

11 September 2002

I was fine up until I listened to my voicemail messages. Déjà vu of 9/11/01. As tears rolled down my cheeks I felt an overwhelming sensation of grief. My sister Kim...my friends Hal and Liz Baumgardner...Barbara Ellington of DISO (organization we resided with at the Alexandria Hoffman Buildings after 9/11)...my girlfriend Brenda...everyone calling to wish me well. More prayers came in the form of E-mail from as far away as Michigan (thank you Kevin!). Darn, I had been doing so well too on holding back the tears. Just a little slip, it's okay once in awhile. Suck the pain back in.

The sweet, savory taste of chocolate. Comfort food. Many of us craved it after 9/11 (I myself gained 10 pounds). Many thoughts raced through my mind today as I slowly walked down the A corridor to the Pentagon concourse. CVS (the drugstore) was giving out Nestle chocolates so I helped myself to three. Back at my desk, I opened the box of Godiva chocolates that LTC Franklin Childress and MAJ Angela Cotton gave me for volunteering my time on 10 September at an Army G-1 function – a “Muster” for the G-1 victims’ families.

I had never tasted Godiva chocolate up until now. I opened the box and admired the pretty shapes (flowers, leaves, hearts, and squares). I wonder how good it could possibly be as I bite an edge off a square. Delectable. Much better than I expected. I put the box back into my desk drawer, away from any wandering bodies who might ask for a sample.

The “Pentagon Observance” ceremony is over. The sound of the crackling, waving flags in the strong winds drowned out many parts of the speeches and music. Hats flew past us along with little flags and the sound of cameras being dropped from the stands echoed around the bleachers. As soon as the flag was unrolled from the top of the Pentagon it had to be brought back up due to the blasts of the wind. I even watched a huge flag fly upside down on top of the Marriott hotel (the wind was so strong it had blown the flag from the side of the hotel high into the air).

And what was the meaning of it all I wonder as I glance at my new pin that was included (just like last year) in the Observance program. “United in Freedom” instead of “United in Memory” is stamped on it along with “...we will not fail,” President George W. Bush. I am wearing my Memory pin today too along with the Freedom pin. After three hours of sitting in swaying bleachers I am thankful for the other pin I always wear, the virtual one that is pinned on my heart and reminds me every day how lucky I am that God willed it to be that I would still be here for my family and friends.

Never forget. Always remember. But never recall because I'll fall apart. That's why I stick to the first two, as they're much safer. My Grandma, Betty Addicott, is always telling us “kids” to write our stories down. She, of course, told me the same thing after 9/11. And here I sit today, finally capturing my thoughts on “paper.”

I am not a victim. I am not a victim. All together now, repeat after me, “I am (you are) not a victim. Feel better? I don't. Why is that? I am a survivor. So what's a survivor supposed to feel like? Happy? Elated? Ecstatic? Grateful? How about hurt, sad, angry, and burdened. Ah, but isn't that how a victim would feel? No wonder those of us who “survived” are so confused. We're victims and survivors, all wrapped up into one package. For better or for worse, forever shall we wear these badges of honor.

Go visit "Operation Solace" they say. "They'll help you deal with your issues," we're told. I'll just take two more aspirin and squeeze the "stress ball" I was given. Probably just a coincidence that the ball has "Operation Solace" and their phone number on it. I give it a good squeeze and continue typing.

Think, think, and think. I picture Pooh Bear sitting on a log with his paw tap, tap, tapping on his forehead. It's so hard to tell people "bad" stuff. It hurts. Everything surrounding 9/11 hurts. Even the good things hurt. Like on one of the first weekends after the attack when my husband Pete and I went to a local flea market and I found Ariel.

Ariel the bear and Cheery the sunshine bear sat on top of my monitor at work. While others worried about their laptops and credit cards I thought only of my dear bears, not because they were valuable (hardly, at \$5.00 or less!), but because, well, they made me smile. And sometimes that's difficult to do in a work environment as stressful as the Pentagon.

Pete and I wandered around and browsed through stuff, him mostly as I wasn't in the mood to shop (crawling under the bed covers was the most strenuous thing I wanted to do after 9/11). I was walking around in a daze, feeling physically battered and emotionally scared and wondering what people were thinking when they looked into my eyes. I bought a ceramic pot with cute little flowers for a buck. I'd listened to a news show that said planting flowers would make us feel better and thought it was worth a try.

A little later I came upon the TY booth. Hey, nothing cheers someone up like a new beanie! And then I saw her. As I carefully picked her up the salesperson informed me "...that's Ariel..." and I interrupted her to say "...created by the late Ariel Glaser when she was 5 and who died from Aids." As I paid for her I could barely hold back the tears and then the flood came. "...I'm sorry, I lost my bear on 9/11" I told the salesperson. At that point she handed me a couple of dollars back (survivor discount I guess!) and told me that they were all praying for us. I said thank you and turned away, clutching Ariel and my new plant, barely able to see where I was going through my soaked eyelashes, and headed to where Pete was.

I told him about the salesperson and as we made our way back to thank her again she came running up to us. She shoved all my cash back into my hands (which were still full with Ariel and the flower pot) and told me "thank you." I'll never forget that moment, as it was the first of many times that the public boldly showed its care for us, the surviving victims.

As survivors we often don't get the same respect that the victims and their families do. We are survivors, what more could we possibly want? Our faces on film? Our voices on radio? Our stories told around campfires for centuries to come? No. We want recognition of the fact that we endured a lot in order to survive. We are all in desperate need of many, many hugs and prayers and we appreciate knowing that others know what we went through.

We feel multitudes of pain. We bear grief beyond all reasonable limits. When 24 of your co-workers are wiped from the earth in one sweep you grieve. When your office blows up around you, you grieve. When you overcome obstacles that your mental mind won't even allow you to recall all the details about, you grieve. Long after the cuts and bruises have healed open wounds still weave across your heart and reopen without a moment's notice. I grieved when my last large bruise (right hip, about 12" x 8") faded away. I grieved when Rohnda my hairstylist clipped away the smoke-singed layers of my hair. And I'm grieving today because I feel as if I've lost an entire year of my life and I don't know where it went and I feel as if I've accomplished nothing but breathing and existing. I'm hardly a "survivor" in the real sense of the word. At least I don't much feel like one, not on 9/11/01 and not today on 9/11/02.

I took a short break from typing this story to attend an Army ceremony, "Army Remembrance Ceremony, Service of Hope and Honor." I can honestly say that it was ten times better than the "Pentagon Observance." It was more personal, emotional, and befitting of our needs at this particular time of the year. General Shinseki, Chief of Staff of the Army, was inspirational and inspiring, reminding us that we are indeed surviving victims, living for those we loved and lost, and hopeful that we will remain strong and true for the Lord.

I was a civilian contractor employed by BTG back on 9/11/01. That company sold to Titan Systems Corporation just prior to 9/11/01. My office was in the D-Ring, 2D450 to be exact. The D-Ring is just inside the outermost E-Ring, where LTG Timothy J. Maude, the Deputy Chief of Staff of Personnel (ODCSPER) had an office that overlooked the helicopter pad where American Airlines Flight 77 began to "land."

The day started out gloomy. You wouldn't think so if you had looked outside though because the sun was shining and the sky was a really pretty blue with white puffy clouds. Just like today but not so windy. I didn't feel well though and our office (2D450) was a freezer as usual. In the office with me were Sean Bruck and Scott Semelbauer. Charles "Chuck" Mella and Constance Baptist were on leave and Edmond Young was working on SPC Chin Sun Pak's computer in LTG Maude's office.

My husband Pete called me with the news that an airplane had hit the "Empire State Building." I started searching for the news on the Internet but it was bogged down with users and I couldn't get a single news site to pull up.

Within a matter of minutes my co-worker Constance Baptist who was on leave (and note she rarely takes leave) called me. "Did you hear the news that one of the Towers was hit?" Okay, so it wasn't the Empire State Building I thought...and attempted again to access the news on the Internet but still no luck.

My supervisor Mary Ann Bier walked into the office at that moment and informed us of the news and mentioned that we could watch the news on TV at Marian Serva's desk. I decided to do that and began to lock down my PC after she left.

Seconds later as I finished with my PC and was getting up to leave when I heard a "whirring" noise. I barely had more than a second to think about it and my only thought was "oh, no, don't tell me my development server is dying" as I had been having problems with it. Alas, the whirring noise got louder.

And then my desk exploded in front of me and was lifted high up above my head and I was thrown backwards into the office area (still in my chair). I don't know how long I was out. Seemed like only seconds but it appears it was longer than that. I got up when I heard my supervisor Mary Ann screaming "Sean, Scott, Tamera, get out, get out!" I tried to stand up but quickly figured out that I had to stay crouched due to the electrical cable wires hanging from the ceiling where the tiles had fallen out. Sparks were flying everywhere.

And it was dark. I had never seen such darkness in my life. Only the sparks of the wires lighted the area.

I started screaming for the guys so they could find me (as I was closer to the front door). "Sean, Scott, Sean, Scott, are you okay?" Slowly but surely I could tell something was moving towards

me – it was Scott who managed to find my pant leg while he was crawling on the floor. Moments later Sean emerged and grabbed my hand and Scott's.

I only recall getting to the (now) closed door that we always kept open, hesitating because of the last remaining hot cable swaying in front of me. The ironic part was that I could only see the doorknob (thus see to open the door) when the cable sparked. As the cable swung by and brightened the dark space in front of us, I held my breath and reached out towards the doorknob. Success! I yanked the door open and went out into the hallway with Scott and Sean in tow.

Sean and Scott told me afterwards that we climbed over mountains of computers and monitors (not just ceiling debris) in order to get to the door. I do recall Sean telling me to “slow down” because I was moving too fast. As we had lots of equipment stacked along the wall waiting to go out to the staff I can only assume that Sean and Scott are correct and that I've blocked the “climbing” memory, why I do not know.

I can't even remember how we got from our door to the main corridor. I can visually picture the corridor doorframe (the doors were blown away) and the emergency lights had finally come on so an eerie yellow glow engulfed us along with the heavy smoke as we went out into Corridor 4. At that point, Scott, who happens to also be a private pilot, tells us “I smell jet fuel.” That statement alone should've been enough to convince us to get out of there immediately but we didn't. Hesitating, we stared at the solid black wall of smoke to our right coming from the E-Ring. “We have to get out of here,” Scott says. Yes, we can't help anyone behind the wall of smoke but the Lord knows how much we wanted to try. To turn to the other direction, away from the wounded soldiers who were coming towards us (waving their arms and telling us to get out), away from the screams of pain and fear and all of the crying and pleading for the Lord's mercy....

As I hesitated too long, Scott took the lead and led us to the left. We were relieved to get to the B-Ring. But our relief turned to momentary terror when we found that a heavy security door had slammed shut and locked, blocking our most direct escape route, in an automated response to the emergency. Incredible, I thought, a system that actually worked!

We saw a shaft of light in the corridor and moved toward it. Scott found an open office door and dragged Sean and I through it. We emerged into a brightly lit office whose occupants were still inside wondering what to do, unaware of the extent of the devastation elsewhere in the building. They were stunned to see us stagger in, covered with dust and bits of ceiling insulation.

From there, Scott led us past the stunned people, out into the A-Ring, and into the center courtyard, out into what looked like a war zone. People were running around everywhere but getting nowhere. A few people were vomiting, apparently from exposure to the fuel fumes. Finally, we were led by security through a tunnel and out into the parking lot (South parking).

Now what, we wondered. I looked back behind us at the Pentagon and thought in one quick second thought “they're gone, the front office is gone, and Edmond...” I looked at the guys and started to say “Edmond...” At that point, Scott reached for his cell phone and then realized it was gone. Can't call Edmond. Page him? No, I thought. He's gone. They're all gone. As we walked around we inquired as to the whereabouts of our supervisor Mary Ann and learned that she had gotten out safely. But what about Edmond....

Scott, thankfully, still had his car keys. He asked us to leave with him and we didn't think twice about it. We headed towards his car, past the thousands of people and what appeared to be large puffs of pink insulation (from where, I don't want to know). It took us an hour to get through the gridlock on Route 1, which is only 10 minutes away, and another hour or more to get through D.C. to Scott's girlfriend's house.

For a while, we sat on her porch and watched the butterflies fly by and listened to the neighborhood dogs barking playfully nearby. We called and paged Edmond but received no return call. "He's gone" I told the guys. Ah, Ms. Positive, that's me! We watched the news and learned that "the area of the Pentagon that was hit was a newly renovated area that no one had moved into it yet." Huh? We looked at each other in disbelief.

It was then that I really looked at Scott and Sean and realized what a mess they were. Sean had a cut on his forehead and Scott's back was bleeding. I finally went into the bathroom and looked at myself. My hair was all matted on top, stuck together. I then realized I had nothing to brush it with and my lips were so parched I could barely open them. What I would've given for a tube of Chapstick!

We eventually got through the phone lines to friends and family. At Pete's office (Drug Enforcement Agency) they had gone into emergency mode and weren't letting any calls through. "That's fine," I told the secretary, "just let Pedro Ramos know..." "Wait, is this Pete's wife?" she asked. "Yes" I replied. She started screaming "Oh Lord, Hallelujah! Pete, PETE, your wife is on the phone, she's alive!" You should've heard the cheering that was coming through the phone while I waited on the other end, wondering why everyone was so excited. Of course I'm alive, was there ever any doubt? I hadn't thought about it until then, the fact that there was doubt, that friends and family had no idea if I was alive or not. I had only been thinking about Edmond and the others that I was so certain were gone.

We did finally leave D.C., around 4pm or so. Scott dropped Sean and I off at Sean's car which was parked in a commuter lot in Springfield and Sean gave me a ride to Pete's side-business (All American Auto Wash & Custom Detailing) nearby. Pete was still at work so I waited for him to pick me up. Around 8pm, after a long and exhausting day, we arrived in Woodbridge and picked up our daughter Franchesca from the wonderful friends who had thankfully picked her up at her daycare.

I didn't hear from my supervisor Mary Ann until 11pm that night. She said they didn't know where Edmond was but that his family was searching for him. I thanked her for saving my life. She asked me what I meant and I told her about hearing her scream for us to get out. "But Tamera," she told me "I was never even near your office."

Maybe Mary Ann just doesn't recall yelling for us...or maybe it was my imagination...doesn't matter. It was divine intervention either way. I know the Lord saved me that day. He was everywhere, going to folks as they cried out for Him and tending to those who needed Him most. He was so many places at one time, saving, guiding, leading, showing us where we needed to go. I know Edmond was watching over us too as he went through the gates to heaven. Don't worry Edmond, I thought, your family will take good care of your son, just as Jesus is taking care of you.

11 September 2003

Yes, today is indeed 9/11/03. It's been a year since I wrote the story above. This day was not as mournful as last year but every bit as painful. Outside wounds may have healed but the inside ones are still there. In January I was moved back into the once-again renovated 2D450 area. Not exactly in my old spot though. No, now I'm sitting directly where many of my comrades died. Yes, quite uplifting! (if you can't tell, that's sarcasm).

Yesterday they decorated the walls of the Pentagon's Corridor 4 with the donated quilts and drawings from school children. Every floor is filled with memories.

The Army G-1 ceremony started at 9:37am and ended by 9:45am. After that we feasted on sweets of every kind, lovingly made by the staff. It was a quick rush to the center courtyard after that to catch the end of the Army's official ceremony. I arrived too late and only heard the ending - the calling out of the names of all who we lost here.

I've meandered up and down the corridors today, seeing familiar faces and not-so-familiar, cherishing the quiet time away from my desk. I've squandered away time by chitchatting with co-workers about that fateful day and what the meaning of it was, what we learned from it all. As we came up with no answers, the chitchatting eventually stopped and we all sighed in unison. Yes...what was learned? And if we learned anything why are so many still dying for freedom? Because...it's worth dying for.

I wish I was a better storyteller. I wish I could fully describe what we went through. These past two years have been very difficult. Lots of good changes though. Pete quit working for the DEA to work full time in our detailing shop and recently he acquired a towing business. Our daughter Franchesca has started Kindergarten. And me? Well, I'm a work in progress! Always changing, always growing, and still always remembering. Thanks to my friend Suzy keeping me busy with the Heart of America Quilt I don't have too much time to remember the bad stuff because too much good stuff is happening.

I also know why I'm here today and not still hiding under my bed covers, because so many people prayed for me and for my colleagues. Strangers prayed for us when we didn't even know we needed prayers. While many did not survive that day, many more did. And it's up to us to make sure folks don't ever forget and always remember.

To Edmond...to all the friends we lost on that fateful day...cheers to your legacy which will live on forever. To all of you who prayed for us...thank you! God Bless!

Tamera