




"I'm Eternally Grateful."

Jerry Henson '59
Recalls His Rescue
From the Pentagon on
September 11, 2001

By Jerry C. Cooper '63



(left) Jerry Henson '59, front, and his two rescuers,
Lt. Cmdr. David Tarantino, left, and Capt. David Thomas.

Forty-year Navy veteran

Jerry Henson '59 was beginning a normal day at the Pentagon. As a civilian, he heads the seven-person Interagency Support office in the Navy Command Center, coordinating counter drug operations and emergency relief efforts. After flying 72 combat missions in Vietnam, he figured he'd seen his roughest duty, but he wasn't prepared for September 11, 2001.

Following a meeting with the Joint Staff, he passed the Duty Captain's station in the third ring (C-Ring) of the massive building. People were watching reports on the World Trade Center (WTC) attack in New York City. After seeing the second plane slam into the WTC south tower on a TV set in his office, he and his deputy, Jack Punches, agreed "That's not an accident!" It would be his last conversation with Punches.

Minutes later Henson spoke briefly with his wife on the phone. Then, as he called to cancel a hotel reservation, he heard "one loud, sharp report and...the lights went out." It was 9:38 a.m. and American Airlines Flight 77 had hit the Pentagon at almost 350 miles per hour.

He later told Navy Historical Center interviewers, "All this stuff falls on top of me. I'm sitting upright in the seat and my head was pinned against my left shoulder with a massive weight. I can't move in any direction. Smoke (from burning jet fuel) is coming and getting thicker...I called for help." His desk, piled high with rubble, was resting on the arms of his chair. Those chair arms were all that kept him from being crushed.

Managing to get his head free, he realized he was pinned to his chair. Finding his legs free, he kept moving them so they wouldn't fall asleep before he found a way out. Later, he recalled "heavy boiling black smoke...you could almost reach out and grab a handful...I was putting all my energy into trying to get out of there."

Henson could hear petty officers Christine Williams and Charles Lewis on

the floor nearby. Lewis managed to dig out of the rubble, but was unable to free Henson. Williams was helped out and immediately sought additional assistance.

Dr. David Tarantino, a Navy Lt. Cmdr. working for the Secretary of Defense, and Navy Capt. David M. Thomas Jr., an executive assistant for the Navy's Quadrennial Defense Review, joined forces in a breezeway outside of C-Ring. Crawling through a small hole punched in the office wall by an airliner tire, they dodged exposed electrical wires as molten metal dripped on them from above.

Tiles and light fixtures fell around them as they fought off flames with fire extinguishers and pushed into the office. Their flashlights showed portions of the plane's cockpit and landing gear wedged into the ceiling. Secondary explosions continued as Tarantino and Thomas struggled to follow the voices in the smoke. Henson had passed out, but regained consciousness just in time to see their flashlight beams.

Wooden bookshelves in the office were already burning as the pair fought unsuccessfully to release Henson. Finally, Tarantino, who had rowed crew at Stanford, lay on his back and used his legs to lift the debris four or five inches. An amazed Thomas forced his shoulder under it. "Move your ass," Tarantino yelled to Henson. "It's now or never! You've got to get out of here now!"

Henson wriggled free and crawled between the doctor's upraised legs. His shoe caught on a cable. Tarantino pulled the cable and screamed, "Go! Go! Come on, man, you can do it." Henson squeezed out of his shoe and crawled out. SEAL Commander Craig Powell kept debris from closing the exit hole. Tarantino called for other survivors until a general officer warned him the ceiling appeared ready to collapse. As soon as Tarantino was clear, he found Henson and started him on oxygen and an IV.

Photo by Erica Berger Photography

*I*n all, 189 people died at the Pentagon, including those aboard the aircraft. More than a 100 were injured. Twenty-eight of the dead had worked in the Navy Command Center.

Henson would cough up a crude oil-like material for days; get stitches to close wounds on his head, ear and chin; and deal with smoke damage to his throat and lungs. In a while, his voice and his lung capacity would return to normal.

Henson's son, who works for the Drug Enforcement Agency across the street from the Pentagon, didn't know his dad's condition. He linked up with his mother (Kathy, Jerry's wife of 38 years), his sister Kelly and his wife, and made it to the hospital to see his father transferred from the emergency room.

Henson didn't learn his two rescuers' names until a *Dateline NBC* story finally brought the trio together. "I'm eternally grateful," Henson told Tom Philpott as part of a story in the November 2001 issue of *Washingtonian* magazine.

"There's never been any doubt in my mind about the quality and responsiveness of the American serviceman. The American sailor is an absolutely incredible individual. This is just the way we take care of each other and the way we take care of business."

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article was prepared from material in Jerry Henson's interview for a Navy Historical Center documentary. Other information and numerous direct quotes were taken from the November 2001 Washingtonian magazine article by Tom Philpott. We also want to thank J. Earl "Lefty" Beckman '59, Jerry's Classmate, for making us aware of his story.

One Year Later: The Aggie Family Remembers

by Holly Roper '03

As another school year gets underway, football games go on as usual, tests are scheduled, homework consumes students everywhere, and day-to-day work continues for us all. Nevertheless, this year the ordinary things seem slightly surreal. Since the attacks on September 11, 2001, our lives have changed and our hearts are heavy. As Aggies, our patriotism is stronger than ever.

Thousands of Americans, including fellow Aggies, are serving our country and fighting the war against terrorism. Since September 11, many family members know the heartache of having a family member, spouse or friend overseas facing danger in Enduring Freedom. A year later most of us can only imagine the horror of losing a loved one in a terrorist attack or during military action so far from home.

As we look back over the past year, it is fitting to remember again and honor the members of our Aggie family who lost their lives on 9/11.

Lt. Col. Jerry Don Dickerson '92

Lt. Col. Jerry Don Dickerson '92, Assistant Executive Officer for the Army Deputy Chief of Staff for Programs, died in the Pentagon when hijacked American Airlines Flight 77 crashed into the government building. He was 41 years old.

Dickerson earned his bachelor's in economics at Mississippi State University and served in the National Guard before joining the Army in 1983. He received his master's in industrial engineering at Texas A&M University in 1992.

Some have said Dickerson illustrated the definition of Army values with his selfless service and compassion for others. Through his years of service he received three Meritorious Service Medals and earned the Army Air Assault and Airborne badges.

Dickerson is survived by his wife, Page; son, Will; and daughter, Beth.

Jimmy Nevill Storey '65

Mr. Jimmy Nevill Storey '65, a Katy, Texas resident for 24 years, was a regional financial advisor for the Southwest Region of Marsh McLennan. On the morning of September 11, Jim was on the 99th floor of the north tower of the World Trade Center.

Storey was a 1965 graduate of Texas A&M College of Business. As a student he was in the Corps of Cadets. His family says he truly loved his experiences at Texas A&M. He is remembered as, "A wonderful son, father and grandfather."

Storey's mother, Iva Dell DeStefano said, "It's still mind-boggling. I do know that you just can't dwell on what happened. But, what Texas A&M did with the Red, White and Blue Out game was beautiful... The Aggies are an amazing group."

Storey is survived by wife Pam, children Cynthia Morrow '88, Tracey Storey, Geof Storey, and four grandchildren.

Dr. Lee A. Adler '84

Dr. Lee A. Adler '84 was on the 103rd floor of the north tower of the World Trade Center when it was struck by hijacked American Airlines Flight 11 on September 11. The 48-year-old Adler was a systems programmer at Cantor Fitzgerald, an international bond trading firm which lost 700 of its 1,000 New York employees.

Adler earned a Ph.D. in nuclear chemistry at Texas A&M University after receiving a B.A. degree from Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio.

Adler is remembered as having had a rough exterior but a very kind heart. He is survived by his wife Alice Doerge Adler, a Bryan native, and daughter Lauren.