

Resilience and Renewal at the Pentagon

By Jacquelyn S. Porth

A remarkable reconstruction project helps bring recovery from the attack on U.S. military headquarters.

Arlington, Virginia—On September 11, 2001, terrorists hijacked an American civilian airliner using it to attack what Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld rightly calls America's symbol of "military might." In a terrifying instant, three of the Pentagon's five concentric rings of corridors were penetrated by a plane-turned-missile flying at 560 kilometers-per-hour delivering tons of explosive jet fuel that would turn reinforced concrete into mush.

Upon impact, one wedge of the five-sided Pentagon turned into a fireball and buckled as though experiencing an earthquake. The tragic event occurred exactly 60 years to the day from when construction first began on the structure that houses military and civilian employees working around-the-clock to provide for America's defense. The attack on one of the world's largest office buildings killed 125 of those workers, another 110 were seriously injured, and 59 passengers aboard commandeered American Airlines Flight 77 died instantly.

Besides the human tragedy, suddenly, more than 37,000 square meters of interior office space was out of commission and workers with critical national security missions were displaced. Reconstruction efforts at what one international journalist called "the other Ground Zero" began almost immediately. The project to rebuild what the attack had destroyed was named aptly after the mythical "Phoenix" bird that arises from ashes of destruction. The reconstruction program required 3,000 individuals to collaborate in fixing the fire, smoke, and water damage in an area of almost 186,000 square meters.

One year later, what seemed the nearly impossible has been accomplished at the Pentagon. Construction workers hauled away 45,000 metric tons of debris and devoted an equivalent of 3 million hours to do what some said, at first, could not be accomplished: return

Department of Defense (DOD) employees to their formerly demolished office space by September 11, 2002.

The anniversary goal was not handed down from high-level officials, but instead emerged through consensus from on-site workers—many of whom are immigrants to America—who toiled alongside billboard-sized digital clocks that counted down the days, hours, minutes, and seconds to the September 2002 deadline. It was a marathon. Brett Eaton, the project communications team leader, says a lot of the construction workers “put their lives on hold to get the job done” viewing it as a small sacrifice compared to that of others who faced the loss of colleagues and loved ones.

The sense of urgency was clear, Eaton says, “Everyone...understood that the entire world is watching to see how the Pentagon reacts.”

The first 600 workers returned to their former space several weeks in advance of the anniversary and the target date. Some of the first returnees expressed some understandable “trepidation about going back to the exact same spot,” but also satisfaction about their return to a semblance of normalcy.

Peter Murphy, counsel for the Marine Corps commandant, was among those who reoccupied space in August. He told reporters it is important to carry on and show that “we aren’t going to have our future dictated by terrorists.” Returning also helps provide some sense of closure for the 3,000 Army and Navy personnel who will be back in their former office space by the anniversary date.

The September 11 attack occurred in a part of the building that had just been renovated with new water sprinklers, credited with helping contain the fire, and blast-resistant windows that helped hold off collapsing walls long enough for a good number of workers to escape. The stories of those difficult escapes also inspired new safety features for the renovated space. All the internal exit doors and doorknobs in offices, stairwells, and restrooms are lined with tape designed to glow in the dark for four hours. Glowing exit signs have been added at ground level since so many workers, trapped in smoke-filled office warrens, couldn’t see identified escape routes in the September 11 disaster. There are also new strips of lighting at floor level.

A new “meditation” area is another reminder of what

happened. A large, backlit stained glass emblem with an eagle and the sun overlooking the Pentagon dominates the room. It bears the words “United in Memory” and the date of the tragedy. A second room is devoted to “America’s Heroes” who died that day. Jean Barnak, Phoenix Project deputy manager for Wedge One, says the walls will permanently bear the names of the 184 killed in the building and on the airliner.

The passage of a year has brought change to the outside of the building as well. The new blends invisibly with the old, despite the placement of 4,000 pieces of new limestone trucked in from the Midwest. The stone was drawn from the same vein in Indiana that was used when the Pentagon was first built 60 years ago. Vintage 1941 machinery was located to use in scoring the new stone so it would match the surviving blocks. Since the Pentagon is an official historic landmark, great care had to be taken to preserve its appearance.

The process of renewal is also visible in the new landscaping of the once severely damaged property. Freshly planted, pink flowering crepe myrtles, holly bushes, and magnolias are growing up alongside the new facade.

But there is still one startling reminder of the fury of the attack. A single rectangular block of charred, pockmarked, cracked limestone from the damaged structure stands out from its new surroundings as a stark reminder of the recent past. Inscribed simply “September 11, 2001,” it is located near the jet’s point of impact and covers a dedication capsule put in place on June 11 by Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz to mark completion of the outside of the building.

The bronze capsule is dedicated to the victims and contains items identified for inclusion by families of the victims, construction workers, and Defense Department management “as a testament to the strength and resolve” of Americans. The contents include lists of the names of those killed in the attack on the Pentagon, and the 46,000 people who wrote to express thanks to those who suffered from the attack, as well as badges from police and fire crews who aided in the rescue effort.

One of the rescuers from Maryland’s Montgomery County says the rapid reconstruction is “a testament to the resiliency of our nation.” Captain Troy Lipp says having the Pentagon rebuilt is “a great symbol” and “means a lot to the whole country.”

When the outside of the building was completed, Wolfowitz said the "patriots" who died at the northern Virginia site represented values that were "alien" to those who perpetrated the violence. Reconstruction at the Pentagon "is part of the fight in the war against terrorism," he said at the June 11 ceremony, and getting people back in before the one-year anniversary sends "a message back to the terrorists." That message is that "we will not only rebuild, but we will be better than we were before."

Stress and trauma counselor Victor Welzant told a group of Pentagon employees recently that marking anniversaries is "embedded in our culture." Americans are "hard-wired for this," he said, warning that the first anniversary will reawaken many emotions in people. But whatever reactions are evoked, and whatever questions about the attacks linger, he said they are part of a normal healing process.

Americans are managing the anniversary and healing in many ways. Immediate family members and associates will be part of a September 11, 2002, ceremony at the Phoenix site. The commander-in-chief, the defense secretary, and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff will address them. A moment of silence at 9:37 a.m. will commemorate the moment when the plane struck the Pentagon.

Some family members, such as Jim Laychack who lost his younger brother in the attack on the Pentagon, hope to draw comfort from a permanent memorial that will be built soon close to the "other" Ground Zero. "We feel that we owe this to our loved ones," he says. The memorial will be located on the west side of the Pentagon grounds as close to the point of impact as security will permit.

Family members helped define the memorial's design criteria. Laychack says he hopes the Pentagon memorial will communicate a "sense of loss of ordinary people: brothers, sisters, wives, and dads." Family members realize it is "too easy to forget" individuals whose lives "were snuffed out" and want a permanent reminder of what happened there. They will have that by the second anniversary on September 11, 2003.

The Army Corps of Engineers will build the Pentagon memorial after a final design selection in December. Officials note that entries from more than 50 nations have already been received. The Corps' memorial project manager Carol Anderson-Austra says the many submissions from abroad demonstrate how "the attack touched everyone all over the world." People who desire a peaceful world and/or wish to offer comfort to the families, she says, want to express "a sense of solidarity" by participating and they want to convey a message that "we will always remember."

Reed Kroloff, the Corps' design adviser for the memorial and a trustee with the National Building Museum, says if the terrorists sought "to destabilize or demoralize" the United States, their effect was "exactly the opposite." The Pentagon is being rebuilt, birth will be given to a new memorial, and America has "rebounded with record speed," he says.

Perhaps those who are still grappling—in many different ways—with what happened beside the Potomac River last year should bear in mind the words of the secretary of defense: "from the ashes, hope springs."

Jacquelyn S. Porth writes on political security and defense issues for the Office of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State