

Remembering 9/11/2001

In November, 1999, Ashley Hinman, who now lives in Sanford, became National Security Agency [NSA] representative to Assistant Director of Central Intelligence for Collection, Charles Allen. George Tenant, Director of Central Intelligence (DCI), had tasked Allen with coordinating Intelligence Community efforts to find Osama bin Laden. Ashley's most important responsibility was to meet workdays with Allen and other senior staff representatives from CIA, the Counter Terrorism Center, and the National Photographic Intelligence Center to discuss the latest intelligence on Bin Laden. By 9/11, Ashley had been in this position 22 months and was an acknowledged intelligence Al-Qaeda expert. He was retiring in three weeks after 30+ years as a Signals Intelligence officer (SIGINT'er).

On 9/11, Ashley arrived at work about 7 a.m., checked overnight NSA reports, scanned e-mails, and called key analysts. At

8, Commander Kirk Lippold, of the USS Cole, made his accustomed periodic visit to Allen and asked in passing, "What will it take to wake up America?" The brief regular meeting began at 8:30 and was ending when a secretary ran in to announce that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center.

Hints had come all summer, but the projected target was considered a US military installation, embassy, or corporation abroad. When the second airplane struck, the Intelligence Community knew that Al-Qaeda was in America.

Ashley passed instructions to NSA to start an intensive review of all collected data to see if evidence had been overlooked or if additional attacks were planned. Rumors and misinformation included reports of planes not responding and unidentified frogmen approaching an aircraft carrier.

About 40 key personnel, Ashley included, shifted to a "crisis center"—a large conference room with inadequate phones and no computer terminals. Five minutes after its contact phone numbers were called into NSA, the third plane hit the Pentagon. The main CIA headquarters building was evacuated; its workforce was sent home. The crisis center shifted to the print plant across the parking lot. It had some work stations with computer terminals



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and telephones repairmen had to reprogram. The constant changing of numbers added to the confusion, and NSA was unable to reach Ashley and others. Trying to access his files remotely, he spent 45 minutes getting beyond the log-on screens. When NSA found the first hard evidence that Al-Qaeda was responsible, he could not e-mail the report to the DCI. He ultimately ran the quarter-mile back to his office, unlocked cipher locks to enter, disabled the alarm system, retrieved and printed the e-mail, and raced back to hand it to Tenant, who ordered him to get NSA on the phone and relay any forthcoming intelligence. Ashley sat side by side with the DCI, who was on the phone with the President.

Commander Lippold ran to get updated before returning to the Pentagon. He was en route when the plane hit. His office was destroyed; everyone in it died.

When CIA headquarters was evacuated, a conference was in progress in its detached auditorium. No one thought to inform the several hundred conferees. Adjourning for lunch, they came through the linking tunnel into an empty building with no one in the cafeteria. They had no idea what had happened until some reached an entrance where guards had been stationed.

Normally, private cell phones were not permitted in CIA offices, but Ashley grabbed his for the move back in, and, several hours after the attacks, his 30-year-old daughter called to ask, in an atypical "little-girl voice," "Daddy, what's happening?" Later, this long-time peace advocate remarked that she suddenly understood why he believed so strongly in his work and thanked him for what he had been doing all those years.

Technology in the print plant was overwhelmed. As soon as the FAA announced that all aircraft in US airspace had landed, the DCI sent the intelligence personnel back to their offices. They slept on the floor the few hours

they could spare and manned their telephones and computers the next four days and nights. Ashley went home once to sleep a few hours, shower, and eat. After a month, their 80-100-hour weeks reduced to 65-70. They went on a six-day work schedule but were on pagers. Ashley's first day off was his mid-October birthday, celebrated at his brother's house about 50 miles away. Less than 10 minutes after arriving, he was summoned back to the office.

Ashley was hired by NSA as a foreign missile analyst shortly after graduating from the University of Maryland in Aerospace Engineering. He and his wife Mary Ann lived in Ethiopia, Australia, and England; and he was commended by the Director of NSA for "dedication and outstanding leadership under extremely hazardous conditions during an outbreak of civil war in Ethiopia." He had an unusually broad exposure to NSA and other US intelligence agencies and activities and, in England, managed a multicultural organization of over 200 from several US intelligence agencies as well as US Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine and British and contractor personnel.

Ashley can never fully disclose what he knows about and experienced during that second surprise attack on America—the 9/11/2001 assaults on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. Unlike the first, Pearl Harbor, this one, now known as the War on Terrorism, is likely to be interminable. He had to postpone his retirement. For the next five months, he remained a critical interface between Allen and NSA. He warns us to be vigilant, for "one day," "terrorists will spot a weakness and strike again. They are resourceful, and they are determined. It is just a matter of time, and the more complacent we become, the sooner our guard will drop enough for Al-Qaeda [or a similar group] to mount another successful operation." When that moment comes, Ashley, we can hope, will still be available to be called out of retirement.

Dr. Lynn Veach Sadler, of Burlington's The Village at Brookwood, a former college president, is widely published in academics and creative writing and works as a writer and an editor. Her latest book, "Chased with Truth", a collection of historical fiction, is just out.

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