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### The day that changed America

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Posted on 21. July 2006 by Administrator



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By Robb Frederick

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Wednesday, September 11, 2002

[http://www.pittsburghlive.com/x/pittsburghtrib/s\\_90823.html](http://www.pittsburghlive.com/x/pittsburghtrib/s_90823.html)

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Did you feel for those people, at their desks, drinking coffee, then caught in a hellfire so hot they just had to jump, their neckties snapping like kite tails as they fell 84 floors? And the people in the street, their necks craned, their cheeks wet, their hearts breaking; their Prada bags dropped as the first tower rumbled and they ran, panicked, like extras in a Godzilla film?

John Shaw did. He stood in front of the set at Westmoreland County's 911 center. He saw the fireball, the smoke, the investment bankers at the window. He heard the phone ring.

"We are being hijacked," the man on the other end said.

Whoa.

He sat down. The man on the line was crying, trying hard to hold himself together. He'd be dead in six minutes.

He talked fast. His name was Edward Felt. F-E-L-T. He was on United Airlines Flight 93. To San Francisco. He had locked himself in the bathroom.

The plane had been hijacked turned an explosion white smoke.

"We're going down," he said. "We're going down."

"???"-

Val McClatchey heard the 757 roar over Indian Lake, three miles east of where it would crash. She had been watching the "Today" show, with footage from New York, and now the Pentagon.

She looked out the window, above the red barns. She caught a glimpse of it, like light off a watch face. Then nothing, and then a boom that nearly knocked her off the couch.

The lights went out. The phones, too.

She grabbed her camera. She stepped onto the front porch and shot one frame of the smoke cloud, a charcoal puff in a pure blue sky.

That image ? "End of Serenity," she called it ? caught the essence of Somerset County that day. The barns, the blue sky, the open slope of pasture ? it's a postcard, except for that fat, black cloud, swelling like a smoke signal, warning that something horrible has happened.

"I thought it was an accident," McClatchey says, a Time and a Newsweek and a Reader's Digest in the binder on the coffee table, the pages with her photo marked with Post-Its. "I thought it was a small plane. I figured they were just trying to get out of the air."

She didn't walk up that road, toward the hole in the tree line. She could hear the sirens; she knew it was bad. She didn't need to see.

She went into the kitchen and put on barbecue for the rescue crews.

"?""?""??"-

Dave Fox did go out to Skyline Drive, to the old strip mine, abandoned in 1996.

The former firefighter had heard the emergency tones. He, too, had been watching television, in a back office at the Deaner Funeral Home, where he was preparing an 11 a.m. service.

He saw the smoke. He drove out in the funeral van, expecting a skid crash, with fire and fuselage chunks, and the tail off to one side. And a survivor or two, God willing.

Some scrap yard workers had run up, hoping to help. Some coal truck drivers had stopped. And now the firefighters were coming, their radios crackling, calling out four more companies.

They couldn't find the plane.

At about 500 feet, with the wind so loud they could barely hear, the passengers had fought back. Several had forced their way into the cockpit, where the hijackers had the controls. They struggled, shouting, swearing. They grabbed at the instrument panel. Behind them, a woman cried.

The plane pitched, then rolled, belly up. It hit nose-first, like a lawn dart. It disintegrated, digging more than 30 feet into the earth, which was spongy from the old mine work.

The hemlocks caught fire. The jet fuel pooled. The wind played with paper scraps: a Bible page, some bank-machine receipts, the corner of a business card.

Fox stepped over a seat back. He saw a wiring harness, and a

piston. None of the other pieces was bigger than a TV remote.

He saw three chunks of torn human tissue. He swallowed hard.

"You knew there were people there, but you couldn't see them," he says, home now, the kids playing in the background. "You try not to let it sink into you too much."

He'd assumed it was an accident. A Cessna, maybe. A spark in the fuel tank. A stuck rudder. He didn't connect it to the other planes, still crashing on cable TV.

"?""?""??"-

In Friedens, at Mostoller's Country Corral, the dining room went quiet. The twin towers were smoking. The news anchors looked lost.

"You have got to be kidding me," said Pamela Tokar-Ickes, one of the three county commissioners. She'd stopped for breakfast after a coffee klatch, a meet-and-greet with the Chamber of Commerce.

Her staff had moved to new offices, which weren't yet wired for TV. So she went to the county's 911 center, in the basement of the old Greek-revival courthouse. The dispatchers were watching CNN. The Pentagon was burning.

She asked them to keep her posted, then left for another meeting.

She was in the commissioners' room, with proclamations to be read, when Rick Lohr called. He runs the 911 operation.

"We have a jet down in Buckstown," he said. "This is the real thing, guys."

"We just went numb," Tokar-Ickes remembers.

She ran a disaster declaration to the 911 center. She worked the phones, lining up a command center and morgue space, signing

purchase orders for fencing and phone lines, lights and aspirin, rubber boots and bottled water. The county spent \$250,000 on crash-site supplies; the state has yet to pay it back.

A man arrived in hospital scrubs, asking how he could help. Across the street, in her new office, Tokar-Ickes' voice mail filled. There was a nurse, an attorney, a man from California. What could they do? When could they come?

She rode out to the crash site, just north of Shanksville. A state trooper waved her through.

She stood there as the men hunched in contamination suits, sifting through what was left of the plane and the 44 people on board. She shivered.

"This isn't happening," she said to herself. "This is unreal."

"???"-

The state police secured the scene. Troopers stood in the woods, each within sight of the next, so no one could slip in. They worked 14-hour shifts, the mosquitoes biting, the sun beating down. They stayed 11 days.

The FBI arrived. The governor came. The Smithsonian sent forensics experts, pulled off an Indian dig.

The plane hit at about 575 mph. The cockpit and first-class cabin collapsed; the rest crumpled into it, the rivets giving, the fireball scorching everything.

Investigators crawled through the debris field, bagging bolts and bone fragments. They found chunks of seat cushion foam, and honeycombed sound insulators. Then a shoelace, some shirt buttons, and a wedding ring. Then part of a passport, and a necktie, still knotted.

"The first responders really went through a lot," says Capt. Frank Monaco, commander of state police Troop A at Greensburg and

the coordinator of the state's 400-man crash site team.

The work wore on them. "People say, 'Wasn't it horrible?'" Monaco says. "Well, we didn't have time to think about it. We literally ran on adrenaline for two weeks."

Monaco has never seen the twin towers footage. The networks had backed off by the time he got home.

Wallace Miller, the lanky, Civil War-studying county coroner, did see it. He sat at the family funeral home, his father, Wilbur, with him. They watched the second plane sweep in low, from nowhere. They winced when it hit.

"Boy, how'd you like to be the coroner there?" the son said.

He could have been out of town, at a coroners convention in eastern Pennsylvania. His colleagues had gone early, to golf. But his game had slipped, so he stayed back.

His secretary called.

He couldn't believe the scene. He saw the burnt trees, and some debris smoking in the dirt. He saw half a window frame. He saw shreds of that white cloth they put over the headrests.

He saw things in the trees.

He takes off his glasses, cleans them with his T-shirt. "This is the most eerie thing," he says. "I have not, to this day, seen a single drop of blood. Not a drop."

Every day he thinks about the people on that plane. John Talignani was flying to his stepson's funeral. Patricia Cushing was flying for the first time. Lauren Grandcolas was pregnant.

Honor Elizabeth Wainio was 27; Nicole Miller just 21.

Wallace Miller's own daughter is 18.

"That hit kind of close to home," he says. "I thought about what I

would have done if this was my daughter, in California."

He'd have been there, he thinks. He'd have asked for her body, and her things.

He decided he would help the families. He would take them to the crash site. He would introduce them, so they would know they weren't alone.

"People here look at these families as a group, like it's a club," he says. "No. They don't know each other. When have you ever gotten onto a plane and known everyone on it?"

He organized a family meeting in New Jersey, and then another. He wrote. He called. He attended a Buddhist service for Toshiya Kuge, whose mother left behind origami birds.

On Sept. 11, though, he simply tried to make sense of the crash site. He went home about 2 a.m., too tired to think straight. He'd start fresh in the morning. The federal mortuary team would be there then. The light would be better.

He lay down on his couch, still dressed.

The phone rang. A man had died near Rockwood.

He woke his father and went for the body.

"??????"

Fifty-five thousand people lost loved ones on Sept. 11, according to American Red Cross estimates.

The people of Somerset County lost something else, something that cloud crowded out of Val McClatchey's photograph. She realized it that night, in bed, listening to the hum of the emergency generators. The lights up the hill came through the curtains.

"You go along, day to day, and you never think much about your situation in life," says her husband, Jack. "Something like this, it

changes your outlook on things. You're waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"This area will never be the same," he says.

That day was bad enough on television. But that was New York, and Washington. Obvious targets, if you think about it.

But here? This is a county of mom-and-pop shops, of Mail Pouch barns and windmill farms. A dime still buys an hour of courthouse parking.

"In the back of your mind, you never think these things can happen," Tokar-Ickes says. "Not here."

Now, though, there is a memorial to plan, and a legacy to keep.

"An extraordinary thing happened on that airplane," says Miller, who spent five months and \$500,000 and found less than a tenth of the victims' remains.

To him, that old strip mine is now a cemetery. "In 20 years, this will be a historic site," he says. "I won't be coroner. The commissioners won't be commissioners. The president won't be president. But those (victims') families are still going to be coming back here."

Four thousand people already come to the crash site every week. They pose for photographs. They leave flags and flowers and St. Christopher medals, set on the rocks. The turnpike toll collectors hand them printed directions.

"It's kind of amazing, how many people come," says Dave Fox, who drives by the memorial every few weeks. He rarely gets out of the car.

His mother still lives on Lambertsville Road, a short walk from the crash site. He was out there a few nights ago, cooking mountain pies with his nieces and nephews. They sat there, under the stars, licking their fingers and counting all the cars.

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