

September 11

written by Guest Contributor | September 11, 2019



I was driving the old blue Volvo northbound on U.S. Route 89 through Chino Valley, bound for Las Vegas, while feeling content just to drift in and out of the NPR news station. Not too much was happening in the world to capture my attention, as I was looking forward to this five-day trip for National Airlines and also to what remained of the four-hour drive from my home to McCarran Airport. I remember turning off the radio and fumbling through some CDs, looking for some good road tunes to tick off the miles, and settled on a compilation of retro lounge standards a friend had recently mailed to me.

So began what I thought would be a five-day trip, departing that evening for Newark, with subsequent layovers in Los Angeles and New York. I was happy in a subdued way, confident that things were going well and would continue to do so. It had been over five years since I'd had a drink; I was functioning well for a company I respected, and I believed the feeling was mutual. I know that companies are not sentient beings with feelings, but I had every reason to believe I was in good favor with a management team I admired. No less important, life at home was almost idyllic, a near perfect environment of small town and wide-open wilderness. Passing the tiny town of Paulden, I could look to the northeast and see the San Francisco Peaks over forty miles away, through an unusually clear and calm summer's day. The weather across most of the country was similar, and the visibility at our destination was postcard perfect, and I would later comment about that to the colleague I would share the coming days with. That was Monday, September 10th, 2001.

I managed to sleep a few hours in the "quiet room" before checking in for the eleven p.m. departure, then met the copilot at the dispatch counter before riding the crew bus to the plane. We briefed the flight attendants on the four-and-a-half-hour flight, discussing routine details as we made our round of introductions. I was looking forward to an uneventful five days, the highlight for me being a couple of all-day walks in Manhattan. I would also rent a car in Los Angeles and visit my parents and sister. Or so I thought.

Bob flew the leg, and somewhere over Ohio the eastern horizon began to glow with the sunrise, always (for me) the most fatigue-inducing part of an eastbound night flight. A cup of strong coffee, augmented by a spoonful of instant from a jar in my flight bag, shook off the nods as the sky gradually brightened. There is always a second wind which kicks in for the approach and landing, and on this morning another pick-me-up coffee was not required. Air traffic control into the New York area was beginning its normal morning pace,

and visibility was about the best I've ever seen, before or since. As we were lining up to land to the northeast on runway 04R, I remember looking to the right and seeing the sun glint off the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center.

Unnecessary chitchat is forbidden during a "sterile cockpit" environment, which usually means any aircraft movement below ten thousand feet. I suppose if an FAA inspector or company check airman was on the flight deck, I would have kept the talk to checklists and operational items, but I'm only human, and the approach was going well, with gear down, flaps down, aircraft stable and runway in sight. I could not help but comment on how beautiful the Manhattan skyline looked, especially the way the morning light was playing off the buildings, and I recall chatting about that during the final few minutes of the approach. Bob agreed (and said so), and in any case our sightseeing and comments did not take a bit away from the approach and landing. That was approximately six-thirty.

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I was sound asleep in my room at the Newark Airport Hilton when the phone rang. It was nine o'clock in the morning, and Monica was on the other end. She knew I would be asleep then, and that call would be waking me up, so there was either a death in the family, or we had won the lottery. Such an intrusion into a much-needed sleep would be acceptable for either of these extremes, but nothing in the middle.

"Turn on the TV," she said.

"What channel?"

"It doesn't matter." OK, maybe this has nothing to do with the middle, or even the extremes as I've selfishly defined them. I got up to turn on the TV, and just then the second of the Twin Towers collapsed, live on television. I completely forgot the rest of our short conversation, other than we agreed to talk soon, after I begin to make sense of this. That is, if making sense would even be possible.

For the next hour I was transfixed on the television, trying to process the images and decipher what they meant. Boeing jets flying into buildings in broad daylight with unlimited visibility. Remarkably, there was still some speculation by news reporters that this was a freak set of accidents caused by some technical chain of events gone horribly wrong. Another aircraft had crashed into the Pentagon and yet another went down in Pennsylvania. I sat on the end of the bed, not three feet from the television screen, bouncing from one channel to the next, attempting to grasp as much information as possible.

I don't believe a television news reporter can be faulted for speculating on the causes of that morning's event, especially as it unfolds on live television. This was a national tragedy, not just limited to airlines and crew, and when considering its causes every possibility needs to be

considered, even the absurd. But it was immediately clear to me (and no doubt a few million others around the world) that these crashes were no accident.

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Flashback to April 19th, 1995, about a year before my unglamorous departure from America West. I was walking through the concourse of John Wayne Airport in Orange County, fresh cup of coffee in hand, returning to the plane to begin the one-hour flight to Phoenix. Something didn't feel right. The crowds around the TVs in the bars were just a little too thick, a little too motionless and silent, for everything to be just . . . normal. Even the bartenders were rigid, ignoring the customers while staring at the same screens. I was standing on the periphery of a small crowd as the broadcasted image of what was left of the Murrah Building in Oklahoma City was being shown. It was bombed to rubble, culprits unknown, death toll about forty, but it would soon climb to over 160. I was shocked and disgusted but had to shake off the anger to focus on the job to fly home. I relayed to the copilot what was happening on the TV screens, and before we pushed back from the gate, he let out a string of epithets toward the only people he believed capable of doing such a thing. I initially didn't respond to his comments, but by the time we leveled off and put Palm Springs behind us, we started chatting about it. He was convinced that "ragheads" were responsible.

Brainwashed fundamentalists, even foreign ones, *could* do this sort of thing, I mentioned, but there was one detail which suggested that the bombers were American. He was shocked that I was not in agreement with him. I suggested only one detail: Oklahoma. With no disrespect to the middle of the country, it did not seem reasonable to me that foreigners would go to the trouble and expense to cause such destruction within the United States, and their target be a little-known federal building in Oklahoma City. Apparently, this intuitive detail was also lost on right-wing radio, as the days between the bombing and Timothy McVeigh's arraignment had Rush Limbaugh accusing foreign Muslims of the bombing. Before McVeigh was implicated, I *knew* that the perpetrators were an all-American fringe of anti-government paranoiacs. There was a Democrat in the White House, the Waco disaster was fresh in the memory, and backwoods militias were all fired up that the government was coming after their guns. For political reasons, who else would bomb a government building in Oklahoma? Foreigners bent on harming America will need a lot more bang for their dollar, both literally and in the media, so they would likely target American landmarks known around the world...such as Hollywood (too spread out), the Grand Canyon or Yosemite (not enough people or buildings), a famous amusement park (bad PR), or . . . the Pentagon, the Twin Towers, or the White House.

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This time around, bouncing through the television channels on the day that would come to be known as "9/11," it never occurred to me that the perpetrators could be anything other than Islamic fundamentalists. In addition to their religious indoctrination, they were no doubt motivated by a mix of political ideology, hatred of the West, and maybe a dash of unrealized self-loathing. I've never accepted the common tale that they sincerely believe panting virgins await on the other side. Whatever those virgins did to deserve that eternal duty, it obviously wasn't promiscuity. Nor did I accept the argument that they were motivated by a hatred of our freedoms. Such accusations sound just a little too packaged and self-serving.

I was physically exhausted yet becoming mentally alert, at least in a strangely selective way. After a few minutes sitting numb by the TV, it was beginning to occur to me what a catastrophe this was, and in no time at all, I shifted my thinking...to my own insular little world. I've struggled with this in the years since, wondering at the mechanisms of my own selfishness. A mere five miles from my comfortable hotel room was a scene where thousands of people were dead or dying in a toxic mountain of burning rubble. And I turned my thoughts to getting home, wishing my own company would survive, and hoping the world I lived in would not change radically for the worse.

Adrenalin was beginning to give me the feeling that my mind was becoming more alert, though that feeling was an illusion. My senses were sharpening by the minute, and the stream of thoughts was accelerating, yet those thoughts were widely scattered. Exhausted, emotionally drained, and probably developing some measure of fear all created a spaced-out feeling which I could barely recognize, but with the perspective of time, it was obvious. My mind was actually becoming duller; the phone rang about five times before it occurred to me that I could just pick it up and talk to whomever was on the other end. It was Bob. "Are you watching this?"

"Yep. Where are you?" Stupid question.

"In my room."

"Let me get my shit together and let's meet up. I'll call you in about half an hour."

"OK."

And maybe I was even hallucinating. I couldn't stop flicking through the TV channels, and on one of them I caught a short glimpse of the aircraft in Pennsylvania, United Airlines Flight 93. For a brief few seconds, it showed the Boeing 757 in a dive, wings banked at least forty-five degrees and the nose down about twenty, with thick black smoke originating from the left wing root. There was another plane in the background, moving at a much faster rate: a fighter jet. The source of the film was not mentioned, and I do not recall the network which aired it, but I do remember those images, though I have not seen them since, nor heard any more about it. Unlike so many other 9/11 images which have been kept in the public eye, that one was mysteriously

laid to rest.

I called my parents and sister in California to let them know I was OK. They wanted to know when flights would resume, and of that there was no answer. All commercial and private aircraft were grounded in the entire United States, from crop dusters to the scheduled airlines. All flight school activity was halted, as was all recreational flying, even gliders. These restrictions were immediate and would remain in effect until further notice. In the shower, I had the wild idea to rent a car and drive back to Arizona. I could take Bob, who lived in San Diego, or any of the flight attendants who may need a ride west. But the idea wasn't that wild because after calling several car rental companies at Newark Airport, no cars were available.

The phone rang again, and it was the chief pilot. "Hello Dave, how are you doing out there?"

"I'm fine. Other than, well, the obvious." What good would it do to say I was confused and angry? Everybody was. I cannot recall word for word the rest of our short conversation, other than the gist of it—they have already had meetings with the company officers; we are not going to throw in the towel; the company is going to do everything it can to survive. We will also do whatever is required to support the crews at the outstations. Please stay put in Newark for as long as it takes because we want you to fly the plane out when we resume service. At last, a small piece of stability to cling to and to build upon.

I called Bob with the news, and we agreed to meet on the rooftop patio of our eleven-story hotel. When I arrived a few minutes later, he was already there, leaning against the railing, looking toward the southern tip of Manhattan. Black smoke was billowing from the rubble, moving left to right from our vantage point, the skyline forever changed. A mere four hours had passed since we commented on their beauty, and now they were gone, all 110 stories of each tower.

There were about twenty of us on the rooftop patio then, and that number would slowly trickle up throughout the day. The mood would eventually change, but an hour after the second tower collapsed, it was still somber, with a respectful softening of voices among the onlookers. Quietly, Bob and I chatted, avoiding the customary hellos and how are yous. I remember a couple of points that he made in our first real post-9/11 conversation while standing on the roof of the Newark Airport Hilton. He brought up Pearl Harbor and stated the obvious: When the Japanese attacked, they flew their own airplanes with their national flag emblazoned on the sides. Some group will likely take proud credit for this, but we were still days away from positively identifying those responsible for the devastation in front of us. "Why?" would be a question asked many times over, even to this day, years later. "When the dust settles..." we will know more, but as Bob also pointed out, the dust was still rising and would continue to rise for a long time. We didn't yet know who did this, but more and more speculation focused on foreign Muslims, and both of us seemed to think that was the most plausible line of reasoning. By noon, all talk of this being an accident was gone.

I remained on the rooftop for about another hour, sitting quietly or chatting with strangers. Eventually a couple of our flight attendants arrived, and one of them had obviously been crying. I told them of my conversation with the chief pilot, and they too had heard the same information from their supervisor. They did not seem as willing to be reassured by "good" news from the company, and I've since come to the conclusion that, as it relates to responding to a tragedy such as this, they were more evolved than I was.

By early afternoon I returned to my room after a visit to the hotel lobby. I wanted to get a feel for the mood and ambiance of the place, and to search out (mostly by eavesdropping) information other than what was broadcast on television. The hotel was used by Continental Airlines, and several dozen crewmembers were milling about, some in uniform, looking as confused as I was. The restaurant was nearly full, its staff running about with plates and order pads, and a few customers were waiting to be seated. I was surprised by this and wondered how the waiters could remain focused on their jobs. Eating was the farthest thing from my mind, as there was that old familiar knot of nerves hovering around my middle. Could these people not know what was going on across the Hudson? Is it possible they hadn't heard? But questioning this was yet another manifestation of my own selfishness, for as individuals, we respond to horrific events in different ways.

Even so, I was repulsed when I returned to the rooftop several hours later. After the visit to the lobby (where the gift shop was also doing a brisk business in the sort of items hotel gift shops sell), I returned to my room to shower again, wash my hair again, brush my teeth, and change my clothes again. I flopped on the bed to stare at the ceiling and try to empty my mind before collecting my thoughts, but I couldn't. On went the television, where I remained hypnotized for several hours before heading upstairs.

On the rooftop, someone had produced a large barbeque that was grilling various cuts of meat and hot dogs. There was a table set up with large bags of chips, bowls of salsa, and other party snacks. Many of the people, now numbering at least twice that of my earlier visit, held a beer in their hand or some other drink. They were mostly clustered in groups, some with their backs to the carnage behind them. Occasionally, I could hear a bellow of laughter as if some punch line had just been delivered. It was not entirely a festive atmosphere. It would be a lie to claim it as such, but the ambience was too weird a mix for my comfort, and within a few minutes I *had* to get out of there. It was my last visit to the rooftop.

Over the next three days, I remained entirely within the grounds of the hotel. Before Bob and I could seriously plan on venturing into Manhattan to volunteer to help in any way we could, the news was already out that any such services would not be necessary, as going onto the island would be prohibited. Instead, I watched more television news over the course of those days than I have ever done, before or since. I had a few meals in the restaurant—some with Bob, or with a flight attendant or two, or alone. I forget the specifics of our conversations, other than it always related to Tuesday morning's event, and what that event will mean for ourselves and the airline industry.

On Friday night, the government creaked open the door of air travel, with hastily put into place new and tougher security procedures. The seven of us were together as a uniformed crew again, and we were under as much scrutiny, if not more, than our passengers as we made our way through airport security. The minimum-wage private contractors were present, but it was obvious they were not in charge. Milling about were New Jersey National Guardsmen, rifles either in hand or slung over a shoulder. After my bags were x-rayed and I walked through the big magnet, I received, for the first time in my life, a physical pat down in order to go to work. One of the Guardsmen held in his hand the ID which hung around my neck, which in large letters next to my picture said, "David James."

He asked, "David Banes?"

I said, "No, David James." He could read, of course. I guess this was one way of tripping up a potential impersonator who was not all that bright. I passed that test, but my toilet bag was another matter. One of the other Guardsmen was going through my belongings, and he discovered a pair of nail clippers.

"You can't have that," he politely said with a toothy grin, then tossed them into a large bin at his side. Two hours later we were the fourth aircraft to leave Newark, part of the first wave of departures from New York's airports since the lifting of the flight ban. And we flew west, to a very different world than the one we left behind.



David James recently swapped a thirty-five year career flying airplanes for the more satisfying life of writing, reading and wilderness hiking. He has been based on five continents and flown to over ninety countries, and is compiling his adventures in a collection of chronological essays titled, "Building Time." These days, he is much more likely to be seen trekking a Northern Arizona trail than staggering around an airport, or sitting on an airplane.