

How We've Changed

'Hey, center, what's going on in New York?'; Most Minnesotans watched the horrors of 9/11 from far away. For a few, the devastation was immediate and personal.

by Bob Von Sternberg
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A year ago today, at precisely 8:32 a.m., a Sun Country Airlines 737 lifted off the runway at John F. Kennedy International Airport, banked to the northwest and headed for the Twin Cities.

Hal Johnson, a Cottage Grove resident with 20 years of flying under his belt, still remembers that "rare sightseeing day where we looked out the window more than we usually do." Johnson and his co-pilot gazed down at the towers of Manhattan, glittering just below them. "It was weird - it was just seconds before."

As Johnson flew north, American Airlines Flight 11 was screaming south. A week or so later, when Johnson next flew the route, he realized "we had to have passed right by each other, within just a few miles." A year ago today, at precisely 8:45 a.m., Flight 11 slammed into the north tower of the World Trade Center.

Within minutes, pilots throughout the Northeast began peppering air traffic controllers with questions.

"Hey, center, what's going on in New York?"

"I can't say."

Moments later, a controller told Johnson to immediately divert to a Canadian airport.

"Can I ask why?"

"There's been a national security crisis. We have to cleanse the national airspace and get everybody on the ground."

At that moment, "I knew we were looking at a really serious issue," Johnson said. "But nobody knew how serious."

A year ago today, Twin Citians joined the rest of the world in watching the unfolding horror of Sept. 11. For most, it was a televised, vicarious event beamed from 1,000 miles away. But there was nothing vicarious for some, such as Johnson, who would become direct participants, eyewitnesses or responders to the worst terrorist attack in American history.

'Follow that aircraft'

Lt. Col. Steve O'Brien started his day at the controls of a Minnesota National Guard C-130 cargo plane. He and his crew were heading back to the Twin Cities after moving military supplies around the Caribbean. About 9:30 a.m., O'Brien throttled the lumbering plane down a runway at Andrews Air Force Base, just southeast of the District of Columbia.

"When we took off, we headed north and west and had a beautiful view of the Mall," he said. "I noticed this airplane up and to the left of us, at 10 o'clock. He was descending to our altitude, four miles away or so. That's awful close, so I was surprised he wasn't calling out to us."

"It was like coming up to an intersection. When air traffic control asked me if we had him in sight, I told him that was an understatement - by then, he had pretty much filled our windshield. Then he made a pretty aggressive turn so he was moving right in front of us, a mile and a half, two miles away. I said we had him in sight, then the controller asked me what kind of plane it was.

"That caught us up, because normally they have all that information. The controller didn't seem to know anything."

O'Brien reported that the plane was either a 757 or 767 and its silver fuselage meant it was probably an American Airlines jet. "They told us to turn and follow that aircraft - in 20-plus years of flying, I've never been asked to do something like that. With all of the East Coast haze, I had a hard time picking him out.

"The next thing I saw was the fireball. It was huge. I told Washington the airplane has impacted the ground. Shook everyone up pretty good. I told them the approximate location was close to the Potomac. I figured he'd had some in-flight emergency and was trying to get back on the ground to Washington National. Suddenly, I could see the outline of the Pentagon. It was horrible. I told Washington this thing has impacted the west side of the Pentagon."

O'Brien asked the controller whether he should set up a low orbit around the building but was told to get out of the area as quickly as possible. "I took the plane once through the plume of smoke and thought if this was a terrorist attack, it probably wasn't a good idea to be flying through that plume."

He flew west, not exactly sure where he was supposed to land. Somewhere over western Pennsylvania, O'Brien looked down at a blackened, smoldering field. "I hoped it was just a tire fire or something, but when I checked with Cleveland center, he told me he'd just lost a guy off the scope pretty close to where we saw it. By then, we were able to patch in AM radio, so we heard about all the planes. It was like a domino effect - a really bad day for airplanes."

He finally landed at the Youngstown, Ohio, airport. "For awhile there, almost every night, I found myself stone awake at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning. Took awhile to get over it."

'The bomb is coming'

Lauren and Bill Schneider felt much the same way. They had traveled to Washington, D.C., from their home in Stillwater with their two young daughters to receive an award for their efforts on behalf of adoptive parents. Before the banquet that evening, they decided to do some sightseeing.

In the midst of their White House tour, a Secret Service agent escorting the group glanced quizzically at his pager. "Kind of matter-of-fact he told us, 'Oh, one of the World Trade Center buildings has been hit by an airplane,'" Lauren Schneider said. "All we thought of was a horrible accident."

They walked outside, past the White House gates and crossed Pennsylvania Avenue to Lafayette Park. Abruptly, uniformed guards told everyone in the park to move farther away from the White House. Now.

"People are all over the place running out of the White House," Lauren Schneider said. "A guy in a white chef's hat came running, so I figured maybe there was a fire in the kitchen. Then, someone in the park said the Pentagon was just hit."

They could see black smoke wafting to the southwest, behind the White House. Armed guards appeared on the roof. A homeless woman walked the park chanting, "The bomb is coming, the bomb is coming." Limousines tore down the mansion's driveway and roared away.

Later that day, the Schneiders made their way through deserted streets to their hotel. They got home by Friday, among the lucky few who found a rental car that week. They made it a point to attend a memorial service for Thomas Burnett Jr., the Bloomington native who was one of the passengers on Flight 93 who had fought the hijackers over Pennsylvania.

"If they had kept going and reached the White House, we could have all been killed," Lauren Schneider said. "He basically saved our lives, so we had to say thanks."

'Surreal'

The Rev. Michael O'Connell had planned a quiet weekend visit to New York, cruising Long Island Sound and catching up with family and friends. "The weather had been pristinely beautiful - on Sunday, there were thousands of boats on the sound," said O'Connell, who serves as rector at the Basilica of St. Mary and pastor at the Church of the Ascension in Minneapolis.

His brother-in-law caught a news bulletin about the first tower as they unmoored the boat. They sailed westward toward Manhattan. "After we heard the news of the second tower being hit, we all knew what it meant," O'Connell said. "Once we got out to the middle of the sound, you couldn't see the profile of Manhattan, but you could see the smoke. A little before 10:30, we got to the point where we could see Manhattan. The whole thing was surreal."

They watched the north tower collapse. It was 10:29 a.m.

As far as they could see, theirs was the only boat on the sound. With all commercial and private planes grounded, the sky was utterly quiet. And then a military fighter flew toward them: "He came up the port side and did a power turn over us and went back on the starboard side," O'Connell said. "It was obvious he was looking at us. That was disconcerting, a little scary."

A Coast Guard radio operator ordered all boats out of the Hudson and East rivers. They headed back into dock. "We knew we weren't getting out of there any time soon, so went to a supermarket to stock up on provisions," he said. "No one said anything until later, but we were all thinking, who knows what insanity will happen next. The boat might be the safest place to be because we could get out of there in a second."

When he woke up Thursday morning, O'Connell realized the wind was now coming out of the west. "You could smell the fire," he said. "We all knew we were smelling the remnants of what had been there."

A sacred space

Back in Minneapolis, basilica staff members' first priority was to make sure that O'Connell was safe. When the priest and Johan Van Parys, the church's director of worship, finally connected, they agreed they needed to lash together some kind of interfaith service that evening.

"Even before people were sure what was happening, the phones began to ring," Van Parys said. "They wanted to know what we were going to do, people from the parish, even strangers. We had an emergency staff meeting and decided to do what we do best: gather together and pray."

As the staff scrambled to create a service, a steady stream of silent people came to the basilica all day, kneeling in the pews and lighting candles.

"That's a wonderful symbolic gesture of our tradition," Van Parys said. "When people don't know what to think, the only thing to do is gather together in a sacred space."

That evening, the sanctuary was bursting at the seams, he said. "That night we had Buddhist monks in saffron robes sitting alongside men wearing yarmulkes. It became a place that went far beyond the borders of the Catholic Church."

Reason to worry

As Hamdy El-Sawaf watched the news, he heard the word "attack" for the first time. "All I could think was, 'Oh my God - I hope this isn't Oklahoma City all over again,'" said El-Sawaf, executive director of the Islamic Center of Minnesota. "I knew Muslims are going to be accused of this in a second. I told my wife to stay home, to not go out at all. I had to come in to the Islamic Center because I knew something

could happen here."

He had ample reason to worry. In the days after the Oklahoma City bombing, before any arrests had been made, intense, hostile attention was focused on Muslims locally and nationwide. Many people considered Muslims to be the most logical suspects, and harassment and vandalism swept the nation.

Not this time. Isolated outbreaks were reported elsewhere, but none of significance in the Twin Cities. The most blatant, if ineffectual, happened sometime before dawn on Sept. 12 when vandals threw toilet paper on a tree on the Islamic Center property in Fridley.

But on Tuesday morning, El-Sawaf didn't know what to expect. "I had 320 kids here in the school who could be the target of any crazy person," he said. "We had to be sure the building itself was secure."

Parents called, checking on their childrens' safety. So, surprisingly, did strangers. "There was no backlash," El-Sawaf said. "It was people calling to say, 'How can we help?' What I remember most was an old man - he was over 80 - driving up here from Burnsville. He said he came because he was a Christian and wanted to make sure we folks were safe and secure. It put me in tears."

'Is any place safe?'

Four thousand men and women were at work in the IDS Center, downtown Minneapolis' tallest building. A barrage of worried, confused phone calls poured into the skyscraper's management office that morning. Rattled tenants wondered whether they should send their people home. Should the building be evacuated? David Sternberg, vice president of the management company, tried to get guidance from law enforcement agencies. He talked to his counterparts in other downtown skyscrapers.

"Is it terrorism? Is any place safe? Is a prominent building in a midsized city a target?" Sternberg recalled wondering. "Even if this was only happening 1,000 miles away, there were too many unknowns that morning. A lot of people were already leaving the building on their own. From just a productivity standpoint, not much was getting done because everyone was watching TV."

Shortly after the second tower was hit, he ordered the evacuation. In less than two hours, the building was cleared.

Thirty-four floors down, building security supervisor Jim Anderson oversaw the evacuation from his station in the IDS lobby, helping to guide shocked, mute people to the exits. "People starting coming down almost right away," he said. "It can't have been an easy decision to send 4,000 people home. They were doing their deals, making lots of money."

"We walked every floor to make sure everyone got out. There wasn't panic, but most folks didn't have to be told twice. I remember one time looking out the window and catching sight of a jet on the horizon. I wondered for a minute if he was turning toward us, then decided I'm not going to buy into that."

'A firestorm'

As the streets of downtown Minneapolis were swarming with homebound workers, some office buildings in downtown St. Paul also were emptying, including St. Paul's World Trade Center. "I'm on the 10th floor of Town Square, looking down at the people pouring out of the World Trade Center, wondering what they knew that we didn't," said Kevin Smith, the Department of Public Safety's communications director. "It was so surreal. I mean, what movie were we in? Your mind just runs wild."

Smith's day had begun with call from his boss, Public Safety Commissioner Charlie Weaver. "When I hear from him that early, you know it isn't anything good," he said. "All he told me was to turn on the TV and get your ass in here now!"

Smith raced to the Capitol, where he huddled with Weaver, Gov. Jesse Ventura and John Wodele,

Ventura's press secretary. "We were in the middle of a firestorm," he said. "The State Patrol was reporting that the entire metro emergency communications network was almost locked up with so many people calling. Should we close the schools? Sound the sirens? Were we going to be attacked? What was the good information? We had nothing."

In short order, Smith and other department staffers set up a basement-level emergency operations center. "It was no different than what we do for a flood or a tornado," he said. "We had nothing to respond to, but we didn't know that at the time."

At the moment the second plane hit, Capt. Tom Fraser, the Capitol security director, decided, "By God, we've got to do something. Even though it was happening so far away, I unilaterally decided to close down the Capitol complex."

Within 15 minutes, 72 entrances to the Capitol and seven other state buildings were locked or guarded. Access was limited to a single entrance of each building. State officials also set up a telephone hot line, in the hopes of easing the frantic pressure on the 911 system. "At the peak, we were getting better than 300 calls an hour," Smith said. "People were just short of panicked."

'Nothing to do'

Dr. John Hick found himself in tears Tuesday morning. "My sister-in-law called me and told me I'd better turn on the TV," said Hick, an emergency physician who is Hennepin County Medical Center's counterterrorism director. "It was such a catastrophic loss, all I could do is cry and my 2-year-old couldn't understand why."

He drove downtown to the hospital and headed into the emergency operations center to wait - for what, he didn't exactly know. "We all wanted to help, but we felt powerless," he said. "We were poised to do everything that was needed of us. And we had nothing to do."

A quick survey of Twin Cities hospitals established that more than 200 beds could be made available if hospitals in New York were overwhelmed with casualties.

"We waited, had a conference call after about six hours and then waited some more," Hick said. "By the next day, New York got word back to us that there weren't going to be a lot of patients evacuated to us. We were poised and just felt deflated, like a balloon that had lost its air."

"It really hit home how tremendous the number of casualties had been. With the forces involved, a lot of people just turned to dust."

'A Mideast accent'

By a few minutes after noon, nearly 1,000 people were scattered across the parking lots that surround the Minneapolis Veterans Medical Center. One of the hospital's doctors roamed the lots on his bicycle, making sure patients were in good shape.

Staff members had been heading to a hastily organized memorial service when a call came into the hospital switchboard at 11:32 a.m.

"The caller had a Mideast accent and said we should evacuate the building because 'you're the next target,'" said Linda Duffy, assistant to the hospital's director. "The operator called police, who called me. I called the FBI, and they said we should take this as a legitimate threat and evacuate. We didn't know if it was a plane, a bomb or just the kind of crank call we get every once in awhile."

The evacuation was pulled off in less than half an hour. Some patients were brought out on stretchers, while two remained inside - one too ill to move, another in the midst of coronary bypass surgery.

Air-conditioned Metro Transit buses arrived to house patients. Neighbors living near the hospital offered

extension cords to keep respirators running, handed over lawn chairs and provided refreshments.

By 3:30, FBI agents and local law enforcement officers had swept the building; they found nothing, so the staff and patients headed back inside. The threat may have evaporated, but "remember, the whole world was mesmerized at the time," Duffy said. "Anything seemed possible."

Stations jammed

Vague, unsubstantiated fears - that the Twin Cities could become a target - hovered like a ground fog all day. As they dissipated, a wholly different panic broke out: a run on gasoline fed almost entirely on rumor.

Kevin Smith recalled: "People were on the hot line, telling us about hoarding, gas lines, six-buck-a-gallon gas, and all that did was drive people to create a panic."

In fact, only a single suburban service station had briefly jacked its prices up to \$6 a gallon. But by mid-evening, lines of vehicles jammed the streets around stations throughout the metro area.

TV newscasters tried to tamp down the growing frenzy. "We kept getting these persistent rumors of price gouging, fighting in the streets, but there were no first-person accounts," said Scott Libin, news director at KSTP, Channel 5. "It was all friend-of-a-friend stuff. We tried to get out there and show folks that prices weren't up."

But at Bobby and Steve's Auto World on Washington Avenue near downtown Minneapolis, the lines started snaking down the street within moments of the end of the 10 p.m. newscasts. "You could have timed it with a stopwatch," said station supervisor Jared Scheeler.

On a normal night, the station sells about 2,200 gallons of gasoline. By early Wednesday morning, it had sold 5,600 gallons.

Smith didn't get home to Eden Prairie until 3 a.m. "My own kids were freaking out that a plane would drop on our house," he said. "That night when I finally got home, I could hear the F-16s overhead. Remember that unmistakable sound? It made me wonder what the hell was happening to us."

In a blur

The Air Force had scrambled fighters nationwide within moments of the attacks. In the cockpit of one of those F-16s was Lt. Col. Brad Jackson, a 22-year veteran of the Minnesota Air National Guard's Duluth-based 148th Fighter Wing.

He had arrived at his base about 10 minutes after the second plane hit the World Trade Center. "When the first one hit, I figured at worst some guy had strayed off course," he said. "With the second one, everyone put one and one together: This is not an accident. Some serious stuff is going to go on in the next 12 hours."

The next few hours passed in a blur as crews got the wing's 15 fighters ready to fly, trying to round up as many of the wing's 35 pilots as possible.

About 5:30 p.m., the initial order came: Fly south to accompany Air Force One on its way back to Washington, D.C. But almost as soon as the 148th's fighters were in the air, the order was canceled and the pilots were directed to Chicago. Jackson sipped coffee as he circled the city for the better part of five hours.

"Even the first night, I got a lot of time to reflect on what's going on in the world, how's this country going to react," Jackson said. "But it was sheer boredom, because as a fighter pilot, you want to strike back directly at whoever attacked you. We didn't have that this time."

High in the sky that night, Jackson was struck by how empty that sky seemed. "Most of the time, you feel

like you're in an office with 50 other people, all talking to each other," he said. "That night it was dead quiet. Extremely strange, eerie. It felt like there was nobody left."

The radio traffic was all but nonexistent because of the heroic effort by the nation's air traffic controllers, who got 4,500 planes safely on the ground in less than four hours.

That meant diverting some planes, often hundreds of miles from their original destinations. Former Minnesota Sen. Dave Durenberger was about 40 minutes out of Washington's National Airport on a Northwest Airlines flight from the Twin Cities when a flight attendant approached him.

"Senator Durenberger? You should know an airplane has hit the World Trade Center and the president has declared a national emergency," he said she told him. She then said they would land in Detroit.

No formal announcement was made, but the news quietly made its way from passenger to passenger. "When we got to a TV in the World Club, everyone realized it was a much bigger deal," Durenberger said. "I was more inclined to believe it was a terrorist act, but my mind kept swinging back and forth between science fiction and the world in which we live."

Bits and pieces

In the pilot's seat of Sun Country Flight 1, Hal Johnson still had no idea where he was going to land. Controllers had suggested he choose among Toronto, Ottawa or Montreal, but he lacked legal clearance to land in Canada. Green Bay? Perilously short runway. Traverse City, Mich.? Same problem. Finally, the former Sawyer Air Force Base on Michigan's Upper Peninsula, with its 12,000-foot runway, was picked.

In bits and pieces, Johnson found out what had happened in New York and Washington. He told his crew but kept the news from his passengers. "I had a full load of New Yorkers back there - I didn't want to create a riot in flight," he said. "I just told them over the PA that we were diverting, but that everything was fine with the airplane."

He radioed to a controller: "Things are awfully quiet up here - anyone else still flying?"

"You're pretty much alone today."

Just before they landed, a flight attendant alerted Johnson with a page.

"I knew something must be up because when you're below 10,000 feet, they're only supposed to call in an emergency," Johnson said. The plane, only a few hundred yards from the end of the runway, had been cleared for landing.

A passenger bolted out of his window seat. A United Airlines pilot who had been riding in back blurted, "He's rushing the cockpit!"

The passenger lurched forward, hauling his carry-on bag from the overhead bin.

Someone else shouted, "He's going for a gun!"

Shaken flight attendants buckled the passenger into his seat, where he offered no resistance. The 737 touched down and rolled to a stop. Johnson taxied toward the gate, telling a controller he needed some cops to meet the plane. "He was pointed out as he deplaned, and they quietly grabbed him," Johnson said.

No, he wasn't a terrorist. Crew members eventually were told the man was a Russian immigrant, confused and worried about the diversion and afraid he would be arrested if he didn't have his travel documents in his pocket. "He wanted his paperwork, but he picked a really bad time to do something stupid," Johnson said.

Crew members spent much of the rest Sept. 11 watching the news. "At one point, when I realized what

this would do to the airlines, I thought, 'Aw, shoot - there goes my job,'" Johnson said - correctly, it turned out.

"But it was an extraordinary day in history. It was like the good Lord was with us all: Absolutely everything clicked when it had to. We pulled the best out of ourselves and made it all work."

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