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Chambersburg man who was at Pentagon on Sept. 11 recalls that fateful day in history, so no one forgets

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By TERRY TALBERT
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Photo: Douglas A. Warnock

Sept. 8 – Chambersburg resident Doug A. Warnock was sitting at his desk in the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001 when American Airlines Flight 77, piloted by terrorists, plowed into the building. He had no warning. “I felt the explosion and the concussion, and pretty much knew we were being attacked,” he recalls. It is a day Warnock will not forget – a day that he feels all Americans should never forget. To that end, he spoke on Sunday at the Annual Service of Remembrance for those who perished in the terrorist attacks, at Letterkenny Chapel. Today he will be attending services at the Pentagon.

Warnock, who is 51, recalled his personal experiences on the day that forever changed the face of this country. He was, and is today, Assistant Chief of Staff for Installation Management for the Army, a civilian employee who works at headquarters in the Pentagon. He was on the job on Sept. 11, 2001.

“It was pretty much a normal day,” Warnock begins. “I got to work as usual at 6:30 a.m., but by 9 a.m. I could see that things were changing.”

He says that he was talking over his computer via Instant Messaging with his son Matthew, who was 20 years old at the time, when Matthew told him about what was happening in New York. “My son was a student at Penn State. He was watching it on TV,” Warnock explains. “I have no TV in my office.”

It was only minutes later – at 9:37 a.m. to be exact – that Warnock felt the shock from the impact of the plane into the Pentagon. “There was no warning – just what was happening in New York City” that he learned from his son, he says.

Warnock was on the west side of the Pentagon where the doomed flight plowed into the building, but he was not in the outside ring of offices that were hardest hit. Those belonged to the generals and their immediate staffs.

“Our general and his staff – there were about eight of them – their office was on the outside ring,” he says. “Luckily most of them were out of the building at the time. My boss, the general, was not there and there were probably four of his staff who were at a meeting with him at Crystal City ... That’s a community basically across the street from the Pentagon.”

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Unfortunately, two of Warnock's colleagues who were in the general's office when Flight 77 struck died, and a third was seriously injured – burned over 60 percent of his body. That man has since recovered.

Warnock's office was further inside the Pentagon, approximately 300 yards from his general's main office. Even at that distance from the impact point, the concussion could be clearly felt. "It didn't knock me out of my chair or anything, but I knew it was an explosion," he says. "It was very pronounced."

Still "talking" to his son via Instant Messaging, Warnock told him in the wake of the blast what was happening at the Pentagon. "My son didn't know a plane hit until I told him," he recalls. "At first he didn't believe me. Then he said 'Go, get out!'"

Warnock left the building at that point. "When it hit, I walked into the five-acre center courtyard in the middle of the Pentagon, and I could see smoke billowing out above the building from the front," he says. "When I went back inside, smoke started coming down the hallway, and I left."

Warnock describes the experience as "very surreal."

At that point Warnock became part of an evacuation of the entire Pentagon population of 24,000 military and civilian personnel – an evacuation he says was "orderly." It was when he was outside the building and could see firsthand what had happened that the full impact struck him.

"I walked around to the side where the plane hit. It was really surreal," he recalls. "I couldn't see the plane. It was entirely inside the Pentagon. All there was was a hole" and devastation.

Then people from the Department of Defense came running up to the employees who had evacuated and sounded what was really the first alarm of the day. "They said, 'Run as fast as you can and as far as you can,' because another plane was going to hit us," Warnock says. "There we were with 16 fighter jets overhead, and helicopters ... It was quite an experience."

As it turned out that second plane was United Airlines Flight 93, which went down in a field in Shanksville, Pa. after passengers who had learned about the other attacks stormed the terrorists on board.

Meanwhile, while outside the Pentagon, Warnock tried to contact his wife Darlene by cell phone, to no avail. "Cell phone service was pretty much non-existent," he says. "I couldn't get my wife. She was at work."

Luckily, Warnock had been able to communicate with Matthew. "One thing I'll never forget is when he told his roommates, 'My father is alive!'" he says. "That's something I'll always remember."

As for his wife, that day Darlene wasn't listening to the radio, as she normally did. By the time she did turn on the radio and learn about the attacks, she did not have to wait long to learn her husband was alive. "About 10 minutes later she got a call from our son telling her that I was alright," Warnock says.

On that fateful day five years ago, Warnock's two colleagues who died in the terrorist attack at the Pentagon were among a total of 189 souls who perished there on that day. Of those who lost their lives, 64 were on the hijacked flight, and 125 were Department of Defense employees.

"I was at the right place at the right time," Warnock says. "It makes me appreciate each day more, certainly."

At Sunday's Remembrance service, Warnock made a presentation that included photos from that day, and told his own story, in an attempt to bring home the impact of

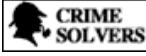
the events of Sept. 11, 2001.

“Our country was attacked on that day. That’s something we should never forget,” he says.



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