

DeWITT ARMY COMMUNITY HOSPITAL, FORT BELVOIR

The news spread throughout the building. “Disbelief, shock. It was just hard to comprehend that it could really happen at first, and of course, then seeking out the radio to hear from other people what was going on for the next ... minute or so, and then [seeing] how I could help out, what needed to be done.”

DeWitt’s Response

The clinic immediately began to respond. “We went into a MASCAL mode. We stood up our EOC; we took all of the steps that you do in a mass casualty exercise; we did our bed count; we looked at how much blood we had. I made contact with the Red Cross on post to see if we could get more ... blood ... because it appeared, in the very first minute, that we would be seeing a fair amount of trauma and that many systems would be overwhelmed. At least that’s what it looked like from what we were seeing on the television.”

“It was like a scene [from] Star Wars ... when they’re getting invaded. There’s people running everywhere and I remember seeing soldiers carrying mass casualty kits...and it was just chaos...the sergeant major was getting accountability and designating security posts throughout the hospital grounds.”

“We received several burns, and some inhalation injuries ... We had one lady who [had] part of the building fell on her head ... she was quite hysterical. She had periods of confusion, and she was very emotional. I basically stayed by her side...and tried to reassure her, and contacted her family. And then, of course, we got the chaplain involved.”

However, for the most part, the clinic found itself in a waiting mode.

Ambulance Crews Respond

They also sent their ambulance crews to the Pentagon. “When we got there, you couldn’t see anything. It was like you’re in a box. And then the doors opened and it was just the most surreal thing I’d ever seen. It was just like kind of getting hit in the head with a ton of bricks. You really couldn’t absorb it, but you kind of went on autopilot. You knew that the first thing you wanted to do was check all of your equipment...I think people were more in shock than anything else. People were just working and not talking. And it was really, really, quiet. It was almost like being at the Vietnam Memorial; it was really quiet.” Doctors and nurses accompanied the paramedics in the ambulances.

In the spirit of that day, everyone at the site of the crash cooperated. “Everyone had thousands and thousands...of dollars worth of equipment that would belong to their hospital, and everyone was just great about unloading it and just giving it to whoever needed it.”

Each of the ambulances had to wait in a long line, in a situation where there was a huge response and few patients. “The sights, and the smells, and the whole day were just an experience I’d rather not go through again.”

During the waiting, most of the doctors left the ambulances in line and walked to the triage area. “We saw several firefighters with respiratory inhalation problems. There were several burns that came through ... I think that within a half hour of the impact, people were evacuated to the nearest facility by car, by ambulance, by whoever was there, any mode of transportation. But I think that the biggest feeling was that we were there to help, but there just wasn’t much need as there was the ability to do something...My initial impression was of the shock that there weren’t other stragglers coming out, there weren’t other people making it out of the building.”

At least two ambulance units got to the triage area in the courtyard. “The patients that we treated were mostly firefighters involved in the rescue effort.”

It was a long day of waiting. “We sat and waited, and then waited and waited...and hours just went by. Then they said, ‘Look, we really don’t need your help anymore. Thank you very much for standing by.’ And I think nobody really wanted to leave. We all just kind of stood there and waited.”

“Well, it’s kind of the ER [emergency room] nurse’s worst nightmare. You’re there to help and you can’t. You feel helpless. You’re just standing there, and you know that there are people in there that are probably still alive that you could probably potentially save, but you can’t get to them. And you’re frustrated, you’re irritated, you’re mad. You go through a lot of emotions ... You’re just standing there watching these people die, and that’s a very helpless feeling.”

“It made you feel helpless because you were just hoping ... that somebody would come out and you could do something, but it became evident that that was just not going to happen.”

Personnel from DeWitt also provided mental health support at the Pentagon. That story is with the Mental Health Response.

This summary brings together the oral histories of the following people:

Mr. Christian Aschenbrenner
LT Robert Cox
CAPT Jennifer Frank
MAJ Michael K. Halliday
Ms. Barbara Harris, RN
CAPT Charles David Henkel

Mr. Frederick Carl Koerner, Jr.
COL Eileen D. Malone
Ms. Tonya Molnar, RN
Mrs. Betty Thomas, RN
Ms. Samara Walker, RN, EMS
Ms. Sherelyn Zeto