

“LIKE A WARZONE”



Recalling the 9/11 Response at the Pentagon

On Sept. 11, 2001, Jim Schwartz was beginning his day in the Arlington County (Va.) Fire Department’s office when his wife called with news that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center. The events of 9/11 were starting to unfold and, as assistant chief of operations at the time, Schwartz was about to be thrust into the middle of it.

While watching the TV coverage from New York, he and his team started thinking through what it could mean for the D.C. area. They didn’t have long to think. Just a few miles away, at 9:37 a.m., Flight 77 slammed into the Pentagon. Eleven minutes later, Schwartz was on the scene, where he assumed command of the incident and started assessing the situation.

“It felt very much like a warzone,” he recalled. “Thousands of people streaming out of the building, smoke and fire hundreds of feet in the air, a gash. The building had not yet collapsed, but it was not hard to discern where the airplane had gone in. Obviously, it was a somewhat chaotic situation as we, the responders, were trying to gather information and gain control of the situation.”

Schwartz quickly connected with John Jester, then chief of the Defense Protective Service, the Pentagon’s security force at the time.

“John and I had worked on a number of projects in the region together, so we knew each other and he knew the kind of information that I was going to need to start forming a response, building an incident-management team, beginning to care for the wounded, searching the inside of the building, beginning to fight the fire and evolving our response from there,” he explained.

As fate would have it, Schwartz and many of the same first responders at the Pentagon that morning had, just three days earlier, taken part in a regional training exercise together. Among them was FBI special agent Christopher Combs from the Washington Field Office. Schwartz explained that Combs, who closely studied the Oklahoma City bombing, had spent the previous three years building relationships with local first responders knowing that their close collaboration would be vital in situations like the one before them.

“When Chris arrived, we already knew each other, we knew what to expect from each other, we knew

there wasn’t going to be any kind of a turf battle or an elbowing for position,” Schwartz said. “I had confidence that information the FBI had that I might need was going to be forthcoming.”

As the evacuations continued, Schwartz got word from his team that the damaged structure’s collapse was imminent. From the command post, they were able to inform everyone to pull back and avoided any deaths amongst responders. Soon after that, Combs informed Schwartz that the FBI believed another plane was headed their way.

“Chris giving me that information caused me to evacuate the incident scene,” he said. “Now, that airplane turned out to be Flight 93 that crashed in Shanksville (Pa.), but we know from evidence gathered later that its target was probably the United States Capitol.”

Schwartz continued working at the Pentagon the remainder of the day, through the night and past sundown the next day.

“I did not leave the grounds for the first time until 10 p.m. on Sept. 12,” he said. “I went home that night with probably the worst headache I’d ever had.”

Schwartz and his department continued to lead the response for 10 days before handing it over to the FBI. Meanwhile, first responders across the country were eager to help out the beleaguered crews in New York City, Pennsylvania and the Pentagon. Billy Freeman, now retired, was a firefighter at the time in Memphis, Tenn. He and 70 of his colleagues from Tennessee Task Force 1, part of the FEMA Urban Search and Rescue program, packed up 60,000 pounds of heavy-rescue equipment and boarded a 16-vehicle convoy for the 858-mile journey to the Pentagon. They arrived the morning of Sept. 19.

“As we came out from under the overpass, we could see the Pentagon,” Freeman said. “The hole was still smoking and it was like someone punched me right in the stomach. I served in the Army; I’ve been serving the last 40 years in some capacity. It felt just like somebody punched America in the stomach.

“When you have federal agencies [like mine] intermixing with local agencies, volunteers, nongovernmental agencies ... especially with the technology we had in 2001, there’s always a problem in trying to communicate, but we worked it out the best we

could. I called it ‘mud and wire’ — figuring out how to make something work with what you got. And that’s what we did.”

Freeman said the team instantly went into “mission mode,” shoring up the building, searching for survivors, recovering bodies and supporting the many other public safety agencies that had rushed in from across the country.

“That’s where we were for the next nine days,” he said. “It was very emotional because we knew that a lot of firefighters, police and EMS had been killed in the Trade Center, one of them my friend — Dennis Mojica, who was in one of the first fire trucks to arrive on the scene.”

As they dug through the rubble to recover human remains, Freeman described it as unimaginable to the average person and barely imaginable to him and his teammates, who all had experience working on difficult recovery missions.

“You take the worst traffic accident you’ve ever seen and multiply it by 100 or 200,” he said. “You just had to drive through it. You had the mission. You start thinking about the families ... getting their loved ones back to them for closure. We have one of the best jobs in the world. We get to help people, and we were helping people there.”

Freeman now works at the First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet Authority) — an independent federal agency established by Congress. The FirstNet Authority is charged with delivering first responders FirstNet, America’s interoperable wireless communications network built specifically for public safety.

“After returning from the Pentagon, I came home and hugged my kids and my wife, and realized that, yeah, this one’s going to be with me for the rest of my life,” said Freeman. “Today, my son is a firefighter/paramedic in the Memphis area. I joined the FirstNet Authority because I wanted to make sure that he wouldn’t have the communication challenges I experienced at the Pentagon. He’d have something that works. And now he has FirstNet.”