

THE SCENE IN D.C.

False rumors fly amid awful truth

Roads, cell phones jam in the aftermath of an unbelievable morning

BY JOEL ACHENBACH
Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The nation's capital was plunged into a state of fear and confusion Tuesday morning, with rumors of explosions all across town and thousands of people trapped in gridlocked traffic. People scanned the skies for incoming terrorist planes. There were reports — sources unknown — of bombs and smoke all around the federal city.

They came one after another: a car bomb at the State Department. A bomb at the Capitol. A bomb at the Old Executive Office Building. The USA Today building in suburban Rosslyn, Va., was supposedly enveloped in smoke. Reported as fact on radio and television, the rumors were untrue. But so much had happened already, so many terrible things in New York and Washington — you could see the cloud of smoke from the plane crash at the Pentagon from almost anywhere in town — that anything seemed possible.

"Go!" shouted Michele Tolson, an Office of Personnel Management employee helping direct cars out of the garage. A driver was balking at the direction to turn right onto 18th Street.

"But it won't get me anywhere I want to go," the driver protested.

"But it would get you out of the building. We just got a phone call," Tolson said, meaning, a bomb threat.

"They're not done yet. The object of this is to hit every major city in America," Verizon employee Carlton Jones told co-workers as they tried to hike out of the city past the gridlocked cars.

At the White House, phone bank volunteers were hearing the voices of the American people soon after the first reports of the plane crashes that demolished the World Trade Center buildings in New York City. A volunteer who requested anonymity said later, after being evacuated: "People calling on the phones were hysterical. They said, 'Do something now. Do it swiftly. Don't be a wuss. Don't be moderate. Get bin Laden.'"

Cell phone traffic downtown became jammed for much of the morning.

"I can't call anyone. I can't do anything!" said a student at George Washington University who gave her name only as Kate. Katherine Nussbaum, another GWU student, was similarly confounded.

"I'm worried that my parents are going to freak out and there's no way to call them," she said.

For the most part, people were not panicking. Many stood, stunned, on street corners.

"Everyone seems to be very much in shock," said printing company executive Mike Poppalardo, surveying the chaos on E Street just west of the White House. Outside the evacuated Federal Reserve building, Jim Johnson, an employee of the General Services Administration, calmly sat in the shade in a pocket-park and read the financial section of the morning newspaper. People were hustling in all directions on the sidewalks nearby, but Johnson was imperturbable.

"What else you gonna do?" he said. He lives in suburban Falls Church, Va. — it seemed unlikely he would get home any time soon.

On the steps of the historic Octagon building, a block from the White House complex, Bert Stacey sat glumly, wondering how long until he could get a ride home. The cars in the street next to him hadn't moved for an hour, he said. He said he was disillusioned and angry.

"Disillusioned that we're brought to instant gridlock in one of the world's most powerful capitals. Disillusioned that the security net didn't preclude at least some of it. Obviously it was well-planned, well-coordinated."

Unlike, he didn't need to add, the evacuation of the city.

Verizon worker Timetha Banks summed it up: "It's turmoil. Mass confusion."



TOM HORAN — ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTO

One of the largest office buildings in the world and the seat of American military power, the Pentagon smoldered for hours Tuesday after a jet slammed into its south side.

FIRST ATTACK ON BUILDING

Hijacked jet plows through Pentagon

Disaster shuts down government, building will reopen today; unknown number killed, hurt

BY ELAINE SCIOLINO
New York Times

WASHINGTON — A hijacked passenger plane sliced into the Pentagon 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.

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 58 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, Defense Secretary 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."

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 such an attack was planned, saying he did not discuss intelligence matters, and said he could give no reliable estimate of casualties.

Rumsfeld was joined by Army Gen. Hugh 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



KAMENKO PAJIC — ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTO

Rescue workers look over damage Tuesday at the Pentagon. The Pentagon burst into flames, and a portion of one side of the five-sided structure collapsed after the building was hit by an aircraft in an apparent terrorist attack.

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 of what then happened, Mike Slater, a former Marine, told his fellow workers, "We're next."

Then the building, built to withstand terrorist attacks, shook like a rickety roller coaster. A section of it collapsed and burned. "It sounded like a roar," said Slater, who was 500 yards away from where the jet slammed into the Pentagon's west side. "I knew it was a bomb or something."

Slater said he braced himself for a second explosion since he knew there had

been two airplanes that crashed into the twin towers in New York. Instead, blue-and-white strobe lights and wailing sirens alerted those inside to evacuate. Evacuation orders were also sounded over a loudspeaker. Smoke quickly filled the air, but the lights stayed on.

Indeed, shortly after the evacuation, warnings were broadcast of a reported second plane approaching the building, but it did not come.

As soon as Slater stepped outside, he saw and smelled something uncomfortably familiar. "I saw a mass of oily smoke and thought of the oil fields of Kuwait," he said. "There were 3,000 Americans killed in Pearl Harbor. This will be at least that many, if not more, and I hope Congress has the guts to do something about it."

When the Pentagon was built as a fire-

proof, air-conditioned headquarters for the American military in a record 16 months in the early 1940s, it was touted as an engineering marvel. Even now, the five-sided, five-story building, which has three times the floor space of the Empire State Building and houses 24,000 employees, is considered one of the architectural achievements of the 20th century.

Over the years, there have been a number of terrorist bomb threats that resulted in tightened security at the Pentagon. In 1987, a 29-year-old gunman was shot and killed at one of the Pentagon's entrances after he pulled a gun and tried to enter an area near the National Military Command Center. But never before, even in the tensest days of the Cold War, had there been a terrorist attack against the Pentagon.

Rumsfeld was in his office on the third floor of the outer ring when he heard and felt the crash on the other side of the building. The 69-year-old former Navy pilot was jolted and rushed to the scene. "He went outside the building and was helpful in getting several people that were injured onto stretchers," said a Pentagon spokesman, Adm. Craig Quigley. "He was out there 15 minutes or so helping the injured."

Then Rumsfeld headed to the National Military Command Center, the secure operational nerve center below his office, even though it was permeated with smoke. There, Rumsfeld, Gen. Richard Myers, the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and other top military and civilian aides remained sequestered through the day to discuss military options.

Police officers immediately blocked all highways and roads leading into the Pentagon and the Metro mass transit lines were detoured to avoid the underground station at the Pentagon and several stations around it.

The Pentagon converted one area into a field hospital that looked like a MASH unit, filling it with ambulances, fire engines and other emergency vehicles. Search-and-rescue equipment, cranes and dog-sniffing units swarmed into the area; troops in riot gear ringed various military bases.

But at the Pentagon building itself, rescue workers, blocked by fire and smoke, failed to reach the central site of the crash for several hours.

Pentagon officials said many casualties were averted because the plane exploded in a newly renovated area of the Pentagon where many offices were not yet occupied. The area had been fitted with blast-resistant windows, which may also have helped to cushion the impact.

All children in the Pentagon's day-care center, which is on the opposite side of the building from the crash site, were safely evacuated.