

ATTACK ON THE PENTAGON

TERROR HITS HOME

Crisis neared as Pentagon staff watched news of N.Y. attacks

*Number dead, injured in act not yet known*By Elaine Sciolino
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WASHINGTON — A hijacked passenger plane sliced into the Pentagon on Tuesday, triggering a thunderous explosion and fierce fires in the defense complex, and killing and wounding an unknown number of people.

The surprise terrorist assault, the first in the history of the 58-year-old building, came within an hour of the attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Center and set off a state of emergency in the nation's capital that swiftly shut down the government. All federal office buildings were closed and F-16 fighter jets and helicopters scrambled to police the skies.

Experts on war unprepared

The choking, acrid smell of smoke engulfing the area and the sight of men and women trained for war fleeing in shock and fear underscored the vulnerability of the American military and the inability of the most sophisticated early warning systems in the world to stop a low-tech form of terrorism: hijacking.

American Airlines flight 77, a Boeing 757 carrying 64 passengers and six crew members, was on a scheduled flight from Dulles International Airport west of Washington to Los Angeles when it flew low and slammed into the five-sided, five-story concrete-walled structure about 9:30 a.m., when Pentagon workers are already deep into their workday.

More than 10 hours after the terrorist attack, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld struggled to give the impression of business-as-usual in a brief appearance in the Pentagon press room. Noting that the briefing was taking place in the Pentagon, Rumsfeld announced, "The Pentagon is functioning. It will be in business tomorrow."

Mum on intelligence

He called the terrorist act a "vicious, well-coordinated massive attack against the United States of America," and said, "We have taken a series of measures to prevent further attacks and to determine who is responsible."

But he declined to answer a question about whether the Pentagon had any advance knowledge that such an attack was planned, saying that he did not discuss intelligence matters, and said he could give no reliable estimate of casualties.

Rumsfeld was joined by Gen. Henry Shelton, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who returned to Washington from Europe on Tuesday afternoon. Shelton condemned what he called an "outrageous act of barbaric terrorism carried out by fanatics against both civilians and military people, acts that have killed and maimed many innocent and decent citizens of our country." He added, "Make no mistake about it. Your armed forces are ready."

Many of the Pentagon's more than 20,000 civilians and military men and women were already on edge when the attack came. News of the crashes at the Trade Center had shot through the corridors and it seemed as if every office television was turned on. Military and civilian employees watched in astonishment and horror as smoke engulfed the two towers and shock enveloped New York City.

In a macabre foreshadowing

See PENTAGON, A-15



AP PHOTOS

Rescue workers assess damage at the Pentagon after a passenger airplane hit the 58-year-old building in an apparent terrorist attack.



A piece of aircraft wreckage lies on the heliport on the west side of the Pentagon. American Airlines flight 77, a Boeing 757 carrying 64 passengers and six crew members, flew low and slammed into the five-sided, five-story structure about 9:30 a.m. Tuesday.

Violent forecast comes true

*Defense chief feels impact of jet crash*By Robert Burns
Associated Press writer

WASHINGTON — Inside the Pentagon, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld had just raced to his office after hearing of the World Trade Center attack. On a house porch a little more than a mile away, Ralph Banton, 79, was enjoying a crystal-clear morning.

Then Banton heard a jet flying directly overhead, very low.

"It sounded like it was jetting instead of slowing down," he said.

Seconds later, American Flight 77, hijacked while carrying 64 people from Washington, D.C., to Los Angeles, tore into the side of the Pentagon in a shocking terror attack aimed at the building that represents America's military power around the world.

The Pentagon burst into flames, sending into the blue sky a huge cloud of smoke visible for miles. And a part of the western side of the five-sided building in suburban Arlington, Va., collapsed.

Grim task faced

By Tuesday night, firefighters were just gaining control of the fire, and searchers were preparing to enter the wing to search for dead and injured inside.

They had no clear idea how many casualties would be found, Rumsfeld said at a briefing inside the Pentagon. But he added: "It will not be a few."

Nevertheless, "The Pentagon is functioning," Rumsfeld said Tuesday. "It will be in business tomorrow."

The area hit by the aircraft was under renovation, and thus some offices may not have been occupied, officials said. Overall, 24,000 people work in the Pentagon.

When the attack came at 9:40 a.m. EDT, "the whole building shook" with the impact, said Terry Yonkers, an Air Force civilian employee at work inside the Pentagon at the time. "There was screaming and pandemonium."

Taking cover

Outside, Alan Wallace, one of three firefighters to be regularly assigned to the Pentagon, saw the airplane approaching and dived beneath a van for protection. Then he began working to help get people from the building.

His firetruck was on fire.

On a nearby road, debris hit several cars. Cabdrivers watched, stunned, as hundreds of people poured out the doors of the huge building.

Rumsfeld was in his office when the aircraft hit on the opposite side of the building. He had just run there after hearing of the Trade Center attack.

Rumsfeld said he "felt the shock of the airplane hitting the building," then went running down to the site where the aircraft hit.

The defense secretary then went to the National Military Command Center in the lower floors of the Pentagon.