

Memories of 11 September 2001

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With today being six months from that day in September and with every television station showing the videotapes and covering the speeches, it is hard to not reflect on the day that has changed America forever. I have not talked much about what I experienced that day, in part because I'm not the kind of person that talks about such things, and in part because it is tough to talk about what I saw and experienced. While most people saw nothing but terror and confusion, I had another perspective. I saw terror, sure, but I also saw bravery, courage, honor, an individuals resolved to protect and defend this country.

I was in Norfolk, Virginia at the Naval Base on board the USS Trenton (LPD 14) conducting a hull material condition inspection. I was on board with five other Naval Reserve Officers as part of a team and together we were tagging along with the INSURV (Inspection and Survey) Team. INSURV was conducting a thorough, overall, inspection of the ship and its systems while we were focused on some very specific areas of concern.

The morning of 11 September 2001 began like others during that training period. We arrived at the Naval Base and boarded the ship as a team. We all went to our staterooms, changed into our coveralls, unpacked our equipment, and gathered in the wardroom to begin our inspection. That day we were dividing into three teams to inspect some tanks and voids. A Commander and I were the lucky ones to draw two tanks down in Machinery Room 2. The boilers were firing and it was hot. After a few hours of the heat, we decided to take a break and get some drinks.

On our way back to the wardroom we crossed the crew galley and saw the big screen television out with several Sailors sitting around watching. It was highly unusual for a crew to watch television at that time so we stopped to see what was going on. A Sailor told us that an airplane had just crashed into the World Trade Center tower. Like most, we assumed an accident had happened, but then we saw the second plane fly into the other tower. We knew then that this was no accident.

Shortly we learned that yet another plane had crashed into the Pentagon. At that time I turned to the Commander and said "*We are at war. They have just attacked our center of commerce and our center of the military, this is war.*" Everyone on board the ship knew the same thing. We also knew that it was most likely one of the Middle Eastern terrorist groups behind the attacks.

We made our way up to the wardroom to get our drinks and continue to watch the coverage. While there, the OOD (Officer of the Deck), came on the 1MC (the ship's PA system) and instructed all personnel to set THREATCON Bravo. A few minutes later another announcement was made to set THREATCON Charlie and all civilian personnel were directed to leave the ship immediately.

Things were happening now. Weapons came out of the lockers, and boats were placed over the side of the ship to set up a perimeter. Then what we had all been expecting. The OOD came on the 1MC and said *"Attention Trenton, standby for the Commanding Officer"*. Then skipper came on. *"Trenton, this is the Captain. It has become obvious over the last few minutes that the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon have been attacked. There are also reports of other incidents in the country that have yet to be confirmed. I do not know where this will lead but I know that we are ready. We have been directed by LANTFLT to set THREATCON Delta. All Liberty is immediately cancelled. I hereby direct the ship to set condition modified Zebra and make preparations to get underway. The INSURV inspection has been cancelled and all INSURV inspectors are requested to depart at their earliest convenience. I do not know what lies ahead but I do know that we have a job to do. Focus on your job, do what you have trained to do, and do it safely. We are ready."*

We went to our staterooms to change from our coveralls and gather our equipment. While there another came over the 1MC. *"Trenton, this Combat. CIC (Combat Information Center) is manned and operational. Effectively immediately, secure all cellular telephone transmissions."* A few minutes later we left the ship and what we saw was eerie. The .50 caliber guns onboard were manned and ready. Boats in the water were patrolling making sure nothing came close to the ships. Jersey walls were erected and rent-a-cop gate guards had been replaced by Sailors and Marines with M-16's shot guns, flak jackets, and helmets. Everyone not assigned to a ship or a Command was on their way off base. Civilians were at the front of the line, we were bringing up the rear.

We eventually made it back to our Quarters at Naval Amphibious Base Little Creek. Traffic was slow and the security getting onto NAB Little Creek was tough as well. The Navy had never been at THREATCON Delta before so some of the rules were being made up as we went. Delta is the highest threat condition possible and is indicative that a credible threat of immediate attack exists. Once we got to our quarters, there was little we could do other than watch the news. Although we were at Delta, we still felt safe. All civilians had been directed to leave the base which meant nothing was open. The Exchange, Commissary, gas station, and McDonald's were closed. There were a few Sailors who were running the mess hall but not enough to keep the Officer's mess open. We would all be tired of Galley food before we left.

But that was insignificant to what I had seen on board the Trenton. The INSURV team was by far the oldest group of people on board. Most of the Sailors were in

their late-teens or early-twenties. I did not see panic, I did not see uncertainty, I did not see blind rage. What I did see was tremendous courage and determination. These Sailors turned-to and did their jobs. We had that ship opened up for inspection and they immediately began to close the tanks and make her ready to sail. Their liberty had just been cancelled and they had just been told they couldn't use their cell phones. No one was going home that night and it would be hours before some of them could get word to their families. These were not trivial things but there was no complaining.

Due to the high OPTEMPO (Operational Tempo) while at sea, when a ship is in port, the CO does his best to set up a nine to five (actually a seven to three thirty) work day so the Sailors can spend some time at home with family and friends. A large portion of this crew drove in to work on the morning of 11 September with the intent of being back home in a few hours. Some of them came in the family car leaving wives and children at home without transportation. These Sailors had just been told that they could not go home and that they could not use their cell phones. To make things worse, at THREATCON Delta their wives would not be allowed on base to get the family cars. Add to all of this anxiety the knowledge that you live in the largest concentration of Naval forces on the Eastern seaboard, certainly a valid target. Schools had even gone into lock-down mode out of fear of attack.

I was proud that day. Proud to be a Sailor and proud to be a part of the world's finest fighting force. There was talk of turning some sand into glass but we knew it would not be that easy. The war we were now in was going to be long and difficult. I had no doubt that we were up for the fight but I did have doubts about the American public.

A few days later we resumed the INSURV inspection with at-sea testing. To make things as easy as possible, we mustered at Little Creek and the Trenton sent vans to pick us up. We arrived at the ship around 0430 after passing through extraordinary security and an eerily quiet base. We boarded the ship and prepared to get underway.

Boats were in the water patrolling the waterfront. Believe me, no one was the least little bit interested in getting too close to any US Navy ship that day. As we left the pier, the .50 calibers were manned, and once we left the bay, the CIWS (Close-In Weapons System) was loaded. There was no doubt that this was a warship ready for war.

The sky was quiet. I have never heard less noise in the sky than on that day. There were a few contrails very high in the sky, but that was it. This was the first day that the airspace had been opened so there was little activity. We were able to get a Navy Lear jet to fly which allowed INSURV to do a "detect and engage" test with the CIWS. I stood on the port bridge wing and watched as the jet came

in low and fast, a few feet over the Trenton, and the CIWS definitely did detect and did engage. Fortunately it had been safed so it wouldn't fire.

We returned that night about 2330 to conditions much like we had left. There was heavy security, patrol craft at the piers, and even fewer ships at the piers because several had sortied during the day. Our work, save for the report, was done, but work of the Trenton was just beginning.

During the days immediately following the 11th, patriotism ran high. Flags were seen everywhere. When we went places in uniform, people would always say something kind to us, a "God Bless You" or a smile. I knew they were all sincere but I couldn't help but wonder how long it would last. How long would it be until someone started to complain and started to be Monday morning quarterbacks. It didn't take long.

First were those who wanted to turn this into a Holy War. They wanted it to be Christianity against Islam. This war was not and is not a war against the Muslims and Islam; it is a war against terrorists who do not appear to practice their own religion. America respects the Islamic religion and part of why we fight is to allow those who practice that religion to do so in freedom. We all would do well to learn about their religion, as a group they certainly know a lot about ours, not so we can become converts but so that we can have a better understanding of a large population of those who live on this Earth.

Then the bleeding heart, anti-American liberals jumped in the fray with their call for us to look at ourselves and find why we made these people do this to us. *Excuse me? What WE did to make someone attack us like cowards? What did we do wrong? **We did absolutely nothing wrong!*** The United States stands for freedom and individual rights. We stand for everybody being able to practice their own religion, for everyone to live in relative safety, for everyone to have the opportunity to better themselves, for everyone to pursue happiness. Perhaps it is time for them to re-read the Declaration of independence and the Constitution.

Do people hate us? Absolutely! There are many who hate what we stand for. We are a threat to them, to their power. Some of them want our movies, our music, our cars, and our toys. And there are those who don't want them to have any of those things. Should we give up what we have to keep others from wanting it?

There are also those in this world who are simply evil. Yes, that word that many liberals have forgotten. ***Evil!*** It is what happens when people develop without morals and without a sense of what is right and what is wrong. Some would even say that it is what happens when we take religion, prayer, and discipline out of schools and preach tolerance at the expense of standards. This is not to say that tolerance is not a good thing and should not be taught, but it must be taught with a basis in fundamental truths, truths that are self-evident. A society that is

tolerant of everything soon becomes a society that merely has no standards, and will ultimately cease to be a country.

I've heard about enough from the whiners about how bad the United States is. The liberals have some very selective memories and are quick to forget all the good we have done. They seem to forget that when a nation is in need, we are the first they call. They are also dishonest, dishonest with themselves. They have benefited from the very things they now condemn. In fact the radical Islamists are most upset about the decay of morals in the West and how those morals are infiltrating their country. Need I point out who is primarily responsible for the decline in Western morality?

Like most Americans, I have nothing to be ashamed of. I have a fairly comfortable life, a house that is not too bad, a really cool car, a loving family, the best friends in the world, a job that I enjoy and pays well (not that a raise would not be appreciated), and many opportunities to further my education and understanding. I have these things for some very simple reasons. First, I worked hard. While others were playing, I was studying. When some graduated from high school and went to work, I went to college. While some took the easy classes in college, I opted for the tough ones. While others merely did their jobs, I tried to do mine a little better than was expected. I was also blessed. Yes, I believe that I was given something to make me work a little harder than some. And of course all this was possible because I had parents who made sacrifices to make sure I got these opportunities. They made sure I lived in the best school districts, had the school supplies I needed, sent me to the college of my choice, and encouraged me in all that I did. I have nothing to be ashamed of other than those who are ashamed to be an American

I must admit, I find those liberals to be insulting. They insult me and all the Sailors I know. They insult those who have died in this war and those who are yet to die. But the funny thing about it is that I will fight for their right to insult me. They will not go unchallenged; they will not be allowed to have their say without the rest of us having ours, but we will fight for their right to say what they will. Why? Because we are Americans and that is the way we do things.

We, as Christians and Americans, do need to better understand Islam. It is the right thing to do but we must be careful that we do not turn this into an *us* against *them* war. This is not a war of Christians against Muslims; it is a war against terrorists who happen to claim the religion of Islam. It will be along war and many good people will die before it is over. But we will win it.

I do still worry at times. The left has taken hold of many of our nations institutions with the belief they are doing good. I come back to the words spoken by Benjamin Franklin at the conclusion of the Constitutional Convention when he was asked, "What have you wrought?" Franklin answered, "...a Republic, if you can keep it." I pray everyday that we can keep it.