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THE DAY THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING:

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Cover Story

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Many people today can remember precisely where they were and what they were doing on the morning of September 11, 2001, when terrorists rammed planes into New York City's twin World Trade Center Towers and the Pentagon and crashed into a field in Pennsylvania. These events battered the psyche of Americans in much the same way as did the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1944 and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963.

The 9/11 attacks were an immediate tragedy, causing the deaths of more than 2,977 people and injuring more than 6,000; as well as creating long-term deleterious effects. Exposure to toxins at the crash sites has caused cancer in more than 10,000 first

responders and others with more than 2,000 additional attack-related deaths since then.

But the attacks also had another, more subtle impact on American society, causing a renewed wave of patriotism and boosting enlistment in the military as young Americans reacted to the assault on the U.S. According to a 2020 report by the United Service Organizations (USO), "181,510 Americans enlisted in the ranks of active duty service, and 72,908 joined the enlisted reserves in the year following Sept. 11. According to the Department of Defense, young Americans' interest in joining the military increased by 8%, and many claim that it was 9/11 that inspired them to enlist."

Many of today's military personnel and vet-

erans felt a "call to action" after 9/11, leading them to a career in the service.

"I enlisted a month after I graduated high school," notes retired U.S. Marine Corps Captain Daniel Mathenia. "I was a junior in high school, sitting in a pre-calculus honors class when the first tower was hit, and we spent the rest of the day watching the news. It was a sobering moment and had a very big impact on our class—out of a graduating class of about 200, at least 20 enlisted or commissioned or both. For myself, I couldn't wait to finish high school and go fight for our country."

Army Master Sergeant David Burgess, now serving as an Army recruiter in Pennsylvania, recalls, "I was 17 at the time, and it was about a month before I got married to my wife. I was working at Safeway bagging



Left: Captain Daniel Mathenia, USMC, Retired; Above left: Master Sergeant David Burgess, USA; Above right: Chief Petty Officer Dan Macomber, USN

groceries and pushing carts in the parking lot. There was a TV in the store that had the news on and when the first plane hit the first building everything stopped. People in the store – including myself – were just in awe as to what happened. I remember thinking to myself, ‘How could this be happening, and what would possess someone to attack our great nation?’ Then the second plane crashed shortly later, and I was totally shocked as to what was actually happening. Just over two-and-half years later, I joined the Army – I wanted to be part of those protecting America.”

Navy Electrical Division Leading Chief Petty Officer Dan Macomber, currently serving his 18th year in the Navy, relives being in his small town high school in Maine. “I remember sitting in my first period advanced chemistry class when the bell rang. Everyone flooded the halls, and I heard one of my classmates yell, ‘We’re going to WAR! We’re all getting drafted!’ I walked down the hallway and entered the classroom for my second period study hall where there was a TV turned to the local news station, and we saw the second plane hit the World Trade Center on live TV. It would be an understatement to say that we were all in shock.

“To be honest, the September 11th attacks did not directly cause me to join the military,” he adds. “After I joined, I started to feel a sense of pride for serving my country;

I felt a deep sense of pride knowing what I was going to be a part of would make a difference. I think the attacks shook our nation. Before that, we were pretty comfortable and confident in our safety. That day, many of us realized we were actually vulnerable to attacks of that nature. For the military members, we are one step closer to the danger. I think it makes the threat a little more real to us; maybe even more so for our loved ones that worry about us being called to go into harm’s way.”

Enlisting in the military following 9/11 was different from enlisting during other periods, Mathenia points out. “We knew we were going to go fight,” he says. “We expected and wanted to go fight, so deployment came as no big surprise.”

As the U.S. prepares to mark the 20th anniversary of the attacks, both veterans and active-duty military members have a unique perspective on the event. “Honestly it is hard to believe that it has already been 20 years since I was bagging groceries and pushing carts in a parking lot to currently being 17 years in,” Burgess comments. “The 2,977 Americans that lost their lives that tragic day will never be forgotten nor will all the military members that have lost their lives fighting to keep America safe.”

“For many young Americans, they truly don’t understand the significance of 9/11; to many

of them, it is already history,” Burgess notes, adding that he has a message for these young people: “If I were to say anything to the next generation of young Americans who are considering the military as an option, I would tell them to look into it and make the most of the opportunity.”

Mathenia notes that the attacks made the country come together in a unique and special way. “Now, I feel like we’re really far apart – it would be nice, and fitting, if in commemorating these events 20 years later, we can remember how we came together and do it again. The attacks and the days that followed really reshaped America and the world, and it would be nice if we could come together as a nation and find some good out of it after 20 years.”

Macomber agrees, noting, “I think the 20th anniversary is a great opportunity for us to reflect on the last 20 years. Are we better off as a country? What have we learned? Have our values changed? What do we want the next 20 years to look like? Take the opportunity to reflect on our own personal lives and the country in general. Then, if we find there’s something we don’t like about what we see, let’s work together and change it.

“There was a great sense of pride in being an American in the years following 2001,” he continues. “Let’s not wait for another tragedy to get that back.”

