

The Pentagon: Re-Made in America

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Indiana limestone never looked so good, so appropriate, so formidable to me as it did on September 11th, 2002, at 9:30 in the morning at the Pentagon, in Washington D.C.

The Pentagon had been healed, the breach closed. From my seat in the stands on the morning of the Pentagon Observance ceremony, facing that rebuilt wall and overlooking the families of the victims who were seated at ground level, I could see for myself the grim contrast of a "healed" wall, and weeping, open-wounded lives.

The healed wall was accomplished ahead of deadline by monumental effort, ingenuity, and craftsmanship. Our unique American blend of workmen, with their differing cultures, races, and backgrounds, were purposefully united in single-minded determination. The baby girl who cried inconsolably throughout the ceremony will need more time; the project known as the "Phoenix Project"—the rebuilding of the Pentagon—needed less.

We—my husband, Will Bybee, his brother, George Bybee, George's wife, Lisa, and I—were invited to the morning ceremony because Bybee Stone Company had supplied the drafting and patterning services and the shot-sawn surface work for the forty-five truckloads of dimensioned, cut limestone needed on the Phoenix Project.

Jeff Leisz, the mill superintendent, Pat Riley, the company's head draftsman, and Jeff Chitwood, estimating manager, had come to Washington D.C., too, jumping at the chance to represent Bybee's craftsmen at the "Worker Appreciation" ceremony scheduled later in the day. For Chitwood and Riley, who'd been on this jobsite several times starting in October of last year, it was a particularly satisfying return trip.

From the moment they knew that their skills were chosen to help rebuild the Pentagon, the workforce at the Bybee mill—from estimators and draftsmen to the sawyers, planermen, and cutters—seized their part in that great, single-minded focus which closed the gaping wound on the facade of the Pentagon. Far from the scenes of attack, they saw a chance to "do something," and threw their hearts into it.

They were not alone. Over a hundred different companies involved in the Phoenix Project broke records, worked overtime, and forged an unprecedented renovation success.

The audience on this bright, blue morning was made up of foreign officers and dignitaries, the families of the victims, the press, and many of the hands-on people involved in the reconstruction process at the Pentagon. One and all had braved countless security measures, endured body checks if so much as a safety pin set off a sensor, and had found their seats with their patience and dignity intact.

The reconstruction team's section of bleachers, where we were expected to sit, had filled to capacity early. Eager faces beamed under hardhats, many of which were so covered in patriotic stickers and labels advertising companies including—without immediately apparent significance—“Mary Kay,” that it was difficult to find vacant, miniature billboard space.

Four empty spaces in the bleachers were found for us by a polite young serviceman in the neighboring section, which had apparently been reserved for foreign officers. I found myself next to a teenaged boy who gave me a shy smile instead of an American “hello,” dressed as my sons would be on any ordinary school day. A wide variety of immaculate uniforms—most dripping with looping, gold braidwork and topped by wildly differing military headgear—surrounded us. The uniformed men were alike only in their postures: properly erect, identically respectful. One foreign soldier seemed to think he was expected to stand at attention long after the President of the United States and his wife had entered the massive, flag-festooned stage, and been seated. Mercifully (since he was blocking my view), he was finally given the signal to sit down by one of the American officers stationed at the foot of our section.

United States uniformed personnel were everywhere, and represented every branch of the military. Most were fresh-faced young men and women who, periodically, passed bottles of water up into the crowd with assembly-line precision, but there were also paramedics, police officers, and a number of very fit looking people in very nice dark suits who were interested only in paying polite attention to the officers seated near us.

The U.S. Army Band announced the opening of the ceremony by way of a musical prelude, the attending Heads of State were introduced, and the U.S. Army Chief of Chaplains gave an invocation. A moment of silence at 9:37 a.m. was followed by the unfurling of the American flag from the rooftop of the Pentagon—the same action which heralded the birth of the Phoenix Project one year ago—and the singing of the National Anthem. A gust of wind sent the flag rippling spiritedly high above the crowd for a moment, then cast it back into the arms of the men on the rooftop. With an unrehearsed, poignant symbolism, they did not hesitate to make what adjustments they could and send it into the wind again.

Under the wind-whipped flag, the Pledge of Allegiance was recited by the Honorable George Bush and classmates of four children on American Airlines Flight 77 who lost their lives when the plane plunged into the Pentagon.

The ceremony progressed, its several fine-tuned speeches punctuated by individual soloists representing each of the Armed Forces. In their addresses, both President George Bush and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld praised the single-minded focus which had succeeded in repairing the Pentagon ahead of schedule. Rumsfeld referred to the “singular devotion of the men and women who worked day and night to fulfill a solemn vow—that not one stone of this building would be out of place on this anniversary.”

Defense Secretary Rumsfeld had already personally thanked each Bybee Stone Company employee who had worked on the Phoenix Project. Two weeks before the September 11th anniversary two pallets, loaded with boxes, were delivered to the Ellettsville, Indiana, office.

Inside the boxes were framed certificates—one signed and sent by Rumsfeld, and another from the Phoenix Project managers, both individually naming and honoring the Indiana craftsmen who'd taken part in what Rumsfeld called the “solemn vow.”

An F-16 jet Air Force flyover provided the event finale, but throughout the ceremony airliners were visible in regular intervals overhead, taking off from Washington D.C.'s Reagan International.

The Pentagon no longer needs its flag-fabric bandage. The wall has been healed, the breach has been closed. We can only hope hearts and minds will follow—remembering, but moving on, in peace.