



Nearly 17 years after he served as crew chief aboard President George W. Bush's first post-9/11 flight to Manhattan, GySgt Joe Fijalkowski, USMC (Ret), surveys a Marine One helicopter at HMX-1, Quantico, Va., June 1. Fijalkowski now works as a civilian for the presidential transport squadron, where he is the lead engine mechanic for Marine One. (Photo by Abigail Wilson)

# The Flight to Ground Zero

## Sept. 14, 2001, Presidential Transport Remains Etched in the Minds of HMX-1 Marines

By Sara W. Bock

**F**or the elite group of Marines selected to transport the President of the United States aboard Marine One, the famed olive green, "white top" helicopter attached to Marine Helicopter Squadron One (HMX-1), some flight paths become second nature, and many sights—like the New York City skyline—are routine to the point of becoming nearly unremarkable.

But in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, when hijackers rammed two 767 jetliners into the World Trade Center's twin towers, another into the Pentagon, and made a fourth failed attempt that ended with a crash in a remote location in Pennsylvania, a Sept. 14, 2001, flight to the southern tip of Manhattan for one crew of HMX-1 Marines was atypical, to say the least.

Their mission was identical to that of every other Marine One flight: to get the president where he needed to be safely and on time. On this day, though, things were markedly different. President George W. Bush's destination was Ground Zero, and the nation's wounds were fresh from the inconceivable tragedy that claimed the lives of nearly 3,000 people. America would be forever changed, and the country's response to the day's events had only just begun.

The mood onboard was solemn, and the view from above was sobering as the crew took in the sight below from an unbelievable vantage point. For the pilot, co-pilot, crew chief and security guards who ensured Marine One's safe landing that day at the Downtown Manhattan Heliport, the pall of smoke over New York, visible from many miles away, is forever etched into their memories.

Until now, their story has largely gone untold; for them, this comes from a deep respect for those who tragically lost their lives that day, and a strongly held belief that they didn't do anything remarkable—that in that moment, they were just Marines doing their job.

Like all Americans who were alive on 9/11 and were old enough to comprehend the events that transpired that Tuesday morning in 2001, the Marines involved recall without hesitation exactly where they were and what they were doing when they first heard that the nation was under attack.

Security guards Corporal Liberty Steiner and Cpl Alfredo Cerna, a married couple, had both just returned home from working the night shift. (Their unique role at HMX-1 was not to guard the commander-in-chief—that's reserved for Secret Service—but to guard the perim-



Fijalkowski captured this aerial view of the southern tip of Manhattan during the Sept. 13, 2001, rehearsal flight for President Bush's arrival in New York the following day. He and other crew members recall being shocked to see how much smoke continued to pour out of the World Trade Center site days after the attacks.



COURTESY OF COL STEVE TAYLOR, USMC (RET)

**Above:** Marines with HMX-1 stand with New York first responders in front of Marine One at the Downtown Manhattan Heliport, Sept. 14, 2001.



COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES

**President George W. Bush embraces a firefighter at the site of the World Trade Center, Sept. 14, 2001.**

eter of each landing site and make sure the aircraft was secure at all times.) Their attempts to fall asleep were thwarted by the incessant ringing of their telephone. They quickly packed bags and headed back to the HMX-1 hangars at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., to stage their gear and wait for tasking.

Staff Sergeant Joe Fijalkowski, a crew chief assigned to Marine One, had the day off after working all weekend and was at home with his 9-month-old son when he

turned on the TV and began watching in disbelief.

Major Phil Fickes, who would co-pilot the flight on Sept. 14, was driving to Washington, D.C., for a meeting and heard the coverage of the World Trade Center attacks on the radio. He was still on the road when the third hijacked plane hit the Pentagon, and he could see the smoke from the 14th Street Bridge as he crossed the Potomac.

Sitting behind his desk at HMX-1 headquarters, signing paperwork, was the

squadron's commanding officer, Colonel Steve Taylor, who would pilot Marine One on the flight to Ground Zero. It was a clear, blue, sunny day on Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., he recalls, when one of the squadron's Marines showed up in his office with the news that the first plane had hit the north tower.

Assuming it had been some sort of freak accident, Taylor continued working for a few minutes before heading down to the ready room, where a group of HMX Marines had gathered around the television. He entered the room just in time to watch the second plane hit the south tower. Taylor immediately called a meeting of the squadron's department heads and ordered that every helicopter be "preflighted" and crews assigned so that they would be prepared in the event of being called to assist in a mass-casualty scenario. The squadron, which not only is responsible for presidential transport but also serves as the primary operational test and evaluation unit for Marine assault support helicopters, mobilized immediately.

"You never know how you're going to react until you're put in that situation ... and you go on automatic. It's what you train for," said Steiner of the squadron's response, crediting the Marine Corps with preparing them for even the most unthinkable of situations.

And while that call never came, another call came in a few days later: one that would bring these five Marines together to take part in a pivotal moment in American history.

After being shuttled around the country as a safety measure, President Bush, who was in Florida at the time of the attacks, returned to the White House on the evening of Sept. 11, where he delivered a televised address from the Oval Office. The next day, he met with his national security team and toured the damage at the Pentagon. Then, on the 13th, the call came in to HMX: President Bush would travel to New York City the following day. Taylor quickly put together a detachment of Marines, of which he would personally take the lead, and the group left Quantico in the afternoon, bound for McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey.

"The flight to McGuire was unusual. Other than fighters, tankers and Airborne Warning and Control System, we were the only other aircraft in the air that day," said Taylor. "I never had imagined that we would be flying to New York, with all air traffic grounded, and the skies of our nation being patrolled by fighters," he added, saying that the environment felt similar to what one might expect in a combat situation and certainly not on domestic soil.

MONTH SEPTEMBER YEAR 2001

During a visit with *Leatherneck*, April 5, Fijalkowski shows his logbook page from September 2001, which documents the flight to New York on the 13th and the presidential flight the following day. (Photos by Nancy S. Lichtman)

On any other day, the northeast corridor from Quantico to New Jersey would have been busy and hectic, filled with air traffic, said Taylor. There was something particularly eerie about knowing they were virtually alone in the sky, and their interactions with air traffic controllers were atypical and somber.

"I don't think anybody ever really said it, but it was sort of implied ... [that] this is an other-worldly kind of situation," said Taylor of the dialogue during the flight.

After a quick landing at McGuire to refuel, they took off again, headed to the city for a rehearsal flight to ensure that they were prepared for the President's arrival the following day. The decision was made to land at the Downtown Manhattan Heliport—also known as the Wall Street pad—chosen for its proximity to Ground Zero, which would allow for the shortest possible route for the presidential motorcade.

As the Marines approached New York City on Sept. 13, not only were they able to rehearse the next day's movements, but also to begin processing the devastation as they witnessed it firsthand.

"It wasn't New York anymore," said Fijalkowski, now a retired gunnery sergeant who continues to work at HMX-1



as a civilian, the lead engine mechanic for Marine One. "The World Trade Center was such a dominant piece of the picture, and once we got up there, it was just flat."

They passed the Statue of Liberty, went north up the East River, turned west over lower Manhattan to the Hudson River, and then flew south along the Hudson.

"As we flew over the site, I was most aware of the fact that we were looking at the graves of what was believed to be more than 5,000 people," said Taylor. The significance of that moment is not lost on him—or the rest of the crew—even now, 17 years later.

After scouting out the site, they made landings on the pad, departed and returned to McGuire.

"There was, I'll say, somewhat less pressure, because this was just the rehearsal. The president wasn't with us and wasn't until the next morning," said Taylor. "So we were able to kind of absorb those things, see them, deal with them, however we each did, to get our job done."

President Bush had declared Friday, Sept. 14, as a National Day of Prayer and Remembrance. After a morning Cabinet meeting and remarks at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., early in the afternoon, he boarded Air Force One

headed for McGuire. Mayor Rudy Giuliani and New York's Governor George Pataki met the President there and the trio boarded the "white top" VH-3D Sea King. Before heading to the landing pad, Marine One flew over ground zero, allowing President Bush to view the scene from the air.

It had been three full days since the planes hit the towers, and the skyline remained hardly visible through the cloud of smoke that continued to fill the air.

"It was absolutely surreal," recalled Fickes, who co-piloted Marine One that day and retired from the Corps as a lieutenant colonel last year. "I remember landing on the Wall Street pad and seeing all the first responders that had come off the scene to provide protection and crash/ fire rescue for our aircraft and the other support aircraft who were with us. They hadn't slept in three days probably, and they'd lost lots of buddies and they had the thousand-yard stare in their eyes, they were covered in dust and it was just a very sobering moment."

The Downtown Manhattan Heliport, with a small landing pad in the East River, was swarming with New York police, firefighters and Port Authority. Their presence was standard procedure



COURTESY OF THE WHITE HOUSE

President George W. Bush salutes Fijalkowski, left, and Cpl Liberty Steiner, right, as he exits Marine One at the Downtown Manhattan Heliport in New York City, Sept. 14, 2001.



COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Aboard Marine One, President Bush converses with New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, left, and New York Governor George Pataki as they tour the World Trade Center disaster site from the air, Sept. 14, 2001.

**CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters, support aircraft from HMX-1, follow Marine One through the thick smoke above Manhattan during the Sept. 13, 2001, rehearsal flight.**



GSgt JOE FIJALKOWSKI, USMC (RET)

for a presidential landing, but there were more people than usual, and the tone was completely different.

As HMX-1 security guards, Cpl Steiner and Cpl Cerna had been dropped off on the pad prior to the president's landing. For Cerna, a New York native, his observations that day hit close to home. Most striking to him was the number of first responders waiting at the pad.

"They looked like they were really traumatized. They'd gone through something really bad," said Cerna. "When they saw us there, and the helicopters got there and the president got there, they were really happy to see us there. From the time I got there, I couldn't believe what they'd gone through—it was like nothing I'd ever seen my entire time in the Marine Corps."

There was one particular observation Steiner made that still stands out in her mind today. Firefighters and police officers had written their social security numbers in permanent marker on their arms, so they could be easily identified

if, while searching for survivors among the debris, they didn't make it out alive.

"It's been so long, but it hasn't," said Steiner with emotion in her voice. "It's still raw and real."

Despite any feelings of shock and dismay, however, their training kicked in and took over, enabling the Marines to remain focused on getting the job done.

After Marine One and CH-46 Sea Knight support helicopters from HMX-1 made their landings on the pad, President Bush exited the aircraft and saluted Fijalkowski and Steiner. It made an impression on Steiner that, despite how preoccupied he must have been, the president didn't miss the salute. "You'd think that would have been the last thing on his mind," she said.

For Fijalkowski, whose job as crew chief aboard Marine One was multifaceted as he was responsible for maintaining the aircraft as well as being the "ceremonial," often-photographed Marine in dress blues who stands outside the aircraft as the president enters and exits, the police and

fire presence that day was unlike what he'd observed during every other New York landing.

"There's usually police and fire over there and it's usually a really jovial moment, but you could tell that the mood was totally different. Everybody was quiet and somber," said Fijalkowski, describing the exhaustion on the faces of the first responders, who were coated in a layer of ash. And the president, who according to Fijalkowski was normally very upbeat during Marine One flights, appeared emotional and subdued as he, Giuliani and Pataki greeted the first responders and boarded the motorcade to ground zero.

The Marines shut down the helicopters and began to wait for the president's return, speaking with the police officers and firefighters who had assembled at the heliport.

"As we began to talk to them, it was apparent that most of them had been working at the World Trade Center site since the attack," said Taylor. "They had been desperately digging for many hours,



**Fijalkowski photographed this image as Marine One flew over Ground Zero on Sept. 13, 2001. He and the other members of the crew recall that this sight, witnessed firsthand, is permanently "seared" into each of their memories.**

but by Friday there didn't seem to be much expectation that they would find many more survivors."

What was originally planned as a three-hour visit turned into six, as the president visited with families of victims of the World Trade Center attacks and spent time showing his support for those who had worked tirelessly for nearly four days, moving concrete and steel and risking their own lives in the harrowing search-and-rescue mission.

With a bullhorn in hand, President Bush

would deliver a speech to first responders that would arguably become one of the defining moments of his presidency.

"I can hear you! The rest of the world hears you, and the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon!" he shouted from atop a pile of rubble. Captured on camera, the moment is now an iconic part of American history and a harbinger of things to come.

It was dark when the motorcade arrived back at the Wall Street pad, and Marine One lifted off quickly once the President was on board.

"As we took off, we made another circle around the site," recalled Taylor. "By now it was bathed in the bright lights that had been set up to allow the recovery efforts to proceed during the night. The lights starkly highlighted the scene and it was

once again a very harsh reminder of the tragedy that had taken place there."

It was a quiet flight back to McGuire, with hardly any discussion on the radios or in the cockpit, recalled Taylor.

"On that day I think we all felt like we were a part of our nation's history. We empathized with our fellow citizens; we supported the president on what was a difficult day for all Americans; we were angry at what had happened to our country," said Taylor. "Most satisfying to me was that throughout the response to 9/11, the men and women of HMX-1 responded with the calm professionalism they have been known for throughout the history of the squadron."

Established in 1947, HMX-1 began as an experimental unit tasked with testing and evaluating military helicopters for



GYSGT JOE FIJALKOWSKI, USMC (RET)



COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES

**This iconic photo depicts President Bush's impromptu speech to firefighters and rescue workers as he stood atop the rubble of the collapsed World Trade Center at Ground Zero, Sept. 14, 2001.**



COURTESY OF GYSGT JOE FIJALKOWSKI, USMC (RET)

**Then-SSgt Joe Fijalkowski stands next to the presidential state car that transported President Bush from the Downtown Manhattan Heliport to Ground Zero as part of the official motorcade.**

children—who were born after 9/11—and he's been amazed to find that many of them don't have an understanding of what happened that day in 2001.

"I sometimes find myself talking about it, not my own experience, but just that day and how it changed our country, only I think more so because of my experience that day with the president. I want them to understand how important that day was," said Fickes.

A post-9/11 America has placed great

demands on its Marine Corps, and from HMX-1 to the infantry and everywhere in between, Marines have answered the call of duty with a steadfast determination to do what they do best: get the job done. The Marines who flew to Ground Zero on Sept. 14 insist that they don't deserve any accolades for their involvement—that they were simply doing their job—but there's no denying that for all, it's one day in the Marine Corps they'll never forget. 

possible use by the Marine Corps. Ten years later, in 1957, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, on vacation in Rhode Island, was urgently needed at the White House, and an HMX-1 helicopter transported him back to Air Force One in seven minutes, a ride that would have taken two hours by motorcade. Since then, rotary-wing transport of the president, vice president and other important personnel became an essential element of HMX-1's mission, and Marine One's frequent landings on the South Lawn of the White House a common sight.

He didn't think much of it at the time, but Fickes acknowledges that in retrospect, the flight to Ground Zero was a unique opportunity to experience history in what he considers an unfortunate way. In his life after the Corps, he teaches young

Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction  
prohibited without permission.