

DEER CAUGHT IN THE HEADLIGHTS

The morning was typical for the intermodal business, three drivers late for work and three more late for delivery appointments, the railyards trying to find calm in the chaos, cantankerous owner-operators waiting impatiently for the lift cranes while complaining about the cost of diesel fuel, CSX employees darting among the railcars and tractors, and one of my company drivers calling in to report an accident at the BNSF yard in Birmingham.

I took another sip of cold coffee, grabbed a blank accident report then asked the Birmingham driver, “Okay, Ron, what happened?”

He replied, “You know that section of the rail yard where you cross the tracks and it’s almost impossible to see a train coming around the tight curve? Well, I didn’t see it.”

Trucks always lose a confrontation with a train, but my driver’s welfare came first. “Ron, are you okay?”

“Yeah,” he said. “And the tractor is okay, too.”

Meaning, the rail container was not. “How badly damaged is the rail container?”

“Well, it’s more destroyed than damaged.”

I suddenly wished my cold coffee was Kahlua. “Destroyed?”

“Yeah, the container was sort of cut into two big pieces and the cargo is spread all over the railyard, all 45,000 pounds of it.”

“What type of cargo?”

“Ragu Spaghetti sauce.”

The mental picture gave me a headache. One of my dispatchers broke the nightmare, “Pete, your wife is on line two. She said it’s important.”



I pushed the button for line two. “Hey, what’s up?” Joyce informed me an airplane had just crashed into one of the twin towers. The morning was going to get a lot worse for a lot of people.

Three hours before American Airlines Flight 11 slammed into the north tower of the World Trade Center at 8:46am, a device called a ‘Random Event Generator’ at Princeton University projected that a catastrophic incident was about to happen.



Three hours after a machine predicted an upcoming disaster, American Airlines flight attendant **Madeline Sweeney** was on the phone relaying the unfolding events with a flight services manager when

she uttered the last words from Flight 11, “Oh my God, we are way too low.”

Thus began a 9/11 tragedy that robbed 3,051 children of a parent and 17 unborn babies of a father. Muslim terrorists had struck America in well-coordinated attacks with fully-loaded California bound passenger jets heavily laden with full loads of jet fuel. In the debris of the towers lay the remains of a Twin Tower Muslim prayer room and a room filled with copies of the Koran. Following the attacks, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community donated 11,170 pints of blood to help the victims of 9/11. Ascertaining good folks from the bad folks is still a challenging decision, for both sides.



After Joyce notified me of a second plane hitting the second tower, I knew we were under attack. I left my office, opened the door to the over-the-road and inter-city intermodal division, and told the 20 plus employees busily dealing with freight issues, “People, a second plane

has hit the World Trade Center. Our country is under attack.” Deer caught in the headlights. Stunned, skeptical, no emotion and no reply. I shut the door and returned to my office.

Four eye-witnesses interviewed by “A Veteran’s Story” experienced a wide variety of roller coaster emotions, ranging from fear to vengeful fury.



Army veteran **Terri Prieto** was working in the east side of the Pentagon when American Airlines Flight 77 hit the west side of the building. She didn’t even feel the impact. Four of Terri’s friends were among the 125 civilian and military personnel killed. Her supervisor received a call and was told a helicopter had hit the west E ring. He bolted out the door to safety. Security

officers began emergency evacuations. Rushed outside to a grassy area opposite the parking lot, Terri soon realized the aircraft that smacked into the Pentagon was much bigger than a helicopter. “I saw large pillars of thick smoke billowing from the west wing,” she said. “Then fighter jets arrived overhead and security officers kept shouting, ‘Move back! Move back! Another plane is inbound!’ That other plane was the one that went down in Shanksville but I doubt if anybody that day knew where it was headed.”

Told to go home, Terri fought traffic jams, picked up stranded survivors, and tried to call family members on her cellphone but all the airwaves were overloaded. She finally got through later that evening.

On 9/12, she was back at work. “I was proud to see the American flag draped over the side of the Pentagon,” she said. “It was our way to say to the bad guys, ‘you only won the first round.’ We noticed the vending machines had been vandalized, but later found out the first responders had broken into the machines for soft drinks and to keep the survivors hydrated. Oh, by the way....one of my friends saw the airplane hit the Pentagon, so those conspiracy freaks need to get a life!”

Stress and nightmares still plague Terri. “It’s getting easier,” she stated. “But I was there, I saw it, smelled it, breathed it, and I’ll never forget it. I hope my country doesn’t either.”



Price Waterhouse Cooper employee **Mike Casillas** stated, “I had arrived for work when the first plane hit, so I joined about 50 other people on the waterfront staring at the North Tower. Smoke was pouring out of a big hole in the side of the building. I called my wife but while we were talking the second plane came around and I actually saw it crash

into the South Tower. I knew immediately we were under a

terrorist attack. We were all hoping and praying for the people trapped in the buildings, debris was falling from windows, then I saw a person jump.”

Shaken by the jumper, Mike said, “That really upset me. Then the first building came down. I was aghast and felt like throwing up, knowing all those people in the building were dying.”

Mike, like most people, wanted to help. “After the second tower fell a huge dust cloud blocked our vision so a buddy and I found a hotel filling with survivors covered in dust. The hotel manager sent employees out to buy food for the survivors, even cat and dog food for their pets. I’ll never forget 9/11. Had I arrived for work early that morning, you and I wouldn’t be talking. My shock turned to anger. You see, one of our co-workers and his two year old kid were on one of those planes. As far as I was concerned, I wanted our military to go over there, find the guilty people then nuke the place into a plate of glass.”

Meanwhile, Flight 77 hits the Pentagon at 9:37am. The only American not on Mother Earth was astronaut Frank Culberston circling above the tragedy aboard the International Space Station. Notified of the disaster unfolding, Culberston started recording the event from outer space. He found out later the commercial pilot of American Airlines Flight 77 was Charles Burlingame, his classmate from the Naval Academy.

At 9:45am, the US Capitol and White House employees evacuate their buildings, eyes glazed like deer caught in the headlights. Less than 20 minutes flying time to their fourth target, the



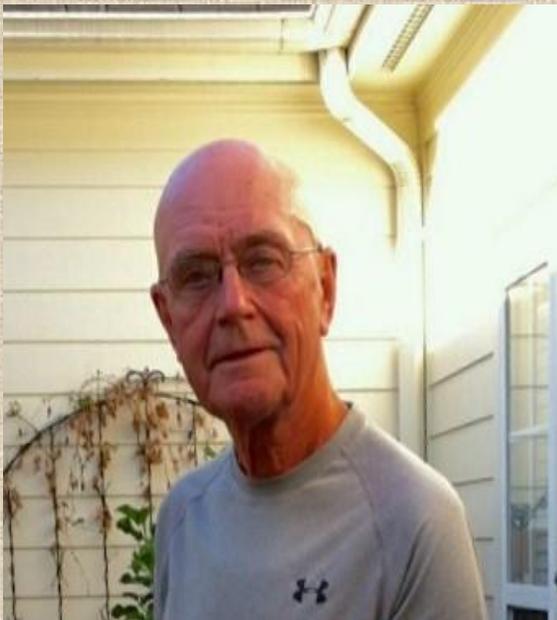
terrorists in command of United Airlines Flight 175 are fighting to die while the travelers aboard are fighting to live. Having said 'goodbye' to his wife, passenger **Todd Beamer** leaves his cellphone on and can be overheard urging his fellow passengers, "Let's Roll." Minutes later the plane disintegrates into a million pieces as it slams into the

ground at 500 mph in Shanksville, PA at 1003am. Only temporarily blinded by the headlights, the passengers aboard Flight 175 saw the light then fought back like tigers with their eyes wide open. After the crash, Todd Beamer's cellphone remained on until it too died fifteen minutes later.





Bill LeCount recalls evacuating the PWC building less than a half mile across the Hudson River from the Twin Towers. “We had made it out to the evacuation area when the second plane hit the South Tower. The explosion was enormous; a gigantic ball of flame. We were all in a state of shock. Later I took photos of the boats going back and forth to bring people to safety. It was an incredible act of human kindness. The boats transported over 500,000 people from Manhattan. One of the saddest things was watching hundreds of refrigerated trucks passing by to load the projected number of bodies to be brought across.”



Bill’s co-worker, **Martin Burton** recalled, “It took a while for everything to sink in. It was all so unbelievable. We went to Bill’s apartment just as the South Tower came down. It was a thunderous rumble, easy to feel and hear from half a mile away. I felt like we were in a bad movie. Then the second tower came down. I went numb, like detached from the whole thing. For

me, the real horror set in about two or three days later, of how cold and calculating the act was on 9/11.”

The towers were gone. The Pentagon burning. A big Boeing 767 in a million pieces in an isolated field in Pennsylvania. I went back to the local dispatch and over-the-road room to check on folks. Except for conducting what was now limited business on the phones, everyone remained silent as if trying cope with an unbelievable catastrophe. It reminded me of how deer respond to headlights.



One hundred days after the 9/11 attack, New York firefighters finally extinguished the last fire in the rubble of what used to be the Twin Towers. Of the thousands who perished only 291 bodies were found ‘intact’ at Ground Zero, yet recovery efforts discovered 437 watches and 144 wedding rings. The recovery

efforts through DNA continue to this day. A male was officially identified this year.

The terrorist group, Al Qaeda, declared war on the United States via Osama Bin Laden in 1996. After a string of successful terrorist attacks against American targets versus unsuccessful if not feeble retaliatory strikes from the U.S., the desert mouse roared on 9/11. Expressions on the faces of George W. Bush down to the most junior Congressman said it all: deer caught in the headlights.



As of this writing, North Korean intimidator Kim Jong-un has recalled all his top ambassadors back to Pyongyang. He's ordered his troops to 'be ready at any time to strike' and American intelligence sources believe he's prepared to launch a missile to 'land in the vicinity' of Guam. The North Korean news

agency has urged all nations, 'not to make hasty or war decisions based on an unintended hit.' Right. Have you noticed the strange expressions of the faces of world leaders lately?



We are all veterans and victims of 9/11. Let's all pray we're not caught in the headlights a second time.