

Colder Than The Place From Which We Came

Written by {ga=diminishingskills}

Monday, September 10 2012 11:00 PM - Last Updated Thursday, September 12 2013 7:44 AM



Today is the twelfth anniversary of 9/11, one of the saddest days in the history of this great country.

Most visitors find the site much colder than the place from which they came.

Standing at this site on a sunny summer day, I am inclined to agree. Although the hilltop on which I am standing is neither particularly high nor steep, a chilly wind is definitely blowing, making me glad that I decided to wear a long-sleeved shirt on an otherwise warm summer day.

Then again, maybe some of that chill comes from the knowledge of what happened here. The hilltop I am standing on is located in Shanksville, Pennsylvania; it overlooks the site where United Flight 93 crashed on September 11, 2001. And as I stare over the field where United 93 met its end, I cannot help but think that the above advisory - which comes from the [Flight 93 Memorial](#) web site - refers to those recollections of the day at least as much as it refers to the current temperature.

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If you are reading these words, then you are old enough to remember September 11, 2001. No need to recount that day in much detail. You know that terrorists associated with the group al-Qaeda hijacked four commercial airliners, turning those planes into civilian-populated missiles. Two of those planes were flown into the two main towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, causing the failure and collapse of those buildings (as well as others nearby) shortly thereafter. A third plane struck the Pentagon in Washington D.C., collapsing a section of the world's largest office building.

The fourth plane, United Flight 93, was also earmarked for a significant target in Washington D.C., although we will likely never know definitively if that target was the U.S. Capitol building or the White House. Thanks to the courageous efforts of the passengers aboard the plane, who learned of the terrorist plot by calling relatives and friends from the plane, the plane crashed in Shanksville, saving an untold number of lives.

In the aftermath of the attacks, the World Trade Center and Pentagon crash sites became tourist attractions. Tens of thousands of visitors flocked to the giant pile of debris in lower Manhattan, where two of the world's tallest buildings went from skyscrapers to smoldering rubble in less than two hours. Hundreds of thousands more saw the gaping hole left in the southwestern face of the Pentagon.

For several reasons - the geographic isolation, the distance from most major cities, and perhaps the lack of remaining visible damage from the crash - the United 93 site has not been visited nearly as often. Nevertheless, I felt drawn to the site. I wanted to see where forty selfless Americans, knowing that they were almost certainly going to die, overcame their hijackers, in what would prove to be America's first response to the terrorists.

Life kept getting in the way of my plans to visit the site, until finally I found myself one Saturday with absolutely no plans for the rest of the day. A few minutes and a visit to Google Maps later, I set out for rural Pennsylvania.

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The 9/11 attacks were one of those few crystallizing historical moments, like the Challenger space shuttle explosion a generation ago, or the assassination of President Kennedy a generation before that, or the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor a generation before that. Chances are, you can remember exactly where you were when you heard the news, and you can remember plenty more details about that day than you could about, say, September 10th.

For me, the attacks came at a particularly sensitive time. On the evening of September 9, 2001, some 36 hours before the first plane would hit the World Trade Center, I held my father's hand as he passed away. He had been diagnosed with lung cancer several months earlier, and his health had deteriorated rapidly over the summer. By Friday, September 7, it was clear that his remaining time would be measured in not months, or days, but hours. He passed in and out of consciousness throughout the weekend, took a final turn for the worse around 8:00 PM on the evening of the 9th, and then died minutes thereafter.

If you have ever experienced the death of a close relative (I assume most of you have), then you know that the days following the death pass in a sort of fugue state, almost as an out-of-body experience. My sisters and I called the hospice that had been providing help in my father's final days; they sent a nurse to clean up my father (and, interestingly, to flush every last remaining morphine pill down the toilet). We then called a local funeral home, which dispatched two helpers to retrieve my father's body. We phoned every relative and friend we could think of to break the news (not that it was unexpected).

The next day, my oldest sister and I took care of all of the necessary, somewhat macabre details when a relative dies - meeting at the funeral home to decide when the funeral and wake would occur, buying a casket (metal? pine? *Who gives a shit?*), writing a death notice, and at least a dozen other details that added to the blur of the day. As the schedule turned out, the wake wouldn't be held until Wednesday, leaving us with Tuesday wide open. We agreed to meet at my father's house, clean out as many of his possessions as we could in one afternoon, and more or less mark time until Wednesday.

Tuesday dawned as a gorgeous day - sunny, warm, not a single cloud to break up the blue sky. With no real plans other than cleaning out my father's house and maybe meeting my then-fiancee for lunch, I was lazy. I woke up later than usual, went to the grocery store to get a few things, then came home. I decided to go to the rec center for a workout ... but before I did, I turned on the TV. It was approximately 9:10 in the morning. I still remember flipping through the cable channels, making my way down to the networks, when I came across the foreign

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programming channel. You may have seen this one - it's the one that plays an hour of Italian TV, then an hour of Poland's best, et cetera. At that moment, it had a Spanish-language live broadcast showing an image from *Nueva York*. The image was the one that any of us can see when we close our eyes - the two towers of the World Trade Center spewing black smoke into the Manhattan morning.

Of course, the entire day changed, much as I am sure yours did too. I still went to the rec center later that morning, jogging blindly on a treadmill while the second tower fell (the first fell on the drive to the rec center; I still remember the "oh my God" uttered by the announcer). I showered, met my fiancée for lunch at a local eatery (itself a surreal experience - it was the one time I have ever been in a restaurant when there was absolutely no buzz of conversation, as everybody silently munched their food while staring at the monitors by the bar), and then met my sisters at my father's house (where we did basically zero work, as we were glued to the TV).

I do not pretend that my experiences were unique. Every person reading these words has his or her own recollection of September 11th. (For a particularly good one by a regular TheClevelandFan.com message board contributor - one who was in the World Trade Center Marriott when the first plane hit, visit [this site](#) .) But I was always drawn to the attacks. I put together a "time capsule" of newspapers and magazines in the days that followed, thinking that it would someday help me describe the day to my as-yet-unborn children. I could not help but wonder: what would possess anybody to believe that attacks on civilian targets (well, we could quibble about the Pentagon, I suppose) were a good idea? Why would anybody be so misguided as to sacrifice their own lives in its pursuit?

And as for Flight 93: what would bring forty intrepid passengers to rise against their hijackers, when all advice up to that point would have been "stay calm and quiet and let the hijackers do what they want"? What events would cause forty people - complete strangers as of that morning - to become a team somewhere over eastern Ohio?

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Particularly on a summer day, the drive to the temporary Flight 93 Memorial is a pleasant one. The greenery and rolling hills of western Pennsylvania provide a very pleasant backdrop on a warm summer day. To get to the site from Ohio, you drive on the Pennsylvania Turnpike (official motto: "Now With Ten Miles Of Construction-Free Driving!") to Somerset, a small town

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not terribly far from the Maryland border. You'll drive north on Pennsylvania 281 for a while (along the way, you'll pass the Somerset County Airport; in an interesting touch of irony considering the nature of the 9/11 attacks, the airport displays a large sign offering flight lessons). You'll make a right at U.S. 30, then another right a couple of miles down that road (where you will see the first sign pointing the way to the Flight 93 Memorial). A couple more miles through the Pennsylvania countryside, you'll drive up a hill ... and once you have crested it, the memorial comes into view.

The crash site itself is not terribly remarkable. It looks like ... well, any other green field in Pennsylvania, of which there must be thousands. If you look at the site on [Google Maps](#), you won't see much. If you go to the map from the link in the previous sentence, the crash site itself is in the bottom center of the screen, just north of the patch of trees at the bottom, in between the two roads. You never would have known it unless I told it to you, as the site of the crash was not terribly large, and has since been filled in and planted over (consistent with the decision to treat the site as a burial ground).

The temporary Flight 93 Memorial is similarly underwhelming at first glance. (In the map picture, it's the patch of concrete in the upper right hand corner of the screen.) A tiny wooden building contains some maps, copies of the transcript from the cockpit during the flight's final moments, a sign-in log for visitors, and little else. Beyond the building, a chain-link fence provides a place for visitors to attach photos, signs, shirts, caps, and other mementos. A couple of official-looking memorials are flanked by several home-grown ones: little crosses for each of the 40 passengers and crew members on the plane, plaques bearing messages like "9/11: Never Forget The Day," and the like.

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