



The Regional Reporter

www.rra.org

SEPTEMBER, OCTOBER, NOVEMBER, DECEMBER 2001

SPECIAL REPORT

Memories of September 11

How we spent the day and the two months since

Like everyone else in the capital, regional reporters were thrust into a time of uncertainty and overwhelming news when those airplanes slammed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon the morning of Sept. 11.

While some of us rushed out to the Pentagon to cover the horrible scene that day, in the days and weeks since we have found ourselves covering new issues we had never before contemplated, such as the postal service or the biological properties of anthrax bacteria.

Some of us wound up on new national beats that have continued to overflow with news, such as aviation security, immigration or the travel industry.

Others came dangerously close to crossing the line and becoming the news as we wondered whether we had been exposed to anthrax in the Senate Hart Building, struggled to get reliable information about the risks and figure out whether we should join the hundreds of others taking Cipro.

Here is a sampling of snapshots from Sept. 11 and beyond:

James W. 'Woody' Brosnan,
The Commercial Appeal, Memphis

I got to the office between the first and second strikes on the World Trade Center. I was going to the Hill but after the strike on the Pentagon I realized they would close the Capitol.

On the first day I did a where and when story on my local congressional delegation, plus a story on past reports about failings in airline security.

Since then I've been pretty occupied with airline stories, either the bailout package or security issues. Memphis is the base of FedEx and a Northwest hub. For the most part I've written the major story about those developments, with some tailoring toward air cargo issues.

The two exceptions were a congressional delegation reaction story on Bush's speech to Congress and Sen. Fred Thompson, R-Tenn.'s announcement that he's running again.

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the war in
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Michael Sprengelmeyer, Rocky Mountain News, Denver
I was in the newsroom getting ready to chase Colorado stories when we saw the first images from the World Trade Center attack on our newsroom television. After watching the second attack live, I was on the phone with a congressional staffer when I got word of the Pentagon attack.

Within one minute, two colleagues and I were sprinting through McPherson Square looking for a cab. The driver sped across the 14th Street Bridge and dropped us in the middle of the freeway. We ran down the ramp and joined mobs of confused evacuees, some bleeding, many still panting from streaming out of the building. These were folks in full military regalia, wandering aimlessly, running like hell when security personnel shouted: "Another plane is in the air! It's headed this way! Get away from the Pentagon! Get away from the target!"

I hadn't seen shocked faces like those since I was sent to the Columbine High School shooting scene shortly after the April 20, 1999, attacks.

After four long days at the Pentagon, I was supposed to take some time off. At home, I was overwhelmed by video images I had missed while out at the scene. It was too much, so I came into work and spent six hours one day cleaning my desk. I decided to throw out anything that didn't seem important anymore. I tossed almost every piece of paper I touched.

Bart Jansen
Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram
I was at my desk in the Senate press gallery when the planes flew into the World Trade Center. After the evacuation of the Capitol, I searched for my senators outside the Russell building and found Olympia Snowe, R-Maine, along with John Warner, R-Va., Joe Biden, D-Del., and Charles Grassley, R-Iowa.

I phoned in quotes, frustrated that I was no longer with The Associated Press and able to get them on the wire immediately. I had begun writing a column the Sunday before, so the paper had me write a first-

person piece, where I put more from my interviews.

Lack of cell phone, long lines at pay phones and lack of laptop (abandoned in the evacuation) made it difficult to report and file. I wound up dictating from scraps of paper and cardboard.

The next day I covered the congressional resolution. For Friday, I did an analysis about the debate behind the scenes on war powers, with help from a Congressional Research Service report and colorful commentary from Bill Thomas. For the weekend, I wrote a tick-tock with lots of description about how folks got through the week.

Because some of the WTC terrorists apparently began their journey at the Portland International Jetport before connecting in Boston, I've been covering security, with stories about increasing air marshals, Border Patrol and federalizing baggage screeners. GAO reports and past legislation were helpful.

I got an interview with former Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell, D-Maine, who headed a Mideast peace commission. I've also written about how the bipartisan consensus building was going to throw overboard most of the legislation my delegation was seeking, and a story about the delay in tracking foreigners who overstay their visas.

Larry Wheeler
Gannett News Service
9:25 a.m. Having just spent 60 minutes commuting on VRE and Metro, I arrived at Gannett News Service bureau office, 1100 New York Ave., totally unaware of what was going on.

9:30 Editor Norm Brewer rushes to my desk: "There is smoke at the Pentagon. Get over there."

10 I-395 south, adjacent to Pentagon south parking lot. Blowing smoke fills the cab with a stinging odor and briefly obscures the road ahead. I get out of the cab on the highway and make my way down a steep embankment toward the parking lot and evacuated Pentagon workers. Flames leap from the Pentagon as firefighters direct water onto the burning building.

10:20 Police, emergency workers flee build-

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MEMORIES

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ing, waving arms, moving people back in a frantic effort. I interview evacuees.

10:31 Much closer now, I can see the damage, the size of the hole, the twisted metal, the crushed walls. The sound of helicopters fills the air. U.S. Park Police. Medistar.

10:42 A fighter jet howls overhead. Police establish control of the perimeter and push press and others back to the Navy Exchange Citgo Quickmart. There are three pay phones there that don't seem to work. A man on one of the phones loses his composure, screaming into the mouthpiece about FEMA federalizing the phone system. He is a TV producer. I walk to Pentagon City, about 1/2 mile away. Workers in a fast food restaurant under construction let me use their phone. I call in quotes and color and head back to the scene.

I spent the next 10 hours at the Citgo scene, interviewing evacuees, Pentagon and fire fighting officials and calling in quotes and color. At 6:30 p.m., reporters were herded into three buses and hauled back to the Pentagon for Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's sobering press conference. We entered the building on the Potomac River side, watched closely by menacing-looking soldiers carrying automatic weapons. The Correspondents Hallway was well lit but smoke-filled as was the familiar Pentagon briefing room. On the ride back to the Citgo, the buses drove past the still-burning crash site and a motionless line of ambulances. Briefly, the raucous press corps was silent.

Rachel Smolkin

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette and Toledo Blade

Sept. 11 is a blur. I was about to leave for work when my husband called to tell me that I should turn on the television because the World Trade Center had just been hit by a plane, and it didn't look like an accident. By the time I arrived at work and turned on the TV, the Pentagon had been hit. We live minutes from the Pentagon, and I must have passed it on the Metro's Blue Line moments before it was hit.

When Flight 93 crashed outside Pittsburgh, the Post-Gazette decided to put out a special afternoon edition. We had about an hour to throw a Washington story together. I skimmed wire copy, flipped through television stations and made whatever calls I could while my bureau chief, Ann McFeatters, wrote the story.

I also started calling delegation members on their cell phones. As everyone knows, few if any cell phones were working that morning. I finally got through to Sen. Rick Santorum's spokesman, who quickly put me in touch with the senator.

We live minutes from the Pentagon, and I must have passed it on the Metro's Blue Line moments before it was hit.

— Rachel Smolkin

We updated our story for the Post-Gazette and our other paper, the Toledo Blade, several times throughout the morning.

It's been challenging to figure out how to handle the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks. My editor recently suggested an anthrax-cleanup story that turned out to have lots of regional connections. A Pittsburgh-based company, The IT Group, was handling much of the cleanup in D.C. The electron beam machine used to sterilize potentially contaminated mail is in Lima, Ohio, not far from Toledo.

In a funny coincidence, the story also turned out to have connections to states I used to cover. Scientists at Sandia National Laboratories in Albuquerque, N.M., created a soapy foam as a kind of all-purpose cleaner against biological and chemical agents.

Sandia labs licensed two companies to sell the foam, which is now being used to rid buildings of anthrax. One of the companies is based in Huntsville, Ala. When I worked at Scripps Howard News Service as the D.C. correspondent for the Albuquerque Tribune and the Birmingham Post-Herald, it was rare indeed to find stories with connections to both places!

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

By Lisa Friedman ■ Oakland Tribune / ANG Newspapers

Regionals finding angles on tragedies

Thanks to everyone who made the Regional Reporters Association workshop "Covering the War for the Home Front" such a great success.

We've all been feeling our way since Sept. 11, and in some ways regional reporters have the toughest jobs. We're usually not the ones headed out to Ground Zero in New York (much less Afghanistan), yet we're also not at the home base covering the boys going off to war or the reaction of the local Arab-American community.

It's been a struggle for many of us to find ways of localizing the World Trade Center and Pentagon tragedies, the anthrax scares and the "war on terrorism" from Washington. But on Nov. 9, four veteran regionals told us ways they've found of tailoring the national and international stories to their communities. (Please see Marc Heller's story on Page 5.)

RRA also has been organizing conference calls between Department of Defense officials and regional reporters. As of this writing we have had one half-hour conference call with Pentagon spokeswoman Torrie Clarke, and are expecting to see more in the coming weeks.

These calls have been specifically designed for regionals, allowing us to ask about the current and future roles of our local military bases. Please let me know whether you find the calls helpful and if you would like to participate.

In other news, we are getting ready to upgrade our website www.rra.org (<http://www.rra.org/>), so look for some changes in the coming months. In the meantime, if you have any suggestions about what you would like to see on a redesigned RRA home page, give me a call or shoot me an e-mail.

Finally, RRA will be starting its annual membership drive in a couple months, and you can help us get a head start. If new members have joined your bureau or if you know regional reporters who are not yet members but should be, encourage them to join!

Always feel free to e-mail me at lisafriedman@angnewspapers.net or call me directly at 202-662-8731 with any comments or suggestions for the Regional Reporters Association. Happy holidays!

MEETING MINUTES

OCTOBER 1

Present: Lisa Friedman, Carl Weiser, Jennifer Sergent, Jake Thompson, Angela Greiling, Susan Roth, Jeff Miller, Kevin Goldberg

Under old business, Brett Lieberman was not present to give a report on his research about whom we should hire to update the web site. We'll try to get a report next month.

For our membership drive, Sergent suggested waiting until we get a newsletter out and pegging our drive to our news in the newsletter. Friedman said she'd get a list of members of the House and Senate press galleries (though we know their lists are outdated) and cross-reference that with our membership list. Then we'll divide the non-RRA names among board members and each board member will be assigned to call people to pitch RRA membership.

Under new business, Goldberg reported that he has been working with other press on a letter to the Bush administration

regarding coverage of the war in Afghanistan, protesting the government's clamp-down on information and the Pentagon's stated policy of misinformation. The letter would offer suggestions of how the media should cover the military, and what the press agrees to and does not agree to, reminding the administration of the demand for congressional oversight of military actions. The board agreed to have Friedman sign onto the letter for the RRA.

Weiser mentioned the difficulty he'd had getting a Pentagon hard pass to cover the war, and Miller also complained about continued difficulty getting a White House hard pass. Friedman said if others hear of or have similar problems, they should let her know and she will write letters.

The board agreed that we should seek vignettes from members on how they covered Sept. 11 and the stories since for a newsletter article. Sergent also offered to send out her story on problems with the

Veterans Administration's disability compensation program via listserv.

Greiling suggested we do a program on how regional reporters covered previous wars and/or how we can find good stories in this one. Newsmakers with Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge and Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson are still in the works.

The next meeting was Nov. 5.

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Regional Reporters Association
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Direct newsletter inquiries to newsletter editor Susan Roth at sroth@gns.gannett.com or layout editor Jim Sergent at jjsargent@earthlink.net.

Find us on the Web: www.rra.org.

RRA workshop

Covering the war for the home front

By MARC HELLER
Watertown Daily Times

What does Rhode Island have in common with Uzbekistan and Saudi Arabia? Not much. Except, that is, for a couple of diplomats who helped John Mulligan of the Providence Journal dig up local angles on the war against terrorism.

Mulligan was one of four panelists at an RRA forum on how regional reporters are covering the war in Afghanistan and the fight against terrorism. He was joined by Alison Bethel of the Detroit News, David Lerman of the Daily Press in Newport News, Va., and Larry Lipman of the Palm Beach Post in Florida.

The panelists' lessons for the day: Even far-off events have local repercussions if you know where to look. And many readers would rather see the familiar byline of their local paper's Washington correspondent than a nameless wire report.

"This position of being a regional reporter is infinitely flexible," said Mulligan, who reasoned that he can take two approaches to the job: do nothing and let the New York Times cover everything, or look for local angles on just about any major news story. He picked the latter, interviewing a Rhode Island man who is ambassador to Uzbekistan and reaching out to a former ambassador to Saudi Arabia who was President Nixon's translator in China and also, as it turns out, is from Rhode Island.

If nothing else, Mulligan said, those contacts helped beef up his Rolodex for future stories.

But how do you find out about these people in the first place? Try your congressional delegation, panelists said. Often the local lawmaker will know about people from his or her district who are doing interesting things in Washington or are doing some sort of foreign service. Universities back home sometimes send professors to Washington or have other ties here that can be useful, either for stories about them or expert opinions they can offer.

Other angles are closer to home. Bethel said her paper has focused on northern border security, with plenty of stories about immigration policy and what the Customs Service is doing to reduce delays caused by increased security. Detroit is home to the nation's biggest Arab com-

munity, so the paper finds plenty of angles on immigration, she said.

Most panelists said they have done stories on the mood in Washington, especially in the days immediately following Sept. 11. In fact, Lerman said that was about the only story he could muster the first day, given that he would have had trouble getting to his usual beat at the Pentagon and would have been duplicating the wire services anyhow.

Other angles are obvious enough to regionals, including covering the local congressional delegation and doing profiles of local lawmakers in the news, Lipman said. Sen. Bob Graham of Florida, chairman of the Senate Committee on

Intelligence, suddenly became a major player. In some cases, local lawmakers may be on the fence about the war or legislation related to it, which makes a good story.

For reporters who cover defense, the war is a particular challenge. The story that regional reporters want most – the activities of local soldiers – is precisely the story the Pentagon does not want to tell because that would compromise operational details, Lerman said. While he often covers the daily Pentagon briefings, Lerman said he finds them useless and even insulting.

"The war for us is key because we have a lot of local people going to fight," Lerman said. Newport News is also home to Newport News Shipbuilding, which

makes aircraft carriers, so there are plenty of local angles. Carriers are based in nearby Norfolk.

Although he can't cover the war himself very effectively, Lerman said he has found good angles in stories about air defense systems. And he did score something of a scoop on the imminent return of the carrier USS Enterprise to Norfolk, which bothered some Navy wives who feared he had tipped off the enemy to movements of U.S. forces.

In reporting on terrorism and the war, panelists agreed, Washington bureaus should work with local reporters. While turf wars can sometimes erupt, reporters in Washington can put local reporters in touch with sources at the Pentagon or elsewhere, Mulligan said.

And in some cases, the fallout from the war has been more stories about things unrelated to the war. Lipman said his paper has been giving better placement lately to stories about legislation or other non-terror issues, figuring readers are itching for something else to think about.

Often the local lawmaker will know about people from his or her district who are doing interesting things in Washington or are doing some sort of foreign service.

Several antiterrorism reports that were gathering dust before Sept. 11 are suddenly hot reading as the White House and Congress rush to beef up homeland security. These links will take you to some of the major documents that have been issued in the last two years.



WEB LINK

<http://www.rand.org/nsrd/terrpanel/>

The Advisory Panel to Assess Domestic Response Capabilities for Terrorism Involving Weapons of Mass Destruction, also known as the Gilmore Commission, has issued two reports. The first assessed the threat of chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons. The second made recommendations, including the appointment of a White House advisor similar to the job President Bush tabbed Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Ridge to fill. Virginia Gov. James Gilmore chaired the commission, which will issue a third report soon.

<http://www.nssg.gov>

The U.S. Commission on National Security/21st Century, also known as the Hart-Rudman Commission, issued its report this year. The report recommends creating a new Cabinet-level department built on FEMA, the Coast

Guard, the Custom Service and the Border Patrol to lead homeland security. Former Sens. Gary Hart, D-Colo., and Warren Rudman, R-N.H., led the commission.

<http://w3.access.gpo.gov/nct/>

The National Commission on Terrorism issued its report in June 2000. This provides a very readable overview of the threats and federal shortcomings. L. Paul Bremer, a former Ambassador-at-Large for Counterterrorism, led the panel.

Two recent GAO reports are also worth a look.

Homeland Security: A Framework for Addressing the Nation's Efforts (<http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d011158t.pdf>) and Combating Terrorism: Selected Challenges and Related Recommendations (<http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d01822.pdf>). GAO has actually added a link to its homepage www.gao.gov <http://www.gao.gov> to many of its terrorism-related studies.

— Jeff Miller
Allentown Morning Call

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