

When 20 minutes is a lifetime

By [REDACTED]

We've all been counting our blessings lately. It's hard not to think how lucky you are compared to all the families that aren't as a result of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

I'm no exception, especially since my Air Force husband is one of the 23,000 people that work in the Pentagon.

But for 20 minutes on Sept. 11 – a mere 20 minutes – I didn't know whether he was dead or alive. My priorities have really been messed up since then. Oh, homework, softball and Scouting are all still part of the daily push, but I try harder to make sure I get that morning farewell kiss; that I tell my husband I really love him; and I take more time to listen to my kids.

That day I was on my way into the Armed Services YMCA headquarters in Springfield, Va., and listening to the radio reports about the airplanes that crashed into the World Trade Center. Then the reporter interrupted with a story of a plane hitting the Pentagon near the helipad.

I know the room number in the Pentagon, but had no idea where in the five-sided, five ringed, and five-floored "puzzle palace" my husband's office was located in relation to the plane crash.

Dept. of Defense photo by Tech. Sgt. Cedric H. Rudisill



Hands shaking, I dialed my husband's office and cell phone. The blank messages were not comforting, as a voice mail system might not be affected by the attack. So I hurried into the office to see if he had called. No one had heard from him. On my voice mail was two messages. The first was an ad sales representative (how mundane to hear such an ordinary thing on such a day). The second was terse, but no less appreciated, message from the husband, "I'm okay. Things are a little busy right now. I'll call you again later."

I found out later he was still in the Pentagon, and in fact, didn't leave until the smoke forced him and the team he was working with out of the building.

Out of sorts and worried that my kids might hear the news and also be concerned about their father, I left work to have lunch with them. My 10-year-old daughter again put perspective on this tragedy.

Department of Defense photo by Staff Sgt. Gary A. Simmons



U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Jim Vanheggen



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT:

- A KC-10 tanker from McGuire Air Force Base, N.J., taxis down the flightline to an anxiously waiting crowd of family member and fellow reservists.
- A U.S. flag was set outside the Pentagon after the Pentagon attack. Memorial services were held on the grounds overlooking the Pentagon as part of the Sept. 14 National Day of Prayer and Remembrance.
- Pentagon from air: Aerial view Sept. 14 of the destruction caused when a high-jacked commercial jetliner crashed into the Pentagon.
- A clock frozen at the time of impact inside the Pentagon.

U.S. Air Force photo by Gary Ell



Department of Defense photo by Tech. Sgt. Cedric H. Rudisill



After another announcement called out a third student to go home while we sat in the lunchroom, she asked, "Why are all these kids leaving?" The school had decided to go on normally without saying anything to the students, but parents were showing up and pulling their children out.

"Something really bad happened today," I told her.

"Did the president die?" she wondered.

"No," I assured her, whispering in her ear so the other kids wouldn't hear. "It's much worse than anything you could imagine."

"Did two million people die?" she asked innocently, and so throwing me off I smiled for the first time since the radio report. Once again reassuring her that her imagination was bigger than mine, I said I would explain it when her and her brother came home.

U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. John Valcarenu



And with children's adaptability, the biggest thoughts they had when they came home were that school was closed the next day and they didn't need to do their homework right away.

While the rest of that horrifying day crept along, I was reservedly grateful. While even those who knew no one in the Pentagon or World Trade Center were caught up in a national grief, I was not. To realize how close I came to real grief made my pain all but transparent. I focused on the tasks at hand. Putting on my Air Force Reserve hat, I volunteered to help my active-duty counterparts at the Pentagon.

And so on Sept. 12, I answered the call to duty and headed to the blackened hallways of the Pentagon for a night shift on Air Force Public Affairs, answering reporters' questions.

An acrid odor lingered in the air and the hallways were mostly deserted, lonely tracks of footsteps in the soot trailing eerily along the corridors. Young National Guard soldiers bearing M16s guarded the section of the Pentagon still smoldering. Every sound in the building made those few of us there look over our shoulders for the cause of the sound.

When I returned home at 4 a.m., my children asleep in their beds, my husband just a couple hours from returning to the Pentagon for duty himself, I said a prayer for the thousands whose family members didn't come home.

Then I counted my blessings again.

U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Jim Varhegyi



U.S. Navy photo by Photographer's Mate 2nd Class Jim Watson



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

- Soldiers from Fort Myer, Va., get some well-deserved rest after digging trenches and doing other work in the aftermath of the Pentagon attack.
- Rescue and emergency personnel work into the night following the attack on the Pentagon.
- A U.S. flag was set outside the Pentagon after the Pentagon attack.
- A family member of a victim who was killed during the Sept. 11 terrorist attack on the Pentagon holds yellow roses and an American flag in remembrance of his loved one.