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## Surviving and Remembering 9/11

Navy chaplain Cory Cathcart helped look for survivors in Sept. 11, 2001, Pentagon attack.

*Story by Erik Potter*

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**M**ost people would consider being at the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001, an instance of being at the wrong place at the wrong time.

But it's exactly where God wanted Cmdr. Cory Cathcart, he says.

Cathcart, BS '89, a Navy chaplain who was stationed in Washington D.C. at the time, was attending a



Chaplain Cory Cathcart, BS '89, in Afghanistan. Photo courtesy of Cory Cathcart.

ceremony at the U.S. Department of Defense headquarters that fateful morning.

“I felt like God put me there to rise to the occasion for that,” he says.

After American Airlines Flight 77 struck the building, Cathcart turned into a first responder. He and a team of 14 other service members donned surgical gloves and masks and took as many body bags as they could carry into the tunnels beneath the damaged site and looked for survivors.

They didn't find any.

“As we went into the underground part of it, the rings of the Pentagon, we didn't know what to expect. It was still burning, and it was quiet inside, filled with smoke,” Cathcart remembers. “It was clear early on there were no survivors. There were remains – bits and pieces of people.”

Those first few hours were difficult, especially since service members labored under the false understanding that several attacks had been carried out across the country. But the painful work did not end there.

After a long day of searching, Cathcart joined a team of people who called the families of those who were killed or missing. Days later, after the missing were confirmed dead, he had to call those families again.

Ultimately, 184 people died in the Pentagon attack, plus the five hijackers.

“That’s a long, grueling process,” Cathcart says.

“That’s a day I’ll never forget. ... The country remembers it once a year on the anniversary, but I remember it every day.”

Eleven years later, Cathcart, 47, is now the theater deputy command chaplain for U.S. Forces–Afghanistan, the second–highest–ranked military chaplain in Afghanistan. He is stationed in a command compound in Kabul, the capital.

On Sept. 11, 2012, Cathcart says “all hands,” including a few commanding generals, gathered outside in the dusty Kabul air for a Patriot Day ceremony. They commemorated the thousands who died 11 years ago, as well as a specific soldier, sailor, airman and marine who was killed in battle during the past few years and for whom buildings on the compound were being named.

The 35-minute ceremony was simple, with four speeches describing the four individuals and a prayer to close.

“It was a time of reflection about 9/11, how we got here and the days that lie ahead,” Cathcart says. “It was a poignant ceremony. Not a long one but meaningful.”

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