

Ep. 64: The Erredge's 9/11 story

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Welcome back to the Sword and Shield podcast. I'm Colonel Rick Erredge and today I'm joined by K.C. Erredge. Yes. Thanks for joining me. Thank you for having me. Yeah, this is going to be exciting. And so we really want to have a chance to talk about 9/11 and so I think thinking about 20 years ago where we were it's hard to believe us 20 years ago. Yes it is and obviously the world has much changed and very different, especially with what's going on in the Middle East right now. So it's a good opportunity for us to kind of talk about that tell a story because there's a lot of airmen right now that don't know anything other than a post-9/11 world. Right? Yeah. And so we want to be able to talk a little bit about that. Um share some thoughts there and then and then maybe talk about where we see things in the future and what lessons have we learned from that always support our military members and what you know what military life is going like after that. So tell me about that day. Well it was uh it was a beautiful day and I was at work and I worked for the department of state as contractor in Virginia and I was working and we had seen something on a TV something about an attack in New York city that there had been a plane crash and wasn't really sure what was going on until I got a phone call from you that that kind of clarified that it was an intentional thing and then we were trying to figure out what do we do? Yeah. And so for me I remember very vividly being in General Taylor's office captain headquarters oversight at the time doing personal work. They're doing a bunch of science stuff and I'd normally scheduled weekly visit with him to go over some officer's assignment stuff for him to prove just routine work. Remember sitting there and on this little tiny TV sitting in the waiting room there by the secretary and this was you know obviously the news broke in was going on and I said what? I just walk to the office and I asked her what's going on? So they said a little airplane just hit the one of the towers was like oh said no longer and then it's like man what are we gonna meet like? And then he comes out and says brick and cancel the meeting, go back to your office, stay there. And I was like oh what's going on by the time I got back down the office and learned that second towers head and we didn't understand you know really what's going on at that time all these rumors are flying around obviously the news about all these other different targets and Andrews was on the list. That's where you were right I was at Andrews at the time and so trying to figure out you know what's going on what to do. Well and also I and uh we all kind of looked around like hey where's this airman? Like we normally makes a run to the pentagon and then we find out the pentagon gets hit were like where's the airman? And um about 10 minutes later he comes back and back in the office he's got headphones on, he's listening to his Walkman or his iPod whatever it was listening to music. He's like what y'all doing, stand around the TV? And um he had no idea, he had just left the pentagon doing the Daily Mail run and he

had no idea what happened. And he was like well he's like I was just there like I just walked an hour ago I just walked through the ring over on the army side picking up the mail and so um pretty surreal situation there and then we're trying to figure out you know after the pentagon, I obviously very involved from intelligence counterintelligence perspective and they are trying to figure out what their role is going to be. You know, in in the events at the pentagon and of course there's so much unknown going on. Crazy. They locked based out. I just couldn't go anywhere. And then we heard a rumor that car bomb has gone off where you work. Yes, I remember you calling me and saying you need to leave now and I'm like, but I can't, I can't go, I haven't been cleared to leave work, everybody's still here, you know? And you were very adamant that I should leave work. And I was like, okay. So then I was like trying to talk to my coworkers and figure out what was going on. And it was about then that they said everybody just needs to go home. But I rode the train all the time. You had dropped me off. So I had no way to get home because my train route was passed the pentagon and so I couldn't take metro to get back home because the train had been shut down. And so I had a coworker that was very kind to offer me a ride. He could get me almost all the way home and we're about 88 miles from where we lived. And that drive took us three hours to get to where I could walk to get home. And then I got home and realized since we always rode together that I did not have a set of house keys with me and was locked out of the house. So I spent the afternoon sitting in the yard listening to a very, very quiet sky over Washington D. C. Which is very unusual. There was always a lot of air traffic and at one point I walked down to the burger king, get something to eat and drink, you know, and I kept trying to call our family back in Minnesota to let them know that we are okay. But the cell towers were all jammed with everybody trying to call and I couldn't hear from the last I had heard from you was that you were locked on the base Jacob who was two at the time 2.5 was locked on the base with you. And so there was, there was nothing I could do. I could just sit there and I couldn't reach family, I couldn't chat with you. And so all I had was my mind to wander because I just had a foot phone so I wasn't getting the internet and social media with what was going on and I wasn't anywhere where there was a TV. So like I knew, yeah, that was before all that stuff probably all I could do was just sit and wait. And so that's what I spent the vast majority of the day doing was just sitting and waiting, not knowing when you would be released. Remember they released us. I don't know too 2:30 or something early afternoon and uh like what are we gonna do? Come back tomorrow like yep, everybody's mission essential. Everybody's back tomorrow. I'm like I'm a personnelist. Like, I'm mission essential? Yep, everybody's mission essential. We were in blues every day at the time. Like, I think that's the last time that I wore blues every day. Like, since then it's been in, you know, some combination this on a regular basis. Um many of our Airmen don't realize that like we wore blues all the time, that that was a thing. I'd like six sets of blues and 11 BDU'S and now I had to like, oh it's opposite now, we're going into this thing where we're wearing fatigues all the time. And so yeah finally took a long, long time to get home because I think they said there's like a million two million half people that commute into D.C. That work in the city. So you can imagine and they kind of all stream in from five in the morning until eight right? You imagine them shutting the city down and making

everybody leave at the same time. And the Woodrow, Wilson Bridge that is today is not what it was then. Like it was a tiny like formally bridge. And so getting across from Andrews back to Alexandria was really hard and so it was, it was long, right home for sure. Um, and I remember you telling me the story because I wasn't with you, but as you drove across the Wilson bridge, Jacob was on the side of the car where he could see the pentagon, the fire, the flame, the smoke coming out of the pentagon and I recall you telling me that he had asked you what that was. Yeah, I mean, yeah, I basically said, you know when you're older we'll find out and we'll talk about that. So remember just spending time glued to the TV and watching like trying to understand it and figure out what was going on and why Really confused. Yeah. And I know, I think we realized at a certain point that we had spent way too much time focused on trying to figure out like and follow it and watch what was going on because one night we were sitting there and Jacob built a stack of Legos and he had built two huge towers and then he took his airplane and he smashed the airplane into the towers and were instantly like okay, time to turn the TV off and walk away and like focus on something else because yes, we realized how it was impacting him and that he had was , it was doing something like that . Yeah, so for our generation, I mean it shaped us, it's probably similar to our parents generation of that Kennedy cessation maybe we're really the first time all that stuff is kind of broadcast live and trying to understand if it makes sense of it was really, really awkward. But I remember like, hey man, we got to, like they said, the gates can be backed up. We're doing all these searches for the next day. Like, like it's back to work like, and I don't remember if you went back to work right away or whether, I don't know that I did. I think I stayed home a couple of days. Yeah. Because well, you know, I went back right away and so remember shall like leaving the house like three in the morning and like sitting in line to get in the base for like three or 4, it was multiple hours. I remember that it took you a long time, those first few days. So if you've been her, if you've been stopped at the gate for random anti terrorism measure, you have to pop open everything and they look at everything. You can imagine that for every single vehicle going in the base, like that's what it was. And uh, it was really, really just long and stressful and anxious and stuff. And then eventually when you went back to work and Jake was going to daycare on base, like I had to take him with me. So we'd have snacks and breakfast and lunch, you know before I even dropped him back off at daycare or so it was interesting time for sure. And of course also you know that the FBI took lead on the pentagon. My boss was in was I agent and he's like, yeah like you got called down the pentagon and see him for six months and he was down there working and so just life changed in an instant. Yeah. And the one thing that that I remember was that you know, we hadn't been in Washington D. C. all that long. We had arrived in Washington D. C. in February of that year of 2001. So we hadn't been there all that long. We have been downtown but there was a ton of events that were so excited to be in town and lived there and be able to see like the Christmas tree lighting and the Easter egg roll and all that stuff. And White house too. And the White House, the tour of the White house and all that like stopped and having you in. So I like I'd be like, well I think we should, I'd like to do this and you're like, I've seen a briefing, I can't tell you the details but we're not going there and I'm like yeah, so I left when we when we left Washington D. C. I was sad to have done so

solely because there were so many things that I had hoped to take advantage of while we were there that we didn't get to do that. We did get to do one I think before we left and we go to the lighting of the Christmas tree one year. Yes right before we left. Before we did we did go down and do a Christmas tree lady but we kind of stayed back on that outskirts. We didn't get into the middle of the crowd and yeah so now we look back on it and you know we obviously went way to the right on protection because we don't understand what the threat was and stuff. You look back now I'm kind of like why do we do all that stuff but at the time we're worried about other things happening right? And so we have just seared in our memory for sure that we didn't want to you know I didn't want something like that to happen again. So um but you know I was talking to Sam here before and um You mentioned like these airmen that are coming in now that are 18, don't know what life was like prior to having a Prior to 9/11 and like going to a baseball game without having to go through a metal detector. Like now I don't even think about it but you imagine back then were that was the norm like we just walked right in, walked right in, you have to worry about what was in your purse. You could have any size person you didn't generally baby bag purse. You can go through the airports with as much liquids as you wanted to. Um You can go to the gate and like pick up people visitors as soon as they came off of the plane instead of waiting until they got to baggage claim or and not having to be shoot away at the airport by somebody as you're waiting to pick them up. You have to wait cellphone lot like all these things are the world's just so different right now and um and there's probably been you know some good things that happened as well right? Um I think the international um intelligence community certainly has come together. We've we learned our lesson from that for sure. We're trying to apply those lessons and cyber now and so I just came back from cyber com reserves summit last week and was super interesting to see how the inter agency is working together with us. You know solve problems and get after our threats and we would not be where we are today without unfortunately that happening we're nowhere near where we need to be but certainly a lot of the walls and barriers are down now to you know to give us the opportunity to be better as a community against you know national security threats and so I know for us I don't want to speak for you. But for me um the D. C. Life was really hard. Yeah it was hard and especially after that you know I don't I don't know that we didn't really meet people that were around us a lot and you know there wasn't there wasn't a lot of things because everything got locked down. I mean for the longest time used to be like kind of like the pandemic. Yeah I mean you couldn't you couldn't get into any of the Smithsonian's you couldn't get into the white house. You know you just weren't going anywhere. Big public events weren't being held. Yeah it was it is it is it is kind of a lot like the pandemic. So we had to find other activities to do. And I know we went to the mountains and took trips and trying to find some other activities but I think we decided that we're gonna that's when we joined the reserve a couple years later. Yeah and so we took the opportunity to join the reserve after that. I don't I don't want to say it's cousin 9/11 but there's a time where we were going to like maybe this was it last assignment, get out go do something else you know do something industry move back move back home and it at least for me you know it helps you make that decision to continue to serve well

and I think I think there was a period of time there to where Jake was almost an only child because I'm like how can we bring more Children into this world with as crazy as it is and then you know, we got four or five years post 9/11 and I'm like , oh , but he's gonna be lonely , you know , kind of forgetting about that . I had said all that craziness and I didn't want to do that then I thought about him being lonely and so um, so yeah, I mean it was just a crazy time and I think the operational temple is significantly changed obviously from, from then. I mean I remember before, like you're talking deployment very few people ever deployed obviously post 9/11, everybody's got most people got multiple deployments and now we're starting to win those down as well with what's going on currently in the world and the shift in our national security strategy but it completely shaped an entire generation of, you know, people and families and how we handle deployments and where people are going and you know, burning people out. I mean there's people there, special operators have done 6789, 10 11 deployments. What that toll has done, you know to them in the family. Yeah, yeah. And I think back and, and I don't, I think there were some trials of the key spouse program going on around that time, but the key spouse program didn't really exist in its current state then. But it sure would have been nice to have it then to have, you know, to be checked on to see how everybody's going and have that have that network, you know, kind of like we have now where when things are happening, we can we can call and check. And that's definitely a time that I think back to man that would have been nice at that time to have that that network of other spouses that are going through the same thing and not knowing just what was connecting people and kind of like, you know, the pandemic here. Well, I think that's another lesson we learned like connecting with people is really important and giving them an opportunity to talk and listening just be engaged about their concerns and feelings and making sure the units so like I feel much more connected to my unit and since post 9/11 than I did the first, you know, 70 years prior to that, it was a little bit just different. I don't know how to explain. Yeah. And so, um hopefully we continue to learn from these lessons and move forward with how we treat people and stay connected and mission wise, certainly want to never forget what happened in the lessons we learned from that and take that into our everyday lives and we're just not going back on some of those things like you're not gonna be able go to baseball game or a football game without going metal detectors ever again. And so I think we just accept that move on and take what to take the best of it and get rid of the worst of it and continue to press on. But it's interesting, you know, looking at our kids knowing that they don't know any different and there they're doing fine. Well maybe doing in our case any closing comments or thoughts. No, I guess um, it was a really trying time just being so unsure of what was happening and how long things were going to last and nobody really had any ideas and I really didn't connect it to kind of what's been going on with the covid until you brought it up. But it is very similar situation and, and um, you know, we managed to get through that and I'm sure we'll get through this. Um, and it's going to be, it is trying, you know, everybody, we thought it was improving and now we kind of got a little setback and, but I know we'll get through it and just like we did that and we'll learn some lessons and, you know, there's fear, anxiety, depression, hopefully we see a little bit of come together as a community to try to solve this and attack it and not let

it, you know, completely destroyed who we are as a culture and just around the world and making sure people have opportunities to um and access to the health care they need and that we're taking these lessons really learned and you know not having another pandemic . And so I remember being at the V. A. We're doing I was working there were doing pandemic flu planning. This was back 2006 2007, 2008 09. Like what happened all that. We just forgot that and lost that muscle movement and we can't do that. We've got to continue to get better and certainly take care of our families and our units the best we can. So appreciate everybody. Listen. I think this has been a good discussion. Thanks for your time K.C. You're welcome. There'll be more to file. Um so I think we have another podcast coming. It's going to talk about some more stories about their 9/11 experiences as well. So thanks again for listening. And until next time.