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Connecticut veteran who rushed to the Pentagon on 9/11 has one message 25 years later

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Firefighters drape an American flag on the Pentagon after the September 11, 2001 terror attacks. (STEVE HELBER/AP)

On Sept. 11, 2001, Wethersfield native Carl S. Ey walked up to a "big black hole" belching smoke and witnessed the horrific aftermath of the terrorist attack on

the Pentagon. He was among the first people at the disaster scene, responding from his U.S. Army post at nearby Fort McNair.

But it's the national unity he witnessed the next day - on Sept. 12, 2001 - that remains with the Army veteran 25 years later.

"We were red, white, and blue on 9/12 - I don't think we're like that today," Ey said. "We're not there... we're divided. I want us to go back to 9/12 as a country."

Doing media interviews about 9/11 on its anniversaries has become a mission for Ey, who also flies flags relating to the attack outside of his current home in Ohio and speaks to students and other groups about his experience.

"I'm not afraid to talk about it," Ey said. "But more importantly, the two big messages are number one: 9/12 - think like that. We can do better. And then the second one is remember, there's a lot of people out there that don't like us."

As the years pass, Ey said he's concerned memories of the events of 9/11 and the lessons learned are dimming.

"I'm worried that people are going to forget about it," he said. "I really am."

Among the first on the scene

Ey grew up in Wethersfield and attended the University of Connecticut starting in 1984. While a student he joined the ROTC program and played baseball at the West Hartford campus. The son of a World War II veteran, Ey had long dreamed of joining the military.

"All my buddies were getting a \$21,000-a-year starting salary to go to work at an insurance company - I didn't want to do that," Ey said. "The Army said to me, 'You want to go on active duty?' I'm like, 'Yeah, I could just do this job for a few years.' And next thing you know, I had 23 years in and a pension and lived in seven different countries."

On Sept. 11, 2001, he had returned to Fort McNair after a dentist's appointment that morning to see people "standing on the loading dock looking over the Potomac River at the Pentagon, watching it burn."

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site. American Airlines Flight 77 had been hijacked shortly after taking off from Dulles Airport and was smashed into the Pentagon at 9:37 a.m. on that day, killing 184 people.

"I was the first soldier on site with my driver, who was also a soldier, and I was surveying the hole and trying to figure out how to walk into that mammoth building that was full of concrete," he said.

Ey had come under fire in Somalia and visited several war zones, but he said he was most struck by the shock of experiencing the chaos and death of war in his home country. Images that stay with him from that morning include the sight of workers in business suits running from the site and jumping into random cars to escape.

"That struck me... the whole concept of people with end-of-the-world kind of fear in their behavior as they just (threw) all caution to the wind," Ey said. "I thought to myself, for just a minute, well, what the heck am I doing? I'm heading towards the hole."

For the next seven weeks, Ey remained working on the Pentagon recovery, serving as operations officer for Army Signal Activity in the Military District of Washington. His duties included establishing communications networks and supporting mortuary affairs, medical operations and chaplain services.

Conspiracies shadow disaster's legacy

In the quarter-century since the attacks, Ey said he has seen the events of that day become clouded by conspiracy theories and misinformation. He is often asked why there were so few visible remnants of Flight 77 - an airliner that was full of fuel ahead of a cross-country flight and flown at high speed into a concrete "fortress" built in 1941.

His own service overseas has also inspired Ey to try to get a message to his fellow citizens: Don't be shocked if we get future attacks from abroad.

"I think we should be afraid every day - not live in fear, but have our head on a swivel," Ey said. "Because I think there's a lot of people out there that like doing damage to this country in a lot of different ways."

Speaking about his 9/11 experience over the years, Ey has also encountered some eager to explain away or minimize the tragedy, he said.

"After 25 years, I do worry that people are going to forget," Ey said. "Nobody deserved what happened that day... they just wanted to go to work that day and go home to their families."

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