Pentagon explosion spreads panic in capital

The symbol of US might is a smoking ruin, writes **Damian Whitworth** in Washington

THE direct hit on the Pentagon reduced a major part of the greatest symbol of American military might to a smoking ruin yesterday and spread fear and panic through the US capital.

As Defence Department officials were scrambling to respond to the earlier attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York, another aircraft ploughed into one side of their headquarters. There was a huge explosion and flames spread quickly.

Nearly an hour later in Pennsylvania a fourth aircraft, carrying 45 people, crashed about 80 miles southeast of Pittsburgh. United Airlines said a further plane, with 65 people on board, had also crashed, but it did not say where.

The 20,000 civilians and military men and women who work in the Pentagon were immediately evacuated and dozens of people were taken to hospital.

The numbers of fatalities and other casualties were not immediately available, but Glenn Flood, a Pentagon spokesman, said there were "extensive casualties and an unknown number of fatalities".

The aircraft hit an area of the building near a helicopter landing pad at the southwestern side of the complex containing the offices of the Marine Corps Aviation, with army and navy offices on different floors.

A section of the five-storey building near the impact collapsed and burnt, sending plumes of smoke billowing across the Potomac River to Washington itself.

"The leadership of the Defence Department is OK. The Secretary [Donald Rumsfeld] is OK," Mr Flood said.

Fire engines surrounded the Pentagon as the flames spread and other government buildings in Washington, including the White House, the Capitol and the Treasury, were evacuated. Police and secret service agents sealed off the area around the White House and agents with automatic weapons patrolled the grounds.

Traffic was gridlocked in the city centre as office workers tried to flee to the suburbs. With the subway system shut, pedestrians walked in lines along the verges of main roads away from the Pentagon, high-profile monuments and government buildings. Many looked skywards as they went. Others gathered in the lobby of the National Press Building to watch silently as the news unfolded on televison or to question reporters.

Reports of an explosion at the State Department proved to be unfounded but did nothing to diminish the atmosphere of fear.

Troops, including a regiment of light infantry, were deployed immediately after the attack and an F16 fighter jet swooped low over the burning building.

An emergency services telephone controller in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, received a mobile phone call just before 10am (3pm BST) from a man who said he was a passenger locked in the bathroom of United Airlines Flight 93, the Boeing 757 that was to crash in Pennsylvania, according to Glenn Cramer, emergency services supervisor.

"We are being hijacked, we are being hijacked!" Mr Cramer quoted the man as saying. The man said the plane was going down. "He heard some sort of explosion and saw white smoke coming from the plane and we lost contact with him," Mr Cramer said.

George Clodfelter, Pentagon security officer, whose uniform was stained with blood, said he had pulled a woman and her infant out of a window close to the impact site, and that they were shaken but unhurt. "I pulled them out of a window [of the building] next to the helipad," Mr Clodfelter said.

Lisa Burgess, a reporter for the army newspaper *Stars and Stripes*, said she was walking in a corridor near the blast site and was thrown to the ground by the force of the explosion. Sirens wailed as the whole building was evacuated.

Paul Begala, a Democratic consultant, said he witnessed the explosion at the Pentagon, saying it sent a huge, orange fireball skyward.

Dave Winslow, an Associated Press reporter, also saw the crash. "I saw the tail of a large airliner ... It ploughed right into the Pentagon," he said.

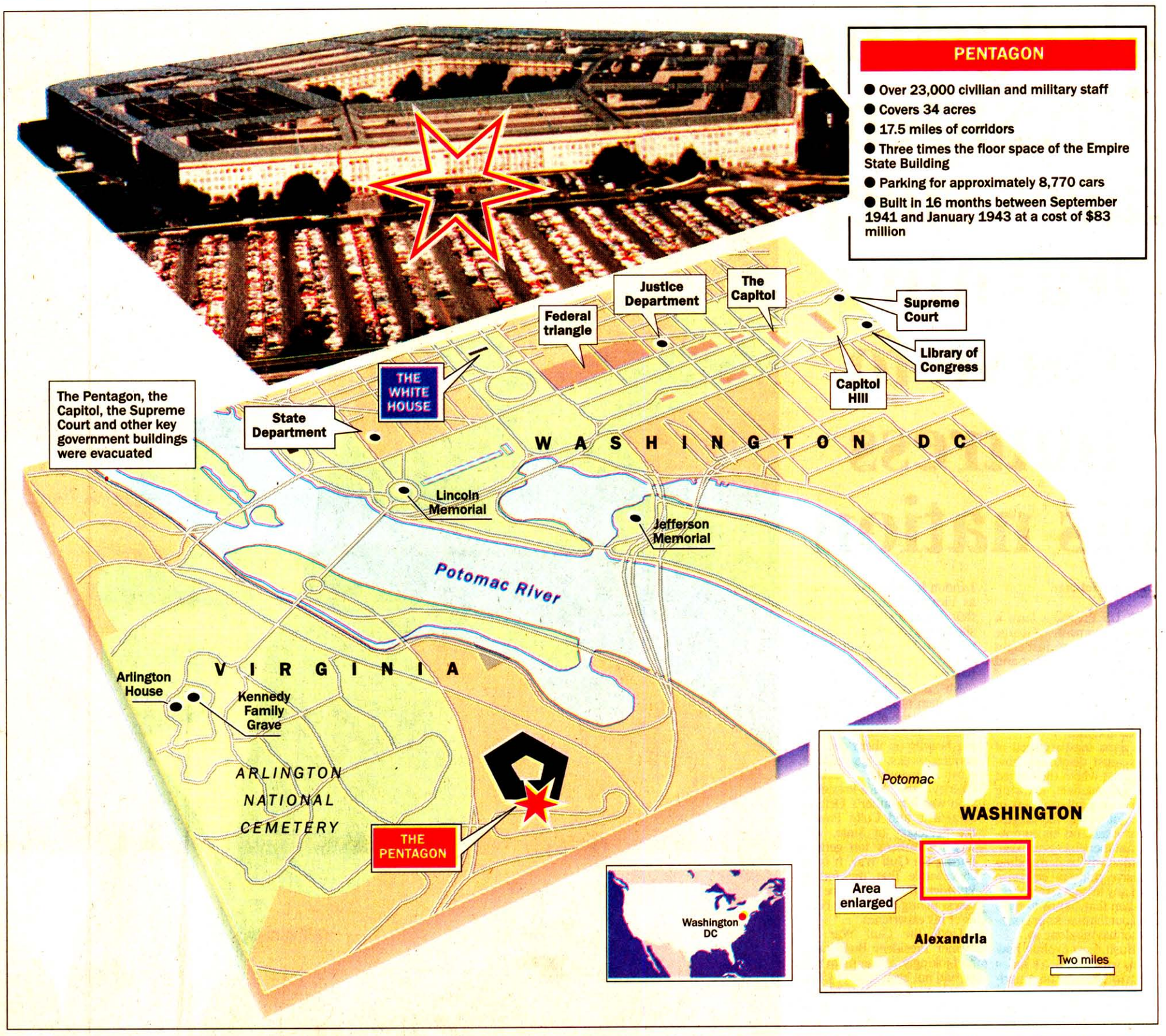
General Richard Myers, vice-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that military officials had been notified before the crash that another hijacked plane had been heading from the New York area to Washington.

He said he assumed it was that aircraft which hit the Pentagon, although he could not be sure.

Across the river the congressional leadership was hustled away to an undisclosed location. Many telephone lines and mobile phone networks were apparently overloaded, hampering the closing of schools across the area. Hospitals were on maximum alert but Robert Malson, president of the DC Hospital Association, refused to release numbers of victims, citing security reasons.

Many in the capital appeared stunned by the day's events. "I'm asking myself if it can happen in America," said Charles Grassley, a Republican Senator from Iowa. "Obviously it can."

Jim Wilson, a Treasury Department employee, said people in his building were in a state of panic about the attacks in New York and at the Pentagon. "People were already nervous about the World Trade Centre, but when they hit the Pentagon, we got really scared," he said.



New York's emergency centre fails first big test on its own doorstep

From James Bone in New York

NEW YORK boasts a state-of-the-art crisis centre, nicknamed the "bunker", opened after the first attack on the World Trade Centre in 1993. The problem yesterday was that the $13 million (£9 million) centre, which opened two years ago, was built in what was supposed to be the city's safest building — the World Trade Centre.

The 50,000 sq ft complex, on the 23rd floor of a block next to the twin towers that collapsed, was symptomatic of the unexpected difficulties that plagued the rescue attempt.

Even Rudolph Giuliani, the Mayor of New York, got trapped while trying to tour the scene of the devastation before both towers fell down.

"We were there when the building collapsed," he said after escaping through a neighbouring building. "We were trapped in there for 10 or 15 minutes and we finally got out through a basement."

Bystanders, distraught by the destruction of the city landmark, complained that the US Army and Marines should have been out in force to respond to an act of war.

Instead, police officers and T-shirted FBI agents sealed off the streets of Lower Manhattan, but that was clearly not enough to save many of their colleagues involved in the rescue when the buildings collapsed. A single police rescue helicopter buzzed to the top of the burning buildings in an apparently unsuccessful effort to see if it could collect any survivors from the roof.

All firemen in the city had been called into work and appeals were made to the public to donate blood. The injured were distributed throughout the city's 170 hospitals.

Teddy Leoutsakos, a court officer who had joined the rescue effort, narrowly escaped the first building collapse and said that "hundreds" of his fellow rescue workers probably had not. He could not say for sure because, when he emerged from the rubble, he could not see for 20 minutes.

The city's crisis centre, bullet-proof and built to withstand winds of more than 160mph, was intended to deal with emergencies ranging from power blackouts to hurricanes and terrorist attacks. It is equipped with three generators to ensure continuous electrical supply, a 6,000-gallon fuel tank to guarantee 72 hours of continuous operation and 11,000 gallons of stored drinking water. It opened with a simulated biological attack on America's largest city, in which dozens of volunteers played dead on the nearby streets. Mr Giuliani and his lieutenants used it to monitor the millennium celebrations in Times Square, which many at the time feared would be the target of a terrorist attack.

☐ **Washington:** Many embassies in the capital closed or sent staff home after the attacks. The Mexican Embassy, three streets from the White House on Pennsylvania Avenue, was told by the US Secret Service to close and send all personnel home, a spokesman said. The Colombian Embassy also evacuated its staff.

The Canadian Embassy, three streets the other side of the White House, stayed open but with heightened security. "We are open for the moment. Everyone is alert and busy. We are continuing to function at a higher level of security," a spokesman said.

The Israeli Embassy shut for a few hours, but reopened with a skeleton staff. "There was a period of two to three hours where we closed down totally because of fear there could be more specific attacks," a spokesman said. "We are operating the Embassy with essential personnel."

The Spanish Embassy said that the authorities were evacuating people from shops and restaurants along the avenue that runs past the the White House to Capitol Hill.

The British Embassy sent non-essential personnel home. The French Embassy also stayed open, but American staff, including interns, were sent home.

International financial organisations based in Washington followed the federal government's lead and closed for the day. *(Reuters)*

Military hit to show power of terrorism

By Michael Evans Defence Editor

THE terrorist attack on the Pentagon dealt a devastating blow to America's military machine. The building, the largest office block in the world, contains officials who oversee the running of the US Armed Forces and houses the most senior commanders.

The targeting of the Pentagon was clearly intended to serve as a demonstration of the power of terrorism against the military might of the United States.

The Pentagon is described as virtually a city in itself. About 25,000 personnel, military and civilian, work in the building and contribute to the planning and execution of the defence of the US. The building's gross floor area is more than 6.5 million square feet. More than 200,000 telephone calls are made daily.

It was built during the early years of the Second World War next to the Potomac River. The five-storey, five-sided building has five concentric rings connected by ten corridors. The combined length of the corridors and rings is more than 17 miles. Because of the unique design of the building it takes no more than ten minutes to walk between any two extremities.

During wartime, the Pentagon housed as many as 30,000 people. Although it is supposed to be capable of withstanding terrorist attacks, the designers did not imagine that a terrorist group would target the building with a hijacked commercial airliner. No building, not even one designed to accommodate America's military command, is capable of surviving such an attack.

The Pentagon is one of the most secure buildings in America but was vulnerable to attack from the air. When the destroyed section of the building is repaired, the US military command will have to consider ringing it with anti-aircraft missiles and other protective devices. The building's size reflects the superiority of the American Armed Forces so yesterday's attack has even greater impact for America's enemies. It shows that despite a defence budget of more than $300 billion (£205 billion) a year, no amount of sophisticated weaponry and military planning can counter a terrorist operation of such boldness.

Since George Bush became President, the Pentagon has been at the heart of political controversy because of the Administration's determination to develop a missile defence system. Mr Bush has given warning that the US faces a future threat of attack from rogue states equipped with long-range ballistic missiles armed with nuclear, chemical or biological warheads.

Yesterday's attacks proved, however, that, with or without a missile defence system, the US will remain vulnerable to terrorism. As a victim of one of the attacks, the Pentagon will now have to reconsider its whole strategy. Although the terrorist attack does not in itself undermine the argument for a missile defence system, the Pentagon will need to review its resources to see whether more funds should be channelled towards defending the country from such attacks.

The Pentagon houses all the key defence policymakers in Washington, including Donald Rumsfeld, the Defence Secretary, and General Hugh Shelton, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

With the devastation of one side of the building, the whole American military empire will be affected. The Pentagon is linked to every command headquarters, one of the most important of which is the strategic command headquarters responsible for America's intercontinental ballistic missile arsenal in Colorado. The main operational centre is housed in a bunker beneath the Pentagon and this crucial facility will have continued operating throughout yesterday's attack.

Nation paralysed as transport stops and telephones jam

From Roland Watson in Tallahasee

PARALYSIS gripped America yesterday as an immobilised transport systems and jammed telephone lines prevented thousands of terrified citizens from fleeing city centres, and countless others from returning or even calling home.

From coast to coast, the country shut down as airports and train stations were evacuated, schools were closed and all federal employees sent home.

Roads around Washington and New York became gridlocked as people tried to escape to the outskirts by the only means of transport available.

Anthony Williams, the Mayor of Washington, declared a state of emergency in the capital so that emergency vehicles could move more freely through the clogged city. City authorities said that people should try to stay out of Washington.

The Red Cross appealed to blood donors in the area to come forward because supplies were low.

Across the rest of the nation, office workers in tall buildings were ordered out into the street. Financial markets came to a standstill.

The communications network on the east coast quickly became overloaded, making telephone connections haphazard or impossible.

New York became a city under siege, but US authorities took steps to seal the entire country.

The southern border with Mexico was closed and border crossings with Canada were placed on a high state of alert.

About ten hours after the first aircraft smashed into the World Trade Centre, the nation had effectively shut itself down.

All power plants were placed on a high state of alert, including 103 commercial nuclear power plants across the country.

Within hours of the first explosion at the World Trade Centre, few areas of everyday life remained unaffected.

The widening security measures began with the immediate closure of New York's airports.

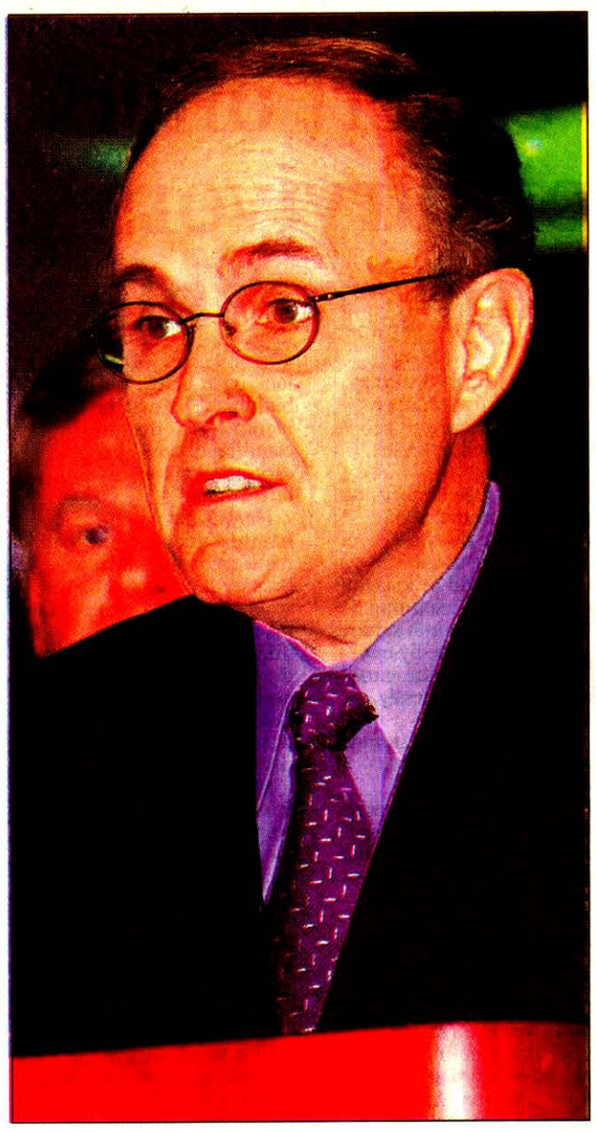
Within an hour, the Federal Aviation Authority had taken the unprecedented step of grounding all aircraft in the United States.

Incoming international flights were diverted to Canada and aircraft already in the air were ordered to land at the nearest airport.

With the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in ruins, and the Pentagon in flames, evacuations were ordered at the United Nations building in New York and the Sears Tower in Chicago.

Los Angeles mobilised its anti-terrorism division, and security was intensified around all military facilities.

The Centre for Disease Control in Atlanta was put on high alert. National monuments in the main cities were closed and New York's mayoral primary election was postponed.

Nasa meanwhile closed the Kennedy Space Centre in Floridaas a result of the attacks, according to a spokeswoman.

Nasa put the spaceport, home to the nation's Space Shuttle fleet, on a "Threatcon Delta" alert, the highest of four states of emergency. It closed buildings, increased security patrols and sent its 12,000 workers home, the spokeswoman said.