



TERRORISM

In Oklahoma City

20 Years Later, Marine Survivor
Shares His Story

By Sara W. Bock

Twenty years have passed since terror struck America's heartland. Captain Michael R. "Randy" Norfleet, USMC (Ret) recalls the events of April 19, 1995, as though they happened yesterday. It was a day that changed his life.

On that April day, America zeroed in on Oklahoma City as the news coverage poured in. The footage was devastating, and the images of rescue workers pulling the victims from the rubble—especially the children who were inside the building's day care center—are forever seared on the minds of all who watched in horror and disbelief.

That morning, the Alfred P. Murrah

Federal Building absorbed the blast of a 5,000-pound fertilizer bomb and was reduced to a pile of rubble. It was the culmination of a heinous anti-government plot by Timothy McVeigh and his co-conspirator, Terry Nichols. The building was home to the regional offices for numerous government agencies—and on the sixth floor, Recruiting Station Oklahoma City, 8th Marine Corps District. The recruiting station had been in the Murrah Building since 1977.

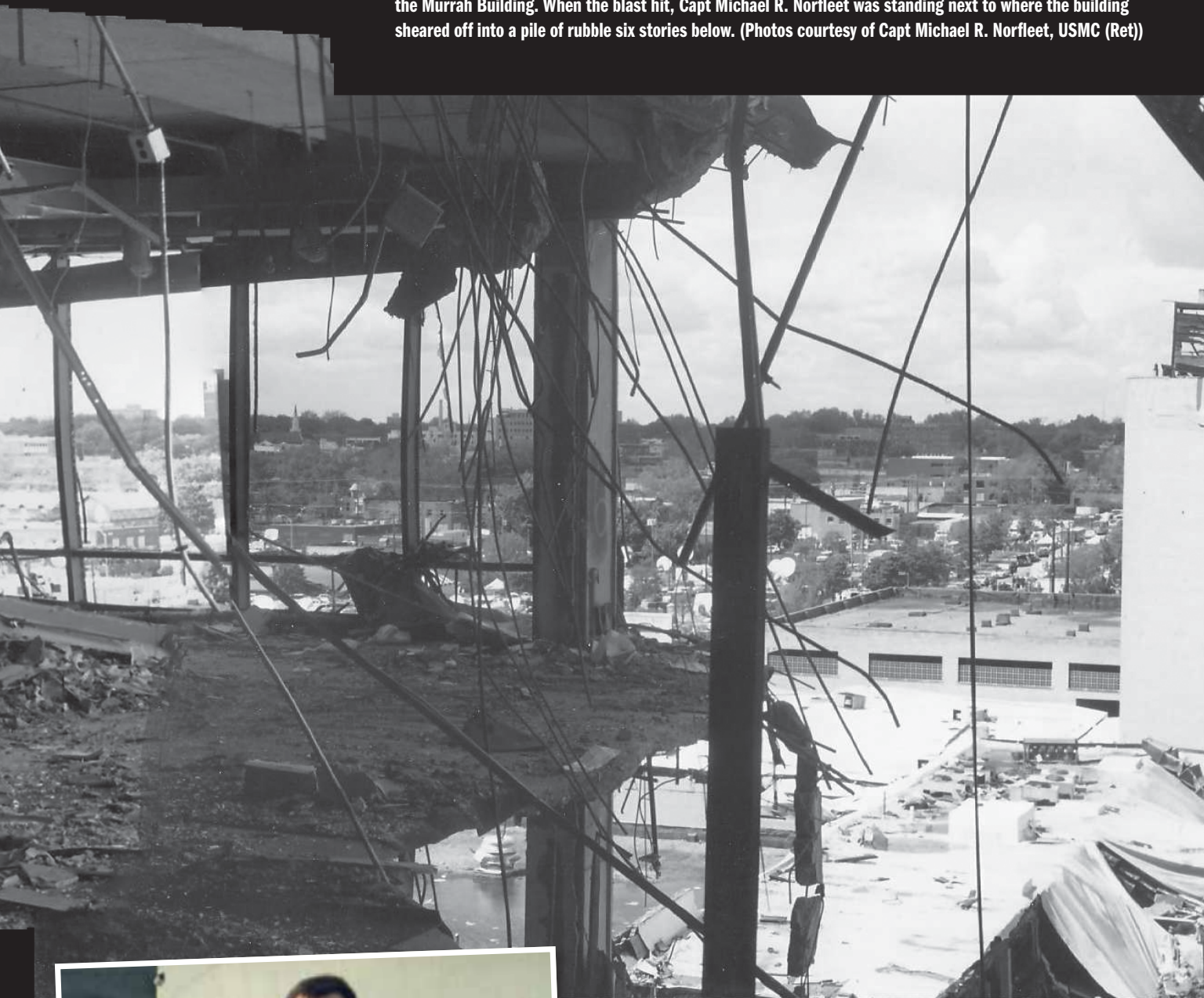
Two minutes prior to the explosion, Capt Norfleet entered the building and made his way to the recruiting office.

Norfleet, a KC-130 pilot, didn't have an office in the Murrah Building. He was the officer selection officer (OSO) in Still-

water, Okla., about an hour from Oklahoma City. On the morning of April 19 he was in Oklahoma City attending a prayer breakfast at the nearby Myriad Convention Center. Rather than immediately drive back to Stillwater, he made a spur-of-the-moment decision to swing by the recruiting station and get some "face time" with his commanding officer.

It was just before 9 o'clock in the morning when Norfleet parked his black Ford Ranger pickup truck in front of the building. Behind his truck was a yellow Ryder moving truck, parked in a loading zone. It seemed out of place to him, and as he contemplated what it might be doing there, a man jumped out and ran across the street. Later, Norfleet would find out that

This composite image of two court photos shows what remained of RS Oklahoma City after the bombing of the Murrah Building. When the blast hit, Capt Michael R. Norfleet was standing next to where the building sheared off into a pile of rubble six stories below. (Photos courtesy of Capt Michael R. Norfleet, USMC (Ret))



In 1990, during Operation Desert Storm, Norfleet, a KC-130 Hercules pilot, gets ready for a flight. Five years later, Norfleet was assigned as an OSO in Stillwater, Okla., but was visiting colleagues at RS Oklahoma City when the Murrah Building was bombed.

COURTESY OF CAPT MICHAEL R. NORFLEET, USMC (RET)

the man he saw was Timothy McVeigh, and that he was the only reliable witness who could place McVeigh with the Ryder truck that contained the explosives at the scene of the bombing.

The captain got out of his truck and headed into the building, walked right into an open elevator and headed up to the sixth floor. The first person he saw in the recruiting station office was Sergeant Benjamin L. Davis, the operations clerk for RS Oklahoma City.

“Captain Norfleet, can you call Headquarters Marine Corps and find out if my meritorious commissioning package has come through?” Davis asked after the two exchanged greetings.

The selection board had met the pre-



Search-and-rescue workers gather at the scene of the Oklahoma City bombing on April 26, 1995. It took many days and a great deal of manpower to recover all the bodies from the rubble.

vious day, and as the OSO, Norfleet had processed Davis' package. He knew the results would be available, so he sat down at the desk of the operations officer, Capt Matthew Cooper, and picked up the phone to make the call. On the other end, he heard a busy signal. He figured he would just try again later. He put the phone down and walked a few offices down to talk to the RS supply clerk, Sgt Tad Snidecor, who he had served with in Operation Desert Storm.

That's when it happened: the explosion that would take the lives of 168 victims, including 19 children, and injure more than 600. It is the most deadly act of domestic terrorism our nation has ever experienced. The clock read 9:02 a.m., and Norfleet

had entered the building only two minutes earlier.

He later learned that he had been in the kill zone until about 30 seconds before the blast. If not for the busy signal on his call to HQMC, his story likely would have ended that day.

"I remember everything," Norfleet said. "I remember it because I felt it, and I heard it, not because I saw it," he added, referring to his experience as a "grayout."

He instinctually threw his left arm in front of his left eye—the glass façade of the building had shattered from the blast, the shards becoming daggers as they rained down on the imploding structure. His left arm and right eye were pierced with glass, and he began to bleed profusely.

Norfleet estimates that about 10 seconds later, all nine stories started to cave in on top of each other. Every one of the support beams in the building gave way except for one, and it happened to be the one he was closest to. He didn't realize it at the time, but the building sheared off just a foot or two from where he lay, rattled and bleeding.

The impact of the structural collapse threw him into the west side of the wall. Norfleet's skull was fractured, his nose broken, there was a piece of glass lodged in his right eye and he was rapidly losing blood from the ulnar artery on his left wrist.

He doesn't know how long he was unconscious—maybe a minute, maybe longer—but when he regained consciousness, the dust had settled a bit.

"It was deathly quiet. It was just deathly quiet, and I don't know how else to say it other than that," Norfleet said, describing the eerie scene.

Sgt Snidecor had sustained fewer injuries from the blast and his Marine Corps training kicked in immediately.

"He was a Marine in charge," said Norfleet. "He knew what to do."

He cleaned off his desk, put Norfleet on top of it and began to administer first aid. After a minute or so, he left to go find some material to bandage Norfleet's wounds. However, Norfleet knew in his heart that if he stayed on the desk he was going to bleed out. He got up and started looking for a way out.

"Somebody had walked out of the building before I had, and they had left a blood trail. ... It was like a neon sign, a neon trail, right there on top of the dust, and I followed the blood to the back of the building. Then, miracle of all miracles, all the stairs were intact at the back of the building," Norfleet remembered.

Somehow, despite his injuries, he mustered the strength to walk down all six flights of stairs and into an ambulance. To this day, he considers it a supernatural experience.

Upon arrival at St. Anthony's Hospital just a few blocks away, Norfleet's blood pressure read 50/0. His blood loss had brought him to the verge of death.

Meanwhile, his wife, Jamie, who was seven months pregnant, sat at home with their two young sons, Matthew and Paul, hoping and praying for a miracle as she watched the devastation on her TV screen with the knowledge that her husband had been in the building at the time. They hadn't received any official word, but the Marines from Norfleet's officer selection office showed up at her home to show their support. Fearing the worst, she wouldn't let them come inside at first.

The 30th Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen Carl E. Mundy Jr., visits Norfleet at St. Anthony's Hospital, Oklahoma City, April 20, 1995. As soon as Gen Mundy heard about the bombing, he headed to Oklahoma to be with his Marines.

She eventually let them in, and they sat with her and waited. Hours passed, and still she had not received any word as to her husband's whereabouts.

Norfleet was in surgery for hours, and at 3 p.m., the Red Cross contacted Jamie. Randy had written her phone number on a surgical nurse's arm. She and a family member immediately left to make the hour-long drive to Oklahoma City.

To get to the hospital, they had to drive right past the Murrah Building. The rescuers were bringing babies and children out of the wreckage; authorities were holding back screaming mothers. It is a mental picture Jamie can't erase from her mind, even 20 years later.

She was too shaken to realize it, but when Jamie arrived at the hospital, an employee could tell that she was in labor. They wouldn't let her see her husband until after she visited the labor and delivery unit, where they were able to stop her labor. Their daughter, Morgan, was born two months later, but nearly made an entrance on the day her father almost lost his life.

One of Norfleet's earliest memories after waking from surgery was opening his eyes to see General Carl E. Mundy Jr., 30th Commandant of the Marine Corps, in his recovery room. As soon as Gen Mundy heard about the bombing, he traveled to Oklahoma City to be with his Marines.

Two of them didn't live to meet the Commandant.

Sgt Davis and Capt Randolph A.



COURTESY OF CAPT MICHAEL R. NORFLEET, USMC (RET)



COURTESY OF OKLAHOMA CITY NATIONAL MEMORIAL & MUSEUM

Sgt Benjamin L. Davis



COURTESY OF OKLAHOMA CITY NATIONAL MEMORIAL & MUSEUM

Capt Randolph A. Guzman

Guzman, Executive Officer, RS Oklahoma City, lost their lives that day on the soil they had sworn to defend upon earning the title "Marine." Their bodies were discovered days later, buried under the debris from the building's collapse. Davis never learned that HQMC had indeed accepted his meritorious commissioning package just the day before.

"He was always motivated. Even when

he answered the telephone," a fellow Marine said of Davis.

Friends remembered Guzman as an exceptionally nice and personable Marine. He and his fiancée had planned to get married soon.

At the scene in the days after the bombing, another Marine was there in a different capacity. Among the police, firemen and emergency medical service specialists from across the nation who were dispatched as part of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Task Force 1, New York City police officer Michael S. Curtin, a first sergeant in the Marine Corps Reserve, worked indefatigably to rescue survivors and extract bodies from the wreckage.

On the morning of April 21, 48 hours after the Murrah Building had crumbled from the horrifying blast, Curtin saw



COURTESY OF CAPT MICHAEL R. NORFLEET, USMC (RET)

Above left: Jamie Norfleet, right, holds her husband's hand as he recovers in the hospital after the bombing.



COURTESY OF CAPT MICHAEL R. NORFLEET, USMC (RET)

Above right: This photo taken at his home in Stillwater, Okla., a few months after the bombing, is of Randy Norfleet holding his infant daughter, Morgan, who was almost born on the day of the bombing. He had numerous surgeries after the bombing, but never regained sight in one eye.



something in the rubble that he would have recognized anywhere—deep blue trousers with a red “blood stripe.” He knew it was a fellow Marine, and upon cutting away part of the trousers and seeing that the victim had light-colored skin (Sgt Davis was African-American), he realized that it was Capt Guzman. Until that point, he and Sgt Davis had both been unaccounted for.

Curtin knew what he had to do. He began asking around to see if there were any other Marines among his fellow rescuers. Sure enough, he found three: Manny Hernandez, Juan Garcia and Ray Bonner. The area of the building in which Curtin had found Guzman’s remains was not an area that the recovery efforts were currently focused on, so their plan required special permission from the FEMA chain of command. They received permission to take on what was considered a high-risk task because the debris covering Guzman’s body included major structural columns



At the Oklahoma City National Memorial, 168 stone chairs sit on an open field, representing the lives lost that day. Two of the chairs are marked for Capt Guzman and Sgt Davis.

COURTESY OF OKLAHOMA CITY NATIONAL MEMORIAL & MUSEUM



COURTESY OF OKLAHOMA CITY NATIONAL MEMORIAL & MUSEUM

from the building. It took five hours and an electric jackhammer, but they were able to remove his body. Guzman was still at his desk, beneath the debris.

An Air Force colonel who was on site found an American flag and sent it in to the Marines who had just recovered one of their own. They draped the flag over Guzman's body and brought him out of the rubble.

"When we came out of the building, I couldn't believe what I saw," Curtin told *Leatherneck* in 1995. "Cranes had stopped. It was completely quiet. Rescuers stopped and looked; people had lined the street. Everyone was watching in silence as we brought our Marine out.

"We were in a highly visible location. Engines were turned off. People removed their covers, bowed their heads ... covered their hearts. You could tell the veterans. They were the ones saluting, with tears in their eyes," he said.

Tragically, Sergeant Major Michael

Left: On the ground where the Murrah Building once stood, a peaceful memorial now serves as a reminder of the act of terrorism that happened there on April 19, 1995.

Below: Earlier in 2015, Randy Norfleet and his family visited the *Leatherneck* office at MCB Quantico, Va., to share their story. From the left, Norfleet's son Paul; wife, Jamie; Norfleet; daughter, Morgan; and daughter-in-law, Shay. His oldest son, Matthew (not pictured), is a second lieutenant at The Basic School on board MCB Quantico.



SARA W. BOCK

Curtin, USMCR would later lose his own life to an act of terrorism as he died on Sept. 11, 2001, while saving the lives of victims at the World Trade Center attack.

Capt Norfleet medically retired from the Marine Corps in October 1995, six months after the bombing. He never regained vision in his right eye, so his injuries necessitated an end to his flying career. He always has been determined, however, not to let the experience rob him of a successful, fulfilling future.

Norfleet now works as a test engineer, but he spends his free time traveling and speaking to various groups about his experience in Oklahoma City. He has a strong desire to help others come to peace with tragedies they have experienced or life-altering injuries they have sustained. Recently, he spoke to students at The Citadel in Charleston, S.C., about his experience. He shared with them the importance of having a calling "higher than yourself—the Marine Corps, for example," he said.

"If you don't," Norfleet said, "you doubt yourself, and the whole loss seems meaningless. I'm sure there are plenty of wounded Marines that wonder: Was their loss worth it? Was the reason they were there worth the loss they sustained? For what I gave, was it worth it?"

Your experience can either be a stepping-stone or a stumbling block, he believes. "You can either use the experience to get better or ... you can never get up from it." His hope is that his story will

encourage those to use their own tragedies as stepping-stones.

Lastly, he shares the importance of accepting what he calls the "new normal."

"The new normal is hard. ... When you go through a trial like this, and [for] any Marine who's been wounded, it's hard to see into the future. It's the unknown that's so hard to get your mind around, get your heart around," he said.

Norfleet's story is a testimony to the human spirit and the Marine Corps spirit, of how we can all overcome the trials and adversities that are put in front of us.

He was a key witness in Timothy McVeigh's trial in 1997 and also was a witness in Terry Nichols' trial. In 2001, he attended a closed viewing of McVeigh's execution. He said his personal outlook on watching the execution is like a wound when stitches are removed from it—"it can finally heal," he said.

Today, a memorial to honor the victims of the April 19, 1995, Oklahoma City bombing serves as a beacon of hope on the same soil where the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building once stood. For each life lost, a stone chair sits empty on a pristine field—168 chairs, 168 lives. In the sixth row of chairs, two names will stand out to any Marine, past, present and future, who visits that hallowed ground. Etched in the stone: Captain Randolph A. Guzman, USMC and Sergeant Benjamin L. Davis, USMC. Lost 20 years ago on that April day, but never forgotten.

