

Word Count: 1,098

Never Forget: 3 Photographers Recall Pentagon Attack on Sept. 11, 2001

By Kevin Dauray

Tuesday, Sept. 11, 2001 is remembered as one of the darkest days in American history. An estimated 3,000 people lost their lives that morning when the World Trade Center fell, the Pentagon was attacked, and an airplane crashed in a Pennsylvania field. In the weeks and months after the terrorist attacks, the nation vowed to never forget. And we haven't. Every year since then, the names of the victims – fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters – are read aloud during solemn ceremonies. Twenty years on, almost every person alive that day can recall where they were when they heard the news of the attacks.

Three photographers remember the morning vividly. In fact, they documented what they saw, rushing to the Pentagon to capture what they knew would be historic. Joe Pisciotta, Bob Pugh, and Sean Kelley are sharing their photos in a new exhibit called Still Standing – Still Free, set to open to the public at Fashion Center Mall at Pentagon City on Saturday, Sept. 11. Many of the photos selected have never been published and will offer viewers a fresh perspective. A VIP reception on the evening of Sept. 10 will be held for project donors who helped defray costs for the nonprofit Still Standing – Still Free, Inc.

The exhibit's purpose, according to Pisciotta, is to remind and educate people about the horrific events that occurred two decades ago.

“My 9/11 Pentagon photos [are] a visual teaching tool so that people, especially American youth, never forget the event and see how Americans showed incredible heroism.”

New York City's coverage of their 9/11 experience is vast. Surprisingly, the Pentagon has very little. Each exhibit photo – along with assorted memorabilia and a video – captures moments in time between 9:50 a.m. and 5 p.m. The video, shot by Pugh, first aired on NBC4, FOX5, and WUSA9 – before he arrived home that afternoon.

The men expressed a range of feelings when asked how they feel about their work now. There is pride that they were able to document history but also sadness and a sense of disbelief that the attack happened.

Kelley was at a friend's house in Chantilly when he turned on the TV and witnessed the first plane hit the World Trade Center. A little while later, he saw the plane hit the Pentagon, knowing instinctively he had to go there. Loading his mountain bike onto his VW Bus, Kelley drove I-395 North to the scene.

Coincidentally, his father had a meeting at the Pentagon that morning, Kelley, however didn't find out until noon that the meeting had been cancelled, so the attack was personal almost immediately. He recalled feeling "stress and a little panic."

In Alexandria, four miles south of the Pentagon, Pugh was monitoring the news on WTOP and listening to police and fire radio transmissions.

Pisciotta had just arrived home that morning from dropping his son off at elementary school, when his wife called to tell him that a plane hit the Twin Towers. He saw the second on TV, certain what had occurred was a terrorist attack. He drove to see his father, a retired Air Force Lt. Colonel who had worked in the Pentagon, feeling that the distinguished veteran could help him understand what was happening. Travelling down Columbia Pike, Pisciotta heard and felt a very loud explosion. In the distance, looking straight ahead, he saw smoke bellowing from the Pentagon. Like Kelley, Pisciotta knew he should record the event. And he just happened to have his camera. To get to the scene quickly, he took every shortcut possible, finding himself a block from the Pentagon 18 minutes after the plane hit.

"I began shooting immediately as smoke was bellowing out of the West side of the Pentagon," he recalled. "Panicked people from the [building] were running past me. At first, I thought it was just their natural instinct to escape from the explosion, but then a panicked Navy guy came running toward me, waving his arms in a yielding way [and] yelling, 'Another plane is incoming.' "

Pisciotta got back in his car, moving it north toward Rosslyn, in case he needed to flee for his own safety. Soon, he was back to photographing the event. Getting closer, he attempted to fit in by standing around a group of military personnel, realizing he was out of his element when they asked if anyone had combat or medical experience. A short time later, the FBI and police declared the Pentagon a crime scene.

Amid the chaos and confusion, Kelley and Pugh met for the first time when Pugh asked to use two rolls of film. He gave Kelley his card, having no other form of identification. As the weeks passed, Kelley had an idea for an exhibit. He found Pugh's card in a box and called.

Learning about Pisciotta from a mutual acquaintance, the two met up at Northside Social in Arlington to discuss their shared experience as documentarians. After that meeting, Kelley would invite Pisciotta and Pugh to be a part of the first Still Standing – Still Free exhibit.

"Fate brought us together there and we have a certain bond about sharing our perspectives," Pugh said.

The first people to see some of Kelley's developed film were his parents. Shock and sadness permeated the room. He shot so much that rolls and contact sheets from med format film were stored away, unseen until a show in Fairfax a decade later.

A retired history teacher, Pisciotta recalled returning to T.C Williams High School following the attack to share his photos with former students and colleagues. The reactions varied from curiosity to shock to disgust. Looking back, he admitted that perhaps the timing wasn't right for some people. Those close to him eventually understood that the photos were taken with good intent and to preserve history. That October, the school's newspaper, Theogony, ran a front-page story on the Pentagon attack using some of his work.

A shared experience and common sense of purpose bonded these men. Kelley sees it as "a public service to share the photos." Viewing this exhibit, those who have memories of Sept.11, 2001, were too young to remember what occurred, and were not yet born can all keep the promise to never forget.

Still Standing – Still Free runs from Sept.11 – Oct. 11. Hours: 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. (M-Th), 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. (F-Sa), 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. (Su). Fashion Center Mall at Pentagon City is located at 1100 S. Hayes St. in Arlington. Entry is free.

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Photo attached: Planes on Tree.jpg

Joe Pisciotta's son, Nicholas, looks at a memorial for victims across from the Pentagon on Sept. 12, 2001. (Photo: Joe Pisciotta)

Photo attached: Smoke.jpg

Smoke rising from the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001 (Photo: Sean Kelley)

Helicopters.jpg

Photo: Bob Pugh

Firefighters.jpg

Photo: Joe Pisciotta