

This web site was frozen on September 20, 2004 at 12:00 AM, EDT. It is now a Federal record managed by the National Archives and Records Administration. External links were active as of that date and time. For technical issues, contact webprogram@nara.gov. For questions about the web site, contact legislative.archives@nara.gov.



NATIONAL COMMISSION ON TERRORIST ATTACKS UPON THE UNITED STATES

[About the Commission](#) | [Report](#) | [Hearings](#) | [Staff Statements](#) | [Press](#) | [Archive](#) | [For Families](#)

First public hearing of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States

Statement of Brian Birdwell to the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States March 31, 2003

Governor Kean, and members of the commission,

Thank you for affording me the opportunity to share with you my experiences from the events of September 11th and their aftermath and how they affected my family and myself.

First let me establish where I was located inside the Pentagon at the moment of impact of American Flight 77. (Slide attached) In the attached slide you see the impact point on the E-ring, the outermost ring of the building. To the left of the collapsed structure my office window is circled in yellow. In the top right hand portion of the slide is corridor 4. The corridors are the

Current News

The Commission has released its final report. [\[more\]](#)

The Chair and Vice Chair have released a statement regarding the Commission's closing. [\[more\]](#)

The Commission closed August 21, 2004. [\[more\]](#)

Commission Members

Thomas H. Kean
Chair

Lee H. Hamilton
Vice Chair

spokes of the building that connect the rings to one another. The rectangular tan box designated with a red X at the top of the building shows the location of the elevators within corridor 4. As I stepped out of the men's restroom on the second floor to return to my office, I was passing in front of these elevators at the moment of impact, in fact moving toward the point of impact. The arrow originating from my circled office window indicates the window I was facing at the time of impact. I was approximately 15-20 yards behind that window within the corridor.

As you can see from this slide, I had crossed the path of the plane in going to the restroom and was just seconds from being in the direct path of the plane at the time of impact. You can also discern that I sit here before you today as the result of Christ's miraculous hand.

In surviving the concussion, blast, fire and putrid black smoke, I am able to provide you a glimpse of the horrific fiery death so many died that day. By virtue of surviving my injuries I can provide you great detail of the physical and emotional trauma of the critically injured. As a husband and father, I can also share with you the emotional and physical strain my wife Mel and my son Matt experienced throughout my hospitalization and continued recovery. Let me share some of that experience.

At the instant of impact I went from a well-lit hallway, fully aware of my surroundings to an earthly hell of fire, choking black smoke, physical and emotional pain and disorientation all of which seemed to last an eternity. First was the physical pain of the fire. My body was burned with a 60-65% Total body surface burn on my back, legs, face, neck, and arms with approximately 40% of my burns being third degree. Portions of my face and each entire arm required complete grafting of skin from those portions of my body that could donate such skin. The heat, smoke and fuel vapor within my

Richard Ben-Veniste
Fred F. Fielding
Jamie S. Gorelick
Slade Gorton
Bob Kerrey
John F. Lehman
Timothy J. Roemer
James R. Thompson

Commission Staff

Philip D. Zelikow
Executive Director

Chris Kojm
Deputy Executive Director

Daniel Marcus
General Counsel

lungs inflicted a serious inhalation injury on me as well. Second, I was disoriented and unable to navigate my way out due to the loss of lighting combined with the black smoke. I cannot put in words the abject panic of not only facing such grievous injuries, but the helplessness of not being able to escape that death. And third, I knew I was facing the finality of my life and I thought about how that morning I had said goodbye to my wife Mel and son Matt and how it now would be my last.

In those moments immediately after impact, I reacted with the survival instinct of trying to save myself. I attempted to get to my feet, but was unable given the concussion and blast of the explosion and the subsequent vacuum being filled effect on my sense of balance. After an undetermined amount of time I eventually accepted my death and collapsed to the floor and waited for whatever the feeling is of the soul departing the body. By God's grace that feeling never arrived. Instead, I could feel liquid running down my face. I had collapsed under one of the functioning water sprinklers that were still working, which doused the flames on and around me. My eventual evacuation and treatment Georgetown University Hospital may include other details in which you are interested but in the interest of time let me move forward.

That evening I would be admitted to the Washington Hospital Center Burn Unit, where I would spend the next 3+ months enduring 30 surgeries, 24 days on a respirator, 26 days in ICU, numerous tank sessions of sterile debridement in a solution of water, iodine and chlorine, 3 days of maggots to eat dead tissue on my arms, and daily physical therapy to the point of requiring a morphine derivative drug prior to each session in addition to the scheduled pain medications. The physical environment was agonizing, but the emotional pain was worse. Seeing the anguish my wife was enduring on my behalf, the separation she endured from Matt and to complicate that

emotional pain was my inability to communicate with her due to my physical incapacitation combined with the pain medications I was receiving. Mel and Matt had already overcome the immediate torment of the first few hours of not knowing if I lay dead inside the Pentagon. Since Mel knew my office overlooked the helipad, she knew it was engulfed in flame along with the other windows so close to the point of impact. Although she and Matt were overjoyed to learn I was alive and in critical condition at Georgetown University Hospital, the greatest challenge ahead was dealing with the medical setbacks that are indicative of not knowing if I would survive. In our visits together, especially Matt's, the overtone was always was this my last chance to see dad alive.

By virtue of the hand of the Lord, an outstanding group of medical professionals, and the presence of my church and US Army family, I sit here before you enjoying the remainder of my life. I trust that you will keep my life and those of other citizens of this great nation in mind as you go about the business of determining how we can improve our processes to combat terrorism.

I look forward to assisting the commission by answering your questions regarding my and my family's experiences from that day. Again, thank you for the invitation to be with you today.

Lt. Col. Brian Birdwell is a survivor of the terrorist's attack on the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. After American Airlines Flight 77 collided into the Pentagon, just feet away from his second floor office, LTC Birdwell was thrown to the ground and engulfed in flames. Of the burns that consumed 60 percent of his body, nearly half were third-degree burns. With more than 30 operations and months of multiple skin grafts and burn treatments, LTC Birdwell is well on his way to recovery.

LTC Birdwell is a native of Fort Worth, Texas,

and a 1984 graduate of Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas. Graduating as the Distinguished Military Graduate through the Army ROTC, he continued his service in the United States Army at Ft. Sill, Oklahoma. After subsequently serving in South Korea for 18 months, LTC Birdwell returned to the states and met his future wife, Mel. In 1990, they traveled to their new station in Kitzingen, Germany. While in Germany, LTC Birdwell was deployed for Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm and earned the Bronze Star for his action in the Gulf War. In 1996 while assigned to duty at Fort Leavenworth Kansas, he completed his Master's Degree at the University of Missouri. In 1998, he also helped lead the Joint Task Force in support of relief operations in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch. At the time of the September 11th attack, LTC Birdwell was serving on the Department of the Army staff at the Pentagon as the Executive Officer to the Deputy Assistant Chief of Staff for Installation Management. He was awarded the Purple Heart for wounds received on September 11, 2001. He continues to serve in the office of the Assistant Chief of Staff for Installation Management.

LTC Birdwell is married to the former Melva Collins of Davis, Oklahoma. They have a 13-year old son, Matthew.

National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States
The Commission closed on August 21, 2004. This site is archived.