

# Instincts Told Them to Flee— Regardless, Marines Went Forward Into a “Hellish Place”

By Maj Fred H. Allison, USMCR (Ret)

**W**hen a terrorist-flown commercial airliner plowed into the Pentagon at 9:40 a.m. on Sept. 11, 2001, the Marine Corps was fortunate in that no Marines were killed or even seriously injured.

Some Marine Corps offices were very close to “ground zero.” Many, fortunately, were not. No matter where they worked, however, Marines from all around the Pentagon responded to the emergency in a manner that conjures up the best images of how Marines react under fire or in an emergency.

These are the accounts of just a few of the Marine “heroes” of that day; more accounts of Marines stepping up, no doubt, will surface.

Sergeant Maurice L. Bease had worked around Marine aviation long enough to know what a fly-by was, and it sounded like

one as he stood outside his office near the Pentagon on Sept. 11. Turning around expecting to see a fighter jet fly over, he saw only a split-second glimpse of a white commercial airliner streaking low toward the building and him! He did not even have time to duck before it plowed into the side of the Pentagon around the corner and about 200 yards from where he stood.

Immediately, a ball of flame shot up the side of the building, followed by smoke, lots of it. People began to flood out into the parking lot.

Sgt Bease did as several other Marines did that day. He checked out with his unit staff noncommissioned officer, then voluntarily checked in with a Marine Corps “command center” that had gone up almost immediately under an overpass of Interstate 395, the freeway that runs beside the Pentagon.



This aerial view taken Sept. 14 vividly shows the destruction at the Pentagon and the efforts made to clear the debris after the Sept. 11 terrorist attack. Marines were among those who rushed into the chaos to help rescue and treat those injured.



Throughout the day, Marines were detailed out from this command center to help wherever they could. For Bease, this meant working the rest of the day assisting firemen in laying hoses and staging litters for the evacuation of the injured.

No Marine Corps offices were closer to the impact point than those of Mr. Peter M. Murphy, the Counsel for the Commandant of the Marine Corps and the most senior civilian working for the Marine Corps. Mr. Murphy and Major Joe D. Baker were having a discussion in Mr. Murphy's office on the fourth floor of the Pentagon's outermost ring, the E-Ring, overlooking the helo-pad. With CNN on a TV monitor across the room, they stopped their discussion when the news of the World Trade Center attacks came on. After watching awhile, Mr. Murphy asked Mr. Robert D. Hogue, his Deputy Counsel, to check with their administrative clerk, Corporal Timothy J. Garofola, on the current security status of the Pentagon.

Garofola had just received an email from the security manager to all Department of Defense employees that the threat condition remained "normal." He passed this information to Hogue, who stepped back into the doorway of Mr. Murphy's office to relay the message. At that instant, a tremendous explosion with what Mr. Murphy said was a noise "louder than any noise he had ever heard" shook the room. Mr. Murphy, who had been standing with his back to the window, was knocked entirely across the room, while Hogue was jolted into his office. Garofola's desk literally rose straight up several inches then slammed down.

The airplane had crashed almost directly below Mr. Murphy's offices. The floor buckled at the expansion joint that ran between the two offices and created a discernible step up between the two rooms. The air was filled with dust particles, and the ceiling tiles fell, leaving the lights dangling from their electrical connections; the building was crumbling.

The men did not know what had hit them, but they did know that it was time to get out. There was no panic, just a shock-hazed determination to survive. Hogue went to Garofola and told him to "get us out of here." The corporal attempted to open the heavy magnetized door, but it had been jammed and did not budge. Then, Mr. Murphy saw the "Marine" come out in Garofola. He yanked the door as hard as he could and it came open.

Garofola and Hogue took charge and made sure that their offices were evacuated. They stood in the hallway and tried to determine which way to go. They instinctively headed left toward the nearest Marine offices, those of Lieutenant General William L. Nyland, the Deputy Commandant for Aviation. They proceeded only a short distance and heard someone call, "There is fire down here." Facing the prospect of fire, they reversed course and headed



**As firefighters battled the blaze, smoke and flames rose over the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001. Part of the building collapsed while rescue workers looked for survivors. Including the passengers on the plane, the attack claimed 189 lives. (Photo by PH1 Dewitt D. Roseborough III, USN)**

the other way into dense black smoke. They went as far as they Garofola and Hogue took charge and made sure that their offices were evacuated. They stood in the hallway and tried to determine which way to go. They instinctively headed left toward the nearest Marine offices could, but it was impossible. They could not breathe, and the heat was unbearable.

Through the cracks in the floor, they could see flames below them. Then they heard voices. They might as well have been angels, but the voices repeatedly called, "Come to my voice. Come this direction!" It was U.S. Navy personnel, calling them to safety, back in the direction they had originally gone.

They went through the smoke for a short distance, then into the clear. They made it down to the second deck overlooking the courtyard, the area in the middle of the Pentagon. From this perspective, they saw thick black smoke pouring over the side of the building and into the Pentagon courtyard. Proceeding to the A-Ring, they saw a U.S. Army lieutenant colonel, whose uniform was entirely black, pulling bodies out. He laid one down beside two others. They could not tell if the bodies were burned or just covered with smoke, dead or alive.

There was confusion but not panic among Pentagon workers as they shuffled through the corridors attempting to make it to a safe exit. There were some injured people, but around each injured were several people attempting to render aid. Mr. Murphy's staff stuck together all the way out to safety. They took refuge at his home, where they were finally able to contact their families.

Sgt Francis W. Pomrunk Jr., a Classified Materials NCO, was at work in his office in the Department of Marine Aviation. Most



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SGT JACOB FULLER, USMC



**Robert D. Hogue**

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of Marine Aviation had just the weekend before been moved to the “Butler building,” an extension of the Pentagon about 200 yards from where the impact occurred, not nearly as close as their previous offices. Pomrink heard the jet engine noise of a rapidly approaching jet and a muffled rumbling explosion, then the floor shivered beneath him. He went outside and could see the smoke rolling up and flames shooting over the top of the Pentagon.

He bolted back into his office and ordered everyone out. He was the last man out, remaining behind to ensure that all personnel were evacuated and that all classified materials were secure. He then remembered the Marines he knew who worked in the Pentagon, part of the staff of LtGen Nyland. Pomrink knew where those offices were—about where he could now see smoke and flames.

Concern for his fellow Marines prompted him to take action. He checked out with his section head and ran up the hill to his barracks at Henderson Hall, about one-half mile away. He changed from his service C or “Charlies” to his camouflage utilities. He then ran back down to the Pentagon directly toward the ugly, smoking, rubble-filled gash in its west side. He made his way through the building to the fourth deck, where Marine Aviation’s offices were. The smoke was too thick to get close. He retreated down and out of the building to ground level. A rescue party composed of military personnel from all services pulled survivors out of the smoke and destruction.

Pomrink then heard screams and people shouting for help; he couldn’t “turn [his] back on them” and began to assist with the rescue. He aided five to 10 injured individuals, then brought up litters for fire department personnel to use. He stayed at the rescue site and assisted until 3 o’clock the next morning. He never found the Marines he was looking for.

Pomrink was right about them, though. Their office was definitely near the impact point, only 25 yards away.

Lance Corporals Dustin P. Schuetz and Michael Vera worked in the Aviation administration section of the office supporting LtGen Nyland. LtGen Nyland’s office was the only office of the Marine Aviation Department that had not moved to the Butler building the previous weekend.

The crashes into the World Trade Center had captured everyone’s attention in the office that morning. Like the group in Mr. Murphy’s office, there were clusters of people around every TV monitor. Schuetz was describing to a couple of Marines who had not had a chance to watch TV how the second plane had crashed into the WTC. He used his hands for visual aids; one hand was the airplane, the other the second tower of the WTC. Just as his hands came together and touched, the building shook violently, like some outside force was assisting in the demonstration.

Schuetz was knocked to the ground, and Vera’s chair rolled him back into the wall. At first they kind of laughed; maybe the

**It was a team effort to provide assistance to the injured. Aide to the Commandant of the Marine Corps, Lieutenant Colonel Robert L. Gardner (right, foreground), was one of literally thousands who pitched in.**



**LCpl Dustin P. Schuetz**



**LCpl Michael Vera**



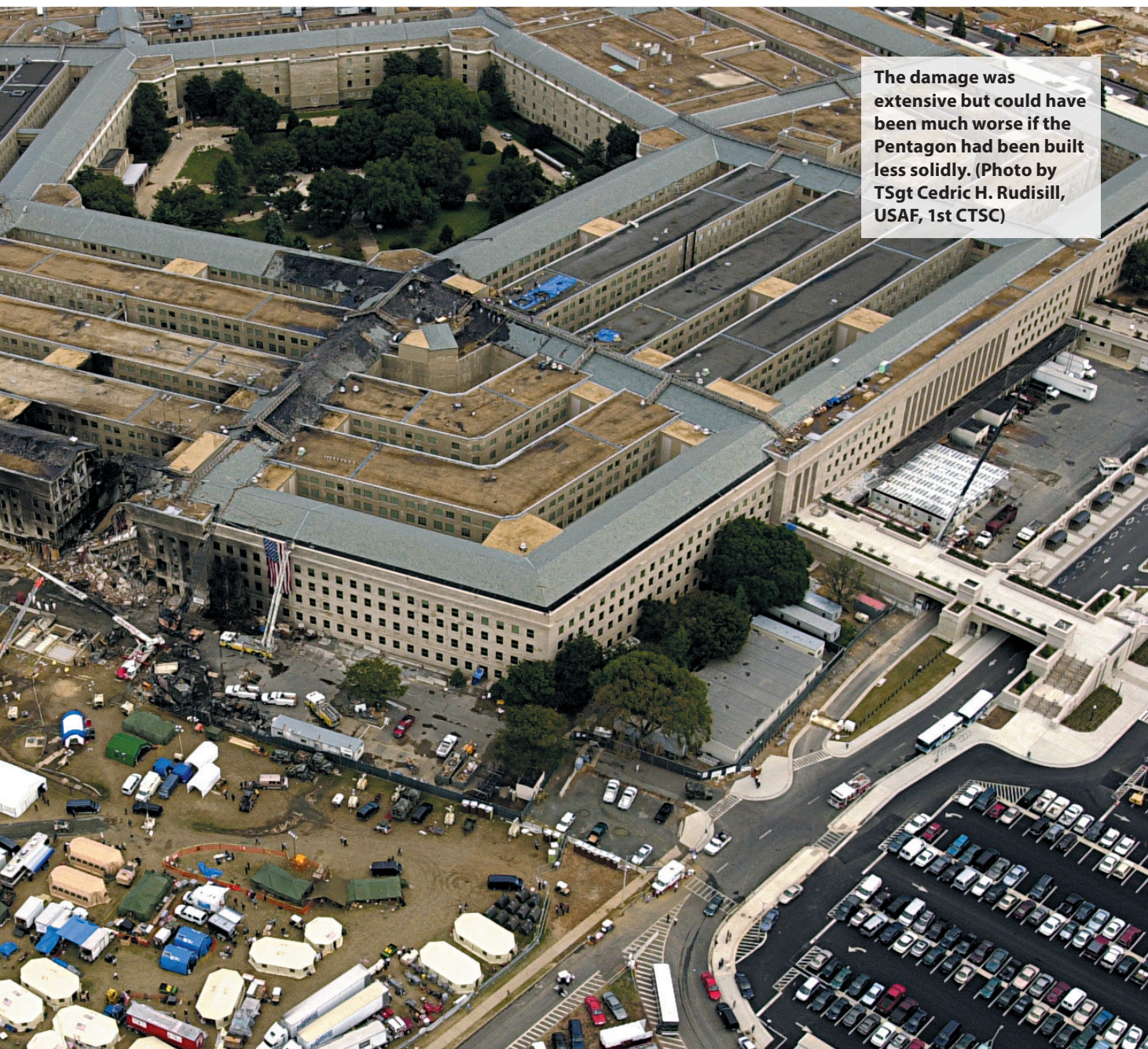
SGT JACOB FULLER, USMC

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CPL JASON INGERSOLL, USMC





The damage was extensive but could have been much worse if the Pentagon had been built less solidly. (Photo by TSgt Cedric H. Rudisill, USAF, 1st CTSC)

**Schuetz and Vera linked hands with others so that they could penetrate the smoke without becoming lost themselves. They guided people out of their offices to safety and aided the injured. Vera estimated that they were able to assist 10 to 15 people at the A-Ring.**

old boiler in the closet exploded, they surmised. Stepping out into the corridor, they realized it was much worse than an old boiler. There was much confusion, and smoke was beginning to roll down the corridor. Something was terribly wrong.

Vera and Schuetz then stepped up and took charge. Taking charge of the situation caused Schuetz to reflect back on the best things he had been taught at boot camp: initiative, decisiveness, teamwork. "It was like a breath of fresh air," he recalled.

They evacuated their office and got the office staff headed away from the smoke. After ensuring that the offices in their area were evacuated and the office staff was headed for clear air, they both, without thinking but responding in silent agreement, immediately ran the other direction, toward the smoke and the heat and the danger.

The two Marines made it down to the ground level and set to work assisting other rescuers around the A-Ring, or inner ring of the Pentagon. Smoke had filled the corridors, and people were shouting for help to find their way out, or shouting because they were injured. Schuetz and Vera linked hands with others so that they could penetrate the smoke without becoming lost themselves. They guided people out of their offices to safety and aided the injured. Vera estimated that they were able to assist 10 to 15 people at the A-Ring.

Sailors from the Navy's security force then called to them. They needed help deeper in the bowels of the Pentagon, closer to the impact point. Vera and Schuetz headed in.

They made it to a small service road that goes through the Pentagon between the C and D rings. There, a group of about



**Amid the chaos, the color of the United States Marine Corps was not singed, damaged or disturbed. It stood in what had been the fourth floor office of Mr. Peter M. Murphy, Counsel to the Commandant of the Marine Corps.**

15 individuals—other Marines, soldiers, Sailors and civilians—were rescuing office workers.

It was an eerie, hellish kind of place. It was almost pitch black from the boiling smoke and choking concrete dust. The small roadway was almost a foot deep in water. Electrical wires dangled aloft, sometimes popping and sparking, and the walls seemed to be bent back by the impact of the collision, even tottering, threatening collapse. Overhead and around them there were small pockets of fire. Chunks out of the windows above them would occasionally fall, letting fresh oxygen rush in to feed a nearby fire, causing it to blossom and flare, reminding Schuetz of the movie “Backdraft.” A weird smell wafted through. LCpl Vera had never smelled it before—burning flesh?

Voices pierced the smoky, hot darkness—calls for help and shrieks of pain. They broke up into groups. LCpl Schuetz recalled boot camp, specifically the gas chamber and fire teams. They were like fire teams, taking turns rushing into the fiery rubble and debris, carrying fire extinguishers, sometimes one in each hand, toward a voice in the darkness. They carried out the injured.

Some they cannot forget: the female chief petty officer, one side of her face blackened, hopefully only from smoke; the African-American soldier’s burned skin that was a bright pink. Many had their hair burned off, others their skin peeled off from the burns.

The smoke and heat prevented the rescuers from going in farther. They had no special equipment. One U.S. Army master sergeant, Rambo-like, ripped off his shirt and his pants to make a mask for himself and bandages to wrap the burns of victims. Vera will always remember him, rushing into the darkness in T-shirt and shorts toward a pleading voice. Schuetz removed his camouflage utility blouse, ripped it in two and made a mask so that he could go farther into the smoke.

One could go only so far, though. In some areas the heat made it absolutely impassable. Yet, coming from the midst of the heat and the other side of it, Vera could here voices calling.

That was the hardest part, Schuetz said. “You could only go so far, until you couldn’t breathe anymore or see anymore, and you don’t want yourself to be a casualty. So you had to turn around, and you could still hear them saying, ‘Help. Somebody help me!’ ”



PH1 MICHAEL W. PENDERGRASS, USN

They persisted in their rescue efforts with the others until fire department and emergency medical service crews arrived. Incredibly, members of the media beat the emergency crews. How surreal it seemed to Vera for someone to be taking pictures in such a place.

How many did they pull to safety? They were not sure, possibly 12 or 13. It was hard to remember all of them. But try as they might, they will not be able to forget those most horribly injured.

Why did they do this? Why did they not just exit into the clear air with the rest of the office staff? LCpl Schuetz perhaps summed it up best: “That’s what Marines are supposed to do.”

Author’s bio: Maj Fred H. Allison, USMCR (Ret) is a former Marine F-4 radar intercept officer. He earned his doctorate in history from Texas Tech University and retired as the oral historian for the Marine Corps History Division. 🦖

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