

San Diego Downtown News
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A day Americans will never forget and wish never happened

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Everyone remembers what they were doing that day.

The television picture showed smoke drifting across the bay and the anchorman said Lindbergh Field was closed to air traffic. Next, the TV showed people running from a huge cloud in the streets of New York. Shortly thereafter, it happened again. What was going on?

Slowly, the tragic facts started to unfold. Those dust clouds were from two of the world's tallest buildings as they collapsed. As for San Diego's airport being closed, all airports had been shut down across the nation.

Then there was that shot of the Pentagon, and then word about a plane crash in Pennsylvania. There was confusion, lots and lots of confusion.

These epoch events left no Americans unscathed, including those on our own staff. Reporter Amy Lehmann was old friends with Mark Bingham, a passenger aboard United Flight 93 which was hijacked and crashed in Pennsylvania. They met while at the University of California, Berkeley. Lehmann remembers Bingham as a former rugby player; tall and strong. Based on cell phone conversations made from the plane, it was widely thought that several passengers planned to assail the hijackers and take back control of the aircraft. Because of his size and strength, and based on Lehmann's knowledge of his personality, it was very likely that Bingham was one of these heroes on that day.

Newsroom intern Alex Halperin called Manhattan his home and his family continued to live there, so the tragedies weighed especially heavy on his mind, too.

A quick check of the newsroom brought word that our reporters were already out on the streets conducting interviews and seeking related events in our own city.

Halperin teamed up with Marisa Lowe for front page stories in the Downtown News' Sept. 20 issue. Here is what they found:

San Diego Mayor Dick Murphy called an emergency news conference to inform the public that there were no known threats to San Diego, but as a precaution, he sent home "non-essential" downtown-based city employees. City Hall services were suspended for 24 hours but some City Councilmembers decided to stay in their offices to answer phone calls and e-mails. A bomb sweep of City Hall turned up empty.

Police Chief David Bejarano called out extra personnel to patrol around government buildings. They included extra squad car patrols, mounted horse units and bicycle units.

Many of the companies occupying downtown's high-rise offices let employees go home for the day. Out of concern for public safety, company executives closed down Westfield Shoppingtowns' Horton Plaza and security guards stood at the entrances. More guards could be seen at the Federal Building on Front Street.

Lindbergh Field stayed closed for days, it continued to be swept for explosives and thousands of travellers remained stranded.

On the waterfront the Coast Guard patrolled San Diego Bay and restricted entry.

Bomb threats on Sept. 13 caused authorities to evacuate both the San Diego Zoo and Roosevelt Junior High School. Once again the searches turned up nothing and the city remained on edge.

The downtown office of law firm Luce, Forward, Hamilton and Scripps sent employees home from its One America Plaza location on Sept. 13.

The long-awaited ribbon cutting for the San Diego Convention Center expansion project was postponed and several conferences planned for September and October were called off.

Those with ties to New York had difficulty getting information as lines of communication were almost entirely severed with that city.

Many businesses experienced a dramatic drop in revenue, the travel and related industries suffering some of the most serious losses.

The effects of the attacks were widespread and frightening, even this far away. A search through the papers of fall 2001 show that nearly every article contained some sort of reference to the tragedies of Sept. 11 for weeks afterward.

But soon San Diegans held events of remembrance and began to rally. The San Diego Blood Bank led the way by quickly shipping off more than 380 pints of red blood to New York City. Almost immediately, the Museum of Photographic Arts in Balboa Park set up an exhibit about the World Trade Center by photographer Wolf von dem Busche and allowed the public a chance to leave feedback, expressing their feelings.

Mayor Murphy set up a memorial service on Sept. 14 outside City Hall. The Children's Museum/Museo de los Niños cancelled its Fiesta Mexicana on Sept. 15, replacing it with a day for children and their families to express their emotions on large murals.

Charities and corporations such as the salvation Army and Ralph's Supermarket began to join forces in fund-raising efforts in support of the victims.

The largest of the memorial ceremonies was the Day of Remembrance event on Sept. 16 in Balboa Park. Thousands carrying United States flags and dressed in red, white and blue attended a very touching ceremony spearheaded by the Navy band.

Eventually, things came back to normal. Many businesses faltered, but most recovered. The Convention Center finally held its ribbon cutting and the conferences came back.

The fear has subsided somewhat, but a need for heightened security and constant vigilance continues to be a fact of everyday life.

Most San Diegans retain a feeling of mourning for the souls lost that day and one thing is clear, no one will ever forget the deep emotions they felt on Sept. 11, one short year ago.