

The remnants of Tropical Storm Gordon made for a perfectly miserable Sunday in Shanksville, Pa. It was the kind of rain and wind that can back up Northeastern airports for hours.

However, in the remote hills of Pennsylvania, it actually seemed to confer an appropriate, solemn atmosphere. The occasion was the dedication of the new Tower of Voices at the Flight 93 National Memorial. The National Park Service has commemorated the crash on a still-developing 2,200-acre site, where wind chimes in a new 93-foot tower rang for the first time this week.

I attended with a contingent of students and staff from Rider University. Former Pennsylvania Gov. Mark Schweiker – a Rider graduate, a trustee, and now a key player in the school’s homeland security master’s program – headlined the trip. As lieutenant governor on Sept. 11, 2001, one of the duties in his portfolio was disaster management. (The next month he became Pennsylvania’s 44th governor when Gov. Tom Ridge resigned to become homeland security adviser to President George W. Bush.)

Schweiker’s deep involvement on 9/ 11 and its aftermath meant he was given roles this week in the 17th anniversary events, both Sunday when the new tower was dedicated and Tuesday when President Trump visited Shanksville and spoke.



National Park Service volunteer guide Lou Dorshin describes the field where United 93 crashed. The flat boulder in the distance marks the point where the aircraft nose struck ground.

Schweiker described his harrowing day on 9/ 11. His strongest memory is being hurtled in a police cruiser toward Harrisburg, the state capital, at speeds up to 120 mph. The World Trade Center towers had been struck. Now another airliner had gone missing over western Pennsylvania. As he bounced in the back seat, his cellphone was patched into the Cleveland Air Traffic Control Center, where specialists spent a frantic half-hour attempting to contact the plane. Though most of the voices remain professionally calm, [audio excerpts](#) are excruciating to hear even today.

Because of airport congestion at Newark (what a surprise, you're probably thinking), United 93 had taken off for San Francisco 42 minutes late. That threw the four terrorists on board out of sync with their cronies who were hijacking three other planes. Eventually, after dipping into Ohio, Flight 93 turned east and then south. Its forced crash-landing ensued, in a rural field in Shanksville – just 20 minutes' flying time to Washington, D.C.

The 40 passengers and crew made sure the plane never got there.

Flight 93's terrorists, armed with knives and a bomb threat, had herded passengers away from the cockpit toward the rear of the mostly empty Boeing 757. (Its passenger capacity was 182.) Gathered in one spot, the passengers got a chance, face to face, to improvise a disaster plan, but of course no time to practice. They took a vote, became a unified force, improvised weapons and launched a furious counterattack.

Though they failed to retake control of the aircraft, they forced the terrorists to abandon their plot to take additional lives.

The horrific experiences of 9/ 11 impelled officials to open a new chapter in our nation's disaster response capabilities. Schweiker added luster to his own expertise the next year in the same Pennsylvania county. He was the top state official supervising the Quecreek Mine flooding, during which all nine coal miners trapped in rapidly rising waters were rescued after 77 hours; it's frequently called a "miracle."

Coincidentally, the same events in Pennsylvania steeled another person into a national reputation in the field. Dr. Glenn Kashurba, a local psychiatrist, provided on-site counseling during and after both the Flight 93 tragedy and the mine rescue. In the years since, while he continues his local practice, "disaster psychiatrist" has become his job under federal contracts at natural and manmade crises across the country.

Schweiker outlined both tremendous progress and unfilled needs. He said more efficient emergency management can be achieved through "soft power" responses;

more emphasis on persuasion than coercion from the top; more civilian leadership; and more emphasis on “practice, practice, practice.”

Realistic emergency practice drills are costly but essential. The Flight 93 passengers had to forge a fighting force out of complete strangers – on the fly! Practice drills help players from agencies with yawning differences in communication systems, protocols and priorities to work as a unified team even though they’re thrown together at the last minute. At least they’ve met each other. When a community or a government body tells Schweiker they have a disaster plan but can’t afford drills, he tells them they’re not serious about disaster preparation.

Like the field of emergency management, the Shanksville park is not totally complete. This rapidly greening former strip mine will benefit from more visitor amenities. But families of the 40 passengers and crew, along with [Friends of Flight 93](#), continue to supplement park service funding, just as the site continues to impel us to remember what happened there.

This week, the tower’s giant [wind chimes sounded](#) for the first time, pulled by victims’ family members.

(The noise on this recording that resembles a sizzling frying pan actually is caused by raindrops on the umbrella over my recorder; you’ll also hear rainfall in “One Voice,” below. Note that only eight of the planned 40 chimes had been installed by the time of the ceremony.)

From now on, the wind will sound a perpetual concert of remembrance, signifying the determinative role that voices played in the flight’s destiny. Patrick White, cousin of passenger Louis Joseph Nacke II, explained:

“As the nation and we, the families, would later learn, the voices of passengers and crew members were heard. Thirty-seven attempted phone calls to authorities and their loved ones led to conversations with one another on board. Ultimately, their voices worked together in the final minutes of the flight to share information about the attacks, first in New York and later the Pentagon.

“This led to a decisive vote to do – something. Passengers and crew members were heard, captured by the cockpit voice recorder, including the voice of my cousin Joey, who would have celebrated his 59th birthday today. Happy birthday, Joey.

“Together they fought back, preventing a fourth murderous attack. Their actions were louder than words.”

Near the end of the ceremony, the Singing Sergeants, official chorus of the U.S. Air Force, performed [“One Voice.”](#)



Former Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge speaks at the dedication of the Tower of Voices.

Most of us, we pray, will never be called to act so decisively in such grave circumstances. But like everyone, we flyers do have countless chances every day to choose small actions that will make a difference.

Let's start by cutting out all passenger-on-passenger discourtesy. Sure, it's someone else's fault, not ours, that we're stressed and in a hurry. But does that mean we should refuse to budge an inch for someone in a worse hurry? That we should treat seatmates like intruders? That our faces have to wear scowls all day? Let's start making aviation great again by respecting fellow flyers.

And here's a proposal for a new unwritten passenger rule: The person in the middle seat gets first dibs on both armrests.

With airline employees, many of us can get even ruder than we are with fellow passengers. Yes, flight attendants, gate agents, reservationists and lost-luggage managers can be exasperating to plead with. But much of the time they're caught in no-win situations, having to stand up for company policies they had no voice in making and that they quite possibly disagree with themselves. When they tell you something that's obviously not true, most of the time it's not their lie; they were directed to tell you that.

Their jobs have become more demanding and fatiguing. Meanwhile, their unions have been weakened, their pay and benefits have flattened at best, and their pride in once-proud professions has been chipped away. It must terrify them today to know that any wrong step they take could blow up worldwide on social media.

The passengers and crew of Flight 93 – a diverse group of 40 people from four nations – found another way. In minutes they forged a belief: “We’re all on the same team.” As the song says, “One people, one voice.” They changed history.

It shouldn't take an impending national catastrophe, fellow flyers, to make us realize – and to act as if – all the passengers and crew on any flight are all in the same boat. Or to be more precise, we're all in the same metal tube 7 miles above the Earth whisking us to anywhere in hours. A magic carpet! When I remember that, I marvel.

Of course, we need to support FlyersRights.org's crucial long game. We need to help them claw back the consumer rights and the human dignity that monopolistic airline corporations have stripped from us while spineless regulators stand back, refusing to ... regulate.

At the same time, we can also improve aviation ourselves, just a smidge. Say a friendly word to that stressed-out person next to you. Show appreciation to the rain-soaked worker gate-checking your huge carry-on. Don't bring irritability on board.

The passengers and crew of Flight 93 can imbue us all with a bit of heroism every day.

Thomas Simonet
Yardley, Pa.

