

OUR PAGE: IN THE AIR ON 9/11

I left Atlanta as pilot of an air ambulance on Tuesday morning September 11, 2001. We were to pick up our first patient in Cape May New Jersey and fly to Pittsburgh. We were, then, supposed to fly to Cleveland to pick up a patient and fly to JFK where we were scheduled to land at 3pm.

As we were talking to air traffic control prior to our approach into New Jersey, we learned that a plane had crashed into the WTC tower. The copilot and I looked at each other and thought that some idiot had crashed a small plane. That did not make sense, as the weather was absolutely what pilots call "severe clear" that morning.

The controller advised that it had been an American flight. We landed a few minutes later at Cape May and were told by police to gather all of our gear, lock the plane and not to return to the plane unescorted. As we walked into the terminal building, we watched on TV as the second plane hit the tower.

Meanwhile, we had a patient waiting in an ambulance at the terminal for the flight to Pittsburgh. After we realized all airspace would be closed indefinitely, the patient returned to the hospital.

We immediately started calling the FAA trying to assess the situation and determine when we could take off. The situation was so unprecedented that answers were not immediately available. I must say that the FAA personnel handled it as best they could, however. After many hours, the FAA cleared ambulances to fly again.

For some reason, we took the patient to Butler, PA instead of Pittsburgh. When one flies in the northeast, he must carefully and concisely execute his radio calls. He feels lucky to even get a call in sometimes. The traffic can be unreal. On the night flight from New Jersey to Pennsylvania, we heard not one other radio call. The only aircraft flying were military, police or ambulance. It was as if the whole world had perished and we were the last of the survivors. Eerie!

We landed in Butler and taxied to the ramp in the dark. We were surrounded by three police cars. As I lowered the stairway, a police officer asked what we were doing there. It is amazing that we were on an instrument flight plan and had a call sign that starts with "lifeguard" and nobody got the word. I pointed to the patient who was hooked up to a drip and on a ventilator. I guess

that was a good enough explanation.

We picked up another patient on 9/12/2001 and flew to Poughkeepsie, NY. On 9/13/2001 we flew a patient from Poughkeepsie directly to Daytona Beach. Our route took us directly over the Meadowlands, where we had a very clear view of the towers that had been destroyed. We were climbing through 14,000 feet or so, the weather was sunny and clear. I have no words to describe the feeling of loss that I had at that moment. I had flown in and around New York many times and to view the city with the crumbled and smoking towers and to consider the resulting loss of life was just hard to imagine.

We continued on to Daytona Beach and landed in 50 knot winds just ahead of Tropical Storm Gabrielle. After the ground ambulance left the aircraft, we quickly refueled and made the short flight back to Atlanta. We were still the only airplane in the US airspace it seemed.

Three weeks thereafter, I was asked to pick up a team of engineers in Charleston, WV and fly them to Teterboro, NJ.

A driver who was driving a crew cab Ford PU with a New York Port Authority emblem picked us up and took us down to the World Trade Center site. I honestly believe the Port Authority emblem must have exempted the driver from stopping at any red light or obeying any other traffic law in Manhattan.

The team invited me to go down in the hole that was created. I stayed in and around a field office on the WTC site while the engineers did what they came to do. I was overwhelmed by the huge scale and the sadness of it all. Even three weeks later, the many firefighters on site seemed to be functioning efficiently yet they also seemed to be in a daze. It must have seemed to them as if they were working in a sacred tomb. I know it felt that way to me. I felt compelled to show the utmost respect for the living and the dead.

I left New York the next day proud to be an American and I felt a deep sense of encouragement by what I had observed there. Considering where I was and the observations I made on the 11th through the 13th of September, I was thankful that I had the opportunity to visit the site. We are a blessed and great nation. I am proud to be an American!



- JOE CHAO

