

MASON CITY AIRPORT MANAGER, EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT COORDINATOR RECALLS WHERE THEY WERE ON SEPTEMBER 11, 2001



For many that lived through the events on that tragic day, it's a memory that will never be erased

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MASON CITY, Iowa - When someone asks you where you were and what you were doing on September 11, 2001, you'll likely have an answer.

Mason City Airport manager David Sims was a sophomore at Louisiana Tech, studying to be a pilot. He remembers watching footage of the first plane hitting the World Trade Center with classmates vividly.

"Being aviation minded, we were trying to make sense a modern airliner can crash into a building on a clear day. We were analyzing that situation through the eyes of future pilots."

The events of 2001 would not only change Sims' career plans, but also how we travel through the skies, including the creation of the Transportation Safety Administration. One thing that sticks out in his mind was the grounding of all aircraft in the U.S. and closing off airspace nationwide.

"As an aviation student, we couldn't imagine something like that even being feasible, but it happened."

Cerro Gordo County Emergency Management coordinator Steve O'Neil was planning a routine training exercise at the airport on September 11. O'Neil was alerted by then Police Captain Dennis

Bengtson, watching the coverage unfold on TV, including the moment the second plane hit the South Tower.

"Neither one of us could speak. It was silence, and I think we both realized our world has just changed. This is not an accident, this is bad."

He immediately headed to the airport, coordinating with authorities and state Homeland Security. Even though he was only on the job for about 8 months at this point, O'Neil immediately knew what to do, with all of his attention focused on what's next.

"We're catching it live on the news, scrambling to what should be our posture, what should we be doing, talking to other local officials, what do you think the impacts will be."

In the years since, the Department has grown, in part thanks to federal funding in the aftermath of the attacks to bolster local emergency management operations, including Fire and Police Departments.

"While people were enthused, while people were thinking about it, get them to prepare, get them to do things."

As we come up on the 20th anniversary of that tragic day, O'Neil feels it's important to not forget what happened.

"It's good to remember, and keep it fresh that it hasn't gone away. It's still there, and we need to be diligent."