

9/11 - FIVE YEARS LATER

HOW IT CHANGED US

Originally published in *The Blade* on Sunday, September 10, 2006

By RYAN E. SMITH
BLADE STAFF WRITER

It's been five years, but sometimes it feels like five seconds.

Images of 9/11 — the four hijacked airliners, the crumbling twin towers — are seared into our brains, and the emotions, when they resurface, still pack a wallop. For some, those terrorist attacks remain a current event.

Craig Valentine, 54, vividly remembers sitting at home on Sept. 11, 2001, watching the two World Trade Center towers fall — over and over and over — and how he felt.



The World Trade Center towers on 9/11 (AP)

"For most of the day, it was incredible rage," the Grand Rapids, Ohio, man said. "I was angry, incredibly angry."

He paused.

"The feelings are still there."

Five years later, the emotions may be the same, but we're not.

In one day, our national security blanket was pulverized into a coat of gray dust and a staggering pile of twisted steel. We woke up to find hate and terror on our doorstep. And not just in a far-off, theoretical sense.

It's here. In Toledo. In us.

Hollywood, of all places, has been among the first to force us to confront this with movies like *United 93* (released last week on DVD) and *World Trade Center*. For some, such as Mr. Valentine, it's still too soon.

"I got a lump in my throat from just seeing the trailer," he said.



Craig Valentine of Grand Rapids, Ohio, felt an 'incredible rage' as the attacks unfolded. 'The feelings are still there,' he says. (THE BLADE)

That's because 9/11 didn't just change us. It remade us.

Colors aren't just colors anymore; they're threat levels.

Planes aren't just transportation anymore; they're flying bombs.

We have a new vocabulary, filled with things like Ground Zero and al-Qaeda and Homeland Security.

Sept. 11 brought some of us anger and suspicion, particularly when it comes to Middle Easterners and Muslims.

It's not always the in-your-face kind, like the shot fired through a window at the Islamic Center of Greater Toledo after the terrorist attacks on the twin towers, the Pentagon, and the flight that crashed in western Pennsylvania.

For Arbid Wehbi, 34, a Sylvania resident from Lebanon, there have been few unkind words and no problems at his local restaurant. But he feels the difference in society at-large.

“The main thing that has bothered me the most is the amount of hate going on,” he said. “From what you hear, from what you see, you can feel it. Since that day ’til now, you don’t feel right.”

Suddenly, Islam is synonymous with terror, he said. A Muslim kills someone and it’s terrorism. A white man blows up a building and he’s a psycho.

“The media made terrorism a glue to Muslims,” said Mr. Wehbi, who is Muslim.

After the attacks, there were widespread interviews in the Muslim community with FBI agents and suspicion that their phones were tapped. There were uneasy looks at airports from fellow passengers.

Mr. Wehbi said he doesn’t mind. He has nothing to hide. But the Patriot Act, with its new rules and increased secrecy, gives him pause.

“To me, that was the last thing I could imagine in the United States,” he said.

It certainly gave us a different America.

So different that David Harris of the University of Toledo’s college of law scrapped his advanced criminal justice class in favor of a post-9/11 criminal justice course.

“Most people thought: This isn’t about us. It’s about terrorists,” he said. “What I sensed from the beginning is the whole system was undergoing a sort of long-term transformation.”

Local businessman Michel Nouafo didn’t need a legal class to tell him that. He just needed a few trips to the airport.

“I’ve changed my concept of privacy,” he said. “I’m now used to my luggage being searched even without me being present; whereas, in the past I would have found that totally unacceptable.”

A frequent flier, Mr. Nouafo, 44, travels about every six weeks for Libbey Inc., where he is vice president for international marketing.

Some adjustments are easier than others. The longer lines, taking off shoes, removing shampoo and toothpaste from carry-ons, the ticket surcharges to pay for security. Those are just a necessity for safety in this new world.

But the mind games ... they can be exhausting.

“When I get to the gate, from that time until I arrive at my final destination, I am very, very much aware of every passenger around me and their behaviors. I’m much more alert,” said Mr. Nouafo of Brownstone, Mich.

In addition to increased vigilance, Sept. 11 gave us patriots.

Flags went up everywhere — and stayed there.

Yellow-ribbon magnets stuck on cars so long the paint job faded around them. Even baseball got into the act for a while, adding “God Bless America” to the seventh-inning stretch. (The New York Yankees are the only team that still does it every night.)

It gave us a war on terror and native sons rushing to its defense.

Not all came back.

Tony Wobler, 53, lost a son to the war in Iraq last year, shot by insurgents in Mosul.

“I miss him something terrible,” the Leipsic, Ohio, man said. “I cry practically every day. I have a little memorial set up in our family room. I’m able to see his picture every day and some of his medals he got.”



Michel Nouafo, a Libbey executive and frequent flier, has been forced to adjust to the heightened security airline passengers now encounter. (THE BLADE/JEREMY WADSWORTH)



Tony Wobler's son, Zachary, died in Iraq last year. (THE BLADE/ALLAN DETRICH)

He said he and his 24-year-old son, Staff Sgt. Zachary Wobler of the Army's 82nd Airborne Division, were close and communicated as often as they could.

"I have a recording on my telephone that he gave me before his death. I listen to that almost every day," Mr. Wobler said.

Deaths like Sergeant Wobler's are the incalculable toll of the war, which Mr. Wobler believes is influenced by misguided leadership in Washington.

"Every day, people die in car accidents and they have mysterious deaths ... but for a parent to know that your son was shot three times trying to battle back ... you just wish you could have been there with them to help them out."

Sept. 11 was precisely the reason some people rallied to the military. It gave us people like Todd Miller, who instantly understood the impact of the day's events.

"Well, we're at war now."

That's what he told a co-worker at the time of the attacks.

Within hours, the Sylvania Township man and former Army National Guardsman was on the phone with a military recruiter. By the end of 2002, he was serving abroad with the Army Reserves as part of the war on terrorism.

People have spent a lot of words talking about security in the wake of 9/11. This is how Mr. Miller found some.

"I feel pretty safe just in that uniform," he said.

His service is over, and he's back to working at his plumbing business.

But the rest of the changes, well, those are forever.

"It's never gonna be the same," Mr. Miller said. "You're never gonna be able to walk into an airport and walk onto a plane again. You're always gonna see cops on the subways now. It's just a way of life now."

Contact Ryan E. Smith at: ryansmith@theblade.com or 419-724-6103.

[next >](#)