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Grove City College president recalls horrors of 9-11 attacks

By Amanda Spadaro

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GROVE CITY — Before Paul McNulty was the president of Grove City College, he worked at the U.S. Department of Justice during the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks.

On the 15th anniversary of those attacks, he will give a special vesper service at the college about his experience.

McNulty described that day as starting like any other, another day at the office as the principal associate deputy attorney general in Washington, D.C., essentially the third-in-command at the department.

McNulty would later serve as the deputy attorney general from 2005 to 2007, the second-highest rank in the department.

“It’s so memorable for me because the first plane hit (the first tower at 8:45 a.m.), and I was coming right into the office at that point,” McNulty said.

Initially, McNulty thought it was a commuter plane that flew into the tower, but then the FBI called.

It wasn’t until the second plane hit the second Twin Tower just after 9 a.m. that the FBI realized an attack was happening, according to McNulty.

A swarm of questions followed, with no easy answers.

“The first decision was ‘Are we under attack? What’s being attacked? Is all of America being attacked? What part of America is being attacked? Is Washington, D.C., being attacked?’” McNulty recalled.

“We hear, 15 minutes later, that a plane has just gone into the Pentagon (just before 9:45 a.m.), and we don’t know if the White House is next. We don’t know if the Department of Justice or the Capitol is next.”

At that point, the Department of Justice building was evacuated, still not a guarantee of the employees’ safety.

“When you do something like that, you don’t even know whether or not you’re sending them actually to their own harm, because what happens if there is something outside the building that’s going to be worse than what could happen inside the building?” McNulty said.

From there, McNulty and officials from the FBI and other government agencies went to the command center on the top floor of the building.

“We have big screen TVs just like you’d see in the movies,” he said. “We’re watching CNN. We’re watching the live coverage of the Twin Towers burning. Around the room are telephones or computers where the FBI and the other agencies are set up, working so that we have a command and control of the situation.

“I remember watching the towers come down, and we’re in stunned disbelief at the extent of what has happened here.”

McNulty said his Sunday service likely will focus on how he came to terms with what he was feeling in the command center that day.

“Flight 93 had not yet gone down,” he said. “But sitting there in that room, realizing we didn’t know where Flight 93 was — we knew it was in the air somewhere and we knew it was headed toward (Washington, D.C.). I remember thinking that plane could be coming right into this building. I’m on the top floor of this building. This could be the last couple hours of my life.”

From there, the group moved across the street on Pennsylvania Avenue to the FBI headquarters, he said.

Then, the uncertainty of the situation was immense.

“The country is under attack, and it’s hard to describe what that’s like in terms of the uncertainty, the stress of it all, just trying to piece bits of information together and deal with rumors ... and figure out who did what just happened.”

McNulty said there were numerous false alarms of other attacks happening that day.

He also remembers his drive home across the 14th Street Bridge, past the Pentagon.

“At one o’clock in the morning, I leave the FBI’s headquarters,” he said. “I’m passing the Pentagon and ... there are the firetrucks, dousing the flames still from where the plane went into the Pentagon. And I just stopped and cried to think about how America was never going to be the same again.”

Only three days later, McNulty was confirmed by the Senate as the U.S. attorney for the eastern district of Virginia.

“What do I do the first day on the job is go to the Pentagon and have the FBI and the Department of Defense literally take me in to the wreckage and walk me through the crime scene,” he said.

“At that time, a guy is sitting in a jail in Minnesota named Zacarias Moussaoui, who had been arrested in August for trying to learn to fly planes but not land them.”

McNulty led the prosecution of Moussaoui in his jurisdiction.

“(Moussaoui) was supposed to be the pilot of a fifth plane,” he said. “They move him to my district and my job is to oversee the prosecution.”

That case lasted 4½ years, and the prosecution sought the death penalty, McNulty said. Moussaoui was charged with six felony charges: conspiracy to commit acts of terrorism transcending national boundaries, conspiracy to commit aircraft piracy, conspiracy to destroy aircraft, conspiracy to use weapons of mass destruction, conspiracy to murder United States employees and conspiracy to destroy property.

At the time, the Moussaoui trial was considered a test of how the country would handle a trial for a suspected terrorist, and McNulty credits Judge Leonie Brinkema with guaranteeing a fair trial.

“The Moussaoui trial was done very carefully,” he said. “We had a judge who is known for her attention to detail and going out of the way to be especially fair. So she has a very high bar for everything that is done in a prosecution in her courtroom. Because we sought the death penalty, that made Judge Brinkema even more scrupulous about everything that we did. It turned out to be, from a fairness and process perspective, a model for how a prosecution would go.”

A jury sentenced Moussaoui to six consecutive life terms without the chance of parole. The jury voted 11-1 for Moussaoui’s execution. That vote must be unanimous, McNulty said.

Through his experience on Sept. 11, 2001, and the years following, McNulty said he learned to evaluate how ready he is to be courageous on any given day.

“A moment like that which is so cataclysmic and so out of the ordinary serves as a reminder to us that we don’t know what tomorrow brings,” he said. “Therefore, we have to be ready on any given day, in two ways. We first have to be ready on any given day to serve, to fulfill our responsibility, no matter the cost, whatever those (responsibilities) may be. Secondly, we have to be prepared for the fact that it could be our last day in doing that, and are we at peace?”

McNulty also hopes, with the attacks having been 15 years ago, that the memory does not fade from American memory. The members of this year’s freshmen class at Grove City College, were only about 4 years old when this happened, he said.

“I always come back to the fact that you have to remember the horror of the day,” he said. “When people have to choose to jump out of upper story World Trade Center windows because they prefer to die (that way rather) than to be burned to death, we have to consider very carefully what we’re prepared to allow to happen.

“Sometimes, we get away from that. Try not to forget what that’s like for 3,000 people on a day of such darkness. We can’t let that reality be too far from our minds.”