Aftermath of the September 11 Terrorist Attack on America

There are certain world events that occur in our lifetime that leave an indelible impression on us. For example, many of us still to this day remember exactly what we were doing that November 22, 1963, when President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas.

And so it was on September 11, when the tragic news reached us that two commercial planes were hijacked and suicidally piloted to smash into the twin towers of the World Trade Center while another plane was intentionally flown into the Pentagon, and still another plane crashed near Pittsburgh. Our Budget Planning Committee was at PCI Headquarters in Chicago working on the 2002 PCI budget when the tragic events filtered through cell phones, radios and TV monitors. While at first we went through rudimentary business motions, it was obvious that no one was paying much attention to the meeting at hand, which was immediately terminated. In life there are obviously more important issues to attend to than budgets.

The terrorist assault killed about 6,500 people (including nearly 1,000 foreign nationals), caused billions of dollars in property damage, crippled airline companies, damaged the entertainment and tourist industries, and worsened our already slumping economy. What it will do to the construction industry and our own precast businesses remains to be seen.

Out of all the misery it caused to thousands of people, September 11 united our country like no other event in history. There have been countless stories of heroism, not only among firefighters and police officers, but also by ordinary plane passengers and thousands of volunteers. This spirit of volunteerism is also what PCI is all about. PCI has already made a donation to the victims of the disaster through the American Red Cross.

Some structural engineers were surprised at the rapidity at which the World Trade Center towers collapsed because they were designed to withstand plane impacts. However, they were not designed to resist the impact of a fully-fueled plane traveling at more than 400 miles per hour. The resulting explosion and fire produced temperatures as high as 2000ºF, which melted and buckled the steel columns. Without any support, the upper stories simply collapsed gathering more momentum as they fell. The lower columns then lost all lateral support from the floors and continued to collapse.

Several national commissions are already at work gathering data on the structural design of the towers and the exact cause of the failures of the buildings. Nobody as yet knows what the outcome of the studies or the final recommendations of the commissions will be, but there will be changes in the way super tall buildings are designed. One major issue will certainly be fire resistance. In this regard, reinforced concrete has an advantage over steel. A concrete structure would perhaps not have prevented the collapse, but it would most likely have offered more time for those evacuating the buildings.

Although the major news sources have carried numerous articles and stories about this tragic event in our nation’s history, we at PCI feel it is important to also reflect on it in our industry’s publication.

As the saying goes, “the sun shall rise again.” Out of evil, goodness and inspiration will prevail. In our immediate future, we must look to hope and optimism for our country, industry and families.

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