

Bill Rea ? Remembering 9-11

I took a few moments Monday morning, as I started my work day, to reflect on what I had been doing 16 years before.

Monday, of course, was Sept. 11, the anniversary of that massive terrorist attack on the United States.

It was the Mayor of the municipality in which I was working at the time who first told me about what was going on. It was a Tuesday morning, and I had called her, probably seeking some clarification about something that had gone on at the council meeting the previous evening. Sorting out the confusion took about a minute.

I'll never forget the words that followed.

?Listen,? she said, ?I just heard some really disturbing news.?

?Like what,? I replied, feeling a bit of apprehension. I remember fearing some mutual acquaintance had died.

?I just heard that a 737's crashed into the World Trade Centre.?

That was a little indicative of how facts can get confused early in such situations. In fact, it was not a 737 that crashed into the tower in New York, but something somewhat bigger. But the Mayor was simply repeating information she had heard, which at that stage would have been understandably sketchy.

It was production day for the paper on which I was working at the time, so I only had a few moments to ponder how something like that could have happened before getting back to my job.

A couple of minutes later, I got a call from one of the women who worked in the office. She was on her way in and thought I should know that she had heard on the radio roughly the same news that the Mayor had told me. She arrived in the office a couple of minutes later, bursting to tell about a plane crashing into the tower of the World Trade Centre.

?You just told me that on the phone,? I reminded her.

?No, another plane has crashed into the other tower.?

I did something I had never done before or since. I scrapped the column I had already written, and dashed off a new one while I was putting the paper together, working to get my thoughts written while the whole thing was fresh on my mind. I reflected at the time that I had often wondered what it must have been like to have been around during some of the major events; events that made the history books. There I was, living through such page in a history book.

?I've never wanted to turn a page more,? I remember writing.

We had all heard stories about acts of terror. They had making headlines for years, from airplanes being hijacked to Cuba in the late '60s to hostage takings, some of which ended more happily than others.

There was a period about 30 years before when a number of planes had been hijacked to Jordan. I remember at least one of the aircraft had been destroyed (I recall seeing the pictures in the newspaper), but that was after the passengers and crew had been taken off.

Things not always had such a positive ending.

There was the horror at the 1972 Olympics in Munich, in which 11 Israeli athletes were slaughtered. I was just a school kid at the time, but remember that little fuss was raised by my folks when I stayed up late that night to see how the situation ended. I think that event hit most of the world like a collective sucker punch in the gut. And we all knew it was real.

And a couple of years later, we had an Air France plane hijacked and flown to Entebbe, Uganda. Israeli commandos pulled off a rescue that was admired by much of the world. It carried the message that the terrorists don't always win.

But this attack 16 years ago was different. There had been cases in which unexpected acts of terror had resulted in the deaths of innocent people. The case of the Air India plane that was brought down off the coast of Ireland in 1985 springs to mind, and there have been other similar incidents. But I don't there had been anything of quite the scope of what happened 9-11.

And I think one of the more terrifying factors was there was something of a shortage of reliable information on what exactly was going on. The fact that I was originally told that a 737 was involved is a minor example of that. But other stories were making the rounds that day. I remember hearing reports that a car bomb had gone off in Washington, D.C. outside the offices of the State Department. Such, it turned out, was not the case, but as events unfolded that day, who was to know?

Some of us might have thought at the time that this was the ultimate terrorist attack. But I think we have learned in recent times that the people responsible for such acts are still full of surprises. That includes recent cases of automobiles being driven into crowds of innocent people. One has to wonder if there is any such thing as a safe place, or if there ever was.

Like just about all of you, many thoughts went through my head that day, and over the days that followed. One of them involved the day about 14 years before, when I stood on the observation deck of one of the towers of the World Trade Centre. I was 19 at the time, part of a school trip. It was the first, and so far the only time I had ever been in New York City. My strongest memory of that

day was being almost in awe at how tiny the Statue of Liberty seemed from that height.

I was on that deck in the morning, and I have sometimes wondered if there were any 19-year-old kids on that observation deck on a school trip that morning 16 years ago

