

Remembering 9/11
Bill Menke, September 11, 2022

Columbia University Professor Roger Buck, Graduate Student Jackie Floyd and I were in Iceland during the September 11, 2001 World Trade Center attack. The geophysics meeting, *Symposium on the Icelandic Plume and Crust*, that we were attending had just wrapped up. It had been held at the Svartsengi geothermal power plant on the volcanically-active Reykjanes Peninsula and had been a fun meeting. My good friend and colleague Bryndís Brandsdóttir, from the University of Iceland, was one of the attendees, as were other geoscientists whom I had gotten to know over the years. In addition to attending many scientifically-interesting talks and having many scientific debates, we toured the turbine room of the power plant, swam in the Blue Lagoon and witnessed the Aurora Borealis. Most of us, including me, stayed in the nearby Hotel Keflavik, in the little seaside town of Reykjanesbær.

On September 11, some of the meeting participants, including Roger, were off attending a fieldtrip, but the rest of us, including Jackie and me, were scheduled to fly to our respective homes. I decided to take a hike that morning, for the weather was good and my flight was not until evening. I walked towards the Blue Lagoon, though not expecting to reach it, for it is about twenty kilometers distant. The sun was shining and I had a nice time viewing the volcanic landscape of the peninsula. I turned about and heading back when I was about halfway to the Lagoon. I stopped at a bakery on the southern end of town to buy pastry and coffee. The clerk, a young lady, recognized me as an American and shyly said to me that she had just heard that a plane had just crashed into the World Trade Center in New York. I said something to the effect, “that’s terrible news but thank you for letting me know” and continued my walk back to Hotel Keflavik.

Once I saw a TV documentary about the small military plane that crashed into the Empire State Building back in 1945. The crash killed more than a dozen people and did a fair amount of damage, causing the building to be closed for several days. I was imagining that something similar had happened, perhaps involving a commuter or sightseeing plane.

A half hour later, when I arrived at Hotel Keflavik, the lobby will full of people and the atmosphere was palpably tense. It took me a few moments to realize that everyone was watching CNN on a TV monitor that was hanging from the ceiling. A huge plume of smoke was rising from one of the iconic World Trade Center towers. I stared in disbelief as it suddenly collapsed to the ground. As I continued to watch, I saw several repetitions of a clip in which a large airliner collided with what I guess was the other tower.

I immediately realized that I would be stuck in Iceland for a while. I went over the reception desk and asked to extend my room reservation. The staff were not sure they could accommodate me, but eventually they were able to move me into a small but otherwise unoccupied room.

At first, I was unable to contact my wife, Dallas Abbott. The phone system was working, though it was hard to complete an international call, for the system was very busy. However,

the biggest problem was that I was not sure where to call. I knew that Dallas had been scheduled to teach a class at Columbia University and that she was not likely answer either home or office phone. She had a cell phone, but in that era people did not necessarily carry their cell phones everywhere. And Dallas was not picking up.

I was not worried that Dallas was close to the collapsing towers, for although both Columbia University and the World Trade Center are on the island of Manhattan, they are more than five miles from one another. I was worried that she would be stuck in Manhattan and separated from our children, aged thirteen and fifteen, who were attending school near our Rockland County home. I was imagining that she could be one of the many thousands of people stuck in Manhattan after the bridges and tunnels had been closed.

The internet was working but my only access to it was from a computer in the lobby of the hotel that was in heavy demand. When my turn came, I sent an email to Dallas asking how she was and appraising her of my situation. I also left pleading requests with as many friends and colleagues as I could think of, asking them to check up on Dallas if they were able and send me news of her.

Later in the evening, I received an email from Dallas. She had been on the university shuttle bus heading to the Columbia campus at the time of the attack. It had gotten stuck in a traffic jam when the George Washington Bridge was closed by the police, but fortunately had not yet crossed the bridge. In a second email, Dallas reported that she had been able to contact our Menke and Abbott family relatives. None had been near the site of the attack and all were well.

Dallas' own travel plans were also a source of uncertainty. She had been scheduled to fly to Australia the day after my planned return to New York, to attend a geology meeting that was being held there. Much to Dallas' dismay, the announcement that US airspace had been closed cast doubt on whether her trip would happen.

I was able to get Bryndis on the phone. She updated me on everything she knew about the situation, including her conversation with Roger Buck, whose fieldtrip was wrapping up. Bryndis housed several conference participants in her apartment in Reykjavik, after they were unable to fly to their homes. I also was able to contact IcelandAir. They assured me that I had a reservation on the next flight from Iceland to New York - whenever that was.

The next morning, to work off stress, I took a long walk to Garður lighthouse – a distance of about eight miles - partly by a pedestrian path that followed the sea cliff and partly by country lanes and roads. The weather was clear and the view of the sea was terrific. I met another American as I stood in the empty parking lot of the lighthouse and we shared what we knew about the attack. The skies were eerily empty of planes, for although Keflavik Airport was nearby, it was mostly shut down. I then headed back, stopping at another bakery to buy pastries and coffee. I had been intending to take a bus back to the hotel, but none came by after I waited at the bus stop for a while, so I decided to walk back along the road.

Back at Hotel Keflavik, I spent the evening in the hotel bar drinking Viking beers at ten dollars a glass, watching CNN on the TV there, and talking with other Americans who, like me, were

shocked by what had happened. The news commentator confirmed that all plane flights into the US had been cancelled and not much flying to Europe, either.

The next morning, September 13, Bryndis contacted me and advised me to go to the airport and try to get a flight home, for she has heard an announcement that they were resuming. I met up with Roger and Jackie and we all managed to get boarding passes for Icelandair FI615. We had a long wait on the plane, for according to the Captain, the Icelandic air traffic control was having trouble confirming that we had permission to land in New York. Eventually we took off. Everyone on the plane was a bit tense. I was more than a little suspicious of many of my fellow passengers. Unfortunately, after a couple of hours the Captain announced that our plane would not be permitted to enter US airspace and that we were diverting to Montreal, Quebec. We landed in Mirabel Airport and rented a car that Karen Bocsusis, the Lamont travel agent, helped us arrange. The woman at the counter was very kind to us and gave us a car with US license plates that could be driven just one way. However, we did not immediately drive back, because the US-Canadian Border was reported to be jammed. Instead, we spent the night in a hotel in the Montreal area.

We headed back on the morning of September 14th, driving the 380 miles in about 8 hours. We were pretty nervous as we approached the US border, for we did not know what kind of reception we would be given. Fortunately, the wait was short and the border agent was pretty sympathetic. He did search the trunk for weapons; I was careful to tell him that my luggage held a collapsible hiking staff with a sharp point. But we got through the border control in just a couple of minutes.

We meet up with Roger's wife, Sharon Quayle, at Roger and her house in Nyack New York. Dallas met us there and drove me back to our Tappan New York home. Jackie stayed with Roger and Sharon until she could arrange transportation to her Manhattan apartment. On the way home, Dallas related to me more of her story of the last few days. She said that one fellow passenger of the shuttle bus trip, upon hearing the news that the smoke in the distance was from a terrorist attack, immediately said, "This will change the world".

[These recollections were set down by me, after reviewing my email log from 9-11-11 era. Bill Menke, September 11-12, 2022]