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June Forte

A SEVERE CLEAR DAY

I walked the sidewalk beside the limestone-clad southeast side of the Pentagon, as I had every workday morning for 13 years. The sky was cloudless, an endless canvas of crystalline blue pilots identified as severe clear. A perfect day. Just hours before, I lost my chance to play hooky in a snappish discussion with Ricardo, the man in my life.

“Let’s stay home today and go somewhere.”

“Can’t. Too much on my plate. Meeting in the afternoon.”

“You never just take a day off, do you?” Right. I never did. The Grouch finished dressing and we both went to work.

I climbed the wide-cut concrete stairs, worn thin by decades of leather boots, spit-polished oxfords, glossy corfams, and fashion-statement trainers. Each step took me farther from the lure of that perfect day and deeper into my mental storage bin, prioritizing the day’s work.

The door at the top of the stairs, nondescript and hardly noticed from the outside, opened onto the second-floor Concourse where shop owners and employees plied their wares: Florist, dry cleaners. Rite Aid, the only pharmacy at a military installation where Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff expected to wait in line to buy their snacks. Barber shop. Credit Union. The Fanny Mae Candy counter, where two elderly ladies held court among the chocolates, offering what customers wanted before they ordered.

I continued to my new office, down a hidden stairwell to the first floor.

Commandeered by the Department of Defense’s Assistant Secretary of Public Affairs (DOD/PA) for a one-year assignment, I would rotate through six PA offices. The first: the Office of Public Liaison and Community Relations.

After sitting at my desk for about two hours, I heard Judy McMullin, the office administrative assistant, gasp. “Oh, my God.” She pointed to the television. The first plane struck the World Trade Center’s North Tower at 8:46 a.m. An airliner in that airspace? Was it an accident?

The second plane crashed into the face of the South Tower at 9:02 a.m. An attack. The perfect day went to hell. I phoned both my daughters to quell their fears and told them I loved them. I started to call Ricardo, but stopped. He worked at the FAA, which was in the midst of the incomprehensible reality I’d just witnessed.

Riveted, the Division Director Celia Hoke, Judy, and I couldn’t stop watching. Over and over, the scene in New York played out on the television. At 9:37 a.m. a loud boom followed by a jolt shook us. I felt for the door, inched it open. A fog rolled toward me, washing over the parade of people on their way to Corridor 8 and the exit to North Parking. I shut the door. “Celia, take the staff out the back door. I’ll sweep the office to ensure everyone’s out.” Judy left with Celia.

I cleared Celia’s office first, then turned to the narrow, 60-foot passageway that ended at the back door. Six-foot high, sound-deadening cubicles lined both sides. I methodically searched each one, not just for coworkers left behind, but for signs that Celia had gathered them up: computers running, work opened on desks.

A quarter of the way down, a young political appointee wearing headphones sat at his desk. “Get up, get out. We’re under attack.” A slack-jawed, “Huh?”

Louder. “We’re under attack. Evacuate the building. Follow the people in the hall. Celia and the others are outside by the lagoon. Find her and stay with her.” I continued down the aisle and unseated a State Department exchange worker at his desk. Sent him on his way to Celia.

I finished the sweep, searched my way back to Celia's office. When I opened the rear door, the smoke in the E-Ring was dark and dense. I butted in line next to a young woman who was crying, trembling, being forced forward by the people behind her. I drew her close, my arm around her shoulder. "You're going to be OK. A few more steps. We'll be outside." I stayed with her until the hall met the 8th Corridor. I told her go on to the exit without me.

An Army Colonel was coming down the corridor at a fast pace. His face and arms were covered with shrapnel wounds. I grabbed the back of his elbow, the only place that looked unhurt.

"Let me help you."

"I'm OK, I'm OK." Not likely. He struggled to breathe, his eyes glazed.

"Where were you?"

"4th Corridor. 4th Corridor." Another Army officer who seemed to know him came over to help. Physically strong, he took charge. A savior. If the Colonel collapsed, he'd have taken me down with him. I let them go the rest of the way without me. Back down Corridor 8, people emerged from the B, C, and D rings, passing me on their way to safety. I followed a group out of the building. Celia and staff had gathered by the flagpole near the lagoon, our practiced evacuation assembly point. Other offices bunched together. Individuals milled around the lawn like sleepwalkers. Some sat on the grass under trees, dazed. Not injured, in shock.

I went to where the clinic staff had set up a makeshift medical station. A nurse was treating the colonel. He was in good hands.

What could I do? Medical supplies and equipment carried from the clinic were jumbled together. I sorted them into types. IVs, bandages, blood pressure cuffs, latex gloves, tape.

A helicopter hovered over the building.

“It’s not ours?”

An Army general standing nearby shaded his eyes. “It says Park Service on it.”

Not our planes? Andrews Air Force Base had Reserve Marine fighters sitting on the runway. Where were they?

Fearing another strike, the Pentagon Police moved everyone farther away from the building into the North Parking lot. I stayed at the medical site.

An Army EMT, who’d left to scout the building, returned.

“Everyone with medical background, follow me. We’re setting up a triage in Center Court.”

He didn’t have enough trained medical people on hand to handle it. I silently built a checklist: Worked in hospitals, attended patients as they died. Army medical emergency field training. Can take direction. I knew what I could offer: comfort to the dying, memorize their names; tell their families they didn’t die alone.

We stopped in the clinic to fill up a wheeled laundry cart with more supplies and followed Corridor 8 to Center Court. The smoke, so black, I barely saw the person next to me. The Security Policeman had remained at his station by the entrance. He trailed us, laying yellow police tape on the floor as a marker. An unknown man called from the darkness of the B Ring. “Go to the 8th Corridor. It’s clear. The 8th Corridor is clear.”

We pushed through the door into Center Court, the five-acre park people also called ground-zero throughout the Cold War. Always a place of respite from the overstressed workplace environment.

I recognized Air Force Lieutenant General Bruce Carlson from Joint Staff. He sat on a bench with another general who had hurried from the POAC fitness center when the plane hit. Wearing fatigue pants and a T-shirt, he was just lacing his boots. A dentist, three or four nurses, four Chaplains and some others I couldn't identify. Not enough.

The EMT took charge. He scanned the courtyard, nodding as he counted his resources. He formed three teams: a trained medical team would tend to the injured who needed immediate lifesaving intervention. He tasked the second team to assist the injured whose treatment could be delayed. The third to care for the dying. The Chaplains would split up and serve all three teams.

I was on the third team, along with both generals and a few others. We leaned in, listening to the EMT's instructions and a demonstration.

“Pulse, number of beats per minute. Check the strength, the rhythm.” He used his own body to demonstrate the checkpoints. “Take it at the wrist, at the bend inside the elbow, on the side of the neck. Breaths, number per minute. Watch the chest rise and fall, listen for difficulty in breathing.”

Our team gathered on the lawn by the stairwell, next to the 7th Corridor. While we were setting up, four men with a stretcher ran by us into the building. A third general officer. My boss, Brigadier General Ron Rand, Director of Air Force PA, manned the stretcher's rear left handle. I couldn't be prouder, and not at all surprised. He had Vietnam combat experience with the ribbons to prove it. General Rand graduated from the Air Force Academy in 1971, “with distinction,” he'd boast. The lowest ranking cadet in his class.

Whatever struck us had not penetrated through the outer wall of the A-Ring. We saw the massive plume of smoke over the west side of the building, but no fire. More than twenty-thousand workers in the Pentagon, and an average of two thousand visitors a day. Those

num-bers were chilling. They ate at me. How many would we have? How many could we handle?

I suggested we position ourselves as pivots with patients radiating out from us, allowing us to reach as many injured as possible. I spoke with the Catholic Chaplain. I offered to help with the last rites and prayers. Still no casualties.

A man shouted from across the park, “There’s a plane, coming fast and low over the Po-tomac. Get out. Get out.” Based on the attack at the Trade Center, two planes made sense. We ran back through the 8th Corridor. Total darkness. I could see the yellow tape on the floor. There was a layer of pure air from the ground up to about six inches. A pearl necklace on the terrazzo floor. My hand went to my neck. I’d worn my mother’s necklace that day. It fell off when we raced through the corridor earlier. I retrieved it. A good omen.

As we regrouped by the lagoon, we heard that the plane belonged to the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Back at our Center Court stations, we could hear fire engines, and ambulances coming from the west side of the building. It became clear we needed to relocate where needed. Move the triage to the point of impact. The EMT made the call.

I detoured to my office. The power was out. I tried the phone. No connection. I changed to sneakers and put my heels, purse, and useless cell phone into a small rolling briefcase I kept under my desk. Leaving the building, I walked down to an empty Highway 110, then through South Parking, and onward to the impact area.

When I turned that final corner to the west wall, my knees buckled. It took all my will to remain standing. The deep V of the impact filled with fire. Too heavy a grief to carry.

There was a large medical supply area on that side of the building, in need of sorting and organizing. I scanned the multitude on scene. No Ron Rand. I walked the length of the building. No Ron Rand. I asked an Air Force PA there if he had seen him. “No.”

More in the way than asset, I packed up at 5 p.m. The amount of professional rescue equipment and people now outnumbered the need. With no idea how I’d get home, I set off, towing my briefcase across the parking lot, through the tunnel under I-395 to Pentagon City. I didn’t expect the Metro to be running, but the Blue Line heading south from Pentagon City had never shut down. I switched to a bus at Springfield. It dropped me in front of my car in my neighborhood commuter lot.

That evening, from the briefing room of the burning Pentagon, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld announced, “Business as usual tomorrow.”

Back at work the next morning, I made a stop at General Rand’s office. I hadn’t seen him since he ran that stretcher into the building. Alive and well.

“What do you want, June?”

“I just want to look at your familiar face a while.”

“Get out of here. I have work to do.”

In one way 9/11 was a perfect day. A day for heroes. So many ran into the fire, ran toward the sound, fought their way into the smoke and debris without a thought for their own safety. The Pentagon. Not just an office space. A Sacred Place, consecrated by military and civilians who live honor, duty, and country on a daily basis. I felt blessed working among them.