

*Editor's Note: Each year, the Arlington Historical Society, in partnership with the Cherrydale-Columbia Masonic Lodge, sponsors an essay contest for Arlington students in grades 8–12. This year, in commemoration of the 20th anniversary of 9/11, we asked students to write about the terrorist attack on the Pentagon. Specifically, how did the 9/11 attack affect Arlington? As a community, are we successfully remembering and memorializing the day? The Historical Society is proud to publish the winning essay.*

# The Clear Blue Skies of September 11, 2001

## How Arlington Remembers that Fateful Day

*by Grace Freitas*

“The sky was just so blue that day.” When asked about the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, people often first remark on the color of the sky and the calm it brought. That crystalline and peaceful sky quickly turned into a sky full of distress when two planes struck the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York, one plane crashed into a field in Pennsylvania, and one plane struck the Pentagon right here in Arlington, Virginia. This surprise attack on this country caused the beautiful blue skies to be filled with billowing, black smoke. In the face of this darkness, Arlington remembers and honors the brave men, women, and children who lost their lives on that tragic day. To memorialize the tragic events of September 11, 2001, Arlington has constructed memorials and created annual traditions to honor those who lost their lives in this act of terror.

The attacks on September 11 were organized by the Islamic extremist group Al-Qaeda, which was led by Osama Bin Laden. He orchestrated

and planned the attacks that involved nineteen suicide bombers who would claim the lives of over 2,000 Americans. Two planes left from Boston, Massachusetts; one from New York City, New York; and one from Dulles, Virginia; all with different deadly plans in mind. The two planes that left from Boston struck the twin towers in New York City, which resulted in over 2,500 casualties. The fiery infernos ultimately collapsed, trapping many inside. The plane that departed from New York City crashed in a field in Pennsylvania after the passengers united in an epic display of bravery to ground the plane, which tragically killed all those on board. In between the planes crashing into the twin towers and the plane hitting the fields in Pennsylvania, one plane hit the western side of the Pentagon, leaving an indelible mark on the history of Arlington, Virginia.

At 9:37 AM, American Airlines Flight 77 crashed into the Pentagon, killing all 59 passengers and crew members inside the plane, and 125 people inside the Pentagon. Although the loss of life was immense, the reality is that the attack could have been much more deadly. Due to ongoing construction, the affected section of the Pentagon was less populated, saving countless lives. Following the plane crashing into the Pentagon, the response from the Arlington County Fire Department (ACFD) was almost immediate. Within minutes, ACFD was able to establish a unified Incident Command System (ICS), the goals of which included putting out the fire, saving those still inside the building, and creating medical services stations in the area where the plane struck.<sup>1</sup>

With help from fire departments from Washington, DC, and neighboring counties like Alexandria, all three of these goals were accomplished. Chief Tom Hawkins of Alexandria's Fire Department was quoted as saying, "Anything you need, you've got," to ACFD Incident Commander Chief James Schwartz.<sup>2</sup> This attitude of giving and putting others before oneself encapsulates the true heroism of September 11. The attack on the Pentagon demonstrated the power and selflessness of the Washington, DC, Metropolitan Area. In the words of Arlington County Manager Ron Carlee, "The cowardly and evil effort to terrorize our community and our country served only to unite us more strongly than ever before."<sup>3</sup> Even in the wake of the terrorist attack, Arlington was able to emerge as a more unified county and went to great strides to remember and memorialize that horrific day.

Over 190,000 Arlingtonians were left in a state of shock following the attack.<sup>4</sup> A terrorist attack had just occurred in their city, and a large burnt hole was left looming in the side of the Pentagon for all to see. The first sign of hope in the days following September 11 was when rescue crews unfurled a huge American flag next to the burnt crumpled hole in the Pentagon. Photographer Michael Pendergrass snapped the image, and it was reprinted and shown in news coverage all over America (Fig. 1). Pendergrass knew that the hurting country needed this image of hope and resilience. The flag represented “that this wasn’t going to beat us,” rather, the display of patriotism proved that America would truly become a more united nation.<sup>5</sup>

Like the rest of the country, the citizens of Arlington were able to unite in the effort to support their community and rebuild the Pentagon. Reconstruction began less than a month later in October 2001; dubbed “Project Phoenix” and was led by Lee Evey, a Vietnam war

*Fig. 1: Iconic Michael Pendergrass image of first responders unfurling the US flag along the side of the Pentagon days after the attack.*

Courtesy of US Department of Defense



veteran and project supervisor of the renovations in the Pentagon prior to the attack. Evey said that Project Phoenix served as “symbolic importance in the American psyche.”<sup>6</sup> He believed that showing Americans and the rest of the world that the US would rebuild was the most powerful thing that he could do.

Even though a more united America emerged from the ashes, a long and deadly war could be seen looming in the distance. Although war was never officially declared by Congress, less than a month after the attacks, the United States began a nearly twenty-year military campaign in Afghanistan. The mission: to fight terrorism and kill Osama Bin Laden, the mastermind behind the attacks on 9/11. The “War on Terror” also included the US armed conflict with Iraq.<sup>7</sup> Many brave Americans were sent to fight in these two wars, and unfortunately approximately 7,000 soldiers never returned, including six Arlingtonians. Niall W. Coti-Sears, Adam M. Kuligowski, and James J. Walton died in Afghanistan, and Joel E. Baldwin, Michael P. Cassidy, and Sean P. O’Connor died in Iraq. Their memory and legacy are honored on the Arlington War Memorial in Clarendon (Fig. 2 and 3). Their names are remembered and honored alongside fellow Arlingtonians who fought in all other US military engagements dating back to World War I.

Displaying the American flag is another way to pay tribute to fallen heroes. On the anniversary of September 11, one can stand in Rosslyn, look up at the tall buildings and see large American flags draped over the sides. When looking at these emblems of the American fortitude, many Arlingtonians are reminded of the large American flag that hung from the side of the Pentagon following the attacks. The stars and stripes that hang in Rosslyn honor those who were killed on September 11 and serve as a symbol of the tenacious American spirit. Flags across Rosslyn did not start as an organized effort; it happened “organically and spontaneously.”<sup>8</sup> This display of patriotism demonstrates that the

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*Fig. 2 (right top): The Arlington War Memorial located in Clarendon lists the names of Arlingtonians who died in World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan.*

*Fig. 3 (right bottom): Plaque on the Arlington War Memorial of the six Arlingtonians who died in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.*





Courtesy Grace Freitas

people of Arlington do not need to be told to honor this day; the citizens take it upon themselves to show their own patriotism and honor those who were killed.

While many Arlingtonians honor those who were killed at the Pentagon by displaying flags, a memorial was constructed at the Pentagon to allow visitors from all over the world to remember those who were killed by this act of terror. Built seven years after the attack, on September 11, 2008, the memorial was dedicated on the western side of the building to fully honor those who died in the terrorist attack at the Pentagon. It consists of 184 benches with a pool of water underneath to represent the 184 people who lost their lives on that day (Fig. 4). The benches are organized in a timeline of the victim's ages—starting with three years old ranging to seventy-one. They are also specific to those who lost their lives on the plane versus those who were in the building. The ones who died on the plane have benches that are aligned in a way that when reading them, the viewer must look up at the sky. Those who died in the building have the name of the victim aligned with the Pentagon, so that the reader must face the building (Fig. 5). This memorial serves a great importance to remembering September 11

*Fig. 4: The Pentagon 9/11 Memorial contains 184 benches to represent the 184 lives that were lost at the site.*



Courtesy of US Department of Defense

and those who were killed. It is visited annually by millions of people from all over the country and the world, proving that Arlington, and the world, will never forget. To ensure that every visitor has their own unique and personal experience, the memorial offers no tours, and is open 24 hours a day, which allows the victims of the attack to be honored during every moment of every day. This serves as a permanent reminder of the atrocities of that day.

Even amid a pandemic, Arlington found a way to peacefully remember the attack of 9/11 and honor the victims of this tragedy. In the days prior to and on September 11, 2020, forty-four individual lights shone 18,000 feet up into the sky to create one massive beam of light to commemorate the nineteenth anniversary of the attack. The organization, Tunnel to Towers Foundation, was responsible for constructing this awe-inspiring display of light that could be seen for miles. This blue beam of light shone up to the skies, acting as a reminder of those blue skies that shone so brightly on September 11, while simultaneously honoring those who died.

Though the Pentagon has been rebuilt, the planes have resumed flying, and the smoke has been cleared out of the skies, Arlington will

*Fig. 5: A bench at the 9/11 Pentagon Memorial that reads “Lt. Jonas M Panik, USNR.” Panik is one of 125 benches that face the Pentagon, where he was killed.*

Courtesy of US Department of Defense





never forget the events that took place on September 11, 2001. The effort shown by members of the Arlington community to commemorate the events of that day demonstrate that this community will always remember 9/11. Arlington honors every aspect of that day, with the large flags unfurled on buildings, the creation of the 9/11 memorial outside the Pentagon, and with the blue light beam serving as a reminder to residents of Arlington of the lives that were lost. Arlington also recognizes the dedication of those who lost their lives as a result of September 11, in the military conflicts with Iraq and Afghanistan. The terrorists who took the lives of so many innocent people on September 11 intended to hurt the American people and spirit. However, just the opposite occurred. As seen here in Arlington, September 11 brought the community together to both mourn and honor those who were lost. The sky may have been filled with dark smoke, creating a fearful atmosphere, but Arlington was able to rise as a stronger, more united community, and as a community, the tragic attack on this country and this city is memorialized and remembered.

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### **About the Author**

Grace Freitas is an 11th grader at Bishop O'Connell High School.

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### **Endnotes**

1. Department of Justice, et al., "Arlington County: After Action Report on the Response to the September 11 Attack on the Pentagon," (2002): 6, <https://topics.arlingtonva.us/pdf>, [https://topics.arlingtonva.us/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2014/04/after\\_report.pdf](https://topics.arlingtonva.us/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2014/04/after_report.pdf).
2. Ibid., 10.
3. Ibid., 14.
4. US Census Bureau, "Historical Census Data," 2000 United States Census, Arlington.va.us, <https://projects.arlingtonva.us/data-research/demographics/historical-census-data/#:~:text=2000%20Census%20Data%20for%20Arlington,to%20189%2C453%20residents%20in%202000>.
5. Karen Parrish, "Photographer Looks Back on 9/11 Memories," *US Department of Defense, DOD News* (September 8, 2016), <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/938492/photographer-looks-back-on-911-memories/>.



6. John Parkinson, "Special Report: Lee Evey: The Man and His Mission." *Facility Executive* (January 15, 2012), <https://facilityexecutive.com/2012/01/special-report-lee-evey-the-man-and-his-mission/>.
7. Term coined by then President George W. Bush in a speech to Congress on September 16, 2001.
8. Mary-Claire Burick, president of the Rosslyn Business Improvement District, interview by Jeff Clabaugh, "Flags Across Rosslyn Marks 15th Anniversary of 9/11," WTOP, September 9, 2016, <https://wtop.com/business-finance/2016/09/flags-across-rosslyn-marks-15th-anniversary-of-911/>.