

Sept. 11 stirs up retiree's memories

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8:20 a.m., Sept. 11, 2001. American Airlines Flight 77 takes off from Dulles International Airport, near Washington, D.C., bound for Los Angeles.

8:30 a.m., Sept. 11, 2001. Brigadier General Paul Kimmel, USAF - now retired and a Palm Coast resident - is in the high-tech briefing room at the Pentagon. As CEO for the Air National Guard, he attends many such high-level, chief-of-staff meetings. It seems a normal day.

On this Tuesday, as on the second Tuesday of each month, the Pentagon conducts special briefings on "black world activities" - things not normally in the news. Ironically, this day's briefing is on anti- and counter-terrorism.

Gen. John P. Jumper, current chief of staff of the United States Air Force, and James G. Roach, secretary of the Air Force, are present in the small amphitheater.

"I'm in the cheap seats because I'm only a One-Star," Kimmel recalled. On the presentation screen, faces of terrorists from around the world are being shown, and terrorist incidents described.

9 a.m. Flight 77 is missing on radar. No one in the Pentagon is aware of any danger.

In the Pentagon briefing room, a picture appears on the screen. American Airlines Flight 11, from Boston headed to Los Angeles, is shown earlier, at 8:45 a.m., crashing into the World Trade Center's North Tower.

"At first we thought it was part of the briefing," said Kimmel. "The briefers stopped talking and there was silence in the room."

A minute later, the CNN logo popped up, and shortly afterward, United Airlines Flight 175, from Boston headed to Los Angeles, was on the screen. "We saw the second plane turn and slam into the tower."

It was 9:20 a.m. - 17 minutes after the 9:03 crash.

"We sat there stunned. I will never forget Gen. Jumper's words. "Well, ladies and gentlemen," he said. "I think the meeting is adjourned. We have some work to do."

Kimmel was scheduled for a second meeting in the Pentagon. He started to walk to it, changed his mind, and called his driver. They crossed the highway to the Jefferson Plaza, where Kimmel was working while his Pentagon office was being renovated.

"I got out of the car to walk into our building and heard the explosion."

He raced up to his 12th-floor office and looked over to see the American Airlines plane planted in the southwest fifth of the Pentagon. His meeting was scheduled for 9:30 a.m.; the plane crashed into the building at 9:38.

"It was havoc, obviously, but the first thing that went through my mind was that I was hacked off."

You have to understand: He had survived four combat tours, two in Vietnam, had been shot at countless times, and didn't want the end to come while working in a desk job at the Pentagon.

Kimmel's wife, Melody, also in the military, knew her husband was at a meeting in the Pentagon, but a staff member in the Air National Guard assured her that Kimmel was safe. The two didn't speak until long afterward.

At the Pentagon, plumes of smoke were rising from the 60-year-old structure - the center of America's military power. All 64 on board Flight 77 were dead. Two million square feet of the Pentagon were damaged or destroyed. Eventually, another 189 lives would be lost.

Kimmel conferred with his boss, Gen. Paul Weaver, who told him to get out to Andrews Air Force Base to run the Air National Guard CAT (Crisis Action Team). He and his executive officer covered the 17-mile trip in 12 minutes, racing past the White House at 100 m.p.h. on the road built as an emergency escape route for the president.

Andrews wasn't locked down yet, and when Kimmel arrived, his mind was racing. The Air National Guard had 14 planes ready to launch. Nobody knew the extent of the attack or what was going to happen next.

"My job was to get folks ready to do whatever it took," he recalled. His first call was to Maj. Gen. Larry Arnold, commander of 1st Air Force. "He said to get everything we've got in the National Guard ready and loaded." That meant 89 different flying units, and 200 other kinds of geographically separated units.

"I felt so proud of our people," Kimmel said. "They were showing up on their own, doing the right thing. In the first four hours, 65,000 showed up at the base. That's the kind of people we have in the guard. In the military, you go on automatic. We knew it could have been 'way more extensive. You do whatever you can do for the worst case."

In his view, the terrorists had total knowledge of the way in which American airliners would respond to a hijacking: passively, clearing everyone out of the way and allowing the plane to go where the hijackers chose.

"The military had radar fixed offshore to look for intruders, but had no radar focused into the interior of the country, and the terrorists knew that."

This has since been changed.

9:40 a.m. Air space within 25 miles around New York City and Washington, D.C. has been declared inviolate. "The FAA, civil aviation and the military did a magnificent job," Kimmel noted, "responding to something they never trained for."

9:42 a.m. The FAA halts all air traffic nationwide, for the first time in U. S. history, and orders all planes to land at the nearest airport. It would be five days before Kimmel left Andrews and went home. Three months later, he was back in his office, coordinating deployment of various guard units to Afghanistan.

Two years after the attack, Kimmel retired, but one image still vivid in his mind is the side of the Pentagon . . . draped with an American flag.

Cutline: Gen. Paul Kimmel poses in front of some of his framed memorabilia - some from the Pentagon, where he barely missed being caught on Sept. 11.

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