

9/11, 20 years down the road: ‘A solemn reminder’ to honor ‘courageous first-responders’



Vallejo firefighters, others reflect on day 20 years ago

Local veterans along with Vallejo Fire Department Captain Matt Choy met near the flag, at half staff, in front of City Hall to talk about remembering 9/11. (Chris Riley—Times-Herald)

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Over time, the bonds between firefighters run as deep as the Pacific Ocean. After all, they aren't just programmed to save people's lives from burning flames, but are also focused on saving each other's lives.

Those bonds were on full display 20 years ago, when four hijacked planes crashed into the two towers of the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and a former coal mining site in Shanksville, Pa.

Wally Trujillo, a 10-year veteran of the Vallejo Fire Department, was years away from being a firefighter in 2001 when American Flight 11 and United Flight 177, both Boeing 767s headed from Boston to Los Angeles, took off within 15 minutes of each other at 7:59 and 8:14 a.m. EST. Trujillo was a junior at De La Salle High and was getting ready for his Tuesday morning classes when his sister began screaming.

"My sister went yelling through the house saying that a plane had hit one of the towers," Trujillo remembers. "As I watched the second plane hit, the look on my parents' face told me this was bad. After days of watching the horror of this day, I knew that I wanted to do something to help people and make a difference. I came from a family of law enforcement, but after many talks with a firefighter who is a close family friend, I decided that's what I wanted to do — become a firefighter."

Vallejo High School football team shut out by West County

At 8:20 a.m EST, American Airlines Flight 77, a Boeing 757, departed from Washington Dulles International Airport to its scheduled destination in Los Angeles. Twenty-six minutes later, Flight 11 crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center between the 93rd and 99th floors, instantly killing 92 people on board.

Less than 45 minutes later, Flight 77 crashed into the South Tower of the World Trade Center between the 77th and 85th floors. It was around that time that Jon Riley, a former Vallejo firefighter who is now the executive director of the Napa Solano Central Labor Council, was coming back from a long run in Vallejo. He immediately turned on his television and watched in horror as 65 more people on board Flight 77 died instantly. He immediately thought of his family.

"When I did (turn on the television), I saw the second plane hit," Riley said. "My first thought was of my sister, Ronnette, who lives in New York and had an office at the top of the Empire State Building. Once it occurred to me that she was on the West Coast visiting family, my thoughts turned to my brothers with the FDNY.

"Myself and two fellow Vallejo firefighters were instructors for a hands-on training exercise in Indianapolis for several years prior to 9/11, where West Coast instructors were teamed with East Coast firefighters to teach various disciplines of firefighting including ventilation and forceable entry, to hundreds of firefighters each year," Riley continued. "Over the years we had developed a close relationship with these brothers and we

all learned as much from each other as the students did, as techniques vary from coast to coast. The trainings were such a success that we had just held the first HOT training in Sacramento a few months prior and were planning for the next trip to Indie when the tragedy occurred.”

At 9:37 a.m. EST, American Flight 77 crashed into the second floor of the Pentagon building. Eight minutes later at 9:45 a.m. and approximately 42 minutes after Flight 77 became the second plane to crash into the two towers in New York, United States airspace was shut down and all operating aircraft were ordered to land at the nearest airport.

Fourteen minutes later, although it was the second of the two towers that was struck, the south tower collapsed.

Elizabeth Hoffman, an executive director for Rebuilding Together who annually coordinates a 9/11 event to help veterans, couldn't believe what she was witnessing when she saw the south tower collapse.

“I was working that day and listening to talk radio and they were telling everyone to get in front of a television. When I finally did ... aghhh. It was so scary. It was almost like watching a movie, not reality. I remember thinking, this is what it must have felt like for the WWII generation and Pearl Harbor.”

Vallejoan Cindy Smith was living in Quito, Ecuador, at the time, having finished a three-year service as a Peace Corps Volunteer in a remote village.

“That morning I received a call from someone who urged me to turn on the TV. Our group of multinational volunteers, travelers and Ecuadorian staff stood in shock and horror as we watched the events unfold,” Smith said. “I had been to NYC before and was in a daze about how this could have occurred. We all were frightened, and for many of us it boiled it over into extreme sadness and then anger. I felt very isolated and alone as an American despite the people around me. In the following days and weeks, my American, British and Ecuadorian friends would try to make sense of it, as did the rest of the world.

“But it was impossible.”

Despite the danger all around, especially after the south tower collapsed, firefighters and first responders were like salmon, going against the current and running toward the danger, rather than away from it. With no elevators working inside the North Tower, firefighters had to climb up to 90 flights of stairs, all while carrying as much as 80 pounds of equipment while passing by hundreds of people coming down the same staircase trying to escape — all while being under the threat of having the North Tower collapse like its twin.

Vallejo Fire Chief Kyle Long spoke admirably about those brave people.

“September 11th is an opportunity to honor the 343 brave firefighters who responded to the World Trade Center, ran into the buildings, and gave their lives trying to save as many people as possible,” Long said. “Firefighters know that every time they go to work, when they leave their families, that this could be the last time they see them. This day serves as a solemn reminder about the importance of our work, about the sacrifices of those before us, and the risks we knowingly take every day to protect our community.”

State Sen. Bill Dodd was struck by the courageous men and women facing possible death in a dangerous situation, and just looking to try and help people.

“Twenty years later, the painful memories of this life-changing attack on American soil remain crystal clear for many, while an entire generation has grown up since,” Dodd said. “It's a day to remember, but also a day to learn and educate, and to commit ourselves to embody the best of the American spirit. We mourn the victims and the courageous first-responders who gave their lives to save others, and we stand with their families. We reflect on these terrible losses but also the resiliency of the human spirit and how Americans can come together.”

U.S. Rep. Mike Thompson remembers the day “families and communities were changed forever.”

“Our nation lost its innocence,” says Thompson. “As we mark two decades since that horrifying day, we remember those that lost their lives. We mourn for the people who got up to go to work, not expecting it would be the last time for them to tell their wife or husband or child, ‘goodbye.’ We mourn for the firefighters and the police officers who rushed toward danger, single-mindedly focused on helping other people.

“We mourn for the passengers on Flight 93, who fought back, heroically stopping that flight from flying into our Capitol,” Thompson continued.

“And as we mourn we are reminded of all the selfless acts of courage that took place that day, some that may never even be told. In our nation's darkest moment, some many citizens showed their humanity.”

Vallejo firefighter Kevin Brown, like so many of his brothers in arms, says the events of 20 years ago strike too close to home for him to comment. Brown did say that while currently battling the Caldor Fire, thousands of firefighters currently deployed at the four major fires burning in the state will all be paying recognition to the event Saturday morning during the morning briefing.

Riley still feels pain remembering the tragedy 20 years ago.

“Nothing I can say will properly explain how it felt to realize that several of our fellow firefighters had lost their lives doing the job we all loved,” Riley said. “And the pain did not end there as over the next months and years we learned of other friends who lost their lives or were forced to retire from injuries suffered from the months spent working at the site looking for the remains of fellow firefighters. Few realize the bonds we share as first responders and like the loss of any family member, memories of them force itself to the forefront at the most unexpected times.”

Twenty years later, Trujillo mourns the loss of so many that day, but is also proud to have a bigger role in Vallejo paying tribute to those lost.

“When I first started working for the Vallejo Fire Department, there really wasn't a 9/11 ceremony, just a moment of silence,” Trujillo said. “Since I play the bagpipes, I started out with a small ceremony six years ago, and since then, it has grown every year.”

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