 9/11 attack, their families and the citizens of this great country deserved nothing less. May God bless them all.

# 9/11 Update First Responders

*by Nancy Savage (1977-2011)*

On September 11, 2001, many FBI employees joined other responders at the scenes of the deadly terrorist attacks at the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and Shanksville, PA. Throughout the course of the response, investigation and cleanup, their dedication rose above and beyond the call of duty.

Their selfless work, however, may have come at a highly personal cost. Many who worked at the 9/11 sites currently struggle, or may in the future, with physical and mental health ailments attributed to exposure at the sites. To extend access to health monitoring and medical services for individuals affected by this exposure, President Obama recently reauthorized the James Zadroga 9/11 Health and Compensation Act of 2010, which gives those personally affected and their surviving family members another chance to seek assistance through three separate programs:

- The World Trade Center Health Program provides medical monitoring and treatment for responders at the WTC and related sites in New York City, Pentagon, and Shanksville, PA, and survivors who were in the New York City disaster area. (<http://www.cdc.gov/wtc/index.html>)
- The 9/11 Victim’s Compensation Fund (VCF) was created to provide compensation for any individual (or a personal representative of a deceased individual) who suffered physical harm or was killed as a result of the terrorist-related aircraft crashes of September 11, 2001 or the debris removal efforts that took place in the immediate aftermath of those crashes. (<https://www.vcf.gov/>)
- The Public Safety Officer Benefit (PSOB) is a unique effort of the U.S. Department of Justice; local, state, tribal, and federal public safety agencies and national organizations to provide death and education benefits to survivors of fallen law enforcement officers, firefighters, and other first responders, and disability benefits to officers catastrophically injured in the line of duty. (<https://www.psob.gov/>)

Society President Larry Langberg has named Florida Regional Vice President Eileen Roemer as the Society Coordinator for the 9/11 Responders. She served as a first responder at the Pentagon with two of her body recovery dogs. During the attacks, Eileen, an FBI criminal profiler, had been working at the Pentagon one weekend a month in her role as a Captain in the Naval Reserves.

Eileen Roemer and I recently met with FBIHQ personnel to ensure that Society member registration for health monitoring and potential benefits is being successfully facilitated. While it is

**Every 9/11 Responder should request verification of his/her response to one of the 9/11 sites.**

not required that responders have a letter of verification from the FBI before registration on the below listed sites, this remains the most accepted and easiest method for verification. Verification allows you to easily register with the three government programs available to responders.

If you have not obtained a verification letter from the FBI:

1. Call the FBI Human Resources Division Call Center at (202) 324-3333 Monday through Friday, 8 am to 6 pm Eastern Time. The Call Center is experiencing a high volume of calls so the best time to call is early in the morning and later in the afternoon.
2. You can also email your request to [FBI911RespondersHelp@ic.fbi.gov](mailto:FBI911RespondersHelp@ic.fbi.gov). Be sure to include your physical mailing address in your email as they will be mailing your verification letter to you.
3. It is vitally important that every responder register and obtain a baseline medical screening.
4. If you are experiencing problems or have concerns, please email Society Coordinator Eileen Roemer at [eileen.roemer@socxfbi.org](mailto:eileen.roemer@socxfbi.org).

If you did respond to one of the four sites or a related one in the New York area, please go to our website [www.socxfbi.org](http://www.socxfbi.org) for more specific information about the various pertinent programs.

The Society would like to thank FBI EAD Valerie Parlave for her personal efforts to ensure that FBI employees and former employees are made aware of the risks and benefits available to those who so courageously responded to these horrific attacks, as well as provide benefits to those FBI employees who have succumbed to illnesses brought on by their response.

## **Help Needed Re Documentation of Assignment to the Work Sites**

The FBI, while working diligently to identify those who were responders, has run into issues with incomplete records or inability to locate records of those who did respond. If you do have any copies of official records showing those who were responding to a particular site including ECs, staff lists, and the like, we are requesting that you share those with us. Please contact Eileen Roemer at the above email and she will provide it to the appropriate personnel at FBIHQs. Such documents have proved invaluable in compiling an accurate list of all responders. The FBI has very little documentation on those who responded to Shanksville, PA. The FBI has been able to respond quickly to those first responders that are currently in their incomplete database.