

A man with a shaved head and light blue button-down shirt is sitting at a desk, looking off to the side. His hands are resting on the desk. In the background, a yellow fire helmet is visible on a shelf, and an American flag is mounted on the wall.

REMEMBERING

9-1

A First Responder Recalls 9-11

Alumnus Leo Titus '91 (CEE) was among the first engineers on the scene in the immediate aftermath of the fiery crash that claimed the lives of more than 180 people when a hijacked Boeing 757 slammed into the Pentagon.

By Suzanne F. Smith

On the morning of September 11, 2001, Leo Titus received an important call summoning him to the Pentagon.

An hour earlier, at 9:37 a.m., American Airlines flight 77, which had taken off from Dulles International Airport in Washington, D.C., en route to Los Angeles, had crashed into the west side of the Pentagon. The Boeing 757 carried 64 people (including five terrorists) and was loaded with 10,000 gallons of fuel when it hit the west side of the Pentagon at more than 350 mph.

"Walking into the burning, devastated building was very frightening and very eerie," he recalls.

"Flaming wreckage and victims' bodies were everywhere. We were climbing over debris and the heat was unimaginable. It was so dark that I could not see more than a few inches in front of me. Scalding hot water was dripping from the ceiling. I really had no idea what I was in for."

"We yelled into the darkness and waited for a response that never came. Slowly the realization came over me that everyone in there was dead. It was extremely intense. Extremely emotional."
— Leo Titus

Titus, an executive with the mid-Atlantic division of ECS Ltd., had never been on a search and rescue mission before. He had only recently joined the Fairfax County's Urban Search and Rescue team (VA-TF1) as a civilian volunteer. VA-TF1 is one of 28 FEMA-authorized urban search and rescue teams in the country. Teams are composed of career firefighters, as well as engineers, medics, dog handlers and other specialists. In fact, Titus had completed his VA-TF1 training the month before. He was a rookie; one of two engineers with the VA-TF1 unit when the team was deployed to the Pentagon.

When the call came that morning, Titus was ready. After watching the footage of the Twin Towers getting hit, he immediately left work and went home to get his gear. He assumed he was going to be called to New York City. Instead, he was needed at the Pentagon. The VA-TF1 was the first FEMA Search and Rescue team on the scene.

As a geotechnical engineer with a great deal of experience in structural inspection, Titus' role was

Rescue crews searching through rubble for survivors at the Pentagon.





Members of the VA-TF1 during the on-site memorial.

critical. He needed to assess the damage and stability of the building to ensure the team's safety as they searched for survivors.

"Our adrenaline was high. We were making our way through a building that had exploded from the inside. It wasn't even a building any more. There were no hallways, no rooms. Concrete pillars were blown away. It was just piles and piles of debris," he recalls. "I needed to help determine the safest way to go as we searched for people who might be trapped or injured. We yelled into the darkness and waited for a response that never came. Slowly the realization came over me that everyone in there was dead. It was extremely intense. Extremely emotional."

Two separate canine units were brought in. The first unit, trained by scent to locate victims who were still alive, was replaced after a couple of days with a second unit trained to locate bodies. At the same time, the VA-TF1 and other FEMA units began to shift their work from rescue to recovery, methodically sorting through the debris to recover bodies and body parts, personal belongings and pieces of the aircraft. The mood, he recalls, was somber.

"Once when we were trying to stabilize the building, we came across a dead soldier in the debris pile and I had to get pretty close to the victim to figure out what we could and could not remove so as not to further destabilize the area. I had a lot of emotions, including anger." Three months later while he watched his young children decorate the Christmas tree, he thought about the soldier and the family left behind. "I kept thinking, who was decorating their tree? It was very powerful. I still think about him."

The VA-TF1 remained on site for a week. "We lived, slept and worked together 24 hours a day," says Titus. "The area surrounding the destruction turned into a small community and was very well organized," he says. There was a Walmart trailer set up and two makeshift fast food restaurants. Boxes and boxes of cards, letters and flags arrived every day from supporters across the country.



In the fall, Titus returned to Clarkson to talk about his experiences at the Pentagon. In July, he was one of three alumni honored with the Woodstock Award, the University's highest award for young alumni.

Before the VA-TF1 unit left on September 18, they held an impromptu, on-site memorial. Later, when they pulled into headquarters the team was met by a cheering crowd. There wasn't, he recalls, a dry eye in the house. Later that year, Titus was honored with an award for "Outstanding Contributions by a Civilian Member" by the Washington, D.C., post of the Society of American Military Engineers.

Today, Titus is president of the ECS Ltd. Mid-Atlantic Division. He remains a civilian member of the VA-TF1 and is working on an MBA at the University of Mary Washington. (He also holds a master's degree in geotechnical engineering from the University of Maryland.) He lives in Virginia with his wife, Rosalie, and three children. [His first wife, Jennifer (Sierzant) Titus, also a 1991 Clarkson graduate, died of breast cancer two years after 9-11 and six months after the birth of their third daughter. The two had married right after college.]

These events, particularly the loss of his first wife, have had a profound impact on Titus. "You realize you only have so much time and you begin to think about what really is and is not important. We all get consumed by things that are just not worth it. It has made me totally rethink the work-life balance thing. I love my job and I work incredibly hard — but it is second on my priority list. My family is my priority."

During the week Titus spent at the Pentagon, he kept a journal. Titus shared his journal with co-authors Rick Newman and Patrick Creed, who feature his story in their book: *Firefight: Inside the Battle to Save the Pentagon on 9/11*.

He still sees a few of the people who worked alongside him that week in September of 2001.

"There is a bond," he says. ♦



Clarkson Pays Tribute to Four Alumni Lost in 9/11

Clarkson University students, faculty, staff and members of the local community gathered Friday, September 9, at the campus World Trade Center Memorial Sculpture to honor the almost 3,000 people who perished in the 9-11 terrorist attacks.

Among those who died in the World Trade Center attacks were four Clarkson alumni: Roger Rasweiler '70, Richard O'Connor '75, Paul Hughes '85 and Peter Klein '87.

Clarkson President Tony Collins addressed those who had come to pay tribute on the 10th anniversary:

We can all remember where we were and what we were doing when the news of a plane crashing into the Twin Towers began to spread on September 11, 2001.

We can remember the panic and fear as we tried to reach friends and relatives that were anywhere near New York City or Washington.

We can remember the sadness, grief and pain we felt as we watched the graphic images on television and realized what was happening to the people in the Twin Towers. ...

It is 10 years later and when we look again at those heartrending images of that catastrophic day, it is hard to think that we could ever take them for granted. It is our duty to remember them today, in another decade and another decade. But we must also understand that education holds the key to rid the world of prejudice, hatred and those feelings that fueled the 9/11 attack.

The ceremony also featured a prayer by Abul Khondker, professor of electrical and computer engineering, and speeches by Stephen Newkofsky, associate vice president for alumni relations, and Clarkson student and Iraq War veteran Adam Pelletier '12.

The steel in the memorial sculpture is from the World Trade Center and was obtained by Michael Bielawa '85. The day of the World Trade Center collapse, Bielawa was called to Ground Zero to help supervise clean-up efforts. He worked on the site for three weeks, clearing debris and helping to recover survivors. After his first-hand experience with the September 11th disaster, he requested that the New York City Office of Emergency Management donate steel from the World Trade Center to Clarkson to be used for a memorial.

The World Trade Center Memorial was installed in the summer of 2005 and dedicated on October 13 of that year as a memorial to the four Clarkson alumni who died.