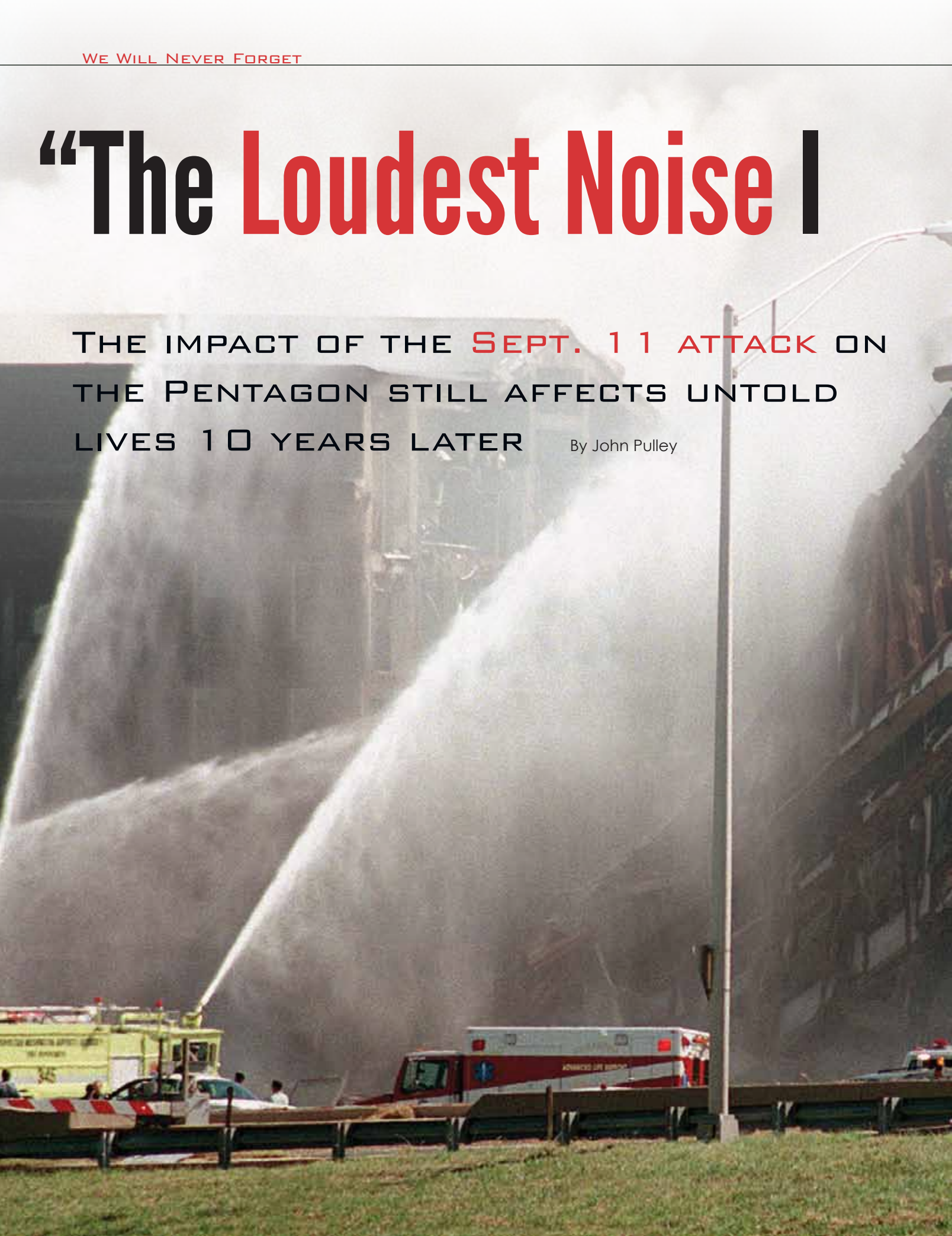


WE WILL NEVER FORGET

“The Loudest Noise I

THE IMPACT OF THE SEPT. 11 ATTACK ON
THE PENTAGON STILL AFFECTS UNTOLD
LIVES 10 YEARS LATER

By John Pulley



Ever Heard in my Life”



PHOTO: Photographer's Mate First Class Dewitt D. Roseborough III

Lt. Col. Steve Zappalla, an Army combat arms officer, had on many occasions during his 20-year career in uniform traveled great distances to confront armed adversaries and face down his own fears. Yet on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, Zappalla was home, ensconced in a cubicle inside the Pentagon, the world's largest office building.

At 9:41 a.m., his office became a crucible. A hijacked plane struck the exterior of the Pentagon at ground level, a direct hit on a section of the massive structure that had recently been renovated during the first phase of a 17-year, \$4.5 billion overhaul. Breaching the western façade, American Airlines Flight 77 sliced into the building's guts, exploded and obliterated most of what was in its path.

One flight up, Zappalla's workgroup occupied a section of the second floor between Corridors Four and Five, two of 10 passageways that project spoke-like from the Pentagon's hub to its perimeter. The renovation had transformed the area into a vast cubicle farm, known as The Bay, that sprawled for 100 yards.

The violence of the collision and the ensuing blast generated the "loudest noise I ever heard in my life, followed by a rush of air," says Zappalla. "The ceiling started falling down. I remember getting lifted up and hitting the wall. Something from the ceiling hit me on the head."

Getting knocked to the floor saved Zappalla's life, he says. Colleagues in the forward part of The Bay, nearest the point of impact, died instantly. Others perished in a secondary explosion of jet fuel propelled by the plane's momentum into the building's recesses. The fireball roared over Zappalla, who assumed it was a gas explosion caused by a careless renovation worker.

It was, of course, part of a well-coordinated assault -- the most destructive terrorist attack ever carried out on American soil.

On the 10-year observance of Sept. 11, millions of people will remember the horrifying images of the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center. For most, time has healed emotional wounds that once

were jagged and raw. But for the relatively small group of men and women who were there, a decade has done little to soften the impact.

September 11 began unremarkably. Zappalla, a staff officer in Army headquarters, arose at 5 a.m., showered, donned his uniform, walked to the bus stop, caught a shuttle at the Navy annex and made it to his second-floor office by 6:30. “It was a nice day,” he says. “A happy, normal day.”

Arriving at The Bay’s cubicle farm, Zappalla “said hello to a few buddies, had a cup of coffee, made phone calls.” When colleagues began stirring and moving, he “sensed something was up.”

Someone turned on a television. One of the World Trade Center’s twin towers, in New York City, was in flames. “Chills were going through the back of my head,” he says, recalling the feeling of disbelief. Zappalla, who reported to Lt. Gen Timothy Maude, the Army’s deputy chief of staff for personnel, instinctively went into action, gathering information he would need to brief the general on the attack’s implications for force mobilization.

After the team briefed Maude in his office on the Pentagon’s outermost E Ring, the general gave the order to fully stand up the Army Operations Center deep in the bowels of the Pentagon. Zappalla retreated to his D Ring office.

Moments later, Flight 77 plowed into the Pentagon. Maude and others closest to the point of impact died instantly. The three-star general would be the highest-ranking military officer killed in the attacks and the most senior Army officer killed by enemy action in

more than half a century. In all, 22 of Zappalla’s colleagues perished, along with 103 others inside the Pentagon and 54 passengers and crew aboard the plane.

In an instant, offices became death traps. People who survived the initial hit struggled to escape. “It was dark. I couldn’t see,” says Zappalla. “The smell was horrendous, a terrible smell. I couldn’t breathe. I felt like I was suffocating.”

Someone asked Zappalla if he was OK. He couldn’t move, but he said “yes.” Someone helped him to his feet, and together

they made their way toward the center of the Pentagon, their movement blocked at one point by a mechanical firewall. They eventually made it to the Pentagon’s courtyard, which had become something of a field hospital. Medical personnel performed triage, and ambulances spirited the wounded away. Zappalla, who had suffered a severe concussion, was treated at the hospital at Fort Belvoir, Va., several miles away.



RETIRED LT. COL.
STEVE ZAPPALLA

“It started like any day,” says Navy Cmdr. David A. Tarantino, a medical doctor, who recalls checking email in his office on the A Ring, the innermost of the five concentric loops. “It was a beautiful day.”

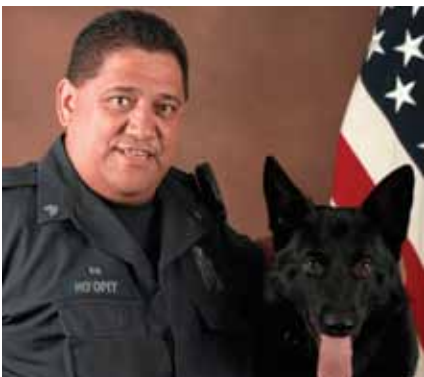
Tarantino watched on television as a passenger plane hit the second World Trade Center. Not long afterward, he “felt a violent shuddering, like an earthquake. We knew we were under attack.” Making his way toward the direction of the blast, he discovered a gaping hole in a wall abutting a service corridor. “We could hear voices inside,” he says. “People were trapped.”

Stepping into the breach, Tarantino encountered an “apocalyptic” scene obscured by “thick, black jet-fuel smoke. ... I could barely see my hands.” The partially collapsed ceiling had exposed electrical wires. Intense heat was melting shoes and clothing. “Get out! Get out!” he yelled.

He saw Jerry Henson, a civilian employee trapped by debris in his Navy Command Center office. Calling on his experience rowing crew at Stanford University, Tarantino used his wiry body to “leg-press the debris off of him” and lead Henson to safety. “As we got back to the passageway,” he says, “that area collapsed.”

Former Army Sgt. Isaac Ho’opi’i, a member of the Pentagon Force Protection Agency, had taken his K-9 partner, Vito, to see the veterinarian at nearby Fort Myer, Va., that morning. He “heard a big boom and felt the ground shake,” he says. Seconds later, his radio came to life. “Emergency! This is not a drill,” blared the dispatcher.

Ho’opi’i sped to the Pentagon, sprinting on foot when he could drive no farther. “The helipad was in flames,” he says, and the



FORMER ARMY SGT.
ISAAC HO’OPI’I

grounds on the west side of the building flared with “little fires here and there.”

People were crawling out of the building. Some jumped from the second floor. Windows bubbled in the intense heat. Inside, Ho’opi’i encountered smoke, running water, flickering lights and people yelling. It was, he says, “chaos.”

He used his booming voice as an auditory beacon to help lead victims, some with severe burns, out of the building, repeatedly instructing people to “come toward my voice.” One of the survivors, Wayne

the Pentagon effectively “closed the loop between the chain of command,” she says, allowing the Guard’s leadership at Andrews to work through the Secret Service on base and ultimately gain clearance from Vice President Dick Cheney to launch aircraft.

Lt. Col. Marc “Sass” Sasseville was already moving toward the flight line when he called out to Penney. “Lucky,” he said, using the nickname given to her by other pilots, “you’re coming with me.” Believing a commercial airliner was still unaccounted for, they punched the afterburners of their F-16s, rocketed northwest along the Potomac River and prepared to intercept a jetliner.

There were no orders for engaging a hijacked plane, no standing rules of engagement. Aside from a few rounds of training bullets that could not take down a large aircraft, the F-16s had no weapons. On the fly, they came up with a plan: Sasseville would ram the cockpit. Penney would take out the tail. “We simply knew what had to be done that day.”

After returning from their sortie, they learned the missing aircraft, United Airlines Flight 93, had been found. Passengers on the Boeing 757 had stormed its cabin before Sasseville and Penney ever took flight. The plane had crashed into a Pennsylvania field.

Shortly after noon, Lt. Michael P. Regan of the Fire & Rescue Department of northern Virginia’s Fairfax County arrived at the Pentagon. He was part of Virginia Task Force 1, an international urban search and rescue unit with expertise in rescuing victims from collapsed structures. The unit has responded to crises all over the world, including the 1998 bombing of the U.S. embassy in Nairobi, Kenya, an attack attributed to Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda.

Searching the Pentagon for people trapped in the rubble, the rescuers experienced “intense heat” of a type they had “not encountered in collapsed buildings before,” Regan says. “At points [it] became unbearable.” Ten feet inside the building, the team encountered the first victim. They continued, finding “total devastation [and] victims just about everywhere we looked.” It appeared that people escaped quickly or not at all. “We did not find any live victims.”

On the day after the attacks, even as the destroyed section of the building continued to smolder, “almost everyone at the Pentagon was back at work,” says Dr. Tarantino, who later deployed with a Marine unit to Iraq. For him, the past decade has been “10 years of being part of the response.”

Former Army Capt. Randy Schwartz, a firefighter, was on the roof of the Pentagon on Sept. 12, putting out hot spots. After he descended, his commander directed him to escort a pair of active-duty Army soldiers to the roof. Scaling a truck ladder that had been extended to its full 100-foot length, soldiers and firefighters lugged a large garrison flag to the roof and unfurled it along the side of the Pentagon. It would



PHOTO: Tech. Sgt. Johnathon Orrell

AIR GUARD MAJ. HEATHER “LUCKY” PENNEY

Sinclair, told the story of his rescue to *The Washington Post*, which led to his meeting the man who had saved his life.

Maj. Heather “Lucky” Penney, an F-16 pilot with the D.C. Air National Guard, had eaten Cheerios before changing into her flight suit and driving to Andrews Air Force Base, Md., that morning beneath “a gorgeous, crystalline-blue sky.” In the language of pilots, such conditions are known by the acronym CAVU: clear above, visibility unlimited.

Penney and her fellow pilots had just returned from a demanding training exercise at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., to ensure pilots possess the skills “to go to war in ‘bad guy’ land,” as Penney says. A routine scheduling meeting “immediately dissolved” when news arrived that the second World Trade Center tower had been struck. Shortly afterward, another plane flew into the Pentagon.

Her Air Guard unit is not part of the official response chain deployed by the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), which defends the country’s airspace. But the attack on



PHOTOS: LT. Col. Steve Zappalla

become one of the iconic images of the attack and its aftermath.

“I was in the right place at the right time to give something back to my country, a small thing. I am thrilled that I was part of that,” Schwartz says. “I was very saddened about the events of the day before, but to give America something to cheer about, I’m awfully proud of that.”

Zappalla, the Army combat arms officer, was back at work two days after the attack. He was present when Maude’s grieving wife, Terry, spoke to the men and women who had worked for her husband. She told them that “Tim” would want his team to pull together and do what needed to be done. “She stood up and gave the most inspirational speech I ever heard in my life,” he says.

Of necessity, most of his colleagues relocated to temporary offices in Alexandria, Va., while workers rebuilt their offices, but Zappalla’s job required him to work in the Army Operations Center, in the Pentagon. He spent much of the next nine months in the Pentagon’s basement. Exiled colleagues considered him fortunate.

“People were fighting to get back in,” Zappalla recalls.

To a person, the men and women who were closest to the events of Sept. 11 say they still feel the impact.

“I think it affected all of us who are firemen,” says Schwartz. “We didn’t lose anybody here (at the Pentagon), but 343 guys in New York lost their lives. You think about it every day. When we’re going up the steps in a high rise, I can visualize what it was like. All of a sudden, their world came crashing down. ... Yeah, I’d say it changed my life.”

Firefighter Regan concurs: “There’s no such thing as closure. ... A lot of our people have sleepless nights. There’s not a single day that goes by that I don’t think about it.”

In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, many people hungered for retribution. Years later, the death of Osama bin Laden was less cathartic than it might have been had it happened sooner. “That guy tried to kill me,” says Tarantino. “But there’s still a lot of work to be

done.”

For Tarantino, being in the Pentagon during the attack led to “a rededication of military values ... honor, courage, commitment ... not leaving anyone behind.”

Some suffer from survivor guilt.

“Did I do enough?” asks Ho’opi’i, who served eight years active duty in the infantry as a police investigator and another 10 in the Army Reserve. “Did I help enough people?”

The day burns within him. At times, when he is grilling and gets a whiff of charcoal smoke and lighter fluid, it all comes back.

“Even though 10 years have gone by, the thing that hits me is the smell. It’s more than just smoke,” he says of the odor inside the Pentagon that day, a mixture of jet fuel, construction materials consumed by fire, incinerated clothes and burned flesh. “I don’t wish for anybody to go through it.”

He copes by coaching youth sports and performing contemporary Hawaiian music with his band, The Aloha Boys. Ho’opi’i plays guitar and ukulele, and he sings. “I don’t take a lot for granted anymore,” he says. “Life is too short. ... Waking up alive is always great.”

For Penney, Sept. 11 provided perspective: “There are things in this world that are far more important than our individual selves. Those things are our Constitution, the Bill of Rights, our way of life, what it means to be an American.”

For Zappalla, Sept. 11 changed everything.

He had grown up in the Italian neighborhoods of Bushwick in Brooklyn, Glendale in Queens and in Levittown, on Long Island. From those places he learned to aggressively stand up for himself.

“The Army seemed like a natural extension of that,” says Zappalla, who was recruited to play on the lacrosse team at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, and eventually became team captain. “The environment there was familiar to me. Very aggressive. I

OPPOSITE: (LEFT) Zappalla snapped pictures of the devastation when he returned to the remains of his Pentagon office on Sept. 27. (RIGHT): Zappalla's photos showed the burned exterior of the building outside his former office.

(RIGHT): Fairfax County firefighter Randy Schwartz, a former Army captain, helped unfurl the large garrison flag on the roof of the Pentagon on Sept. 12 in what became an enduring image of the attack and its aftermath.

would take chances and get rewarded.”

During a summer break, he went to Ranger School, at Fort Benning, Ga. He met challenges and handled fear by fighting back. “I’ve been in situations where I was afraid in the Army, many situations where I was afraid for my life,” he says. “The way I used to deal with it was to put my head down and charge with a lot of aggressions.”

After Sept. 11, fighting failed him.

“I was angry that somebody did this to us. I didn’t know what to do. I felt hopeless that I couldn’t fight back. It was frustrating.” He didn’t realize it at the time, but the attack on the Pentagon was also an assault on a deeply ingrained way of reacting to adversity.

“For months on end, I couldn’t escape the noise of it, the dealing with it and trying to escape from it,” says Zappalla, who lived close enough to the Pentagon that his street was closed to vehicles after the attack. He became claustrophobic, unable to get into an elevator or walk around a shopping mall.

“It was the straw that broke the camel’s back,” he says. “It was the beginning of the end.”

Eventually, he put in his papers and retired from the Army. He took up meditation, became interested in Buddhism and began pursuing a more spiritual life. He enrolled in and graduated from a master’s degree program in counseling.

Today, he helps people struggling to recover from crippling fears, stress and addictive behaviors.

Zappalla didn’t die in the flames of Sept. 11.

He was reborn there. ★



PHOTO: PH1 Michael Pendergrass