

Episode 268: Felicia was at the Pentagon on 9/11

Today marks the 25th anniversary of one of the darkest days in American history.

On Tuesday, September 11, 2001, terrorists hijacked some airplanes and crashed them in New York, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. Nearly 3,000 innocent people lost their lives that day in those attacks.

Many people remember that day very clearly. It's one of those times where you recall exactly where you were when you first heard the news, and as the events unfolded throughout that morning.

Here on the podcast, every year in September we dedicate an episode to the memory of 9/11. We hear someone tell their story of what they experienced on that day. The past episodes have featured guests who were in New York City.

For a long time, I've wanted to have a guest on who was at the Pentagon on September 11. Those stories are not as easy to find. Earlier this year, Felicia contacted me to tell me about her experience at the Pentagon, and I'm pleased to bring that to you today.

May we never forget.

Scott

You were not in the military and you weren't an employee of the government. What were you doing at the Pentagon on September 11?

Felicia

I've gotten that question a lot – usually “What were you doing in the Pentagon?” I worked for the food service company that held the operations contract. So, we ran every vending machine, every burger stand, every cafeteria. We also had an operation that ran the child care that went on at the Pentagon. I should mention that my company also ran the concessions in Tower 2. But I was in the Pentagon that day as I had been many, many, times. I was in the marketing department for this company and my job was usually to go out to sites, find out how the clients and customers were feeling about it, and try to run focus groups or help people get better. I was there that day, not to do a focus group, but to actually travel to the spot in the building where the plane came in.

So to tell you that story, I have to back up a little bit. As I said, I have gone down to the Pentagon. The headquarters was in Philadelphia. It's a super easy train ride and I loved it. My very first time, I was a corporate newbie. The food service director had to go through all that security, walked me straight outside to the center courtyard where there was a hamburger stand – literally what it sounds like – in the middle of this courtyard. He took me there and he said, “Look up, wave to the Russians. Welcome to Ground Zero.” It was a joke, I guess, but the reason it was is that the building was built in the 40s

and it had a structural flaw. The building could implode from the center if a bomb or something was dropped in the center of the building. So it had a lot of outside defenses, but not so much on the inside. Now, is that a real story? Was that a legend? I don't really know. I just know that every newbie was told that story.

I also knew that the Pentagon— it's easy to think about it as five slices of pie, five rings, five hallways. What they did was take a wedge – Wedge 1 – down, meaning they moved everybody out of it, completely refurbished it, re-strengthening it, and did a ton of construction. So, obviously, all of our food service operations there were stopped during that time. It was almost probably a two-year process. We went through the rebid to do all the food service in that wedge, and we lost it. We lost that bid. For us, we had that operation for so long. It was a signature of our company and of my division. So this was a really big deal that we had lost.

Scott

Yeah, you probably kind of take it for granted after a while, right?

Felicia

Yeah.

Scott

How often do you have to re-bid to get something like that?

Felicia

It depends. Those very large ones are usually on the 5 to 10 year kind of contract – sometimes, they could be a little bit longer – but it was a really big deal that we had lost that wedge. Before that happened— I had been down there quite a bit on my own or taking other people and one of the things I tried to explain to everybody about what the Pentagon is like, first of all, it's a ton of security and it's a ton of evacuation drills. You might work in a building that has a fire drill. That's nothing compared to what the Pentagon does. They are prepared in every sense of the word. So I was used to knowing where to go, what to do. There are rally points to a very large office building. Around that time, there were 20,000 people or so. You just knew where your rally point was. Somebody checked you off. When it was all clear, you went back in.

The other thing that would happen sometimes— there's certainly parts of the building that I didn't have clearance for. Sometimes, just how you got from one part of the building to another would change. It's about 10 years of me visiting the Pentagon maybe two to three times a year. I was very comfortable.

Scott

You knew what to expect after a while.

Felicia

Right. And at the end of the day, it's still a workforce. We're providing solutions to make their workday better. I loved going to the Pentagon. So, I had a lot of respect for everyone I saw, whether it was a big meeting that we had to make sure went flawless. Truth be told, the food service director and the operating team there were amazing. I was coming down to help and other people were also coming down to help a lot. It really was a fantastic, inspirational operation for my company.

Scott

Did you find the work, in a way, gratifying knowing that you're feeding all these people – 20,000 plus people every day?

Felicia

Absolutely. I love that about every company that I walked into but, in this particular one, people are in uniform, many different kinds of uniforms, lots of medals on their chests. You knew you were doing something important and that's why I loved coming down there. We lost that rebid somewhere in the summer of 2001. Although we had lost the bid for the operations, there was something else that we could do that none of our competitors could do, and that is operate a full-service espresso cafe – I won't use the name but – like you would see on the street. We were the only ones that had the license to do that.

So my boss's boss, the president of our division, came down to my office that Friday before – September 7th, I believe that was – and he looked at me and he said, ““I need you. to get to the Pentagon on Monday. We need to put a coffee store in there. I've just gotten the okay.” He talked to somebody senior down there. “We can put it in. You need to get somebody from Seattle into the Pentagon on Monday. Let's just go.” That was kind of my area of expertise and the message was clear, “Get to the Pentagon now.”

So I called my contact in Seattle and he told me, “I can't get there on Sunday for a Monday visit. I can get there Monday for a Tuesday visit.” So I had just agreed to meet him in the Pentagon on September 11th. What we did was meet at the Wilmington Train station. He came in, I guess, straight into Wilmington and I drove down from Philadelphia. We left our cars there and jumped on Amtrak. Super easy. When you come into the station there in Washington, you get on the Washington Metro. The Metro has a stop right for the Pentagon. Again, 20,000 people work there every day.

It also has the world's largest escalator – at least it did to me at the time because you're coming all the way down right into the belly of the security of that entrance of the Pentagon. As we were coming up the escalator, I looked at him and said, “Welcome to Ground Zero.” He hadn't been there before. I had to tell him the story.

Scott

The corporate hazing sort of, right?

Felicia

Yes. I had to continue what had been done to me.

Scott

And what was his name?

Felicia

Joe.

Scott

Okay. So he is Joe.

Felicia

He had never been there. He had installed stores with me in the past and our process was to survey the location, ask a lot of questions, and start to really rough up how this could start and get everything ready for the proposal. But again, because my boss's boss had been in my office, pretty sure that that was a yes. We just had to get everything ticked and tied. So this was going to open up in that Wedge 1 that was getting redone and now was reopening. Looking forward to this conversation, I can't remember what the opening date was, but it was pretty close. I want to say it was somewhere in late September that that whole area was going to open. By that, I mean the food service operations, the actual moving people and moving furniture had already started in Wedge 1, but not that many people had relocated back there yet.

Scott

That was probably a fortunate thing.

Felicia

Yeah, it was a blessing in many ways that Wedge 1 was the wedge affected. I can't even start to think about any other wedge coming in because, again, this is not— it's an office building but, as you know, the Department of Defense headquarters are there and to take out a big section of our military that day, our outcome would have been completely different. It came into the empty Wedge 1. It wasn't empty. People were moving back in, but the food service operations had not opened. Therefore, we had some time to make this coffee shop.

Coming up that big escalator, as I was telling him all the stories, there's a giant clock on the wall. I remember looking at it and it was somewhere past 8.30, but not quite 8.45. The reason I remember that is, saying to myself, "We need to go get a cup of coffee. It's late. I haven't had any coffee just from the Wilmington train station." I don't know if you've ever been on an Amtrak. It's not the greatest

coffee. We hadn't stopped yet. I know it was late enough – it's almost 9 o'clock – and I don't have coffee.

You go through security – it's quite intense – and you can't move a muscle until your escort comes. So we stood there and we waited for the food service director to come get us. But now, it's probably 8.47 or so. What I didn't know and that you or anybody else watching TV is that a plane had just hit the first tower. It's a long walk to where we were going.

I remember coming into the food service director's office. This whole day is kind of glimpses. So, I remember coming into that office and seeing him hang up the phone. When we came in, he said, "Okay, it's going to be a second. When we go, you have to grab another form of ID because we're going to have additional security checks." There's a way they rank the security settings in the Pentagon, but I was pretty used to that, like, "Sometimes just grab your wallet. You've got to prove who you are, even though you have the badge, even though you're with me, even though you have your own corporate visitor thing, you're going to have to prove it again." He says to us, we need to do that because some little plane – he used the word "little plane" – hit Tower 1.

I remember we just all looked at each other like, "What? Wouldn't it just bounce off? What are you talking about? How could a plane hit the World Trade Center?" But he didn't think of anything serious. The way he conveyed it to us– again, he didn't think it was serious. This is a person who's worked in the Pentagon for 30-plus years. This guy knew everything about every security setting. He's not upset. I'm not upset. He said, "Do you need a cup of coffee?" And I'm like, "Yes. Let's sit down and have a cup of coffee, talking to Joe, helping Joe understand what operating here will be like." And just probably had, I don't know, a 10 or 15 conversation. I think it was maybe on the longer side of 15 minutes because I remember I got a second cup of coffee, but I didn't finish it. I was planning on finishing it when the food service director got another call and he suddenly stood up with this one. He said, "I don't know what's going on in New York, but if we are getting down to Wedge 1. We need to go now." So I left my briefcase – told me to leave everything – but I remember I took my purse, which turned out to be good.

The way the Pentagon is built– there are those pieces of pie. I think I said five hallways. It's five pieces – each has a hallway on either side. So it ends up to be about 10 hallways. The reason I know that is that I was in Hallway 10 in the basement level and Wedge 1 was around the corner to my left. It came in about, I want to say, the fourth hallway. I wasn't directly across from it, but I was pretty far from where Wedge 1 was, and I was a floor below. Now, when we would travel, we were in those floors below. Sometimes we popped up, but for the most part, it was faster for us to use those hallways. And again, it was more of the operational staff down there anyway. Just like at Disney, there's a lot of hallways.

Scott

All the tunnels.

Felicia

Yeah. I remember walking and I remember walking for quite a distance when I saw something that, to this day, I still can't get my arms around, and that was somebody running towards us. When I told that to a couple of people, they're like, "So?" Again, this is an office building filled with military and defense contractor employees. They're not post office employees. These are very serious people that might walk briskly, but their body language is very, "I'm in control. I know what's going on." So we mimicked that. We were a very serious crew. What I remember is it was an employee in chef's whites. So you could kind of pick them out. He had the hat and the coat and he's running at us. I see his mouth moving before it dawns on me that he's screaming something at us, which is, "We have to get out now! Run, run, run!" Again, I think I just stopped. It was so bizarre and so out of place.

Now, again, I didn't hear anything. I didn't see anything. I didn't smell anything. I thought this was the safest place on earth. I don't understand. I don't know what was happening here. I don't know how long I stood rooted in that spot. Joe and I have talked about some things through the years and I remember – I thought it was Joe – somebody grabbing my arm and pulling me into a larger, dark hallway, which to me felt like a tunnel. There's no lights anywhere in this tunnel. All of a sudden, it's dark. It's fire alarms, it's sprinklers, and it's a ton of people in this hallway.

Scott

So you walked into what sounds like complete chaos.

Felicia

Yeah, because again, they were fast walking. I know that doesn't maybe sound like chaos but, for the Pentagon, it is. Because what hit me right away was, this is too many people for a rally point. Why are all these people here? Why are we walking so fast? And why are we getting wet? This is not normal and nobody's really saying anything. Nobody's explaining it. We're just all going. I can hear people yell, "Run." The people around me weren't necessarily running – I just remember brisk walking – but it just felt like something's wrong. I wasn't necessarily scared, but something is wrong. I guess, looking back on it, that's enough to make me think I should have been scared at that point. There were a lot of people near me, like being at a concert, shoulder to shoulder kind of people next to me.

Then, I started seeing light and I realized we were emerging out of whatever this was into the giant parking lot. I need to describe the parking lots around the Pentagon. I think, if you look at some of the pictures, you can see this. Imagine it's just a sea of cars that surround this building for the most part. Again, that's why the rally points are so important. You're not all coming out into the same space. The next thing I know, we've emerged – all of us. It just seems like a sea of people are in one parking lot. Now I start hearing snippets coming through the crowd. People got their heads on swivels, looking around. "There's smoke over there. Something just blew up the building."

Again, keeping in mind how large the building is – this is very far away to me at this point – and it is not really seeing like a giant explosion. To the scale of the building, it seems like something's on fire, but it doesn't seem as large as what it became or what we knew that actually happened.

Scott

And that's because you were far away from it?

Felicia

Yeah. And it's also the scale of it. It's a very, very large building. That plane did not take out all of Wedge 1. It's severely damaged and a tragedy for the people that were moving back into the building or had reentered those offices, obviously. But the scale of it, that's why around me, people that knew better than me, this is where the rest of the day gets really weird because, right now, nobody looks concerned. Nobody's crying, nobody's screaming, nobody's running, nobody's scared, and I kept thinking, "It must be me. This is really not right." I'm looking at people's faces. I'm trying to ask questions and nobody's talking.

The other thing I should have pointed out, at that time, 2001, we did have cell phones. There's no cell phone coverage at the Pentagon. You're not using your cell phone, not at all. Something hit New York. There was an explosion in New York, but we're not making the connection, and I think that's what makes this day— you would think that's the end of my story, but it wasn't. I think, as the day went on, not understanding what was happening until hours later, it was so bizarre that the people around me — because they're so well-trained, because they know that whatever this is, they're going to handle it — they weren't what a big crowd would be. That's just my opinion.

Now, I've got a bigger problem though. We aren't at the rally points and we don't know where our employees are. Something has happened at the Pentagon. I can't call headquarters to tell them we're okay. I don't know where all these employees are.

I was the VP of marketing at this time. I was the senior ranking person from my company there. I should probably take responsibility. So, I remember standing on car bumpers, trying to look up over the crowd to spot the employees. As I'm trying to do that, I think that's where I start to get panicky. Again, there's no loudspeaker, there's nobody explaining anything, there's not a checkpoint, there's nothing. Now, I start noticing that what I thought was calm starts to look a little vacant. People's faces just look like they're just vacant.

I remember seeing one person, and there's two people with chests full of medals that I talk about. The first one was this big guy — I think it was an Air Force uniform because it was blue. But when I say the chest was covered with medals, it was— I'm not a military person, but there was a lot going on there. This is an important person. I asked him a question and he just looked right through me. People are milling around, people aren't staying in the same place, so I just went on to keep trying to look for employees.

I came back and found the food service director, and he's like, "Look, this is chaos. It's too many people. I don't know where everybody is. Our ultimate emergency procedures are to go home and call

me at home. I'll take roll calls there and I'll call the office from there." Again, we didn't know what happened. I'm thinking he's going to get in his car and drive home. I don't know where his car is, but people were sitting in their cars – the ones whose cars were in that part of the parking lot. I even thought about how he was going to get home. I just said, "Okay, I'll try to find a phone too."

Scott

You had seen the smoke, but you didn't know what the smoke was, what the source was, what had happened.

Felicia

No. And keep in mind too that everybody in there was my client. Although I'm asking them, "Do you know what's going on?" It was more in the spirit of almost like, "Can I help?" In other words, they're my clients. So when I was with the food service director, I think both of us were like, "That can't be anything big. If it was something big, all these people in this parking lot would know by now." And again, I don't want to put words in anyone's mouth. I don't want to put words in anyone's mouth. I don't want to put words in anyone's mouth. What I do know is that we were there for quite a while and nothing was changing.

I found the food service director again – because I was walking around looking for employees – and he tells me that they have emergency procedures, that I'll just go home, all the employees know to call me at home, and I'll get roll call there, and then I'll call headquarters and report everybody in.

Now, what I didn't say to him was I knew that we had the childcare operation there as well and I knew I didn't know where it was because I didn't know where I was in this parking lot right now. So I had a sense of urgency to find a phone and I didn't know where I was going to do that. But I said to Joe, "We need to get across this parking lot. We need to get out of here. I need to find a phone." So we started to walk. As we walk towards where the smoke is, I can start to hear – what maybe was there but I just didn't hear it – was more of the sirens, more of the emergency personnel. Now, you can tell that there's something going on. Even if I don't know it, I can see people running. And again, running at the Pentagon, I'd never seen before.

I just have these flashes of images, Scott. I don't really remember how we got from point A to point B, but I told you there was another person– I'm not sure when I saw this but, after I saw the people running, I remember hearing something very loud in the sky and it was a black wedge of a plane and it was flying way too low and in circles. Now looking back, when I put things together, I think this is when they thought another plane was coming into Washington and they were evacuating everything, but it felt like a movie. Now, the vacant looks are becoming more– now, I'm starting to get this sense that something is very wrong.

I had another stop in my tracks when we saw a line of soldiers in black berets running and they were running in a straight line, pushing people out of the parking lot onto the overpass of the highway.

Again, I'm just staring at them like, "What's happening?" Because what has my attention is they're all holding automatic rifles and they're running. Again, I can see their mouths moving, but then I hear them say, "Run, run." It's a massive people turning and just running up onto highway on ramps, running over the large pieces of hills that are separating the highway ramps.

The next thing I know, we are in another large parking lot, this time, headed towards what looks like to be the mall. I figured out later that it was the Pentagon City Mall. Now, it's a large group of people but, this time, we all are moving. Nobody's kind of milling. We're all moving. Some of us are really running like, now, panic is starting to come in.

There's a very large boom sound. It feels like it's coming right at us from this very large structure in front of us. I don't know if you've ever been in a big crowd when there was a boom, but to see that many people kind of simultaneously duck— again, your brain just starts to detach what's going on. I remember I turned around— this time, it was a different uniform — I think it was Marine — and it was a woman. I turned around with what I wanted to ask all day, "What's happening?" I just remember her looking at me. She said, "I don't fucking know." It was that moment, Scott, that maybe — call me naive, call me that I was a big fan of the military, call me that I'd been going to the Pentagon for 10 years — to have this person say this to me in that way, I was just speechless. Something's wrong and we don't know what it is.

Find a phone, find a phone. We go running into the mall. Doors were open, I think for early morning walkers. We can see that nothing is open yet, but there's a large atrium we walk into, and you can tell that some of the bars that roll down to close a store, some of them are up. We can see up top. We got to get up there. Okay, there's an elevator. Let's go. We jumped in the elevator. Right before the doors closed, another guy walks in or jumps in.

Scott

So it's you and Joe and this other person in the elevator. Okay.

Felicia

And I must have— I know I wasn't crying. I didn't cry for quite a while because I didn't understand what had happened. I didn't understand that I was on my way to where the plane came in, and it's because we had a second cup of coffee and all those other reasons. I think, in that moment in the elevator, I was so scared beyond words in a way because this person looked at us and said, "Hey, if you need a place to go, come to my house." I'm like, okay. I remember Joe, to this day, he says— I call him my guardian angel. What he really says is, "No, I saved you from that guy in the elevator because that was just really weird. He wanted us to go to his house." But to be honest with you, I think it was the beginning of everybody taking care of everybody, at least in my head, because I think I was terrorized by this point. I was really, truly starting to get scared.

I never want to see military people look like that or planes that close to me – certainly not a big black wedge of a plane. I didn't tell you, we found out later – we think, again through rumor mills – that that sound we heard was not another bomb, it wasn't another plane, obviously. You know that. I didn't know that. What it was was the boilers underneath the Wedge 1 in part of the building exploding. So it was just reverberating off of the building in front of us. That's why so many of us thought it was something coming at us. I realized that nobody's helping us, realized that all these people are just as scared as I am. We need to find a phone.

Scott

Let me ask you this. You knew something big was happening that was not right. Did you, at this point at all, connect what you had heard about the little plane hitting New York City – that's what was happening here?

Felicia

No.

Scott

Okay. No connection at all?

Felicia

No. I think it was when we were running up the on-ramps over the highway that this knowledge came to me. I think it was when that airplane came in, people were saying, "Washington's under attack." The connection I didn't make was New York, but there was this feeling of Washington's under attack. I don't know if somebody said that, if I just heard the word "attack" and I put those things together. But again, that's a large group of people now running and there are men with guns running at us. So, somehow, I think that came into my psyche, but I don't know exactly how. That definitely wasn't coming together anywhere. Nobody was saying, "New York got attacked too," because I believe, for the same reason, how would they know? How would they know unless they were in the building and saw a newscast? I've always wondered if there were more people in the Pentagon– obviously the top officials knew something, but were there other people like me that knew more than what I knew? I don't know. It was definitely in a movie. That's the best way that I can describe it.

We ran up to where we saw those gates up and we found a restaurant, and I remember they said I could use their phone. Clear as day, I still remember being in the kitchen of this restaurant, calling and reporting what I knew. I didn't see the daycare. You need to find the daycare.

Scott

You were calling your office.

Felicia

Yes, I was calling headquarters.

Scott

Okay.

Felicia

I called my office number. My assistant was there and she put me on speakerphone. Again, I wish you could probably help me more with my timeline because again, not watching it happen on the news, the time of everything is still kind of spacey to me. So when I came out of the kitchen, I remember Joe looking at me and saying, "It happened in New York too. The twin towers are gone." Because there was a TV on in the bar, I looked up and the towers are there, but they're on fire, and I said, "No, they're not." I think I probably said it a little angrily because I remember him saying it very gently, "That's from earlier today. The towers are gone." So, now, these pieces are coming a little bit together.

I just left the kitchen where I had talked to a bunch of people around my assistant's desk. We don't have anything really to do yet, except try to get home. We're both still kind of in shock. We sat there for a while. I remember the bartender got us a diet Coke and I smoked at the time. Somebody gave me a cigarette – sorry to everybody that knows me if I told you I quit. We sat there for a while. Again, there was something happening in the background during this time.

When I called the office and had everyone around the phone, what I did not know was, for those 90 minutes or so, my older brother was looking for me. He knew that I traveled almost every week and he called my assistant as well after the FAA made the grounding. He just wanted to find out, "Where's my sister? What city do you think she went down in? Where was she headed? What was her flight number? I'll be able to figure it out." My assistant had told me later that she had to pretend and lie really badly, and she thought she did it really poorly because she had to say, "I don't know." And my brother was smart enough that, when my assistant put him on hold and then came back and said, "I don't know," he just had a really weird feeling in his stomach. So, he hung up–

Scott

Your assistant would know where you are.

Felicia

Correct. She was never a good liar. She was awesome. So I know he probably picked up on that. He tells the story that, again, he let probably 20 minutes pass maybe, and then he called back again. This time, he was very, "Tell me where my sister is!" When he told me that story, I got chills. He had a sixth sense that something was not right. So the same group of leadership realized they couldn't lie and say they didn't know. They had to tell my brother that they knew I was in the Pentagon, but I had not called in yet. They hadn't heard from me. They were trying to contact the Pentagon.

It was a different division that ran the operations in the North tower, but all of corporate were trying to phone both locations and find out what was going on, and they couldn't get either group. So at that

point, when my brother called back, they decided that they had to tell them this. He's tried to find me when I've been at famous golf tournaments or I've been in a fancy office. He tells me, like, "Out of all the places in all the world that you could be that day, you had to be at the Pentagon." He didn't know how much time I spent down there. To this day, a lot of people are like, "Why would you be at the Pentagon?" Not really understanding what I do, but for him, it didn't make sense, it couldn't compute.

My mother had kept calling him asking, "Where's Felicia?" And he had to keep lying to her. So my brother— I don't know how long a period of time when he was told I hadn't called in and when they were able to call him to say, "We talked to Felicia." I'm not sure what that timeframe was, but it was lengthy. Like I said, I was watching replays of what all of you had watched live. Shanksville had happened, everything had happened by the time we found that phone in the mall and we started watching TV.

Time doesn't have any meaning here because you've got Dulles airport that shut down all of these highways – shut down very similar to New York in that you've got a large group of people nowhere to go. They're just walking on the highways. They had evacuated DC. I just remember walking and walking and walking. Now, the quest was to find a rental car. Still no cell service. I remember we got tired. It was a beautiful day. It was such a beautiful blue sky day, not too hot, but I had the wrong pair of shoes on and I remember I just wanted to sit down on the curb. We're about a mile from the entrance to Dulles, I think, at this point. We see a guy walking down the street with his luggage and he's got one of those luggage carts.

Scott

Like you'd find in the airport.

Felicia

Yeah. You just find humor in dark places sometimes I think because he's walking down with this stuff and we're just staring at him. He's walking right by us and he just looks at us like, "As if I care about my \$5." He just keeps going. I don't know how far he was going to walk that cart, but he didn't care. He was just going to walk that cart all the way home. We eventually found a rental car place. They were ferrying cars out of other offices and out of Dulles, so we could get it. So we were sitting there for quite a while.

As we were waiting, my cell phone rang and it was my mother. I couldn't get a word in because she just kept crying, but I just kept saying, "I'm okay." As we got our rental car, we asked people, "Is anybody going to Wilmington? Do you want to hop? Do you need a ride?" And people were really trying to help each other. Nobody needed to come to Wilmington, so we just went by ourselves. There was nobody on I-95. Again, now I've known what happened, we can hear it on the radio, we're listening to the radio, but just to see I-95— if you've ever been on it, it's the main corridor from Maine to Florida, it's always packed, right? Nobody's there.

Scott

And this is a weekday mid morning.

Felicia

Correct. Like outer space. Here's really my favorite part of the day – if I had to name a favorite. We found our way back to the parking garage and there's no way I wasn't going to go home and just be home alone. He wasn't flying back to Seattle anytime soon, so “Let's go get a drink at the Hotel DuPont. We need to sit down. We need to relax, maybe get some food.” There's a ton of people around the bar watching the TV. I don't know if Joe said something to them because we were kind of on the fringes of this crowd but, the next thing I know, the crowd is parting and somebody's yelling, “They just came from the Pentagon. Get them a drink.” We got ushered up to the front and I just felt like such a big, warm hug from these complete strangers.

I haven't talked about this day. This is the longest I've ever talked about it ever because I wasn't hurt. I was a civilian. I wasn't even near it. It took me a long time to realize that I almost was, but I never felt that my story– and I think some people around me were like, “Well, the Pentagon really wasn't “that bad”. They didn't say that directly, but you don't hear stories about the Pentagon. It's not what people talk about – certainly civilians. So, I think I struggled a little bit with feeling like my story mattered. As I reflected back on this, what mattered is that moment in the bar where complete and total strangers– like we're sweaty and, obviously, we haven't been hurt, but they comforted us as if we were. That, to me, is something that I hold onto is such a good moment.

Then, the very last moment that was great is, whatever time it was that president Bush landed in Marine One– that's probably how I could do the clock back, but it was sometime in the evening, right? It was 6 o'clock-ish, somewhere in there?

Scott

I don't know.

Felicia

I don't even know, but it was later. Just the way his body language from his walk from Marine One into the West Wing, it just felt like cheering. It just felt like all these people were comforting us. All those military people didn't know what was happening, but you know what? Now they do. I read some things, afterwards, like starting at the 20th anniversary. I watched the newscast that all of you guys watched. I'd never seen that. I always thought that what I went through was harder – I don't think so. I think watching it was horrific. By the time I saw that, I couldn't believe that that's what you guys did that day whereas I didn't know what was happening. As the day went on, things got worse for me, but I think it got worse for everybody.

But I also think that being able to just know that we got it now and that military group was already kicked in, it was just extremely rewarding again. Even though it was my last time at the Pentagon, it

was more rewarding than all the other visits put together. I know that I probably naively expected that same kind of, "This is what you do. You're a civilian in the Pentagon. We run this show. Stand down." And when I wasn't getting it that day, I think that's what caused me to have those disconnects mentally. But just watching his walk, I knew we had it and I'm still very proud of being there that day.

I'm proud that the company that I work for, none of the employees or the children or any of the teachers at that daycare were injured. Like I said, a lot more people could have lost their lives and it was horrible that the number of people that did perish at the Pentagon was that high. It's 184 people that thought they were moving into their new office that morning – new equipment, new copiers – and we just wanted to get them a great new coffee store. It just boggles the mind. We did lose seven employees at the World Trade Center. And if it's okay with you, I just like to say their first names.

Scott

Certainly.

Felicia

Because I'll, although I was in the Pentagon, I feel like these were my coworkers as well just trying to do a great job that day. (Pause) Sorry.

For Tatyana, Victor, Mirna, Giann, Luis, Evelyn and Richard, I was very proud to be your co-worker and, every year, our company honors you. I don't even work there anymore. I left in 2003 and it still feels like my company. But it was an honor to work there and it was an honor to be at the Pentagon.

Scott

I know you didn't discuss what you went through that day for a very long time because it was so difficult to talk about. So today, the 25th anniversary of the 9/11 tragedy. I really appreciate you sharing your story.

Felicia

You're very welcome. I think it was because not all the injuries are external. I think I truly went through a lot of images and things that I know everyone in New York that you've talked to has seen worse things, but every story matters. I would even argue that what people went through watching TV was just probably just as traumatic. What my brother went through trying to find me, what our leadership went through trying to contact New York and Washington – everyone's story matters. So thank you for having this platform and letting people share them.

Scott

You heard Felicia mention that sometimes she got the impression that people felt that the attack on the Pentagon was admittedly bad, but it certainly didn't measure up to what happened in New York City. As if it's some kind of competition or something.

It is interesting though. Can you imagine – being at the Pentagon, one of the most heavily guarded buildings in the country, and a full-size airplane crashes into it, and 184 people are dead – and that's NOT the top news story of the day.

I think the comparison is irrelevant. What's important is that we remember and honor ALL of the innocent people who were murdered that day – whether it was in Manhattan, in the Pentagon, or in Shanksville. And I appreciate Felicia coming on here today with her story.

Graphics for this episode were created by Bob Bretz. Full episode transcription was created by James Lai.

This week's Listener Story is from Amanda, who lived near New York City. A couple of weeks ago here on the podcast I told some stories about some well-known people who narrowly missed being a fatality on 9/11. One of those was Seth MacFarlane, who overslept and missed his flight on the plane that crashed into the North Tower. Amanda is here today to tell her story, which has some similarities to that.

Stay safe, and we'll see you next time.

(Listener story)

I just listened to your 9/11 celebrity near-misses episode, and I found that pretty moving, because I might actually be alive today for a very similar reason to Seth MacFarlane. My name's Amanda Gamsby. On September 11th, 2001, I was 19 years old, living in Jersey City in my first apartment of my own. I had just been fired from my job and I had every intention of getting up bright and early that morning and taking the PATH train to the World Trade Center stop to apply for a job at the Sephora that they had in the mall that was kind of in the basement of the World Trade Center there, where an acquaintance of mine had worked.

But because I was a 19-year-old night owl, I did not wake up until my telephone had been ringing for what felt like hours. When I finally dragged my sleepy bones down the hall to pick up the wall-mounted landline phone, it was my roommate's sister frantically looking for her. When I turned around to walk back to my room, I looked down the hall and out my bedroom window, and my jaw absolutely dropped. My roommate was fine. I was fine, except that I spent that day sitting on my roof, staring helplessly and crying, crying, crying, calling my friends to see if they were okay and just hearing, "All circuits are busy." One of my good friends emerged from that very PATH station, totally covered in that dust after being trapped down there for hours.

I was there without being there, and with each passing year, it's actually gotten a bit more emotional for me. So let's see if I can read this without my voice breaking. Here's what I wrote that day, 25 years ago, later in the day.

Tuesday, September 11th, 2001

I can't believe what I just saw. This isn't going to be very poetic. Words absolutely fail. I just watched the Twin Towers fall down. I woke up this morning to the phone ringing, and when I picked it up, it was my roommate's sister-in-law, and she was frantic. I asked her what the problem was, and she said, "They've blown up the Pentagon and the Twin Towers!" I didn't say anything for a minute. "You're messing with me because I just woke up, right?" "I'm not kidding," she said. "Look out your window! Where is Roxanne?" I let her know that Roxanne did not work anywhere near there, and I let her go, still thinking that she was at least overreacting. It was a bombing, like 93, no major structural damage.

I stretched. I turned. I looked out my bedroom window, and I saw one tower and a lot of smoke. I nearly screamed, but I didn't. What I did do was tear across the apartment, turn on the TV, and start frantically putting clothes on and watching the news at the same time. I had to go to Manhattan. I had to be there. I had to somehow help. Even if I couldn't help, I still had to be there. But first, I had to get up on the roof and take a picture of this, because I still did not believe this was really happening.

I ran into my room for my shoes and my camera. I put one shoe on. I propped my foot up on the windowsill to tie the shoe, and then I looked up to see the tower simply tilt and descend into the smoke. My heart was pounding. The words that I spoke then weren't particularly memorable or impactful, and for the purposes of your program, they were, "Beep, beep, beep, beep, beep." I grabbed my camera bag. I grabbed my purse, my other shoe. I made for the living room, where I saw it happen again from 16 different angles.

"Wait, wait, is this a live picture?" The newswoman said. "Yes, it is," I said to the screen. "Yes, this is a live picture, folks. You have just seen one World Trade Center collapse." She said. Her urgency is real for once.

I put on the other shoe, grabbed the camera, and ran for the door. As I started to open it, I heard, "PATH system shut down." Clinging to the doorknob, I hear— this followed closely by, "New Jersey transit northeast corridor shut down. Long Island railroad trains not running. MTA system shut down. Metro North system shut down." I couldn't go anywhere. I sat down and I stared helplessly first at the door, and then at the TV, and I cried. Then, I tried to call my mother, but as the lady said, "All circuits were busy." I tried calling my ex-geek, just to make sure. he was alive, still no luck.

So, I grabbed my phone and my camera, and finally made it up to the roof, but there was nothing to see, just a lot of photos of smoke. So, I came back down here to the computer. The only thing that still seems to work, and here I am, waiting to wake up with a start. Every year, when you do your 9/11

episodes, I listen, I bear witness, and yeah, cry more tears. That one you did with all the firefighter stories was so moving and so important. I re-listen to that one every year, and I will continue to do so. Thank you for what you do, Scott.