On Approach to LaGuardia, a Dark Cloud Below

By Charles H. White Jr.
For the Valley News

When I served as a visiting professor at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy in Kings Point, N Y., I commuted weekly between Washington National and LaGuardia airports. I left D.C. on an early shuttle flight on Sept. 2, a beautiful, clear day. As usual, I sat on the left side for the view of Manhattan as the plane flew up the East River on its approach to LaGuardia. After viewing the Statue of Liberty, I became aware of a dark "cloud" below the plane.

This didn't make sense on a cloudless day. Then I saw it was coming from the twin towers, now abreast of my flight. (Film clips show a plane flying through the smoke plume from the first hit.) We didn't know what was happening — there was no announcement — and we were told to leave the plane as soon as it landed. The flight deck door was closed.

The radio was on in the car that brought me to the Academy. I thought I heard or felt a "thump" before it reported a second hit had just occurred.

When I arrived at the academy (on the western end of Long Island) it appeared that all the midshipmen then not in class were on the lawn watching the twin towers burn. There was anger (the second hit dismissed the "accident" explanation), and there was a feeling of a call to duty among the midshipmen, who would be commissioned in the armed services upon graduation. But there was no understanding of who or what did this to us.

Within a matter of hours, a military field hospital — a tent city and hundreds of cots — was set up at the academy. It seemed like hundreds of doctors and nurses in their surgical scrubs stood by. And the academy's boat fleet was readied to go to lower Manhattan. But no casualties came; no evacuations were conducted.

As the midshipmen came to my class later in the day, I felt a mixture of pride, fear and love for them. I remembered seeing other Army field hospitals that were, unfortunately, not empty. I knew that these kids, like some a generation before them, would be asked to carry a heavy burden that a vast majority of their contemporaries, in supposedly more "elite" institutions, would not.

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Charles H. White Jr. at his home in Norwich.

Valley News — Jennifer Hauck