

## 9/11: A Visual History

By [Rebecca Mansour](#), September 11, 2023



The whole world experienced the attacks of September 11, 2001, in real time. Videos, photos, and audio captured the horror inflicted by Islamic terrorists and the heroism displayed by ordinary Americans forced onto the frontlines of a sudden new war.

In 2021, to mark the twentieth anniversary of 9/11 and to ensure that future generations never forget, Breitbart News assembled the following visual chronicle of the day that changed the world forever and the two decades of war that followed it.

From the time of its opening in 1973 to that fatal day in September 2001, the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center dominated the skyline of Lower Manhattan's Financial District, as seen in the following photograph taken just six days before the Towers fell.

Designed by Detroit architect Minoru Yamasaki, the Twin Towers were famously disparaged by the New York Times' architectural critic Ada Louise Huxtable, who [offered](#) this eerie and unintentionally prescient prediction in 1966: "The trade center towers could be the start of a new skyscraper age or the biggest tombstones in the world."

Those words were long forgotten on that bright September morning before death rained down from cloudless skies.

Betty Ong, 45, a flight attendant aboard American Airlines Flight 11, was the first person to [notify](#) authorities that a plane had been hijacked and that two of her colleagues and a first class passenger had been stabbed.

Ong and her fellow flight attendant Madeline Amy Sweeney, 35, [stayed](#) on the phone with authorities until the very end, both calmly providing [crucial information](#) that confirmed the identities of the Islamic hijackers.

Sweeney [reported](#) the events right up to the moment of impact. Her harrowing last words were, "We are flying very, very low. We are flying way too low. Oh my God, we are flying way too low."

Among her last words, Ong reportedly [said](#) over and over again, "Pray for us. Pray for us."

The audio of Ong's call to the American Airlines emergency number was included in a montage released by the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) in 2018.

The following video captured the moment of impact when the hijackers flew American Airlines Flight 11 into the World Trade Center's North Tower (1 WTC) at 8:46 a.m.

The first images of the burning North Tower flashed across television screens.

The following video shows the first five minutes of cable news coverage.

Four minutes after the first plane hit the World Trade Center, Christopher Hanley, 35, called 911 from the 106th floor of the North Tower, where he was attending a conference at the restaurant Windows on the World that morning.

This is the audio of his 911 call:

The world then watched in horror as hijackers flew a second plane, United Airlines Flight 175, into the South Tower of the World Trade Center (2 WTC) at 9:03 a.m.

The second plane removed any doubt that this was a terror attack, not pilot error. America was indeed at war.

This video shows the ABC News coverage the moment the second plane struck:

President George W. Bush was visiting an elementary school in Sarasota, Florida, that morning.

He was informed about the attacks when his chief of staff, Andy Card, whispered in his ear: "A second plane has hit the second tower. America is under attack."

On the streets below, New Yorkers watched in shock at the smoke billowing from the towers and the desperate people inside who were hanging from the windows or leaping to their deaths to escape the fire.

Some were [seen](#) making the Sign of the Cross before they jumped.

The controversy surrounding the publication of the image below of a man falling from the North Tower and the subsequent quest to identify him inspired a 2006 documentary called [9/11: The Falling Man](#).

Inside the burning towers, there were many stories of extraordinary heroism. Perhaps the most famous example of selfless courage that day was the story of 24-year-old [Welles Crowther](#), who died in the South Tower while helping others get to safety. He is credited with saving 12 lives on 9/11. The strangers he rescued knew him simply as "the man in the red bandana" because he had covered his face with a red bandana to protect himself from the smoke.

At 9:37 a.m., the Islamic hijackers on board American Airlines Flight 77 crashed it into the Pentagon.

The war had now reached the nation's capital.

At 9:45 a.m., the FAA shut down the United States airspace for the first time in history. No civilian flights were allowed to take off, and all aircraft in the air were ordered to land immediately at the nearest airport.

In the photograph below, a screen at the American Airlines terminal at Los Angeles International Airport showed that all flights had been canceled.

At 9:58 a.m., the South Tower of the World Trade Center began to collapse.

At 10:03 a.m., United Airlines Flight 93 crashed into a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

Were it not for the heroism of the passengers onboard who stormed the cockpit, the Islamic hijackers would have crashed the plane into either the U.S. Capitol dome or the White House.

These passengers included Tom Burnett, 38; Mark Bingham, 31; Jeremy Glick, 31; and Todd Beamer, 32.

Beamer recited the Lord's Prayer and the 23rd Psalm with a telephone operator, which prompted others on the plane to say the words with him. He then turned to his fellow passengers and said, "Are you ready? Okay. Let's roll."

And they charged the cockpit to stop the hijackers, saving countless lives that would have been lost had the plane hit its intended target.

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At 10:28 a.m., the North Tower of the World Trade Center collapsed, sending thousands of survivors fleeing from the smoke and debris engulfing Lower Manhattan in the wake of its destruction.

In the nation's capital, traffic was gridlocked as the city shutdown and U.S. government workers were sent home following the terror attacks in New York and at the Pentagon.

President George W. Bush, aboard Air Force One and escorted by F-16 fighter jets, watched the news coverage and spoke by phone with New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani and New York Gov. George Pataki.

Reports of the attack filled the front pages of the world's newspapers.

As the debris settled, New York's first responders began to search for survivors in the ruins of the World Trade Center.

As evening descended on New York City, thick smoke clouded the skies over Lower Manhattan, billowing from the ruins where the World Trade Center once stood.

That evening, Americans across the nation gathered to pray.

Republicans and Democrats stood shoulder to shoulder on the steps of the U.S. Capitol in a show of national unity.

They sang "God Bless America."

President Bush landed at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland late in the afternoon and prepared to address the nation.

In his address from the Oval Office, President Bush said, "Today, our nation saw evil — the very worst of human nature. And we responded with the best of America."

As the nation prayed, the search for survivors continued.

Across the nation, volunteers donated blood to help New York. Sadly, it would soon become apparent that the donations were largely unnecessary because there were so few survivors rescued from the collapsed towers.

In the days that followed, people returned to Ground Zero with photographs of their missing loved ones, searching for any news of their whereabouts.

Thousands of missing person flyers were posted around Ground Zero.

Many Americans came to see New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani as "America's mayor" in recognition of his steady leadership in the days following the attacks.

In the photograph below, Giuliani consoled Anita Deblase whose son, James, 44, was missing at the site of the World Trade Center. James Deblase was among the 658 employees of Cantor Fitzgerald who died on 9/11.

On September 12, military and first responders unfurled a large American flag on the roof of the Pentagon over the crash site.

In Shanksville, Pennsylvania, a makeshift altar was assembled near the crash site of United Airlines Flight 93.

A flag was raised over the rubble at Ground Zero.

### **And the nation prayed.**

President Bush [issued](#) a proclamation calling for a National Day of Prayer and Remembrance on Friday, September 14, 2001.

“I ask that the people of the United States and places of worship mark this National Day of Prayer and Remembrance with noontime memorial services, the ringing of bells at that hour, and evening candlelight remembrance vigils.”

That Friday afternoon, President Bush visited the first responders and rescue workers at Ground Zero and delivered an impromptu speech that captured the sentiment of the country:

Around the nation, Americans of all faiths gathered to pray and mourn at memorial services and evening vigils.

### **And the world mourned with us.**

In London, Queen Elizabeth II [ordered](#) her Coldstream Guards to play the “Star Spangled Banner” during the Changing of the Guard ceremony at Buckingham Palace.

This was the first time in history that a British monarch ordered the Guards to play another nation’s anthem during this traditional ceremony.

That Friday, the Queen and the leaders of her government attended a prayer service at St. Paul’s Cathedral in London. They sang the “Star Spangled Banner” and the “[Battle Hymn of the Republic.](#)”

All of Britain stopped for a moment of silence that day to honor the victims of the attack in America.

Throughout the world, government officials and ordinary citizens grieved with Americans.

The European Union declared September 14, 2001, a day of mourning for all its member states in solidarity with America.

“In the darkest days of European history, America stood close by us, and today we stand close by America,” European Commission President Romano Prodi [said](#).

### **In the weeks that followed, we buried our dead.**

Among the heroes we mourned were the 23 New York Police Department officers who died in the line of duty on 9/11 and the 343 New York City firefighters who lost their lives trying to rescue people from the burning towers.

Their numbers included New York Fire Department Chaplain Father Mychal Judge, a Franciscan friar who died while administering the last rites to a fallen firefighter in the North Tower when the South Tower collapsed.

### **The massive clean-up efforts at Ground Zero spanned months and even years.**

Among the rubble, a cast iron cross was found rising out of the destruction at the World Trade Center.

The cross fell intact from Tower One into nearby Building Six on September 11.

It became a source of consolation to the rescue workers. On October 4, Father Brian Jordan, a Franciscan friar, blessed the cross.

### **After the attacks, the America people wanted swift justice. What followed was 20 years of wars.**

In an address before Congress on September 20, 2001, President Bush [declared](#) that the United States was engaged in an open-ended “war on terror.”

“Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there,” he stated. “It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated.”

On October 7, 2001, the United States and Great Britain [began](#) airstrikes in Afghanistan to destroy the al Qaeda camps where the 9/11 hijackers were trained. The immediate aim was to capture al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and – in the words of President Bush – to bring him to justice “dead or alive.”

Over the span of two decades, the war in Afghanistan would expand towards an open-ended exercise in nation-building, after bin Laden’s Taliban sponsors were removed from power.

However, in early December 2001 – just three months after the 9/11 attacks – America was close to achieving a swift and decisive victory in Afghanistan during what became known as the Battle of Tora Bora.

The truth about what happened there was eventually revealed in a 2009 U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee [report](#).

From December 6 – 17, 2001, U.S. coalition forces had bin Laden and his associates pinned down in a cave complex at Tora Bora. The U.S. special forces in Afghanistan [requested](#) additional ground troops to launch an assault on the complex and block the escape routes along the mountain pass lest bin Laden get away. Their requests were [denied](#) even though there were thousands of U.S. troops in Afghanistan available to fight, including soldiers trained to fight in mountainous terrain.

“The vast array of American military power, from sniper teams to the most mobile divisions of the Marine Corps and the Army, was kept on the sidelines,” the 2009 Senate report stated. “Instead, the U.S. command chose to rely on airstrikes and untrained Afghan militias to attack bin Laden and on Pakistan’s loosely organized Frontier Corps to seal his escape routes. On or around December 16, two days after writing his will, bin Laden and an entourage of bodyguards walked unmolested out of Tora Bora and disappeared into Pakistan’s unregulated tribal area.”

The decision not to deploy troops to capture bin Laden or prevent his escape was made by President Bush’s Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Gen. Tommy Franks because, according to the Senate report, “Rumsfeld said at the time that he was concerned that too many U.S. troops in Afghanistan would create an anti-American backlash and fuel a widespread insurgency.”

Gen. Franks’ deputy told the Senate committee that the Pentagon didn’t want to escalate the fight at Tora Bora before the U.S.-installed Afghan leader Hamid Karzai was inaugurated. “We wanted to create a stable country and that was more important than going after bin Laden at the time,” he [said](#).

At that same time, the Bush White House was already [focused](#) on a new war.

In November 2001, just weeks before the Battle of Tora Bora, President Bush ordered Secretary Rumsfeld to assemble plans for an invasion of Iraq, despite the country’s negligible connection to the 9/11 attacks. Gen. Franks was then ordered to draft plans for a new war, while the Pentagon was still planning the Battle of Tora Bora.

The 2009 Senate report [concluded](#) that “the shift in focus just as Franks and his senior aides were literally working on plans for the attacks on Tora Bora represents a dramatic turning point that allowed a sustained victory in Afghanistan to slip through our fingers.”

On March 19, 2003, U.S. and coalition forces invaded Iraq, defeating the Iraqi army and seizing Baghdad in less than three weeks.

The war would successfully depose Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein’s regime but [fail](#) to find the weapons of mass destruction he was purported to have.

The years that followed brought sectarian fighting, suicide bombings, regional instability, and tragedy for Iraqi civilians and the U.S. coalition.

On August 30, 2010, President Barack Obama declared an end to U.S. combat operations in Iraq, essentially ending the U.S. war there. But, as would soon become apparent, the U.S. withdrawal left an even greater power vacuum that would be exploited by Islamic State jihadists in Iraq and Syria, which in turn would lead to the ethnic cleansing of Christians and other religious minorities in the region, a migrant crisis in Europe, and ISIS-inspired terror attacks throughout the world.

As many as 306,000 civilians and troops [died](#) in the Iraq War, including 4,598 American service members.

In February 2009, President Obama announced a surge of the war in Afghanistan, ordering an additional 17,000 U.S. troops to the country.

The U.S. nation-building mission there would expand beyond anything having to do with 9/11.

Official reports and interviews uncovered in the “Afghanistan Papers” revealed that after two decades of mission creep, the U.S. military knew it was fighting an un-ending and un-winnable war.

On February 29, 2020, President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo negotiated an agreement with the Taliban to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan by May 1, 2021, thus ending the war there.

In April 2021, President Joe Biden announced that he would ignore the agreed-upon May 1 deadline and instead withdrawal all U.S. troops from Afghanistan by August 31, 2021, in time for the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks.

On July 5, 2021, U.S. forces vacated Bagram Airfield in the middle of the night. The heavily equipped air base — located about an hour from the capital of Kabul — had been the epicenter of America’s 20-year war in Afghanistan. Within weeks, the Afghan army surrendered the base and all of its U.S. military equipment to the advancing Taliban forces.

On August 15, 2021, Taliban forces seized the capital of Kabul and solidified their control over the country. The Afghan government collapsed, and President Ashraf Ghani fled the country with a reported \$165 million in cash of unclear origin.

In the chaos and panic that followed the fall of Kabul, U.S. forces scrambled to evacuate Americans and Afghan allies by President Biden’s August 31 deadline.

During the evacuation at Kabul airport on August 26, two suicide bombers killed at least 60 Afghan civilians and 13 U.S. troops.

The majority of the 13 American service members killed that day were babies when 9/11 happened.

They were the last of the 2,324 U.S. troops killed during America’s 20-year war in Afghanistan.

Before midnight on August 30, 2021, the U.S. military departed Afghanistan. Maj. Gen. Chris Donahue, commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, was the last American soldier to leave the country.

At least 200 Americans and an unknown number of America’s Afghan allies were left behind.

In total, the U.S. wars since 9/11 cost an estimated \$6.4 trillion and as many as 929,000 lives.

**In time, the United States did capture the men who were directly responsible for the 9/11 attacks.**

Nearly two years after the attacks, the 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheik Mohammed — who planned and organized the attacks — was captured in Pakistan on March 1, 2003.

He is imprisoned at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp and is still awaiting trial at Camp Justice, Guantanamo Bay.

Ten years after the attacks, al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden was brought to justice.

On May 2, 2011, President Obama announced to the nation that bin Laden was killed by a team of U.S. Navy SEALs during a raid on his compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, where he had been hiding since his escape from Tora Bora.

**Over the years, the country rebuilt, the memorials arose, and each year we remembered.**

For the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, EarthCam released a time-lapse video of the two decade transformation of Ground Zero from destruction to rebirth.