



PHOTO PROVIDED

Oregon Flight for Freedom participants marched down Fifth Avenue in the 2001 Columbus Day Parade, a powerful symbol of unity from sea to shining sea in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack in New York City. Jack McGowan of Sisters is front-row center, holding the American flag.

roil of mixed emotions — resilience and the desire for joy contending with the somber weight of events.

“There was a certain sense of guilt,” McGowan said. “You’re not supposed to smile. But there was such a sense of welcome and sheer relief, I think, that we were there.”

McGowan reckons that the economic impact of a thousand Oregonians was welcome, but just “a drop in the bucket” in an effort to get the city back on its feet. The real impact of the Flight for Freedom was in knitting the country together, in making a tangible statement of solidarity.

“It was the psychological embrace that told New Yorkers, ‘You’re not alone,’” McGowan said.

And New Yorkers responded. The entire staff of the Waldorf-Astoria turned out on the steps and the sidewalk to welcome the Oregonians,

waving American flags and cheering. Flight participants were invited to ring the bell at the reopening of the New York Stock Exchange, and were asked to participate in the city’s legendary Columbus Day Parade.

In his *Oregonian* retrospective, Dozono recalled, “Certainly the highlight of the trip for many was marching down Fifth Avenue in the Columbus Day Parade. Enthusiastic New Yorkers [yelled] ‘We love you, Oregon.’ We gave the T-shirts off our backs — ‘Oregon Heart NY’ — to our newfound friends along the parade route.”

Oregonians were treated to standing ovations in New York restaurants.

For McGowan, the unity and solidarity on display during the Oregon Flight for Freedom represents a precious moment and an opportunity

to stand upon the best of our ideals, a moment that he fears Americans have allowed to slip away.

“To say that we squandered it, maybe that’s too harsh,” he said. “But we missed it. Without a compass, we wandered into the wilderness that is America today.”

Jack and Jan McGowan have lived in Sisters for more than 14 years now. Jack continues his public service with the Sisters-Camp Sherman Rural Fire Protection District Board of Directors.

And no matter how far we’ve wandered in the 20 years since the September 11, 2001 attacks, McGowan recalls the Oregon Flight for Freedom with deep emotion and profound gratitude for the opportunity to help bring Americans together.

“I’m still so proud of that,” he said. “I’m so thankful I was part of that.”

Air National Guard patrolled Oregon’s skies

By Jim Cornelius
Editor in Chief

For days after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the only planes in the skies over Sisters were the F-15s of the Oregon Air National Guard.

Sisters resident Jim Cunningham was responsible for those planes.

Brigadier General Cunningham didn’t yet live in Sisters full time, but he was visiting his parents at their home in Crossroads when the attacks went down.

“I got a phone call,” he recalled. “You are the only general officer in Oregon right now.”

Jim’s wife, Dana, drove him to Salem, and he got to work assessing the state of the nation’s air defenses, which are entirely the province of the Air National Guard.

“You don’t know if what’s happening on the East Coast is all of it or not,” he said. “You don’t know.”

So his pilots had to be ready for anything — another terrorist strike or an opportunistic attack when the U.S. was vulnerable and distracted.

Cunningham was utterly confident in the readiness of the defenses for the Pacific Northwest.

“The two best fighter wings in the U.S. are in this state,” he said. “Portland had 15 of their planes combat-ready in 15 hours.”

The rest were operational within 24 hours.

“They were the first in the nation to be up and ready,” he said.

Part of Cunningham’s role was to address the media, and to offer reassurance that the skies in the region were protected.

He recalls being struck by the immediate outpouring of patriotism, including in Portland, where noise complaints about military jets were more common than displays of patriotism.

“I was just amazed at the community response the day after,” he said. “Flags went up everywhere.”

Command in the Oregon Air National Guard was a part-time gig, and Cunningham remained a commercial pilot with United Airlines. He recognized that it could easily have been him in the cockpit of one of the doomed airliners. That gave him yet another perspective on readiness. He returned to the civilian cockpit a month after the 9/11 attacks.

“You could cut the atmosphere with a knife,” he said.

United had taken immediate steps to improve security,



PHOTO BY JIM CORNELIUS

Brigadier General Jim Cunningham of the Oregon Air National Guard was responsible for air defense over the Pacific Northwest in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. He lives in Sisters and has served many local community organizations.

including offering Taser training and installing air marshals on flights. Cockpit doors were hardened.

Twenty years down the line, though, Cunningham is dissatisfied with the level of security. He notes that hardened doors are not enough to secure the cockpit. There are still moments of vulnerability, such as when a pilot has to leave the cockpit to use the restroom.

“Most of it has to do with opening and closing that door,” Cunningham said. “Airport security — that’s like locks: it keeps out the honest people.”

He sees complacency setting in.

“I don’t believe the nation thinks another 9/11 can happen,” he said.

Cunningham is also appalled at the outcome of 20 years of warfare in Afghanistan, where the 9/11 attacks originated. A Vietnam veteran, he is dismayed to see the lessons of that conflict forgotten so quickly, and to see military and political leaders deceiving the American people.

“We haven’t had an exit plan for warfare since World War II,” he said. “National security has become a political issue that divides instead of uniting the nation.”

After his career in the Guard and the airlines, Cunningham has continued to serve his community through organizations from Habitat for Humanity to the Sisters Folk Festival to Kiwanis. He believes in country and community and service — but he worries about the future and the nation’s level of readiness, especially in cybersecurity.

“We’re behind China, we’re behind Russia,” he said, “And the evidence is everywhere.”

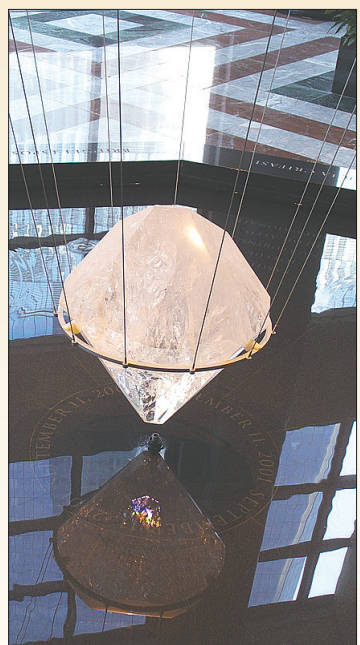


PHOTO PROVIDED

beliefs. I think I can speak for Peter in saying that we both learned and grew from the creativity of our relationship. Working on the memorial was a symbol and reflection of the destructive power intolerance can proliferate. And that it is incumbent upon each of us to set our own intolerance aside for our own good, and the greater good.”



PHOTO PROVIDED

A crystal shaped by Sisters Country artist Lawrence Stoller is the centerpiece of the Eleven Tears Memorial, honoring 11 American Express employees killed in the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York.