ATTACK ON AMERICA

MILITARY SYMBOL

After assault on Pentagon, orderly response

By Robert Schlesinger and Wayne Washington
GLOBE STAFF

WASHINGTON — After the devastating attack yesterday on the Pentagon, the huge building was quickly evacuated with help from the defense secretary in a fashion that witnesses said was extraordinarily orderly and calm. But the image of a brutal gash torn in the headquarters of the world's most powerful military left many stunned.

The terrorist attack with a hijacked American Airlines jet caved in a recently renovated section of the massive, five-sided building, and fires raged for hours — preventing emergency personnel from entering damaged sections. Debris was found hundreds of yards from the building, with police using tape to mark off the potential evidence.

At an early evening news conference, a drawn looking Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said "it's not possible" to know the number of casualties in the 24,000-employee building.

Rumsfeld was in his office around a corner of the building from where the plane hit. He immediately headed toward the crash site and assisted injured people onto stretchers before proceeding back to the smoky but still functional command center, where he remained for the balance of the day.

The nation's defense last night remained on "Threat Level Delta," the highest state of alert.

Rodney Washington, a systems engineer for a Pentagon contractor, was stuck in stand-still traffic a few hundred yards from the Pentagon when the American Airlines jet roared overhead from the southwest.

"It was extremely loud, as you can imagine, a plane that size, it was deafening," Washington said.

The plane was flying low and rapidly descended, Washington said, knocking over light poles before hitting the ground on a helicopter pad just in front of the Pentagon and essentially bouncing into it.

It "landed there and the momentum took it into the Pentagon," Washington said. "There was a very, very brief delay and then it exploded."

Washington speculated that it could have been worse: "If it had kept altitude a little bit higher it probably would have landed in the middle of the Pentagon, in that court."

One witness whose office was deep within the section of the Pentagon that was struck said the explosion seemed to last five or six seconds.

"It wasn't like a rumble, it was just — boom," said Tom Van Leunen of the Navy Public Affairs Office. "It was shocking. . . . It immediately put you on your heels, in fact in my case, actually, it kind of knocked me down."

Staff members and officers all over the Pentagon had been glued to their televisions, trying to comprehend the explosions that had rocked New York City when their own world was shaken, literally, by a long, "indescribable" eruption. As the first concussion slammed the building, few could grasp that they had become part of the disaster.

The attack on the nation's military headquarters stunned many.

"There is always, like all Americans, a certain sense of safety because you're an American," said Van Leunen, who had been in the Pentagon for only six weeks since returning from a four-year posting in Germany. "But there's always been significantly more security in the Pentagon than, say, if you work in downtown D.C. or IBM or something. But that security is internal security. . . . Never in my wildest dreams would I have ever thought of an airplane flying into the Pentagon."

The secretary of defense was in his office around a corner from where the plane hit.

Lieutenant David Gai, who was in his office on a far side of the building when the plane hit, was philosophical.

"The risk we assume is part of our lives," he said. "Service to our country is hand-in-hand with assuming the risks."

Upon the initial evacuation, some building occupants were organized into four-man litter teams to help the wounded, but shortly thereafter they were moved farther from the building when a truck came by warning that a second airplane was in the air and heading toward the Pentagon.

Later in the morning and into the afternoon, F-16 fighter planes could be seen flying overhead along with several military, police, and media helicopters.

Asked at an early afternoon news conference whether the Pentagon has any defenses to prevent such aerial attacks, Pentagon spokesman Rear Admiral Craig Quigley responded: "Not that I'm aware of."

Sitting in his second-floor office not far from the impact point, Lieutenant Colonel Dan Pummill thought construction crews working on refurbishment of that section had "hit the side of the building with a crane or something."

All the glass in the office shattered and Pummill was knocked from his chair, but it was not until the dark smoke started billowing down the hallway that he grasped what had happened.

Henry Mody, a mechanic, was driving his maintenance truck through the halls when he heard the terrific boom and saw garbage cans flying down the corridor. He thought it was a transformer blowing up.

"I saw all of that smoke, it looked like a dark sky," Mody recalled later, sitting in the grass a couple of hundred yards from the Pentagon.

Mike Walter, a reporter with USA Today, was stuck in traffic during his commute to work, listening to the radio reports of the World Trade Center catastrophe when he saw the American Airlines jetliner fly over too low and too fast. Still it took him several moments to realize what was about to happen. "At first it didn't register," he said. "I see planes coming into National [airport] all the time. But it was so low."

He watched the plane pass over a hill separating him from the Pentagon and disappear. Then the boom and the flames climbing into the air.

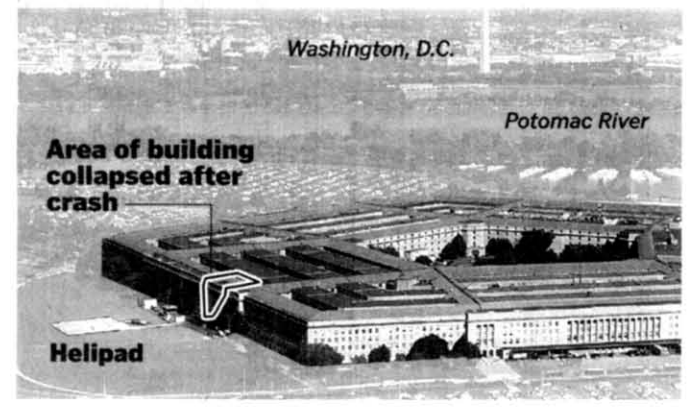
"It was almost like time stood still," Walter said. "It was surreal."

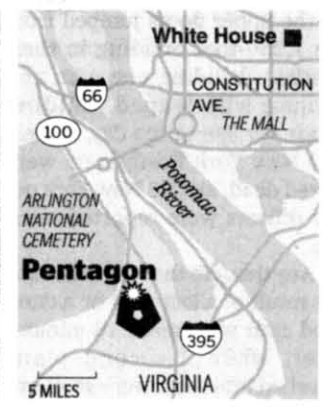
AFP PHOTO

A section of the Pentagon in ruins yesterday, after a hijacked American Airlines jet crashed into the building.

Damage to the Pentagon

At 9:43 a.m. today, an hour after the first of two hijacked commercial airplanes crashed into New York's World Trade Center towers, a similar aircraft crashed into the Pentagon building outside Washington, D.C. Secondary explosions were reported after the crash, and part of the building near the helipad collapsed about a half-hour after the crash. The damaged area housed offices for Marine Corps aviation, the Army, and Navy.





SOURCES: Associated Press, DefenseLink

GLOBE STAFF GRAPHIC / SEAN McNAUGHTON

In unfathomable fashion, we know now terror

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sumptions of safety and its feeling of breezy confidence, had changed.

This is a different country this morning.

The two towers of the World Trade Center are gone, and along with them the entire way we looked at life — the way we regarded signature buildings gleaming on the waterfront, for example, or shiny airliners heading to the coast — has disappeared. American security has been breached, and our sense of security is gone.

Yesterday was an indelible marker. For political scientists, it was the moment the nation finally realized that its most dangerous foes weren't hostile nation-states engaged in the sort of power-politics that dominated the world from the Congress of Vienna to the fall of the Berlin Wall. For military strategists, it was the moment when the conventional tools of deterrence and intelligence that had shielded the nation since the dawn of the Cold War finally failed. For the rest of us, it was the moment when words failed, when the customary comparisons couldn't be applied.

It was the very ordinariness of the day that underlined the vulnerability of the age.

The day, to be sure, had echoes of Pearl Harbor — an abrupt attack, the sudden ending of America's isolation from the threats that had enveloped much of the world, the swift mobilization of military and guard units. And though the Pearl Harbor allusion filled the air yesterday, this was not a conventional attack of war, the enemy is not known (and may not even be foreign), and no obvious response is available.

But the effect of the events of yesterday was unambiguous. The unfathomable suddenly became credible.

And that process — where the power was drained from the word *unbelievable* in just the passing of a few hours — was shared by Americans everywhere.

All day long the barriers to credulity tumbled. Just when it was difficult to conceive of a plane barreling into the World Trade Center, the sight of another jetliner heading toward the other tower appeared on television. That overloaded the senses — until the report that the Pentagon was aflame, the target of another plane.

By the time accounts of the fourth jetliner reached the public, the resistance to the terrible truth was gone. It made sense, even though it made no sense at all.

Then, for hours, throughout the country, people fled to the safety of their homes. But they didn't feel safe. They knew that the same thing could happen again, in a few hours, or maybe in a few days.

They knew that the attacks defied comprehension and defied expectations, but that they did not defy logic. Experts have been saying a terrorism spectacular was possible, likely, or perhaps — though philosophers and historians differ over whether such a concept exists — even inevitable.

Now it has happened, and it occurred not at the Super Bowl (some novelists' fantasy) or at the millennium celebrations (some terrorists' actual plans), but on a completely ordinary Tuesday that began like any ordinary day — a Tuesday, when, fatefully, planes took off from Boston and Newark and Washington, just as they always do, and when the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were full of workers.

Indeed, it was the very ordinariness of the day that underlined the vulnerability of the age. Moreover, the very magnitude of the horror underlined the ties that bind Americans at times of national challenge.

On the surface, seven major American cities were touched by this attack — New York, Boston, Washington, Newark, Pittsburgh, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. But we were all touched by it.

The passengers on the airliners were people in transit. The victims in the World Trade Center and the Pentagon have relatives everywhere. The images of the smoke pouring from the buildings, and of the ambulances racing, and of mere passersby becoming unwitting and unwilling witnesses to history, were seen by us all.

Yesterday, Sept. 11, 2001, was a day of infamy. But it was not Pearl Harbor in 1941, not the seizing of the hostages in Tehran in 1979, not the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993, not the carnage at Oklahoma City in 1995. It was a horror all its own, and before long it will be a noun all its own.