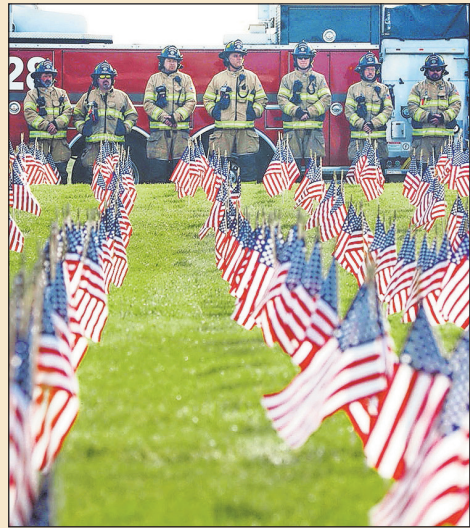


NEVER FORGOTTEN, ALWAYS REMEMBERED



Echo Press file photo

Firefighters stand at the edge of about 3,000 American flags during the 9/11 ceremony on the 3M lawn in Alexandria on Sept. 11, 2020.

WHERE WERE YOU 20 YEARS AGO WHEN THE WORLD SEEMED TO STOP TURNING?

BY CELESTE EDENLOFF
Alexandria Echo Press

Shock. Sadness. Disbelief. Anger. People will always be struck by a slew of emotions when remembering the events of Sept. 11, 2001. The day started out sunny and clear, but soon turned very dark. At 8:46 a.m., al Qaeda terrorists crash American Airlines Flight 11 into the North Tower of the World Trade Center in New York, killing everyone on board and hundreds inside the building. At 9:03 a.m., the terrorists crashed United Airlines Flight 175 into the World Trade Center's South Tower, killing everyone on board and hundreds inside the building. At 9:37 a.m., terrorists crash American Airlines Flight 77 into the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., killing 59 people aboard the plane and 125 military and civilian personnel inside the building. Max Beilke, a 1950 Alexandria High School graduate, was among the first to be killed when Flight 77 rammed into the Pentagon. And then at 10:07 a.m., passengers and crew members aboard United Airlines Flight 93 try to retake control of the plane that had been hijacked, but in response, the terrorists deliberately crash the plane into a field in Pennsylvania, killing all 40 people on board. Thousands of people lost their lives that day.

Many local residents had friends or relatives that were close to the World Trade Center or the Pentagon when the buildings were hit. The Echo Press recounted numerous stories the days and weeks after the attacks. This year, on the 20th anniversary of the terrorist attacks on America, the Echo Press reached out to local residents – two firefighters, a former principal and a pastor – who shared what they remember from that day. Echo Press Facebook commenters, as well as Echo Press employees, also share their memories from that tragic day. This special 20th anniversary section is sponsored by the Echo Press and local businesses. May we never forget and always remember.

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Taking steps to honor 9/11 firefighters

BY CELESTE EDENLOFF
Alexandria Echo Press

343. Those are the number of steps climbed by Alexandria firefighters on Sept. 11. Each step – all 343 – represent the fallen firefighters from the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. Shane Schmidt and Bill Thoennes, both retired Alexandria firefighters, have climbed those 343 steps at Viking Towers in Alexandria numerous times. “Each year after 9/11, we would climb the Viking Towers steps to ‘Never Forget 343,’ ” said Schmidt, who retired after serving in the department for 23 and a half years. “We would climb the 343 steps, then stop and say a prayer for the firefighters and their families.” Schmidt said the group of guys who climbed the stairs would put on their turnout gear and would make sure to bring tools with them – axes, hoses, extra air bottles and more. “When we would get to the 343rd step, we would all remove our helmets and our fire chief at the time would say a prayer thanking those who paid the ultimate sacrifice,” said Thoennes, who served for 26 years as an Alexandria firefighter. “We would pray for our country, our military and families. After the prayer, we would put our helmets back on and we would complete the task they – the firefighters – could not do by going to the top floors of the towers.” Thoennes noted that the 343rd step was about one and a half times up and down the Viking Towers stairwell.

Disbelief

When the events of that fateful day played out back in 2001, both Schmidt and Thoennes were at work – Schmidt at Pro-Tainer and Thoennes with the City of Alexandria. “We stopped what we were doing and were listening to it on the radio then we turned on the TV,” said Schmidt. “It was so unreal.” Thoennes was out and about talking to residents that day about Dutch Elm Disease. He was on Eighth Avenue East as some residents had lost some trees to the disease and he was going to chat with them about tree replacements. “I had knocked on the door and the man inside had his TV on, watching what was happening,” said Thoennes. “He invited me in to watch for a couple of minutes. As I went to the next house, I was listening to it on the radio.” Schmidt said it was so unbelievable that at first, when the first plane hit, he thought it was an accident. But then the second plane and he realized it wasn't. “It looked like it was in slow motion,” he said. “We were in such disbelief.”

Touching and powerful

As a firefighter, Schmidt said he was concerned about what could be next. He said the department went on high alert. “We were feeling for the first responders and wondering what, if anything, we could do to help,” he said. “We felt for their families and there was so much that was unknown.” Thoennes said he remembers that night watching the footage from that day – the replaying of the planes hitting the towers, the videos of people covered in dust walking and running away from the scene, scenes of fire trucks abandoned and damaged on the side of the street. In all that he watched, he said a couple of things really stuck out. The first was seeing the video of then president, George W. Bush, being told by his Secret Service agent that a second plane had hit the second tower. He said the president



Echo Press file photo

On Sept. 11, 2015, Bill Thoennes, retired firefighter, who was the assistant Alexandria fire chief then, led firefighters up the stairs at Viking Towers during a tribute to the victims of 9/11. Behind him was Eric Bjerke.

was visiting an elementary school and that he did not show any emotion in front of the students and that he completed what he had gone there to do. “You just had the largest attack on U.S. soil and for him to show no fear in front of the kids was remarkable,” said Thoennes.



Contributed photo

Shane Schmidt, who retired from the Alexandria Fire Department in 2011, is seen here in a photo from the same year. He served on the department for 23 and a half years.

He also remembers watching footage of when the bodies of a fallen firefighter, EMT/paramedic or police officer was pulled from the rubble, all the digging halted and the body was draped in an American flag and all the rescuers lined the pathway out of the site and stood at attention saluting the body as it was carried in front of them. “What a great show of respect and honor for a fallen brother/sister,” he said. “It was very touching and very powerful.”

Impactful

The events of that day affected, and still to this day, impacts people differently. Thoennes said firefighters are like family; they are your brothers and sisters, and seeing what happened made a huge emotional impact on the Alexandria Fire Department. “Things hit home, and made us more aware and more cautious as we enter burning buildings because you never know what type of structural damage could occur with heat and fire,” said Thoennes. “I know it made us, as a department, think about how we attacked some of the fires we had after that. We made sure we didn't just run into a building without knowing the integrity of the building.” Schmidt said he hopes and prays that something like 9/11 never happens again, but that people also never forget the events of that day. “I feel in today's world things like that should not happen,” he said. “We need to start coming together and supporting each other. Seems like all we do is grow farther apart.” He shared a favorite Psalm of his, Psalms 133:1 – “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity.” Thoennes said the events of 9/11 made him think about how fortunate he and others are, that people live where they do and have the freedoms they have. He also shared a huge thank you to all military personnel who went to bat for our country since 9/11 took place. “Some paid the ultimate sacrifice and did not make it home. To the families of those service men and women, thank you,” he said, adding that he is beyond proud of his son, Brent Thoennes, who served as part of the Minnesota National Guard troop from Alexandria that served overseas for 18 months as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

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