

"I NEVER FORGOT": THE SOLDIER

25 YEARS AGO, A WETHERSFIELD, CONN. NATIVE AND NOW-RETIRED U.S. ARMY VETERAN WAS ONE OF THE FIRST TO RESPOND TO THE PENTAGON ON 9/11. HE SPENT THE NEXT 7 WEEKS CONFRONTING WHAT THE ATTACK LEFT BEHIND.



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It was a cold January in 2001, Major Carl Ey stood inside Washington's Ronald Reagan Building awaiting the arrival of the newly inaugurated President of the United States.

The Wethersfield, Connecticut, native and U.S. Army major had been assigned to the committee organizing President George W. Bush's January 2001 inauguration. As deputy director of special events, Ey was responsible for the military support behind an inaugural ball—the first ever held inside the Ronald Reagan Building. Shortly before the president arrived, Bush's military aide approached Ey with simple instructions: The new commander in chief was nervous. When Bush stepped off the elevator, Ey was to be the uniformed officer waiting to guide him.

Soon, the president and first lady were walking toward him.

"I said, 'Good evening, sir. Congratulations,'" Ey recalled.

He welcomed First Lady Laura Bush and introduced the first couple to the evening's entertainers. It was a brief encounter during a celebratory night in the nation's capital—one of those rare moments when Ey found himself standing close to history.

Less than eight months later, and 4 miles away, history would find him again.

This time, there would be no music, evening gowns or celebration.

There would be a blackened hole torn through the Pentagon, people fleeing toward the highway and Ey moving in the opposite direction

By his recollection, he was among the first eight or nine responders to reach the area immediately in front of the impact site—and possibly the first Army officer there apart from the soldier driving him.

"When I got there, there was nothing there," Ey recalled. "The thing that struck me when I first got there was this big black hole—all five stories—and combustion fires."

Turn on the radio

By September 11, 2001, the inaugural assignment was well over with and Ey had returned to his regular position as an Army operations officer at Fort McNair in southwest Washington.

His unit operated military communications networks along the East Coast. On an ordinary morning, that work meant telephone and computer systems—not establishing emergency communications outside a burning building.

Ey began that Tuesday with a dental appointment. Afterward, he got into his car and called his mother.

"Hey, Mom," he said.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

Ey assumed she meant the appointment.

"Yeah, it was just a checkup."

"No, no, no," she told him. "Turn on the radio."

The World Trade Center had been attacked.

Ey headed back to Fort McNair. By the time he arrived, American Airlines Flight 77 had already crashed into the Pentagon. People stood on a loading dock near his office, crying.

Then his commanding officer, a colonel, came outside.

"Get the government van," he ordered. "We're going to get the mission. We need to figure out how we talk down there."

Their first trip was reconnaissance. The Army would need to establish communications at the Pentagon, and Ey had to determine what personnel, equipment and infrastructure would be required.

He climbed into the van and headed across the Potomac River.

"It was that quick," Ey said.

By his recollection, he was among the first eight or nine responders to reach the area immediately in front of the impact site—and possibly the first Army officer there apart from the soldier driving him.

"When I got there, there was nothing there," Ey recalled. "The thing that struck me when I first got there was this big black hole—all five stories—and combustion fires."

The largest office building in the world had become not only a disaster site but a crime scene as well.

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Going the other way

The side of the Pentagon where Ey stood was removed from much of the evacuation unfolding elsewhere. The aircraft had devastated three corridors. Those who escaped had largely gone in another direction.

But along the building's flank, Ey watched people run toward the highway.

One woman remains fixed in his memory. Wearing a skirted business suit and high heels, she ran toward a pickup truck traveling south and waved it down.

"She grabs her heels in one hand, hikes her skirt up in the other and hurdles herself over the side of the pickup truck because she wanted to get as far away as she could," Ey recalled.

Others flagged down construction vehicles and plumbing vans, climbing inside without concern for where they were going. They wanted only to escape.

No one knew whether another aircraft was coming. There were fears that the White House, bridges or other landmarks might be attacked next.

"It was like an end-of-the-world scene," Ey said.

The woman climbing into the pickup truck crystallized the reality of the moment.

"I thought to myself, 'Man, she's scared and she's leaving—and I'm going the other way.'"

By this time Ey's career, we had already deployed to Somalia and witnessed the realities of death. He knew the scene at the Pentagon would be horrific, but his previous experience allowed him to remain focused.



Medical personnel and volunteers work the first medical triage area set up outside the Pentagon after a hijacked commercial airliner crashed into the southwest corner of the building on Sept. 11, 2001. (U.S. Navy photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Mark D. Faram)

first little separated him from the expanding response except an Army uniform, a military identification card and a government van. Police lines and security checkpoints were still taking shape. Ey drove between the Pentagon and Fort McNair, reporting what he saw and calculating what his unit would need.

It was not yet time to process the enormity of the attack. There was work to do.

Establishing communications

The Pentagon's construction created an immediate problem. Its dense layers of concrete prevented conventional tactical radios from reliably transmitting into the damaged interior.

"It was hard to broadcast into that hole," Ey said. "We couldn't use a tactical radio like you see in the movies—the backpack radios—because they didn't work."

Ey identified space on the Pentagon lawn where soldiers could erect tents, establish an operations center and run communications lines. His unit needed to extend telephone service from within the building and provide equipment that allowed recovery personnel to communicate while operating inside.

By approximately 6 p.m., the Army's communications area was operating.

Around 5:45 that evening, Ey heard a sergeant answer one of the telephones.

"Well, tell the parents to come get him," the sergeant said.

Then his voice changed.

"Oh."

There was a daycare facility on the opposite side of the Pentagon. Most children had been collected, but some remained. In the confusion following the attack, officials could not simply call an alternate guardian and permit that person to cross a secured perimeter.

Ey never investigated the circumstances of the individual families. Some parents may have been injured and unable to reach the daycare. Others may have been among those killed.

"He really felt bad," Ey recalled of the sergeant. "I'll never forget it, because his voice was like, 'Oh, man.' We knew what it could mean."

Ey remained at the Pentagon until approximately 3 a.m. When he finally returned home, he discovered that his answering machine was full. Friends and former acquaintances—including people he had not heard from in years—had called because they knew he worked near the Pentagon.

For the first time that day, he stopped.

He drank a Gatorade, turned on SportsCenter and sat there for 15 or 20 minutes before falling asleep.

Roughly three hours later, he got up and returned to the Pentagon.

That became his life for the next seven weeks.

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Inside the black hole

On the third night, Ey stood near the opening in the Pentagon as a recovery detail from the Army's Old Guard emerged in protective clothing. The team had brought four recovery bags from the building. A doctor remained on site around the clock to examine recovered remains and formally pronounce the victims dead. Military chaplains and religious representatives rotated through the site to offer prayers or the appropriate rites. The remains were then placed inside refrigerated trucks and transported to Dover Air Force Base for identification and preparation for burial. One of the soldiers who emerged that night stopped near Ey. "How are you doing, Sergeant?" Ey asked. The soldier initially answered with what Ey recognized as forced composure. "Cool, sir." Ey looked at him. "Are you really cool right now?" The soldier's demeanor changed. He explained that many of the victims had been found facedown and badly burned. When soldiers lifted them, however, they sometimes found the front of the person's uniform—and the person's identity—still recognizable. "I see their name tag," the sergeant told him. "I see their decorations. I see their ribbons. I see their face." His voice trailed off. He lowered his head and stared at his boots. "I knew he was just having an emotional moment," Ey said. Ey had witnessed death during his overseas service, but the exchange helped him recognize what the recovery mission was doing to soldiers who had never experienced anything resembling it. The daily process was methodical. Firefighters entered first and determined how far recovery personnel could safely travel without the damaged structure collapsing. FBI teams followed, collecting evidence inside what was now on teams enter with stretchers and recovery bags. No survivors remained in that section of the Pentagon. Day after day, the teams went back inside.

They need a break'

After approximately two weeks, one of the fire departments operating at the Pentagon began packing its equipment. The movement surprised Army personnel inside the operations center because the department had not first notified the military command. A fire captain was called over and asked what his department was doing. "My guys have been here for two weeks," Ey recalled the captain saying. "They go in that hole every day, stepping over dead bodies. They need a break." Another fire department would take its place. The explanation forced Army leaders to look at their own personnel differently. Military culture at the time emphasized completing the mission, but the fire captain had recognized that his people could not continue entering the Pentagon indefinitely without relief. Commanders began discussing the condition of their soldiers. Some acknowledged that their troops were struggling. That was when the Army decided to implement rotations. "That, to me, in my career, was like, 'Whoa—we care about mental health here. This is good!,'" Ey said. There would be no expectation that soldiers silently absorb everything they encountered. "We weren't going to say, 'I know you're seeing the dead here, but suck it up, soldier,'" he said. "We weren't going to do that anymore." The attack had occurred on American soil, within sight of monuments and government buildings familiar to everyone stationed in Washington. Unlike the older more senior members of the military who had deployed to foreign combat zones, many of the younger soldiers participating in the recovery had never been surrounded by death. Now they were recovering fellow service members and civilians whose uniforms, name tags and faces they could still recognize.



Medical personnel and volunteers work the first medical triage area set up outside the Pentagon after a hijacked commercial airliner crashed into the southwest corner of the building on Sept. 11, 2001. (U.S. Navy photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Mark D. Faram)

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What he saw

In the years that followed, conspiracy theories claimed that an airliner never struck the Pentagon.

Ey does not become offended when younger people ask him about those claims. Many were either very young on September 11 or had not yet been born. Their understanding of the attack comes from history lessons, online videos and social-media posts—not personal memory.

His answer remains uncomplicated.

“I saw parts of the plane,” he said.

The aircraft’s impact and the resulting explosion left no intact fuselage sitting on the Pentagon lawn. Ey remembered scattered debris, including what appeared to be part of a wheel or wing. He later saw a piece of fuselage placed in the back of a pickup truck.

“It was literally a missile,” he said of the hijacked aircraft. “It exploded.”

In 2001, people did not carry modern smartphones capable of instantly recording high-quality photographs and videos. The Pentagon was also unlike Lower Manhattan, where tourists, news organizations and thousands of residents carried cameras. Photography was restricted around the building, and witnesses who saw the aircraft approaching were concerned with surviving—not documenting it.

“We had flip phones,” Ey said. “We didn’t take pictures.”

For Ey, there is no mystery about what struck the building.

“I know what happened,” he said. “I know who’s dead. I know how many people died in that aircraft.”

He is willing to answer questions from those who were not alive to witness it. What troubles him are claims that the United States somehow deserved the attacks.

“Nobody deserved what happened there,” he said.

As for the theories, Ey returns to the evidence before his own eyes.

“I just know what I saw,” he said. “To my dying day, I’m going to tell people what I saw.”

A Soldier first, a Connecticut native second

Long before September 11, Ey’s understanding of service and history began at home in Connecticut.

His father, Bruce Ey, originally from Bridgeport, served in World War II, Korea and Vietnam. During World War II, he served as a Gunner and a radio operator in the U.S. Army Air Corps with the “mighty 8th”, belief being held for approximately six months as a prisoner of war in Germany.

After retiring from the military, he returned to Connecticut and worked at the state Veterans Home in Rocky Hill. The family eventually settled in Wethersfield.

“I just grew up in Connecticut,” Ey said. “It’s all I ever knew. Wethersfield was where I grew up. Loved it there.”

As a child studying World War II, Ey could turn to his father and hear what the history books left out.

“I realized that he had kind of lived history as well as experienced it,” he said. “He was like a walking history book.”

His father encouraged him to join ROTC while attending the University of Connecticut. Ey went on to build an Army career that took him to Korea, Somalia, Germany, the Sinai and Washington.

His own military service eventually placed him inside history, too.

Ey later served as a Department of Defense spokesperson and worked for the U.S. House of Representatives as director of business continuity and disaster recovery. The professional relationships he formed during the September 11 response and the anthrax attacks that followed helped lead him to the congressional position.

But Connecticut always remained home.

“I love Connecticut,” he said. “I love Wethersfield. It’s a great town. To me, it’s small-town America.”

He is equally proud of UConn, where his Army career began through ROTC and where he later served on the alumni association’s national board of directors.

“I’m really proud of how far UConn has come,” he said. “I’m proud of my alma mater, and I’m proud that it’s on the map.”

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Teaching those who cannot remember

Years after retiring from the Army, Ey moved with his wife and daughter to the Columbus, Ohio, area. He returned to school at Ohio State University—not because he needed another credential, but because he wanted to build a network in a new community. Ey, then in his 50s and already holding three master’s degrees, enrolled in graduate courses alongside students in their 20s. Shortly before one September 11 anniversary, a professor asked whether Ey had served in the military and whether he had any connection to the attacks.

“Well, yeah,” Ey answered.

The professor asked him to speak for five minutes about his experience and then take questions for another five.

Ey agreed.

Forty-five minutes later, he was still standing before the class.

The students had been infants, toddlers or not yet born when the attacks occurred. Ey answered patiently, telling them what he had personally witnessed.

“If you ever talk to somebody about the conspiracy,” he told them, “you can say you knew somebody in class who was there that day and saw pieces of the plane.”

In Washington, nearly everyone Ey encountered had some connection to the attack. They had been inside the Pentagon, knew someone who worked there or remembered watching their city close around them.

Ohio was different. The people Ey met remembered where they were and what they feared, but many had not experienced the lasting transformation that followed in New York, Washington, or Pennsylvania.

September 11 changed security at the Pentagon, altered air travel and reshaped the everyday routines of millions of Americans.

“A whole world changed,” Ey said.

He fears that, as the eyewitness generation grows older and September 11 recedes further into history, the country is forgetting both the attack and the unity that followed it.

“On 9/12, we as a country didn’t care if you were Republican, Democrat, Black, white, gay, straight,” he said of the period after the attacks. “We were just Americans.”

Twenty-five years later, that unity is among the things Ey most wants the next generation to understand.

He also wants them to recognize that the threats exposed on September 11 did not simply disappear. His years living and serving abroad taught him that many Americans remain insulated from the hostility that exists beyond the country’s borders.

“I think people are forgetting,” Ey said. “I think people are a little off their guard, and I think we should be very, very careful.”

Ey couldn’t give his fellow classmates in Ohio a memory of September 11. He couldn’t make them feel what it was like to see people fleeing the Pentagon or to stand outside that black hole as soldiers carried the dead into daylight.

What he can do is tell them where he was.

He can tell them what he saw.

He can tell them about the frightened woman who climbed into a stranger’s pickup truck—and why he — a soldier from Connecticut — was traveling in the opposite direction.

And to his dying day, he says, that is exactly what he will do.



Photo: unfurling ceremony at the Pentagon, Washington, D.C., Sept. 11, 2026. (DoW photo by U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Madelyn Keech)
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