



## “I owe my life to the 9/11 heroes on Flight 93”

By Melanie Bowen | Wednesday, September 8, 2021

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A warm breeze greeted me as I made my way from Union Station to the U.S. Capitol. The sky that morning was the clearest, bluest sky I had ever seen in Washington. Other than that, it felt like any other day. Except it wasn't.

It was Sept. 11, 2001.

As Sen. Orrin Hatch's state director, I had traveled to Washington to attend a seminar focused on — among other things — “Handling Stress at Work.” I found myself with a group of 100 other Senate staffers squeezed into a small meeting room located almost directly below the Capitol rotunda.

The training proceeded in formulaic fashion, when suddenly, a Capitol Police officer entered the room and walked to the front. He informed the training director, who in turn informed us, that a plane had hit one of the World Trade Center buildings in New York City. After hearing this news, terrorism was the furthest thought from my mind; I figured a plane had simply veered off course in a tragic accident. There was no way any of us could comprehend the string of world-changing events that was about to unfold.

The seminar resumed when, just a few minutes later, a different Capitol Police officer burst into the room yelling, “Leave! Leave now!” There was no explanation, but the harried look on his face said everything. We were in danger — from whom or from what we didn't know. But it was clear that whatever threat was headed our way, not even armed policemen could protect us from it.

At that same moment, first lady Laura Bush was being evacuated from the building's west entrance, so Capitol Police ushered us to an exit on the east side. Huddled together, we made our way hurriedly to the exit as whispers made their way to where I was in the back of the line.

“They're saying multiple planes have been hijacked by terrorists.”

“My friend just called saying both World Trade Center Buildings have now been hit.”

“I heard the Pentagon was hit too and that it's now on fire.”

Everything became clear in that moment: This wasn't a series of freak accidents. Our nation was under attack — and the building we were in was the next bullseye.

As we exited the Capitol and emerged into the sunlight, I was startled by the roar of jet engines as a jet fighter buzzed directly overhead. After several attempts to call my husband, I finally got through to let him know I was safe. I then saw the Senate chaplain, who motioned for us to come over to him. We formed a semi-circle around the chaplain, who informed us that a plane targeting the Capitol had crashed in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, after passengers had stormed the cockpit.

The chaplain then asked all of us to join him in prayer. It was a scene I'll never forget: dozens of men and women of every color and creed united in solemn supplication. With our heads bowed, we asked God for a blessing of safety on our nation, and we thanked him for the selfless sacrifice of our brothers and sisters aboard United Flight 93. In that moment, the petty political squabbles that divide left and right faded into irrelevance. There were no Republicans or Democrats that cool September morning — only Americans.

Not a day has gone by since that I don't think of the men and women of Flight 93. I firmly believe it is because of them that I am alive today. Because of them, I was able to see my husband again. Because of them, I was able to watch my daughters grow up, get married and have children of their own.

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." What kind of love, then, compels a man to lay down his life for a stranger? I had never met Todd Beamer, the software salesman and young father of three who inspired other passengers to take the cockpit with him with two simple words: "Let's roll." Nor had I met any of the other heroes on board that day. Yet they were still willing to lay down their lives for me — for all of us at the Capitol.

Twenty years have passed, but I still feel bonded to the Americans who sacrificed their lives to save people they would never meet. Of course, the 40 men and women on board Flight 93 were not alone in their heroism. There were also the hundreds of police officers, firefighters and first responders who rushed into burning buildings. There were the thousands of U.S. servicemen and women who took the fight to the terrorists in the years that followed. Even before 9/11, there were the hundreds of thousands who died here in America and on battlefields across the world to preserve our liberty.

Whether we realize it or not, all of us — no matter where we were on 9/11 or if we were even alive yet — stand on the shoulders of countless men and women who paid the ultimate sacrifice for generations yet unborn. Our freedom is the heritage of hundreds of heroic acts.

Are we honoring that heritage in the way we treat our fellow citizens? Do we show our gratitude for the gift of freedom by doing everything we can to preserve it? Do we recognize the unbelievably high price our predecessors paid to secure our liberty — and if necessary, would we be willing to pay it ourselves?

I have asked myself these questions many times over the last 20 years.

Three months after 9/11, I found myself traveling again for work — this time, to Athens, Greece, the birthplace of democracy. I was there as part of the U.S. delegation to pick up the Olympic Torch for Sen. Hatch to bring it back to Utah for the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympic Games.

Our nation was still rattled, but we were slowly starting to find our feet again. And the Olympics was our opportunity to make the case for American resolve – to show the world that no matter the threat, we would not be intimidated by our enemies.

As part of the torch-lighting ceremony, the orchestra played the Greek and Olympic anthems, saving the American anthem for last. The American flag had been hanging quiet and motionless throughout the ceremony. In a way, its stillness reflected the national sentiment at the time. But as the horn instruments began playing the first measure of our anthem, as if on cue, a powerful gust lifted our flag from its motionless state, and it began waving triumphantly in the air. The message was clear: “We will persevere.”

And we have persevered. Twenty years since 9/11, there has not been another attack on U.S. soil, thanks in no small part to the men and women who have fought to protect our freedom. These include ordinary civilians like Todd Beamer and the other heroes of Flight 93 – the men and women to whom I owe my life. Today, and every day, may we show our gratitude for the gift of freedom by honoring those on whose shoulders we stand.

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