Thoughts on Two Tragedies: 12/7 and 9/11

By Dr. Richard Kelley

Tomorrow, September 11, 2011, our nation and many around the world will pause to remember, honor and pray for the souls of nearly 3,000 innocent people who lost their lives exactly 10 years ago, when al-Qaeda terrorists hijacked four commercial aircraft, full of passengers and crew, and crashed them into the World Trade Center's Twin Towers in New York City; the Pentagon, across the river from Washington, D.C.; and a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, about 60 miles southeast of Pittsburgh.

I will join in prayer for the 9/11 victims, but I will also be praying for the souls of the 2,350 service personnel and civilians killed in the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. I have lived long enough to have both events deeply etched in my memory in a very personal way.

As I have described before in Saturday Briefing, as a boy, I watched the bombs fall on Pearl Harbor with my family from the third floor patio of our home at 2270 Kuhio Avenue in Waikiki. Earlier that morning, my sisters and I had been delivered to Sunday School while back home, my parents, Roy and Estelle Kelley, were about to enjoy a breakfast of my mother's famous waffles with Captain John Schultz, USN, and his wife Martha. Capt. Schultz was wearing his dress white uniform and, when the explosions erupted at Pearl Harbor, he rushed to his ship anchored there and into harm's way without stopping to change his uniform. At the same time, my father rushed back to bring us kids home from Sunday School.

The story I have not told publicly is that I was scheduled to be staying in the Marriott Hotel at 3 World Trade Center on the night of September 10, 2001, and the next morning attending a meeting of the Executive Committee of World Travel & Tourism Council in the offices of American Express, across the street from the Marriott.

A week or so before, my wife, Linda, asked if my scheduled trip to New York was really necessary. She was dealing with the back-to-school issues of our two youngest children, Anne Marie, then 16 and Chris, 18. I had been flying to Hawai'i frequently and had other business travel scheduled that month and on into the fall. “Could you skip the WTTC meeting and help with the kids?” Linda asked.

I agreed to stay in Denver. The WTTC meeting obviously never took place. The Marriott, sitting adjacent to both of the Twin Towers, was successfully evacuated after American Airlines Flight 11 crashed into the North Tower and United Airlines flight 175 crashed into the South Tower. However, the hotel was destroyed and two Marriott employees killed when both towers collapsed onto it about two hours later. The office building housing American Express was also damaged.

I have been married to Linda over 32 years and have found her to be very prescient, with an amazing apparent foreknowledge of things or events before they exist or happen. When I turned on the TV and watched the second plane fly into the South Tower that awful morning, I realized that Linda's gift of prescience may have saved my life.

The Marriott Hotel next to the Twin Towers

The portion of the Pentagon that was destroyed by the impact of American Airlines' hijacked flight 77 was rebuilt within a year, and I visited the Pentagon Memorial about three years ago.

The Flight 93 National Memorial was dedicated today at the crash site in Pennsylvania. Former President George W. Bush joined family members of those on board that flight to consecrate the site.

In New York City, the National September 11 Memorial & Museum will be dedicated tomorrow, and the 1,776-foot One World Trade Center building, taller than the Twin Towers and already rising into the sky, is scheduled for completion in 2013.

May God bless all those who lost their lives in the tragedies of 12/7 and 9/11, their families, and the countless others who have since made the ultimate sacrifice — and their families — and those who will inevitably follow them as they fight to keep our nation safe and free.