

Remembering 9/11

Written by Gallupsun Staff
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Attacks 20 years ago shaped today's FBI, its agents

Staff Reports

The morning of September 11, 2001 remains one of the most pivotal points in American history—and for the FBI. The ensuing investigation was the largest in the history of the Bureau. The attacks led to far-reaching changes in the organization as it elevated terrorism to the gravest threat against the U.S.

The attacks took the lives of nearly 3,000 people, and the crash sites represented the largest crime scene in FBI history.

Over the last 20 years, the Bureau evolved from an agency focused primarily on criminal offenses into an intelligence-based national security and law enforcement organization. Preventing terrorism continues to be the FBI's top priority; the Bureau has established more than 200 Joint Terrorism Task Forces with partner law enforcement agencies across the country.

But the threat picture has changed. Racially or ethnically-motivated extremism and anti-government or anti-authority violent extremism are the top domestic terrorism threats today. These actors often plan their attacks alone or in small cells—presenting an even greater challenge to law enforcement as they seek to prevent the next act of violence.

The events of 9/11 are forever etched in the minds of anyone old enough to remember the day. Those who were on the East Coast recall that it was a brilliant, clear morning. Then, at 8:46 a.m., American Airlines Flight 11 crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center in New York City.

In a meticulously planned attack, terrorists hijacked four airliners. They flew three of the planes into buildings: the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Arlington, Va. They crashed the fourth plane in rural Pennsylvania. The attacks killed 2,976 people and injured thousands more. Today, many first responders are still dealing with adverse

health effects from working in toxic conditions.

THE TOLL OF 9/11

One of those first responders still coping with health effects from September 11, 2001 is Special Agent Scott McDonough, who was helping scientists monitor a massive landfill to ensure heavy debris would not cause a catastrophic collapse. That meant taking photos of it from the sky in an FBI helicopter.

For just over three weeks after the terrorist attacks, McDonough, then an FBI pilot, flew a helicopter over the Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island, N. Y., as well as over the World Trade Center rubble in Manhattan. He kept the helicopter door open to take those photos, choking down contaminated air that made his throat burn.

Crews sent fragments of the buildings and other heavy debris on barges down the Hudson River to Fresh Kills, a landfill about the size of 1,500 football fields. There, other FBI personnel processed the large and complex pieces of evidence.

“One of the big concerns is we were putting heavy fill—concrete, cement, metal from these buildings, into a landfill that was made for regular garbage,” McDonough said. “We did multiple photo flights a day trying to help the scientists prevent an environmental catastrophe.”

Nearly 16 years later, in Aug. 2017, McDonough was diagnosed with cancer. He’s one of more than 100 FBI personnel who’ve gotten sick as a result of their response to 9/11. (There may be more, but informing the FBI of an illness is voluntary.) Seventeen FBI personnel have died as a result of these illnesses.

Twenty years after the attacks, the toll they’ve taken on the FBI is obvious—both in the grief

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over those who have been lost and the vigilance required by all who were there that day to monitor themselves for illness.

Just a few months before his diagnosis, McDonough had heard a presentation by an FBI doctor on 9/11-related cancers. He signed up for the World Trade Center Health Program, which monitors those who responded to the site.

In 2017 and 2018, he endured two surgeries and six rounds of chemotherapy. He even continued working during his chemo treatments.

“It was scary, but never once did I think of the negative side,” McDonough said. “I constantly just had the positive mindset of, ‘I’ve got to fight and beat this.’”

“From the moment of diagnosis, I thought, ‘How fast can I get this out of me and how hard can I fight?’ That’s what I did,” he said.

As the cancer is a workplace injury, the Department of Labor and the World Trade Center Health Program covered all of McDonough’s medical expenses. He encourages all of his fellow first responders to register for these programs and keep careful tabs on their health.

“Know your body. Listen to it,” he said. “If something’s not right, see a doctor right away.”

Today, McDonough is four years cancer-free, though he is screened regularly.

He’s channeled his experiences as a cancer survivor and as a 9/11 responder into the work he does today for the FBI’s Miami Field Office.

McDonough is now a paramedic and manages his office’s operational medicine program,

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providing medical care to FBI employees in the field, especially as they do dangerous work like SWAT operations or searches. He also manages the office's Hazardous Evidence Response Team, working to keep employees safe when they have to work with dangerous materials.

"When I had the opportunity to go to paramedic school, I jumped all over it because with everything I've been through medically, if I can help other people, I want to do that," he said.