

Nebraska service members look back on 9/11 experiences

LINCOLN AIR FORCE BASE, Neb. — It was a cool Tuesday morning in Lincoln on September 11, 2001, what seemed like a normal day, everyone going about their normal business. Then mid-morning, word quickly spread among friends and co-workers to turn on the TV and see what was happening in New York City and Washington, D.C.

The north tower of the World Trade Center had been hit by an American Airlines Boeing 767 and 18 minutes after the first impact another plane hit the south tower. Members of the Nebraska Air National Guard recall a quiet stillness as they watched it happen, followed by an immediate response from members who left home and their regular jobs to report for duty on base.

Lt. Col. Elizabeth Micek, executive officer with the 155th Air Refueling Wing, remembers there being seven to eight people watching the TV as the second plane hit the south tower. Things picked up quickly and the reality of the attacks began to sink in.

“The phones started ringing, people left work, security forces personnel asking what do you need? What are we going to do? What are the requirements?” Micek said. “By the next day we were in 24 hour operations, and there was no commercial flying at all.”

The security forces were among the first to ramp up operations on the base. Airmen were on high alert with almost all the drill status guardsman in security forces being fully mobilized, Micek said.

“We were required to have additional people at the gate, roaming patrols and the aircraft while pulling 12 hour shifts,” Micek said. “It felt like we had all been converted over to active duty.”

Senior Master Sgt. Kathryn Claypool, 155th ARW, described the whole event as if it was like getting ready for war, despite not yet knowing who or where the enemy was.

“We were scrambling to get airplanes on alert,” Claypool said. “Intel was trying to get us as much information as they could such as follow on threats.”

Claypool said the force protection posture immediately changed. Everyone coming on base had to show identification, they were told to be cautious of anyone who approached them on or off base. Guard members were advised to remove stickers on their personal vehicles, which could identify them as military members and possible targets of terrorism.

Senior Master Sgt. Wade Schuett, an assistant crew chief in 2001, said everyone on the flight line that morning was notified of what was going on and made their way inside to turn on the TV.

“As soon as we saw what was going on, everyone ran back outside to start gassing and pre-fighting airplanes,” Schuett said. “We were getting them ready for a mission, and we didn’t even know what that looked like yet at that point.”

The Airmen were getting prepared for whatever mission they would next be asked to do.

“The initial reaction was shock, but then everyone focused on what needed to be done,” Schuett said. “All that training kicked in and despite the chaos we worked through it.”

When asked how the 155th Air Refueling Wing responded overall to the 9/11 attacks, Micek echoed inspiring memories.

“I thought we performed in a manner that well exceeded many expectations,” Micek said. “I think everyone learned what the Guard was capable of and that we can be relied on to do the job equally as our active duty counterparts.”

Agreeing with Micek's statement about overall response, Schuett said the 155th ARW was vital to combat air patrol missions over Colorado. He went on to say how great it was to work with everyone throughout that time.

"It was a lot more of a team effort and team atmosphere," Schuett said. "If you got done with your work, you went on to go help someone else."

September 11th pulled many people together in the country and moments like that are hard to lose sight of, said Micek. She added how the Guard completed that overall experience.

Micek said, "Events like that you don't forget them and you don't forget the people you worked with."