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10 Years After

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911 YEARS

10 AFTER

September 11, 2011, marks 10 years since the terrorist attacks that changed the nation and the world. In recognition of this noteworthy anniversary, five alumni offer reflections and reminiscences about the event and its impact on their lives.



PETER MARLOW/MAGNUM

A GRIM JOB

Like everyone else in America, I was at work on the morning of September 11, 2001. My comfortable job was that of a clinical, surgical and forensic pathologist at the community hospital of Fort Campbell, Ky. I was an Army colonel, a veteran of Operation Desert Storm, and nearing the end of a satisfying military career.

When the day began, we were an Army at peace. Then everything changed.

In my laboratory's waiting room I watched television in detached awe as the World Trade Center events unfolded. But things became much more personal when the Pentagon was targeted by the terrorists aboard American Airlines Flight 77. I knew right away that I would be involved.

The Armed Forces Medical Examiner System (AFMES) is semi-centralized, with most forensic pathologists headquartered in Rockville, Md. The rest of us are regional medical examiners at military (Army, Navy and Air Force) hospitals in the United States, Okinawa and Germany.

AFMES needed us to rally. Because the commercial airlines and all of general aviation stopped flying that morning, the "regionals" had to drive from as far as San Diego to the Dover Air Force Base Port Mortuary in Delaware, where the remains of the Pentagon victims were transported. Many of us drove within sight of the Pentagon to get to Delaware. Others flew space-available "hops" on military aircraft.

At Dover we began the grim job of the autopsies. This was unlike a natural disaster such as a flood, hurricane or tornado, where identification and return of remains to the families would be simple tasks. We were investigating a crime unprecedented in American history.

Among the rubble of the aircraft, offices and concrete building were the remains of five terrorists who assaulted the flight crew and passengers with box cutters. As we performed the autopsies, we were mindful of the need to be meticulous as we collected evidence — and of the future prosecutions of co-conspirators at which we would be the expert witnesses.

This was no ordinary autopsy suite. In attendance were criminal investigators from the FBI, National Transportation Safety Board, Federal Aviation Administration and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. There were disaster liaison personnel from American Airlines and forensic anthropologists from the Department of Defense's Central Identification Laboratory and the Smithsonian Institute. The Red Cross and USO tended to the emotional needs of the body handlers and those restoring personal effects, many of them inexperienced and very young. Grief and stress reaction teams were needed and welcomed. We received visitors from the highest levels of every branch and agency of government.

The recovery took about two weeks. Twice daily, a CH-47 Chinook helicopter transported human remains from the Pentagon to Dover. Office occupants who were not in the direct

path of the aircraft were likely to be intact; they died from burns or smoke inhalation. Other remains were charred, and bones were calcined. Still other remains were so fragmented that the anatomic sites of the disassociated body parts were uncertain. Oftentimes a single Ziploc bag held all that remained of one or more persons.

The most disturbing 2,000 square feet of the morgue were the tabletops where personal effects were sorted and cleaned before being returned to family members. There were passports, photo IDs, cell phones, wedding rings and children's toys. All were cleaned of blood, jet fuel and firefighting residue. All analog watches had stopped at 9:37 a.m.

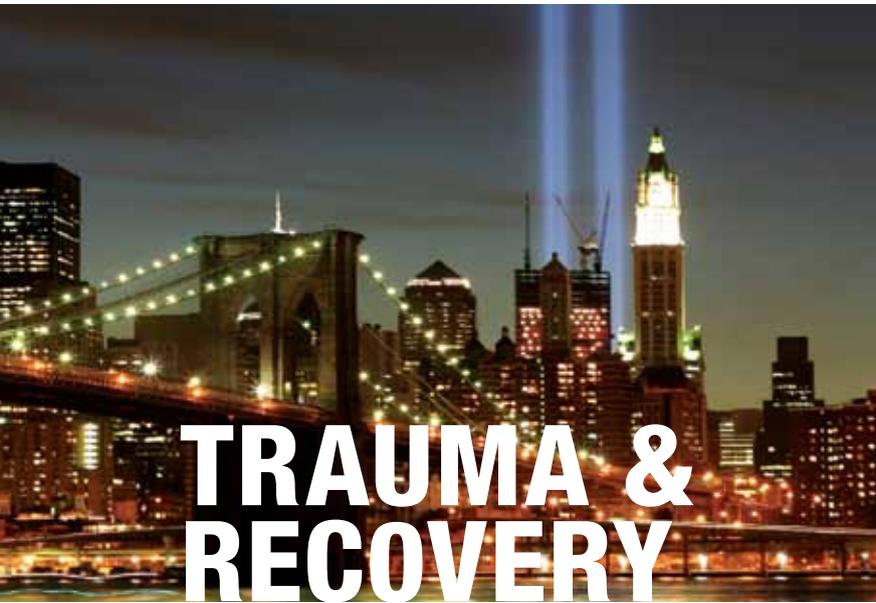
One hundred eighty-nine people perished when American Airlines Flight 77 became a weapon against the Pentagon. One hundred twenty-five of them were in the Pentagon, and 59 were aboard the aircraft. Five people — four at the Pentagon and one passenger — disappeared. Not a trace of their DNA was found.

Five DNA profiles did not match known decedents. All were male and of Middle Eastern descent. DNA has the power to elucidate ancestry.

I had my hands on two of those hijackers.

— ERIC BERG

The writer, a 1974 graduate, is a retired colonel who now works as a civilian employee for the Army. He lives in Clarksville, Tenn.



TRAUMA & RECOVERY

The two things I remember most about 9/11 are the deafening helicopters and the sickly sweet smell. I live on the Upper West Side in New York, far from the Twin Towers, so I couldn't see the disaster, but by the end of the day I could smell it and see a thin, deathlike cloud of ash against the blue sky. We all could, and it made us sick to our stomachs and souls.

Tuesday was my day off from teaching, so I was home writing when my wife called, telling me with a hint of urgency to turn on the television because a plane had apparently hit the Twin Towers. My kids, 5 and 6, were in school, and when it was clear that New York was under attack we rushed to the playground — only to be assured by the principal that they were perfectly safe, and that it was best to leave the students alone and not alarm them.

Most parents frantically grabbed their kids anyway, but we tried to stay calm. When we couldn't take it anymore and took our children out, only four other students were left. My 5-year-old, his eyes huge, said, "Did you hear about the Twin Towers?" We had visited them only a few days before.

By the afternoon, hundreds of people were streaming up the avenues from downtown, like panicked refugees. I stood helplessly on the street with my neighbor. He looked ashen; he had been waiting all day for his wife to come home. She worked in the Towers, and since cell phones were out downtown, he didn't know if she was dead or alive. Eventually she wandered onto the street like a ghost. Not long after, she quit being a financier and became a social worker.

Not all were so lucky. A second grade teacher in my children's school lost her husband. Some people were so traumatized that they left the city, but most of us reacted with a stubborn rage: You terrorist bastards think you can drive us out of the greatest city in the world? Think again! (This is the printable version of what we said.) It felt better to react with anger than with fear.

I felt fortunate to not be worrying about a loved one. It was hard enough just watching the firemen, beloved of my boys, grimly climbing onto their trucks at our local firehouse that morning to speed downtown. Many never returned, and memorials were strewn around the station for weeks. The subways all over the city were also full of memorials and desperate "missing" signs, with haunting pictures.

Within days, downtown turned into a media circus complete with gawking tourists. My friend Jules Feiffer and I vowed that we would stay away from the gross exploitation. The best way to answer the terrorists, we thought, was to go about our daily lives. A more heartening vibe from tourists was an openly expressed solidarity with New York and New Yorkers. Suddenly, we were not "The Other."

There were months of odd, panicky reverberations. A woman on a train had a meltdown when she saw my cat carrier with my 25-pound cat in it; she thought it was a bomb. A mother in our local children's museum line told everyone within earshot precisely how Al Qaeda was planning to wire explosives into our apartments. I had my worst moments in crowded subways and traffic tunnels. But for the most part, New Yorkers seemed to manage their anxieties with dignity — despite politicians' ongoing attempts to exploit them.

One thing I do in stressful times is take advantage of the city and its live art and entertainment. Right after the disaster, I braved the subway down to an eerily empty Times Square and grabbed tickets for "The Lion King." My boys wanted to see it, but seats had been impossible to get. They were easy now. The exuberant show was a perfect release, and I'll always be grateful for it.

The same week, I was asked to write about a hastily organized New York Philharmonic 9/11 memorial concert led by Kurt Masur, with the choir directed by Joseph Flummerfelt. Flummerfelt was a friend and colleague, and I remember him saying right after the tragedy, "It's so horrific that you just can't wrap your brain around it."

He was right. No one really understood the enormity of this thing. What we could wrap ourselves around was Brahms' *Requiem*, Flummerfelt's consoling and cathartic choice for the occasion.

Philharmonic audiences are notorious coughers, but this was the quietest concert I've ever heard. For a miraculous hour and ten minutes, everyone seemed emotionally and spiritually connected. At the end there was no applause, just silence. A woman next to me, a total stranger, grabbed my hand and squeezed it.

Somehow, New York got through 9/11 and its aftermath. The city is not only intact, but more vibrant than ever. No doubt this year's anniversary will ignite a new flame of morbid anxiety and self-indulgence, fully fanned by the media, and we'll have to survive that too.

I do know that 9/11, horrible as it was, made me a bit prouder to be a New Yorker — and an American.

— JACK SULLIVAN

The writer, a 1969 graduate, is professor of English and director of American Studies at Rider University.

ILLUSIONS SHATTERED

The morning of September 11, 2001, found me going about my usual tasks: getting the kids to school, making a grocery list, thinking about my next mutual fund column. That sense of normality was shattered when the phone rang, and my husband told me to turn on the television because a plane had just crashed into the World Trade Center.

As events unfolded on that heart-wrenching day, the attack on the first tower was just the beginning. Both towers fell, the Pentagon was aflame, and the heroes and heroines of Flight 93 perished in the countryside of western Pennsylvania, only a few hours from my home in Erie.

When I picked up my kids from school that afternoon, I struggled with what to tell them and how to make sense of it myself. Trying to frame the unimaginable in a context that would make sense to two boys, 11 and 9, was no easy task. I'm not sure my stumbling explanation made any sense, but I had to try to answer questions that were, in many ways, unanswerable.

In the weeks after the attacks I turned inward, focusing on my family. In a world that suddenly made no sense at all, where I had no control over what happened or what might happen, it was comforting to bake, spend time with my kids, and back off from larger concerns.

In the months after the attacks, I saw the United States invade Afghanistan and Iraq, enact the Patriot Act, and create the Department of Homeland Security in an attempt to stomp out terrorism and make the world safe again. While I shared the sense of outrage regarding the attacks — the lives lost, all the lost potential — I wasn't sure that waging two wars and wire-tapping citizens at home would prevent further attacks.

In the 10 years following the attacks, my life, just like the course of events in the United States, has changed, almost beyond recognition. My marriage ended after 20 years. I became a single parent, went back to school and built a business. I've seen my children grow up and will have an empty nest by the time this article is published, as my youngest son is leaving for college.



ISTOCKPHOTOS (2)

On the wider stage, much has also changed. The wars have dragged on, with American, Afghani and Iraqi casualties steadily climbing, and the economy has soared, crashed and now laboriously tries to keep growing. Since 2007 millions of Americans have become unemployed, many on a long-term basis, and millions more have lost their homes to foreclosures. Thankfully, there have been no more terrorist attacks here, and both Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein are dead.

But I'm not sure if we as a society, or my family as individuals, are safer. I've become convinced, based not only on what's happened on the wider stage but also in my own life, that safety, security and control are illusions. Bad things do happen. It's just a matter of degree and, to some extent, bad luck.

I've been fortunate that none of my relatives or friends was directly impacted by the 9/11 attacks, so I can't know or imagine the pain suffered by the loved ones of those who were killed. I also don't know what it's like to lose a family member in combat. But in my own universe, I've experienced painful issues that can't be easily, quickly or inexpensively resolved.

I've seen my youngest son struggle with debilitating depression, had my own bouts with anxiety, and experienced sky-high medical expenses and related financial distress. These — along with 9/11 and the financial crisis — have taken me to a place where I believe that nothing is certain in this life, whether it's dealing with external threats like international terrorism or the internal demons of mental illness.

All I can do within my private universe is to try to do the next right thing, to act with integrity and make the most of each moment. If we can do that as a society, that's about all we can do as well. We can take sensible precautions against threats, but there is no guarantee that they will succeed.

— AMY BUTTELL

The writer, a 1983 graduate, is a journalist and corporate communications specialist. Visit her blog, <http://amybuttell.wordpress.com>, or website, www.lakeeffectcreative.com.



ALTERED PERSPECTIVES

September 11, 2001, was indirectly the beginning of my relationship with the military and with my husband.

That morning, the first day of classes at Furman that year, I had to call someone in the military science department for advice about an ROTC cadet who was in one of my classes. I was worried about this student because he had taken my classes before, and I knew he was trouble.

The officer in ROTC informed me about what was going on in New York City. At that time, however, no one really knew what was happening, and I still just wanted advice about how to keep this student in line.

I went to class the next hour having no idea what was to come. As the news unfolded, we collectively wondered how the events so far away would impact us at Furman. Was it terrorism? Was it war? What was it, and how would it affect me?

I am fairly confident that 9/11 was the first time I had ever spoken with anyone in the military. It was probably the first time it had crossed my mind that I knew people in the military. Of course, back then my view of military personnel was pretty grim. They were all angry and violent, right?

A year later I met my future husband — a member of the military science department. Bill seemed so nice, not angry or violent at all. And the military people I met through him seemed nice, too — totally unlike my worst stereotypes.

My ultra-liberal parents were worried when we started dating. But even they were ultimately convinced that he was well-meaning — and he turned out to be a pretty good husband. He changed my view of people in the military, and of the reasons people go into the military. He joined because he thought it was the best way he could think of to help people. I had assumed that the only thing the military did was harm people.

September 11 changed my world in the same way it changed many other peoples' worlds. Americans came together in both fear and pride. We felt a bit less safe on our own soil and became more suspicious of "The Other." We clung together in apprehension, and this made us feel smaller.

But my world got bigger that day, too. I was called to examine my stereotypes and knew I needed to challenge them. I had to continue to teach Furman students despite my fears and theirs, and I had to work even harder to make sure that my philosophical lessons were relevant. I had a new "teachable moment."

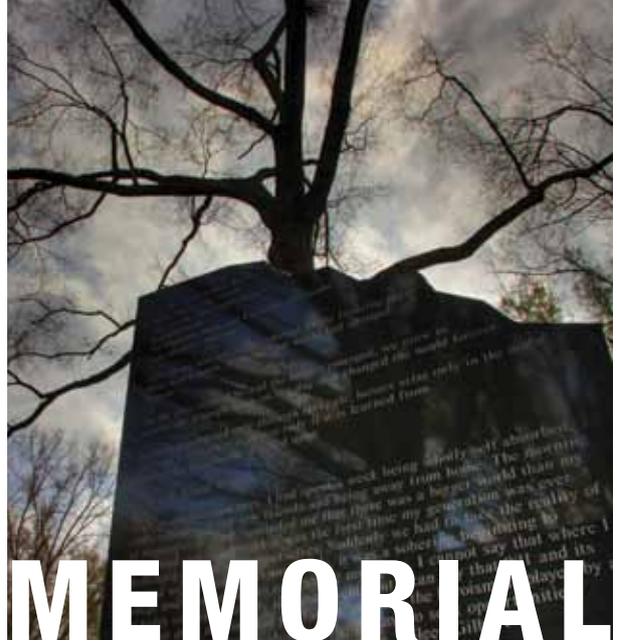
Ten years later, I teach in the same (though now renovated) Furman Hall classrooms that I did that infamous day, and my world has changed, but my students have changed, too. Although 9/11 is one of those "flashbulb" dates — people remember clearly where they were when they learned about the attacks — most members of the 2011 freshman class were born in 1993 and were only 8 when the planes crashed. They do not remember the New York City skyline with the Twin Towers, and they do not remember clearly what America was like before the attack. They know what their parents tell them, and they learn its significance in history class, along with the Challenger crash and the Vietnam War. It is all ancient history for them.

I eventually became an "Army wife." Not really, though, since my husband tells me regularly that I married him and not the Army. And not really, since he was "only" in the Reserves. But I insist on the title, because I spent 14 months in fear when he went to Baghdad in 2006-07. I gave birth to twins while he was away, and they spent their first seven months without their dad. They will live their lives learning about the attacks only from history books.

The reason I was willing to talk to Bill in the first place was because with 9/11, I needed to expand my world and reduce my fear. I was willing to love him because I needed to make bigger who I was and who I was willing to be open to. He was one of the least likely candidates for me in terms of finding a husband, but just as the world changed that day, so did I.

— SARAH E. WORTH

The writer, a 1992 graduate, joined the philosophy faculty in 1999. Photo by Jeremy Fleming.



A LASTING MEMORIAL

I can still recall the sense of anticipation

I felt years ago as I approached the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C.

My father was a Medevac pilot in Vietnam, where he flew a helicopter to transport the dead and dying from the battlefields. He rarely speaks of his war experiences, and I was hopeful that the memorial would reveal to me something of those deep memories he held within. My young fingers traced over the names of friends he lost in the war. I stood in awe of the 58,209 names inscribed in the black stone, and I could understand just a little of my father's past.

Little did I know at the time that, years later, I would have the honor of designing a memorial myself — the 9/11 Memorial on Furman's campus, which was the senior gift provided by the Class of 2005.

Most of us have asked our parents or grandparents where they were when Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon, when Challenger exploded, when the Berlin Wall fell, or when Pearl Harbor was raided. But all of us have our own memories of where we were when the terrorists launched their attacks 10 years ago. My classmates and I had the unique experience of being excited, nervous freshmen starting our first day of college classes on September 11, 2001. What a mix of emotions we felt.

A memorial tells a story and represents a piece of history. It was a challenge to design a sculpture in memory of the 9/11 attacks, and as I did so I couldn't help but think of the impact the Vietnam War Memorial had on me. I tried to create something that would honor the memory of the almost 3,000 people who died, and the effect it had on our country.

The 9/11 Memorial on campus has two stone pillars that commemorate the Twin Towers. One pillar is broken, representing the lives cut short and the pain and violation our nation felt. I hope that people will remember those whose lives were lost in the attacks, and honor the 343 firefighters and 60 policemen who died in an effort to save others.

The other pillar is whole and represents the unity, patriotism and love for our country that emerged from this tragedy. I'll never forget the thousands of U.S. flags that flew in the weeks following the attacks. Race, social class and political parties didn't matter. We were determined to help each other recover from the blow.

I hope that when new students, alumni and visitors pass through the stone pillars at Furman, they will sense some of that love for one another and for our country. The monument and the recollections of my classmates recorded there offer an opportunity for us to share our memories with our children and with future generations.

Just as the Vietnam War Memorial helped me connect to a part of my father's life, I hope the 9/11 Memorial at Furman will help others connect to a piece of our past. Perhaps their fingers can trace over the stories engraved on the stones and allow them to better understand what the experience was like for us.

—ANNA MARTIN WINTER

*The writer, a 2005 graduate, lives in Tyrone, Ga., and is a farmer, artist, birth educator and mother of two.
Photo by Nathan Guinn.*

This fall, as part of the commemoration of the 10th anniversary of 9/11, the Office of the Chaplains is sponsoring a program titled "From the Ground Up." In addition to formal ceremonies on September 11, the series will feature lectures about different faith traditions and a university-wide service project. Learn more at www.fromthegroundupfurman.com.