



# If I were an artist I would travel to a 9/11 Pentagon

By Mike Howard  
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If I were an artist, I would create images of Alan Wallace outside the Pentagon on 9/11.

Yes. I would go back in time to the day the plane hit the symbol of America's military strength to draw the photographs I wish I could have taken that morning. I want to better understand how it felt. I want to feel and experience the emotion those images stir. So I would make my images with oil pastels of this fireman from nearby Fort Myer, Virginia, who had just arrived outside the Pentagon to perform a routine mission of supporting aircraft arriving and departing the helipad.

After my journey to write this article, my mind is full of plenty of mental photographs I would create while looking through the lens of my mental camera.

But as Wallace spoke to me about the events that morning, I focused on three images.

One would say: I can't breathe.

Another: I gotta get down or I'll die.

Still another: Oh my God.

Still, there would be a thousand more images of him and many others impacted by this terrorism.

To understand my Wallace portrayals, here is my journal.

It is 20 years later and few Americans were spared experiencing the trauma of that day. Most of us didn't experience these tragic events firsthand, but the moment we learned of the terrorist attack is frozen in time forever. Television did its instant magic with earth-shattering news around the world.

I watched from a hotel room in Alabama, but every military, civilian, contractor or family member either in the Pentagon that day or a part of the National Capitol Region was touched in a way that those of us who were afar cannot know. They came to work that day like it was any other day, and by the time their heads hit the pillow — whenever that was —

they were left with memories that would impact the remainder of their lives.

We all felt the trauma, perhaps triggering earlier trauma and possibly taking years to emerge when other experiences troubled us. For me, I began my journey drawing images in 2010 as I began wanting to see those things that happened in the past related to my life so that I could better understand them. I drew hundreds of images with my hands that make scribbled marks.

This will be my fifth anniversary of 9/11 while living in the DC area. Until around 10:30 a.m. on August 3 this year, I figured this anniversary would be like all the rest. It is hard to explain how I felt then as I sat in my cubicle in the Pentagon while an officer protecting me was killed outside. The emotions of being in the proximity of violence such as this were unnerving.

Of course we were all safe inside the building. We simply stayed put until things cleared up. When news reports got out of a shooting, we let our loved ones know we were okay. Still, when that officer who died and all the others protecting us went to work in the morning, I suspect they knew the danger but thought it would be like all the other days, with them coming home to their families untouched by violence.

And it wasn't.

So I decided to do what I do as an artist and journalist.

I wanted to try find an eye witness who could bring me close to the action here on 9/11, someone who experienced it firsthand. I wanted to imagine as if I were physically here at the Pentagon with my camera and gear as this monumental story unfolded. I knew how it felt to watch from afar and, while I know nobody can truly understand the true emotion of that day unless you were actually present, I wanted to try to feel those emotions. And I wanted to paint what I saw, even if just in my mind's eye.

Art images by Mike Howard

Image on page 22: "I Gotta Get Down or I'll Die," 19X24 inch Oil Pastel, 2021 — This artist rendering is based on Alan Wallace's account of moments after the plane hits the Pentagon. Wallace runs for his life, dives next to the van and crawls under it to protect himself from the fire, heat and debris.

I have known the stories of many who were in the building that day or on nearby Fort Myer. Accounts of the utter shock and disbelief, the immediate unified effort to help others. The days of funerals and emotional stress. I had friends who experienced this, but I was looking for the story from strangers.

I called a retired Army sergeant major who was assigned on Fort Myer at the time to see if he could help me locate soldiers or anyone who may have seen the plane hit the building or who were somehow involved. I was hoping to locate someone who helped raise the flag on the side of the Pentagon.

His response left me realizing the trouble of digging up memories so troubling.

“9/11 is a painful moment for me,” he said after I told him what I was doing. “And I have mentally blocked it out. I really do not want to go back there.”

I called a Soldier who was in The Old Guard at the time who told me he and other Soldiers were called to the Pentagon the next day to help with the rescue. I asked what they did. He abruptly cut the conversation on the phone and said he’d call back.

He never called back.

I asked a friend to connect me with a Soldier spouse she knew who lost her husband in the attack. After not hearing from her husband by late afternoon that day, the lady suspected he was gone and so she came to the perimeter as close as she could get to where the plane hit. She and others then held vigil through the evening and night praying their spouses would survive. These spouses desperately wanted to believe their missing loved ones somehow survived and were trying to get home on a crowded metro train, or had gone back into the Pentagon to get their car keys, or were unable to borrow a cell phone to call someone.

I sent a compassionate and empathetic email explaining my project to draw images that express the emotions of the scene. She responded that she was honored by my request but it was simply too difficult to remember that day. Perhaps another time.

Desperate to find someone who could tell me what it was like to be on the scene, I called the fire chief at Fort Myer. I knew there was a three-man crew who was near where the plane hit — one man inside the fire house near the old helipad and the other two were outside near the front of the fire truck that was 50-feet from the Pentagon.

One of the men has since passed away and the other doesn’t talk publicly about 9/11. So the fire chief gave me the phone number of the third. I dialed the

number and left a voicemail message thinking this will be another dead end.

But Wallace called me back.

Without hesitation, Wallace took me exactly where I wanted to be to visualize the photographs I would have taken. In one 45-minute conversation followed by two more 30-minute discussions on the phone, I got a visceral sense of his story.

Wallace had driven the fire truck that morning to the helipad for an upcoming mission and backed it up to the Pentagon with the rear of the truck about 35 feet away from the building. He and the man he calls Skipper were walking around the front of the truck without any of their gear on. They were wearing street clothes. Skipper had driven a Ford van that was parked farther away.

Wallace said they could see the plane coming in at a 45-degree angle and knew it was going to hit. A nano-second before it did, they turned to run away from the building.

“I knew I had to get as far away from where I was as quick as I could,” he said. “I ran to save my life. Finally, the heat, fire and debris were too much. I came to the side of the van Skipper had parked and I dove for the pavement — which was pitch black because it was new — like I was diving head first for home plate in a baseball game.

“When I hit the ground, I crawled under the van. A few minutes later, the van was on fire and I had to get out. So I ran to the field and found Skipper.”

Wallace said when he got back to the truck, he thought the Pentagon was on fire so he tried to start the truck to get it to safety. But it wouldn’t move. It was then that he realized that both the truck and a Magnolia tree next to it was on fire.

After he got out of the truck, an Air Force lieutenant colonel asked him and Skipper to help people get out of the Pentagon.

“You could not breathe at that window,” he said. “There was simply no oxygen there.”

All this happened while he was still in street clothes — then he put on his gear and went into the building with a fire extinguisher. The noise attracted victims to him, and he was able to help them get out.

I immediately knew I had what I needed to draw three images in my style for this article — the images of him diving, at the window, and taking a knee near the Pentagon on fire. I knew exactly where I would be with my camera to my eye to get the iconic shots I could call mine.

I quickly sketched them out on three sheets of



Image on page 25: “I Can’t Breathe,” 19X24 inch Oil Pastel, 2021 — This artist rendering depicts Alan Wallace helping a lady get out of the Pentagon after Wallace realized the fire truck and tree were on fire and before he had put on his gear. He says there was no oxygen at the window and he could not breathe.



“Oh My God,” 19X24 inch Oil Pastel, 2021 — This artist rendering is an interpretation of the scene near where the plane hit and Alan Wallace had parked the fire truck beforehand. After helping people get out of the building from the window, Wallace put on his gear and went inside. Here, he is taking a knee.

19”X24” paper I use to make my oil pastel art.

But the story wasn’t complete. I wanted more to make those three images of Wallace mean even more. I needed context to better understand the magnitude.

So I messaged my friend Kathy Rhem, who was a sergeant first class in the Army at the time. She worked as a military journalist in what was then American Forces Information Service in Alexandria, Virginia. This is where she was when the plane hit. The news service immediately went to a 24-hour operation.

Rhem got the night shift, went home to explain what was going on to her children, and then went to the Pentagon to cover then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s press conference from the Penta-

gon Briefing Room.

“It was surreal,” she wrote in a text. “There were no cars going north, and then once I was in the building the blue smoke hanging in the halls stunk. It felt incredibly significant to be in the Pentagon holding a press conference, even as the building was still on fire. It was an act of defiance against our attackers, like we were taking back our home.”

She recalled that the room was completely packed. “And people were scared,” she wrote, “I was scared.”

“I was an Army SFC and felt like I’d lived through many dangerous situations, but this was something new and uniquely awful. I remember thinking I was going to be responsible for the first draft of this history and that millions of people could read what I was

writing. I was very determined to do it well.

“I know everyone in that room felt the weight of what we were experiencing, and it felt very heavy.”

This feeling Rhem and others felt about relaying the first draft of history explains why I wanted — needed — to go back to make my art.

To get still another perspective, I sent a text to another friend, Dave Schad, who was an Army master sergeant at the time and worked for Sergeant Major of the Army Jack Tilley as his public affairs NCO.

Schad had just dropped his Soldier wife off at Dulles International Airport for a temporary duty trip to South Korea. He had not bothered to write down the flight information, he only remembered it was an American Airlines flight that started with a seven — leaving him concerned it was the flight his wife was on that had been flown into the Pentagon once reports came out that morning that it was American flight 77.

Soon, he got through to her unit and was informed she was safe as it was not her flight.

Schad, who was at home on use-or-lose leave with a three-day growth of a beard, immediately drove in civilian clothes to Tilley’s home on Fort Myer, grabbed the SMA’s reading glasses and collected as many charged phone batteries as he could find. He walked to the Pentagon to find Tilley.

Schad worked his way through security and found Tilley right where he expected he would be.

“I headed straight toward the side of the building where the plane had hit,” he remembered. “Hard to miss. Smoke, many emergency vehicles, etc. It didn’t take me long to find the SMA. He was walking around in Class Bs with no hat doing what you’d expect an SMA to be doing — helping people cope with what had happened.”

Schad wrote that it was extremely emotional as people were looking for any hints their loved ones were OK. They used those extra phone batteries to keep their phones working as they loaned them to people to make their calls.

“At one point,” Schad wrote, “as the sun was going down, I sat down on a pile of thick, beam-like boards that had been neatly stacked near the hole. They were there in case shoring material was needed. I recall sitting there, looking into the hole the plane had made.

“Flames were still visible, or at least smoke was coming out, and it was overwhelming.”

Schad was referring to a place not far from where Wallace’s fire truck was and where he dove to save his life.

Schad gave one final thought: “I think of those memories as being in folders in my mind. I know they have the potential to be dangerous, so I didn’t

take them out and examine them very often.”

This helped me better understand the people declining to help me for my article and art.

Rhem also told me about what’s been on her mind as we approach the 20-year anniversary.

“Looking back to that time immediately after 9/11 and in the following years working in Public Affairs in the Pentagon,” Rhem wrote, “I felt like I was sacrificing a lot for my job at the time.

“Now of course that sounds ridiculous to me to be saying that out loud. Hundreds of thousands of my brothers and sisters in arms gave up years of their lives, their emotional and physical well-being, their marriages, years of their children’s lives. Thousands never came home. Those are the things that are in my mind when I watch the news about what’s happening in Afghanistan now.

“As far as the 20-year commemoration goes, I don’t plan to watch any of it. It never leaves me. In fact, I’m going camping that week and hope to unplug to the extent possible.”

I am sure, though, she will join the rest of those who were impacted in seeing images of that day in their own minds — just as they have on every other day since.

For me, I will see these three images I imagined while talking to a fireman named Wallace.

