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On Memorial Day, recalling the fight to save the Pentagon

MICHAEL DOYLE - MCCLATCHY NEWSPAPERS

UPDATED MAY 25, 2008 10:13 PM



Firefighters battle the Pentagon blaze. *FBI photo courtesy of Rick Newman / MCT*



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ARLINGTON, Va. — Remember the Pentagon.

It burned, too, dismembered by the same gang that brought down the Twin Towers of New York's World Trade Center. Circumstances, though, have rendered the Pentagon a 9/11 afterthought. It's the place that survived.

At the World Trade Center, 343 New York City firefighters died. At the Pentagon, every firefighter eventually returned home. Not all came back safe and sound; the Arlington County Fire Department subsequently lost 9 percent of its force to health-related retirements.

But still.

The FDNY battalions memorably marched into the World Trade Center and were entombed there en masse. The Arlington crews subdued a different beast, smaller but still lethal, and in their victory they've remained largely anonymous.

Until now.

Six years on, the Arlington firefighters and their compatriots are getting the accounting they deserve. In "Firefight: Inside the Battle to Save the Pentagon on 9/11," authors Patrick Creed and Rick Newman detail, blow by blow, what happened after American Airlines Flight 77 flew into the nation's military command center at 530 miles per hour.

The plane hit at 9:37 a.m. It weighed 182,000 pounds, carried somewhat less than 11,000 gallons of jet fuel and plowed forward, Creed and Newman write, "like a horizontal volcanic eruption." In eight-tenths of a second, the plane disintegrated. Six hundred thousand bolts and rivets blew out as shrapnel. The concussion rattled fire station doors nearly a mile away.

"What the (expletive) was that?" Arlington firefighter Derek Spector exclaimed.

"That was a (expletive) explosion," firefighter Brian Roche replied.

That's how firefighters talk. The way anyone talks, honestly, when the new world hits them in the gut.

There's a lot that can go awry in a big fire and rescue operation. Competing agencies can't communicate. Turf fights erupt. Egos intrude. Honest reporting attends to these mishaps.

One example, recounted in "Firefight": A spent Arlington crew was resting in the Pentagon courtyard when several District of Columbia firefighters tried to steal the crew's Scott air packs and face pieces. About which perfidy, only one thing could be said.

"What the (expletive)?" Arlington fire captain Brian Spring shouted.

A lot, too, can go wrong in reporting such a story. Misimpressions can coalesce into convenient anecdotes. The facts can grow soggy with sentiment. The fraternal order of those who were there fends off feelers from those who were not.

"Firefight" seems to get it right, as best as I can tell. Everything gets its proper measure. Mistakes happen, but steadfastness is the enduring virtue. At one point, an ailing firefighter sneaks behind an engine to vomit, knowing that if the medics see him he'll be yanked off the biggest job of his career.

Technical competence is esteemed. When hulking Truck 105 couldn't fit through a Pentagon tunnel, officers cut the rear tiller cab off with an electric saw. The truncated vehicle squeezed through with two inches to spare.

Good management matters. By Sept. 21, incident commander Jim Schwartz, now the Arlington County fire chief, and his colleagues could relinquish control to the FBI. Arlington's deft crisis management is now taught as a case study to students at the Harvard Business School.

Creed and Newman appear well suited to capturing this story. Creed is a volunteer firefighter and a U.S. Army civil affairs officer. He's obviously got heart. At one point, after Creed deployed to Iraq, he ended up conducting one evening interview with an Arlington firefighter by satellite phone while his base was under mortar attack. Newman is a reporter for U.S. News & World Report, a former Pentagon correspondent and the author of another book.

Together, they're able to translate the requisite technical and emotional languages.

One of their Arlington sources is Capt. Joe Lightfoot, who formerly ran the fire station where I've ridden as a volunteer EMT since 2002. Hanging out in Station Two's kitchen, waiting for the emergency tones, Capt. Lightfoot and I have talked about, well, whatever: Iwo Jima, say, or Hillary Clinton's latest melodrama, or Led Zeppelin's personnel dynamics. In time, we also talked about the Pentagon. In every profane and poignant particular, Capt. Lightfoot's experiences as I heard them are faithfully recounted in "Firefight." So are many others.

Detail abounds here, and 486 pages may weigh down some readers. Inevitably, the drama that's white-hot at the beginning flags a bit by day eight or nine. It's a big story, though, and not just on the surface. It takes space to delve into an event so complicated. It takes space, too, to plumb the heart of a man; a man, say, like Arlington Battalion Chief Bob Cornwell.

Cornwell fought in Vietnam a generation ago. Five months before 9/11, he had a tumor removed. His debilitating chemotherapy for non-Hodgkin's lymphoma was barely done when the Pentagon was hit. He easily could have checked out of the fight. Instead, he was running all over the building, weighted down by 45-plus pounds of turnout gear and Scott pack. When he was finally ordered to rest back at the command post, he declined. He'd stay with his men, "Firefight" recounts.

"Doing good, Joey," Chief Cornwell told Capt. Lightfoot, as the Pentagon burned and the firefighters worked. "Doing good."

Remember: Steadfastness is a virtue. "Firefight" gives it its due.

McClatchy Washington correspondent Michael Doyle is a volunteer firefighter/EMT based at Arlington County Fire Department Station Two, about three miles from the Pentagon. He joined after 9/11.

This story was originally published May 21, 2008, 1:49 PM.

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