

Flying K

on Kingsville, Texas

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September 7, 2012

All are invited to join the Freedom Walk, on Sept. 11, 7:45 a.m., beginning at the HQ flagpole & ending at the Chapel.

Tokens not needed to remember Sept. 11

By Fifi Kieschnick
NAS Kingsville Public Affairs

There are numerous "survivor stories" and everyone has an account of where he or she was when the first jet hit the World Trade Center that fateful Sept. 11.

But only a handful of us can say that they were on a jet flying out of Washington, D.C., from Andrews Air Force Base, while another was heading in the opposite direction 15,000 feet below, which subsequently hit our nation's military headquarters.

"I know where I was that day," said Capt. Mark McLaughlin, NAS Kingsville commanding officer. "I was briefing Brent Scowcroft about nuclear weapons on board an E-4B (Boeing 747)."

That aircraft was part of the National Airborne Operations Center (NAOC) based out of Andrews Air Force Base in Washington, D.C.

"We were one of many commands practicing a global wargaming and communication exercise called 'Global Guardian.' My aircraft was one of three brought to full alert status for the exercise.

"But we had a secondary mission, to fly to Washington, D.C. that morning to pick up Mr. Scowcroft," McLaughlin added. "He was appointed by President Bush to analyze the nations' nuclear arsenal and strategic plans," McLaughlin said.

"While we were flying into Washington, D.C., we heard over one of the many communications nets that an airplane had crashed into a tower at the World Trade Center. We thought it odd at the time that on such a nice clear morning a plane could have hit that building. It never dawned on us at that moment that a terrorist attack was underway."

McLaughlin said that their aircraft landed at Andrews AFB, loaded Scowcroft and his travelling party on board and had just begun the briefing on nuclear weapons and the nation's nuclear warfighting plan when things started to change rather rapidly.

When briefing a VIP, McLaughlin said, you are never interrupted by a member of the team.

Never.

"That's the protocol. You give the briefing, memorized, and someone sitting behind you changes the slides on cue, without prompting from the briefer. That's just the way it's done."

But, he could see from the podium in the briefing space that

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Pictured above, military members rendered honors as fire and rescue workers unfurled a huge American flag over the side of the Pentagon during rescue and recovery work following the Sept. 11 terrorist attack. (U.S. Navy photo by Michael W. Pendergrass) Pictured left, Soldiers of A Company, 3rd Infantry (The Old Guard), gather the flag being lowered from the side of the Pentagon, where it hung beside the impact site of terrorist air crash. The soldiers retired the flag ceremonially Oct. 11, 2001. It will never be flown again. (Photo by Jim Garamone)

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there was turmoil in the “battlestaff” space, a windowed-compartment behind the briefing area that houses the operations team and all their materials.

“I could tell there was a lot of commotion in the battlestaff, which is unheard of and not allowed when a VIP is on board, especially receiving a briefing,” McLaughlin said. “Then things got really interesting.”

McLaughlin said he felt the hand of his assistant working the computer behind him slip a note into his hand.

“My first reaction was, ‘I am going to strangle that kid for breaking all protocol only three feet away from Mr. Scowcroft.’”

The message contained three simple words: Captain. Battlestaff. Now.

“So I broke from protocol, excused myself to Mr. Scowcroft and looked straight at the NAOC commanding officer and told him his presence was requested in the battlestaff area immediately.

“Capt. (Joseph) Gershon (the NAOC CO) shot me a look that I wouldn’t wish on anyone, for again, it was breaking with protocol on briefing individuals at the highest levels of our government.”

McLaughlin said he continued his briefing, but could tell “something big was happening” because of the commotion in the battlestaff compartment.

“The second protocol followed during VIP briefings at this level,” McLaughlin continued, “is that once you leave the room, you never return until the brief is over. No distractions are allowed for the VIP or the briefer -- that is the rule.

“Capt. Gershon came back into the briefing spaces, gave me the standard Navy hold signal -- a raised fist -- and he said to Mr. Scowcroft, ‘it appears that the country is under attack, sir.’

“Adding to the confusion was that we were in a global exercise and many of us thought it was part of the exercise injects.”

But it rapidly became clear that the exercise was immediately terminated and real-world events were taking precedence.

McLaughlin explained that during the next few minutes, everyone began to fully comprehend that we (the country) were under attack.

“It became very apparent that our aircraft had to get airborne for safety reasons, so we did.

“We learned a few months later that when our aircraft departed Andrews Air Force Base and headed out to the northwest, we had flown right over the top of the aircraft that eventually impacted the Pentagon,” he said.

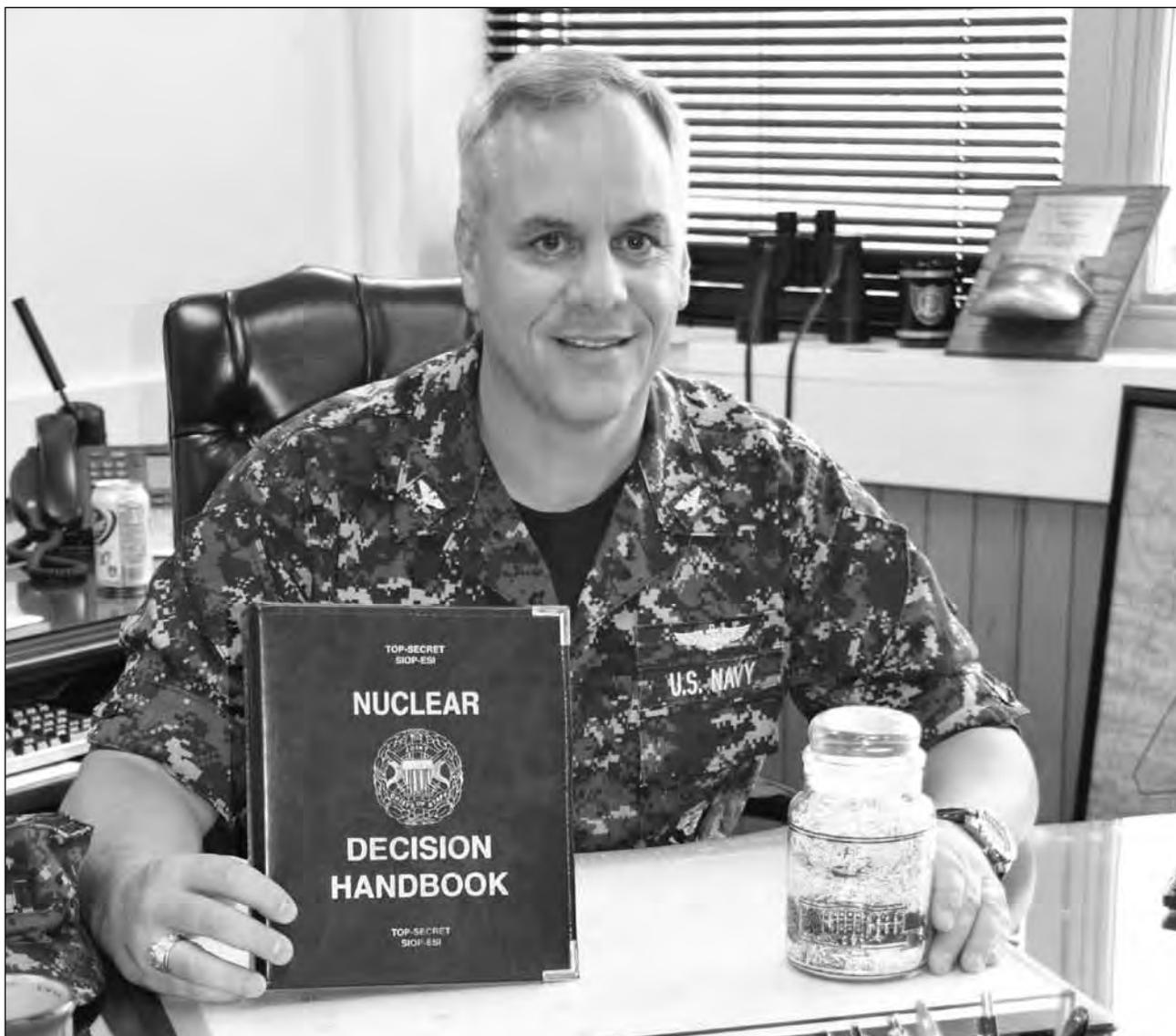
On Sept. 11, McLaughlin was assigned to Operations Team One as the Single Integrated Operations Plan Advisor to the National Command Authority -- the President and the Secretary of Defense.

“My job was to be the expert on nuclear war plans and give all the VIP briefs, and I was responsible for handling the Nuclear Decision Handbook.

“It was only supposed to be a single day of duty -- to provide the briefing to Mr. Scowcroft,” McLaughlin added. “It turned into being on duty for 34 straight days.”

The National Military Command Center (NMCC), which is the National Command Authority’s central command and control center, is located at the Pentagon. It never stood down during the crash and subsequent fire there. Miraculously, it was untouched and the staff there directed the “Flying Pentagon” to land in Omaha, Neb., so that Scowcroft and his staff could debark. Then, the aircraft resumed airborne operations.

McLaughlin said later they could see there was a lot of chaos in the country, but his team’s mission was to remain



Capt. Mark McLaughlin displays what remains of his Nuclear Decision Handbook that he carried Sept. 11, 2001. The glass jar contains the pages -- shredded and melted.

in the air.

All flights were cancelled nationwide and the only aircraft in the skies were military.

“During the very-extended conference call that began with the attacks and continued well into the next day, at about 3 a.m., our aircraft was advised by the FAA (Federal Aviation Administration), that we were the only aircraft airborne over North America at that time,” McLaughlin said.

“All the fighter coverage had landed for fuel or crew swaps, and in that brief moment, we were the only aircraft flying, when normally there are more than 7,000 aircraft

airborne at any given time.

“The FAA commented that this probably hasn’t happened since the Wright Brothers. How many people can say that?”

Today, McLaughlin’s office carries mementos of that tour of duty with the NAOC and that day aboard the “Flying Pentagon.”

But he really doesn’t need those tokens to remind him of what happened on Sept. 11.

None of us do.

Navy joins the nation in honoring 2012 Hispanic American Heritage Month

The Navy joins the nation Sept. 15 in celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month, which will be observed through Oct. 15.

With a national theme of “Diversity United, Building America’s Future Today,” the observance celebrates the histories, cultures and contributions of Americans who trace their roots to Spain, Mexico, the Caribbean and Central and South America.

According to 2010 data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Hispanics comprise 16.3 percent of the total United States population, or 50.5 million people, forming our country’s largest racial or ethnic minority. Additionally, it is projected that by 2050, a quarter of the nation’s workforce will be Hispanic. The Navy’s workforce reflects this diversity - today, over 58,000 Hispanic active-duty and Reserve Sailors and officers and nearly 15,000 Hispanic civilians serve in the Navy Total Force, including four Hispanic flag officers and

172 Hispanic master chiefs.

In his 2011 National Hispanic Heritage Month Presidential Proclamation, President Barack Obama noted, “The future of America is inextricably linked to the future of our Hispanic community. Our country thrives on the diversity and ingenuity of all our people, and our ability to out-innovate, out-educate, and out-build the rest of the world will depend greatly on the success of Hispanics.”

For more information the history of Hispanics in the Navy, visit <http://www.history.navy.mil/special%20highlights/hispanic/hispanic-index.htm>. For more information and resources on Hispanics in the military and Hispanic American Heritage Month, visit the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute (DEOMI) website at <http://www.deomi.org/SpecialObservance/>. (*From Navy Office of Diversity and Inclusion Public Affairs*)