

Out of the Ashes

Photojournalist Terri Cavoli documented a unique view of life in the six months following the 9-11 attacks. She recounts her life-changing experience.

I arrived in Washington, D.C on Sept. 12, 2001 after driving from Jacksonville, FL. Few cars were on the road and no planes were in the air. All U.S. aircraft had been grounded by the Federal Aviation Administration and U.S. air space was patrolled by F14 fighter jets. President George Bush, who had been visiting a Florida elementary school, was whisked away on Air Force One to a secret location under escort by military fighter jets.



America was under attack. Passengers were left scrambling for transportation and were stranded in airports around the world. As I drove past Quantico military base, I saw lights in the sky but there was no explanation of what was happening. It was then that I heard a radio report detailing the high death toll among firefighters, police and military – our country's first responders. My heart ached for the victims, their families, our country and this new, dark chapter in our history.

For years previously, I was working on a project to bring awareness to the high number of American police men and women who die in the line of duty on a daily basis. In one morning, the message had come home. Sept. 11, 2001 was the highest, single-day, toll of non-military first responder deaths in U.S. history.

I covered the aftermath of the attack on the Pentagon and the ensuing reaction in the Washington, D.C. and northern Virginia communities. There I saw a young child in a U.S. Marine uniform holding a coffee can and asking for donations at a local strip mall. I next attended a candlelight vigil by grief-stricken supporters who lined the streets of Dale City, VA. The unprecedented support I witnessed as the community rallied for the families of the victims, some of whom attended my niece's middle school, was truly awe-inspiring.

Downtown D.C. was a ghost town but American flags hung from every window of government office buildings creating a beautiful pattern of patriotism among ionic columns. Military, police and mandatory government workers labored around the clock and struggled to protect us. National Guard soldiers and local police officers, already grieving for their own, were bravely stationed behind new cement barriers on now permanently closed familiar roads.

Outside the Pentagon, I met a police officer who had trained many members of the New York Police Department Emergency Services Unit. Some of these brave men and women has just been confirmed dead in the World Trade Center tower collapse. As we spoke, a woman drove up, handed him the keys to her SUV, and said she wanted to donate it to help.

While on a “walk-along” with a U.S. Capitol police officer one night at 4 a.m., we forgot our country’s tragic circumstances long enough to silently admire the beauty of the fog rolling in over the lighted dome. It was a welcome respite.

Another day, when I attended my niece’s cheerleading championships, school officials announced a donation drive for the families of the victims killed or injured in the attacks. At midnight on another weekend, I drove my niece and her school friends to the hill near the Pentagon so that they could see the damage themselves for the first time.

Nowhere was the death toll and damage more noticeable than inside the walls of the Pentagon itself. The survivors were working to maintain our nation’s security while also taking over the tasks of those who had died there.

I went inside our country’s top military headquarters for the first time in November just before Thanksgiving. The halls were eerily deserted and quiet. As I walked along the corridors in an intact area near the attack area, I stopped to read each of the newly-placed banners made by school children around the country. The one that moved me the most was from students at Columbine High School. These children were part of a community that knew first-hand the kind of tragedy that now had become the new normal in America. They too had experienced an unprovoked, organized attack on an American location. The attacks and deaths in places where we used to feel safe left us all feeling insecure and vulnerable.

After several months in Washington, I had gotten used to seeing the gaping hole in the west side of the Pentagon -- a place that before seemed impenetrable. The top to bottom destruction was like a heavy curtain pulled down and peeled away. But, it was the heart and soul of the Columbine school children who created that banner that struck my heart and lifted my spirits.

“We know how you feel,” one child wrote on the banner that stretched horizontally along the hallway. It was nestled next to similar banners like pieces of an unfinished puzzle. They were messages of sympathy and compassion covering the walls as far as my eyes could see.

I next stopped at a nearby makeshift memorial. As I looked at each picture of those who died tragically on the day forever to be known as Sept. 11, I thought of the unfinished plans each of them had had for their lives. I didn’t take any pictures. The place felt sacrosanct.

My friend, a U.S. Army survivor who was in the Pentagon, described his experience during the attacks. He had been watching TV in one of the rooms and talking with co-workers when the attacks happened. As fate would have it, he took a break and headed down the hallway just moments before the building was struck. He heard the plane hit and felt the building shake. In that instant, the voices, faces and smiles of his friends and co-workers whom he had left just minutes before were gone permanently. They were forever frozen in time doing the same things, the normal things, that all of their surviving co-workers had also done that day. They were going about their daily duties of keeping our country safe.



I also met an Army Ranger who had gone from cook to hero that day -- earning medals for bravery and also a Purple Heart. This courageous man had gone into a burning area and saved three people, one of whom survived, and the numerous remains of those who did not. His lungs were burned from the searing hot jet fuel and toxic smoke billowing out of the inferno. I gave him a hug and my angel pin.

“You are my angel,” I told him.

I went back inside the Pentagon on Dec. 7, 2001. I was introduced to more military personnel as we made our way through the offices where people were working. Although this area had remained undamaged, reminders of the devastation were everywhere. There were ribbons and hearts on the walls and desks and a television featuring a live U.S. military press conference taking place in a far country across the world.

“America at War” was plastered across the screen, a solemn reminder that these times were anything but normal. As my friend’s retirement ceremony started, I looked out at an empty chair in the front row of the audience covered with a carefully placed, large red, white and blue ribbon and bow like a package waiting to be unwrapped. This seat would remain empty just beyond the raised stage. It was another tragic reminder that one soldier had not made it to this event, also his retirement day, because of 9-11.

As the ceremony got underway, I was touched when my friend’s wife surprised him by renewing their wedding vows. I reflected later that the co-workers and friends that shared cake, happy memories and laughter, also shared a common sorrow. I thought about how we often take for granted -- instead of treasuring -- every fleeting moment of happiness. Unknown to us, or any of the thousands of people who died in the air and on the ground during the attacks that day, the end could be lurking around the corner, turning happiness to dust.

Fourteen years later, I still struggle to find peace with these events. If I had to hold only one thing in my heart, it would be to love, live and make the most of every opportunity, even if there’s risk, because each life matters. In doing this, maybe each life lost that day will be reflected in a widening circle where we all can leave a better footprint on this earth. America, this place that we call home, is reflected in all of those who protect us and are doing their best every day to keep us safe. And, too frequently, through the sacrifice of their own lives.



©TerriCavoli.com 2015