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An Engineer's Expertise Joins a Firefighter's Nightmare

By Chuck Hagee
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There have been thousands of stories written about the heroics of first responders on Sept. 11, 2001. But, as with any such moment in history, there are always those episodes that are missed. This is one of them.

Two groups rushing to the Pentagon that fateful morning were the firefighters from the Fort Belvoir Fire Department and a contingent of engineers from Headquarters Battalion, USAG Fort Belvoir, Military District of Washington.

For both it was a professional response that became very personal. That was particularly true for Sgt. 1st Class Fred Brown, an engineer with the light rescue platoon.

Both the firefighters and the Army engineers were flown by helicopter from Belvoir's Davison Army Airfield to Fort McNair, where they joined other units, military and civilian, involved in the Pentagon disaster.

"Ironically, we were conducting classes about rescue techniques when we were told of the planes hitting the World Trade Center," said Staff Sgt. Mark Williams. "My team was one of the initial response groups and one of the first to enter the building upon our arrival at the site. "I still remember it didn't even look real to me. My first reaction when we went in was, this is really hot. It felt like we were cooking. We went in immediately to the left of the impact area."

AS FATE WOULD have it, that is exactly where the office of Fort Belvoir's new commanding officer, Col. Thomas Williams, who took command on July 11, 2002, had been just moments before. On that day the only connection between Williams and the men who would be part of his future assignment was fire, destruction and death.

Col. Williams was not in the area of his office at the moment of impact. But two who were paid the ultimate price, and another suffered severe burns, from which he is still recovering. "One of my most vivid memories is water from the burst pipes hitting me on the back of my neck," said Sgt. Williams. "Things were melting all around us. The carpet under our feet, computers, furniture, everything was melting.

"Since we do not have protective gear or oxygen for that type of situation, like the firefighters, we got out and were seeking air. It was like being in hell."

Williams' unit then began to set up for follow-up teams. On one of those teams was Sgt. Fred Brown. "My initial team went to work with the firefighters from Fairfax County. The building was still on fire, and there was even fire in the water when we started the shoring. This was after we made sure there were no more victims still alive," Brown explained.

IT WAS CRITICAL TO get the shoring in place to prevent further collapse of the building. This meant moving huge 6-by-6 pressure-treated timbers. "It was the largest crib shore ever built in the shortest amount of time," Brown emphasized. He explained constructing a "crib shore" as equivalent to putting together Lincoln Logs, only on a massive scale.

"Working on the shoring with the building still burning was particularly tricky. Our guys were working when slate started flying through the air as it was breaking off from the heat and stress," he said.

"We were working around the clock. I wanted to work at night. It's better. You can get more done," Brown said. But in order to get the proper footing for the shoring, a mountain of debris

had to be cleared.

"As we cleared areas, we just threw stuff out of the way. Nobody was really looking at anything. Then someone came up to me and handed me a briefcase. It had been torn open and for some reason, with this one piece of litter, I glanced down and saw a bank deposit slip with the name Martha Reszke. The case belonged to my mother-in-law," Brown recalled.

"The plane had gone in right where she was located as part of the budget analyst office. The guys began working themselves to death to clear this huge area to try and find her under the debris."

He said his mother-in-law had died in the crash. "We were only partially successful [in finding the body]. It's one of things I'm still dealing with," he admitted.

Sgt. Michael Mills entered the right side of the opening with another team. "We had been training rescuers at the Dewitt Hospital on base when we got the call. We grabbed all the equipment we thought we'd need. When we got there, we immediately started searching, but there was no one to be found," he said.

"We came out and reported to body recovery and identification. I don't recall sleeping at all for the first three days. It all seemed like one long day. It didn't seem real. It was almost like seeing something on the news happening in some third-world country," Mills remembered.

SEVERAL MONTHS AFTER the attack, Mills was eating dinner on base, and a chaplain came up to him wearing bandages. "He came over to thank me for helping to save him. He was a chaplain at the Pentagon and a burn victim," he explained.

Lt. Col. Mark R. Lindon, Commander, Headquarters Battalion at Belvoir, was conducting a garrison control exercise. The object was to test the security at the base in case of a terrorist attack. That training exercise went operational that morning.

"I was out checking on the exercise and heard about the World Trade Center on my car radio. As soon as it was established that this was no accident, we went to a complete security mode. Some people waited up to three hours to get on base that day," Lindon recalled.

"Throughout the next 10 days, I was operating security either here or at the Pentagon. But it was amazing how everyone pitched in and cooperated instantaneously. At one point we had to go to Home Depot to buy 10,000 nails for all the shoring. It was no problem," Lindon said. Those working at the site received helicopter deliveries of a wide variety of items to keep them going. Included on that list were pizza and underwear, according to the engineers and firefighters.

"Although there were a variety of people, both military and civilian, working on the situation, after a short period of time they all came together as one organization. They were a family," Lindon noted.

PART OF THAT FAMILY are the 40 firefighters who comprise the Fort Belvoir department. That day they participated with their counterparts from Fairfax County, Alexandria, and Arlington. And, like all who answer the call to that profession, they know that at any given moment they can be looking at eternity, eyeball to eyeball.

"Although my first day at the Pentagon was Sept. 13, we worked in shifts with the other companies and the engineers right from the beginning. One of our hazmat units stayed at the site throughout the next week, supporting other units," said Capt. Bruce Sullivan, Fort Belvoir Fire Department. "It was amazing how everyone chipped in together."

For firefighter/paramedic Chris Craft, it was truly a baptism of fire. Sept. 11 was his second day on the job.

"We flew to the Pentagon by chopper, prepared to do air transport for victims. Unfortunately we didn't have anything to do, because there were so few victims who survived," Craft said.

"We left by 6 p.m. to change chopper crews."

That was the same reaction from two other Belvoir firefighter/paramedics, Wilbur Willingham and Russell Pearson. "The chief came by and took us to the airfield because the National Guard was short of medics. Once we got to the Pentagon, we joined in the other crews but there were no patients," Willingham said.

"I was off duty that day but came in before 11 a.m. We were on the second chopper off the base. But those who had survived had already been taken to the designated hospital when we arrived," according to Pearson.

BUT, UNLIKE THE building, which has been reconstructed in record time, the human reconstruction is still a work in progress. Primary to that reconstruction is a reorientation of priorities.

"I served as a family casualty officer for one of the people killed at the Pentagon that day," Lindon explained. "When you work there, you don't think about this type of thing happening. You think the greatest danger is getting to and from work on the highway."

"It has taught me to arrange things in life better and to make sure my family is fully informed of all the things you just take for granted. They are now aware of my will, insurance policies, and a lot of other details."

William admitted, "I take life a lot more seriously now, but I also enjoy it more since last September." Mills said that his experience that day had altered his priorities. "Things I took so seriously before I don't anymore, and other things are more serious to me today."

That awareness of the seriousness of their mission has filtered to the entire 65-member unit, according to Lindon. "The engineers have a unique mission. They get a lot of training that many thought they would never use. That day at the Pentagon they had to use it all and then some. They take training a lot more seriously now," he said.

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