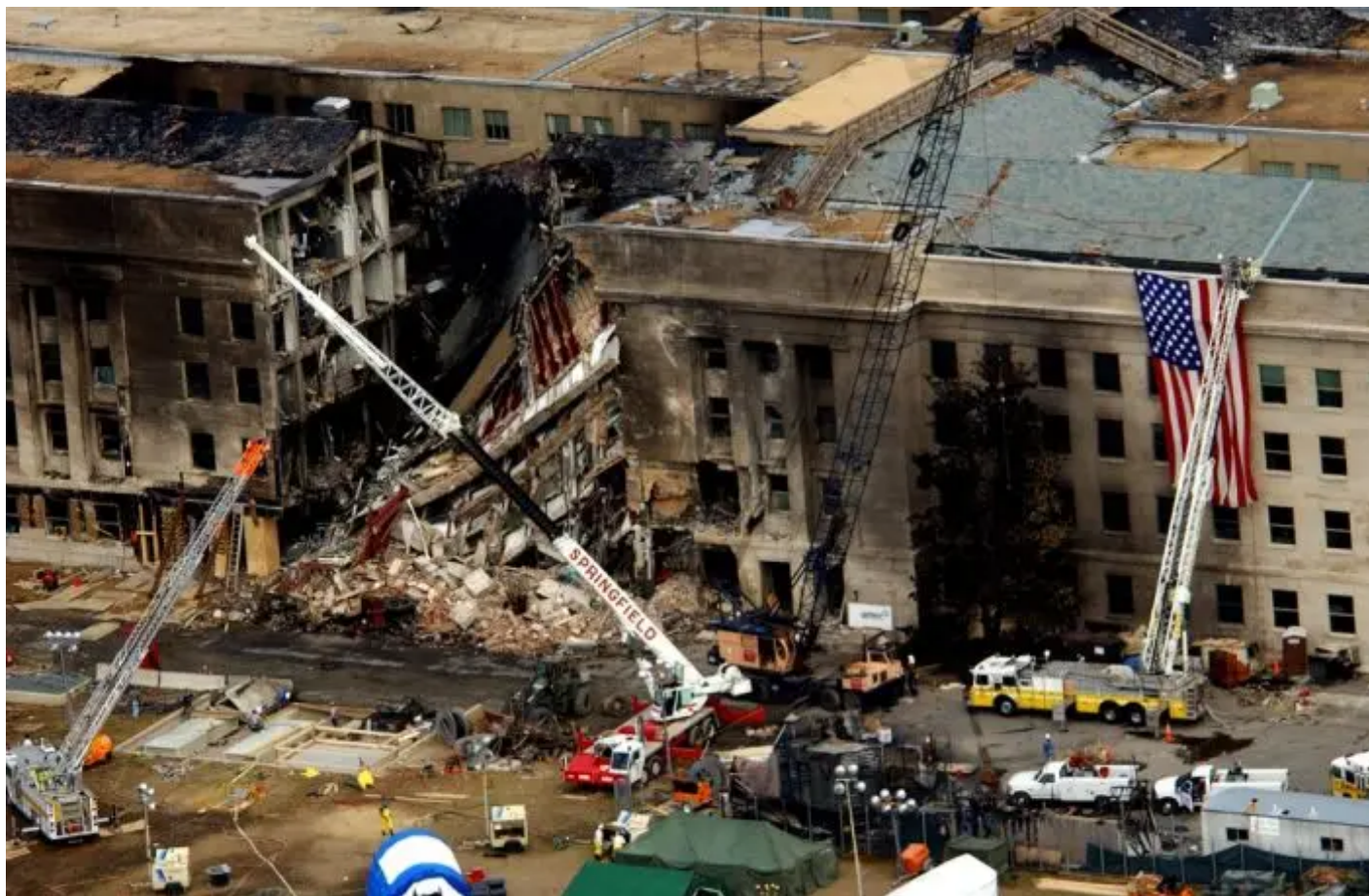


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FBI agents, firefighters, rescue workers and engineers work at the Pentagon crash site on Sept. 14, 2001, three days after a hijacked American Airlines flight slammed into the building on Sept. 11. (Photo submitted)

"It really was a bomb"

Area man recalls scene at Pentagon on 9/11

By Michael Williamson

On Sept. 11, 2001, Union County, like much of the world, watched the events in New York City, Washington, D.C. and rural Pennsylvania unfold over national news broadcasts on television.

Carl Ey, a resident of the Plain City area, was there, in person.

Twenty-five years ago he was a major in the U.S. Army and responded to the attack at the Pentagon, seeing firsthand the fire and black smoke billowing from the building's side, as he responded to the scene. American Airlines Flight 77 had slammed into the western wall of the government office, killing 64 people on the plane and 125 people in the building.

Ey was 35 years old at the time and stationed across the Potomac River at Fort McNair when he became one of the first people on-site after the attack.

"I show up to the front lawn of the Pentagon where the plane went in and it was one of the eeriest feelings ever," he said. "We had no idea at the time – something's going on but we don't know if it's a mistake, a computer error, planes flying over. We don't know that it's a terrorist attack."

9/11/01

In the early morning hours of Sept. 11, four planes took off from various east coast airports for seemingly routine flights.

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Ey

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One of the planes was Flight 77, which took off from Washington, D.C. on its way to Los Angeles, at 8:20 a.m.

Sixteen minutes after it took off, the first of the four planes crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center in New York City. Seven minutes after that, another plane crashed into the South Tower.

A half-hour later, more than 200 miles away in Washington, D.C., Flight 77 crashed into the Pentagon. Then, just after 10 a.m., Flight 93 crashed into a field outside Shanksville, PA. The four planes were hijacked by Middle-Eastern terrorists executing a plot to attack the United States. Nearly 3,000 people perished in the event that would reshape the American landscape for years to come.

For Ey, that morning didn't start out as a life-changing event. In fact, it was a fairly routine Tuesday.

Apart from a morning dentist appointment, he started his day, called his mother, just like he did everyday.

"I called in the morning and she said, 'Are you OK?' And I said, 'Mom, it's just a dental check-up.' She said, 'No, no, no. Don't you see what's going on?'" Ey recalled. "She said, 'Turn the radio on. The Twin Towers are getting attacked and so is the Pentagon.'"

Ey returned to his post at Ft. McNair where he could look across the river and see the smoke. He was told immediately by a superior to get a government van and head to the Pentagon. As an Army operations officer, it was Ey's job to help establish communications at the incident site. When he arrived, he saw the crash site but didn't really see evidence of a plane.

Ey first spoke with a Pentagon police officer and asked the man where the plane was. The officer pointed to the large hole in the side of the building where two pickup trucks were carting away pieces of what was left of the Boeing 757.

"It really was a bomb," Ey said. "It hit that building and exploded. There wasn't a wing, a tail left, there were remnants."

Reports indicated that the aircraft hit the E Ring at the first deck level between Corridors 4 and 5 and the plane's path of destruction ended in the alley between the C Ring and B Ring, nearly 300 feet away.

Ey said that the eerie feeling settled in immediately as he watched Pentagon office workers run from the site to nearby I-395 where they jumped into the first passing vehicle that would take them away.

"I see this woman – and a bunch of people – but this one woman in particular is running toward the highway. She's in a business suit with a skirt and this guy in a pickup truck pulls over...she pulls her high heels off, hikes her skirt up and jumps over the tailgate to get into the back of the truck because she just wanted to get out," Ey said. "And that was going on all around me."

The plane crashed into a portion of the building where there were no exits, Ey said. So people inside were pouring out of the nearest doors they could find, terrified and scrambling to get to safety.

"This is like those end-of-the-world movie kind of scenes," Ey said, looking back. "I turned back around, was going toward the hole and was thinking: what the heck am I doing?"

Ey got to work and nearly eight hours later, the incident's operations center was set up where he would spend the next seven and a half weeks.

The Pentagon and beyond

Ey served as Army operations officer for the Army Signal Activity at the time of the attacks. While there, he established communications and helped support many of the rescue and recovery efforts at the Pentagon. His job was to make sure everyone could speak to each other through some kind of radio communications. He said one of the devices that worked best initially was the Nextel phone but eventually crews ran telephone lines into the site.

In those nearly eight weeks of work, Ey spent from 6:30 a.m. until about 1:30 a.m. everyday at the site until the last week when shifts lowered to 12-hour days. He lived in Springfield, VA at the time, about 15 minutes southwest of the site, and would travel back and forth each day.

Ey recalled a heavy emotional journey during the experience, from those first moments arriving to talking with a sergeant who worked as part of the recovery team. He said he spoke with the man one day, asking how things were going, and the man described the difficulty of entering the site and seeing the charred remains of victims still sitting slumped at their desks.

"At some point, you're just not tough anymore," he said. "Every one of us now sees a shrink." He said that a lot of soldiers, especially combat soldiers, experience post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury and others issues like depression, something Ey experience himself after 9-11.

Weeks later, he watched some employees return to the Pentagon as staff were gradually allowed to come back to collect to their things.

"It was very emotional. People would walk in and see the cubicle they were working at when it happened," he said. "They lived and the one next to them didn't and there were a lot of tears."

Following his time at the crash site, Ey left Ft. McNair and was sent to Iraq where he spent the first year of the war helping set up the satellite network from Kuwait into Baghdad. While he was not in direct combat, he said he was shot at often while stationed overseas.

After spending time in the Middle East, Ey returned to the states, worked on President George W. Bush's second inaugural committee before eventually ending up back at the Pentagon as a public affairs officer. Three years into that, he retired.

A distinguished career and then: Ohio

After 23 years in the military, Ey retired as a lieutenant colonel in 2010, having served two combat tours and received a Bronze Star and the Legion of Merit. He said his time in the Army introduced him to all kinds of cultures and opportunities including meeting celebrities.

The public affairs job at the end of his military career eventually brought him back to the Pentagon and he was able to work near the memorial to the Pentagon crash. He said that was one of the most positive things to come out of the experience and something he's most proud of.

"Our memorial for 9-11 is really nice," he said. "We got ours up first and a lot of people visit it... it's a weird thing to be proud of but we cut through the bureaucracy."

The memorial is right outside the western wall site and features a set of specially-designed benches with the names of people who died.

Originally from Connecticut, Ey travelled the world while in the Army and lived in places around the U.S. before finding Plain City in 2022. His wife's sisters moved to the central Ohio area, settling in Jerome Village and Dublin, so with family in area, Ey said they decided to come too.

He bought his house in Jerome Township in 2022 and moved in the following year. He said he was impressed right away with the area and its support for the military. When he did his first 9/11-related interview at the Statehouse in Columbus, he said he was blown away at how decorated the building was for what was a typical anniversary.

Since then, he said that has carried over to the people.

"I really like it. I really like Ohio," he said. "I like the people in Ohio, they're very friendly."

Though he's retired, Ey keeps himself busy with managing real estate properties and his business, Mammoth Global Partners, a consulting business that works with civilian organizations, governments and military charities.

Other news



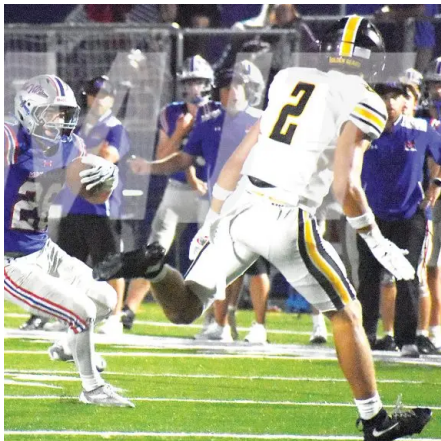
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