

With President Bush after the planes hit on 9/11
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WASHINGTON, Sept 11 — Two Reuters reporters travelled with George W. Bush on September 11, 2001 on what began as a feel-good trip to Florida to promote education.

Here are some of their memories of that day, and those that followed, as they watched Bush's evolution from the leader of a country enjoying peace and prosperity to a wartime president.

Arshad Mohammed

"Mr President, are you aware of the reports of a plane crash in New York?"

I called out that question to Bush in the Florida classroom where, unbeknownst to me, he had just learned the second World Trade Center tower had been hit by an airplane.

Those minutes in the Emma E. Booker Elementary school, where Bush silently came to grips with the attack on the United States illustrate the blessings and the frustrations of being in the media pool that travels everywhere with the president.

On the one hand, we witness history in real time — watching White House chief of staff Andrew Card whisper into Bush's ear as he sat with second graders, and enjoying direct access to the president to lob questions at will.

On the other, as in every White House, the information flow is tightly controlled and our questions often go unanswered.

Standing in the classroom, we knew the first tower had been hit, but not the second and we had no idea what Bush had been told by Card, nor any clear sense of what might happen next.

Bush brushed off my question and emerged a short while later in the school library to say: "Today we've had a national tragedy. Two airplanes have crashed into the World Trade Center in an apparent terrorist attack on our country."

Caught off guard by the hijacked plane attacks, Bush gave an initially halting response, and spent the day flying across the country on Air Force One fleeing some unseen enemy instead of returning immediately to Washington, moves that raised doubts about his leadership in the tumult of the crisis.

Only days later, when he visited the smoking remains of the downed World Trade Center towers would the new president seem to regain his footing with a dramatic, impromptu speech atop a crumpled fire truck and a vow to punish the attackers.

Bush sped away from the school in a long motorcade.

According to the 9/11 Commission Report, the president learned of the attack on the Pentagon on his way to the airport and he grudgingly accepted the Secret Service's advice

that he not return to Washington as he wished.

Before we boarded the plane, a team of security agents and sniffer dogs checked the media pool at the foot of the stairs — an unusual step as we'd already been screened once — and one that suggested the Secret Service was taking no chances.

Near the back stairs, a White House official, in a rare display of emotion, bellowed out to ask if everyone was on board.

Virtually everyone else — from the security personnel who protect the plane to the news photographers who track the president — had their game faces on.

Within minutes of takeoff, it was clear we were not flying home along the Florida seaboard on the route we had taken the day before, with beaches and blue water beneath us.

Instead, we flew over land, made at least one sharp turn, and climbed steeply to an altitude far beyond normal.

In the back cabin, the press pool was on edge but unaware of the frantic attempts to remain in touch with the White House from the front of the plane.

Like most passengers, we were riveted by live images of the attacks broadcast on a TV screen at the front of our cabin, at one point watching in disbelief and horror as one of the twin towers collapsed.

We had no idea where we were going until a young press aide told us our destination was Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana, that Bush would make a statement, and that we could report what he said but not where he said it.

On landing, there was none of the pomp and ceremony that normally awaits the president.

Instead, before Bush descended from the Boeing 747, soldiers encircled it, with an officer at one point brusquely ordering one to "get to that wingtip — now!"

It was as if the military, in all its might, feared that the president's plane was not safe sitting in the middle of a vast tarmac at a base where his very presence was a secret.

Barred from using our mobile phones so that the calls could not be traced to give away Bush's location, reporters were taken to a windowless conference room. Aides scurried to set up a podium and two flags for Bush to make a statement we could later report from "an undisclosed location."

As we waited, someone said news of Bush's arrival had been broadcast on local TV. Quickly confirming this with an Air Force officer, an aide told us we could call our editors.

After vowing to "hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts," Bush got back on Air Force One with a much-reduced entourage — leaving behind aides, Secret Service agents and members of the media, including me, to be flown back to Washington on a back-up Air Force jet.

Steve Holland

The south tower of the World Trade Center bursts into flames after being struck by United

Airlines Flight 175 in New York September 11, 2001. — Reuters pic

Most members of the White House press corps who were in Florida to cover Bush found themselves abandoned. Civilian aviation had been grounded, and it was not until the next day that we gave up on flying home, chartered buses and loaded up on snacks for an overnight drive back to Washington.

Enmeshed in a traffic jam the next morning, the first sense we got of the devastation beyond TV images was a view of the Pentagon from the I-395 highway. Tendrils of smoke were still rising from a long scar in the building left by a hijacked airliner.

The White House itself was ringed by a military cordon. Helicopters whickered overhead. Soldiers carried rifles and confronted passersby. There was a sense of an America at war.

Years later Americans would remark on Bush's ability to study the facts at hand and quickly reach a decision — too quickly, some would say. But this leader, "the decider," had not yet emerged in September 2001.

After all, this was a president who had taken months to decide on his stem-cell policy and, after winning a big tax cut from Congress the previous spring, he seemed more intent on defining himself on domestic issues.

Bush completed his transformation to war leader on September 14, on a visit to Ground Zero in lower Manhattan.

Air Force One landed in New Jersey, instead of New York, for security reasons, and Bush and his entourage flew in helicopters to Manhattan. The smell of the smoldering twin towers was obvious from miles away, and a trail of smoke that passed the Statue of Liberty, symbol of America's openness to the world, was a painful image.

On the ground, a thick coating of ash lay on sidewalks and roads for blocks around Ground Zero. A ghostly line of firefighters, their coats covered with ash, stood in silence along the motorcade route, stopping briefly in their struggle to find the remains of their fallen colleagues. The stability of nearby buildings was uncertain, adding to the unease.

Where there had once been soaring twin towers, there was only death and destruction. Girders rose up in awkward angles. Piles of rubble were all around.

Bush had no plans to speak to the rescuers gathered around him as he toured with New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, but chants of "USA, USA" from the emotional crowd changed his mind.

He clambered up on the remains of a firetruck, put his hand on the shoulder of firefighter Bob Beckwith, and spoke into a bullhorn the words that would define the rest of his White House tenure.

"I can hear you! The rest of the world hears you! And the people — and the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon!" he said. — Reuters

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