

AN AUSTRALIAN IN AMERICA

SEPTEMBER 10TH 2001 TO PRESENT

Christian Flurscheim

A normal day - 10th September 2001

A normal day for us began at around 7am. All of us would meet in the hotel's breakfast area. The breakfast was not bad and quite substantial. It was a buffet style breakfast and you had a choice of eggs (any style), sausages, bacon, cereal, omelettes and bagels. Although, after about 4 months of the same breakfast, the eggs tasted like plastic and it was generally oily.

After breakfast we would all assemble in the lobby waiting for either a shuttle bus or car to the office. The hotel had two hire cars available for us to use. Usually, the manager would have the keys and he would collect the car from the garage and drive round the front to pick us up. The standard car was a Dodge Caravan, a modestly sized 8 people van. Once we were all assembled we'd drive to the office.

Our days were long and quite busy. At this stage of the project we were always receiving software updates overnight from Australia, which we would spend the next day installing and testing. Lunch consisted of a huge sandwich from Mr. Pickles across the road.

After a long 10-hour day we would proceed back to the hotel. The hotel was generous enough to have complimentary drinks between 5.30 and 7.30pm every day. As you can imagine, for a bunch of Australians this was a very attractive offer. There was always a mad rush out of the office at around 7pm to make it back for a last round of drinks.

The evening of September 10th 2001

After arriving at the hotel at 7pm, most of proceeded to our hotel rooms to dump our laptops and other paraphernalia into our hotel rooms. We rushed down to the drinks area and raided the bar. That night, two more Aussies had flown in so we did the traditional welcoming party. We all sat around the table with beers and spirits in hand. It was a joyous time that evening, as we really needed to wind down after a hard day's work.

I had received a company cell phone (mobile in Australian speak) during the day and was pleased to be in communication with the rest of the world. How can anyone survive without mobile phones in 2001? I did not realise at the time how much I would appreciate this phone the next day.

I do not recall where exactly we ate that evening, probably the local restaurant, Taheri's, a few hundred metres down the road. It is a nice restaurant that makes good Mediterranean food, like linguine and cream of mushroom soup. We were regulars at the place. After dinner I recall going back to my hotel room and doing the normal evening thing. I would log on to the laptop, send a few emails and watch some TV. I phoned my wife (then my girlfriend) and then, around 10pm, received a phone call and was surprised to here this voice saying 'Mate, ahh, what are youse doing?'. It sounded just like Guido Hatzis. I was quite surprised at this and I soon heard someone laughing in the background. It was one of my colleagues who was a big Guido fan. He had downloaded some sound files with Guido phrases and was playing them on his laptop. One of his favourite pastimes was doing prank calls. Anyway, soon after he hung up and I was ready for bed. I charged my phone and got my stuff ready for tomorrow. Tomorrow I would be visiting about 5 BART (train stations) to commission and test our products. At the same time I put some washing into the hotel laundry bag. It was again laundry day and I was running out of clothes. At around 11.45pm I went to sleep. I did not think anything would be special about tomorrow. It was going to be another routine day, riding trains all day with transit agency people getting quality assurance documents signed off. That was September 10th 2001 and I set my alarm for 6.30am (US West Coast time).

The morning of September 11th 2001

The alarm went off at 6.30am, as usual. I pressed the snooze button and finally got out of bed at around 6.40am. After a quick shower I got dressed and gathered all my stuff for a day out in the stations. Just after 7am I headed out the door with my laptop, my phone, and my laundry bag. It felt like any normal morning as I was riding down the lift and proceeded to front desk to drop off my laundry bag.

While I was proceeding to the front desk with my laundry bag I happened to see one of my colleagues. She looked tearful and upset and I was surprised, as it was her birthday. I said 'Happy Birthday' and she said, 'Haven't you seen what was happening?' I said, 'no', and looked at her strangely. 'What could it be?' I thought to myself and proceeded to the breakfast area.

What I saw shocked me and I did not think something like this could happen. Standing around the TVs in the breakfast area were dozens of people. CNN was showing footage of the Twin Towers, with one burning and the other had just collapsed. The look on people's faces was unforgettable and everyone looked stunned. I saw some of my Australian colleagues and they were also shocked. The two guys that flown in looked relieved, having flown in last night instead of today. After some discussion with my colleagues, I was still wondering if I needed to go out

to the field. I checked with the manager of the field testing, who did not know. I phoned another manager and he said he had not heard that the testing was called off.

I went back to my hotel room, switched on CNN and watched a bit of the footage of the towers. I prepared to go out into the field and got my small AM/FM radio. I went downstairs and told some of my colleagues I was still going out into the field. I headed for the Pleasant Hill BART station and waited for the train. On the platform were dozens of Americans, all on their cell phones. It appeared that many were in the same state as I, hence, they were still going to work or doing normal activities but a bit apprehensive. After boarding the train I noticed that it was still crowded with people and the majority of the people were on cell phones.

My father phoned me at around 8.25am all the way from Australia and asked if I was all right. I said everything was OK and that I was heading for Fremont BART station, which was on the other side of the bay. He asked me to stay out of the city and said something that still sticks in my mind, 'Tomorrow, the world will be a different place and there will be a war'. Soon after my father phoned, my girlfriend phoned me to ask if I was OK. I said I was and that I was still working but not going into the city. Lucky I was assigned this phone yesterday!

Working on September 11th.

I knew I had a long train ride (around 90 mins) to Fremont BART station. So I turned on my small radio and tuned into a few radio stations. By this time all airports in the US had been shut down. There were also evacuations from the federal and other landmark buildings all over the US. The Americans were afraid of possible attacks on the West Coast and there was a slight sense of danger in the air.

I changed trains at MacArthur station and got on to the Fremont train. I remember passing Oakland Coliseum BART station and seeing the people waiting there with their suitcases. They had obviously got to nearby Oakland Airport and been turned around. At around 9.15am I arrived at Fremont station and was surprised to see my BART counterparts. We were all wondering if commissioning would still be on for today.

With all the relevant people here it was decided the commissioning would still proceed. I recall seeing a BART software engineer who was fixing his computer but he refused to head to work. He was afraid of the trains getting stuck in a tunnel. I also remember him saying, 'This is bigger than Pearl Harbour'.

It did not take long to finish our work at Fremont station so the three of us decided to head to El Cerrito Del Norte station, which was at the other end of the line, something like 45 mins away. All of us rode the train to Del Norte. The BART guy was glued to his staff CB radio, the commissioning contractor was listening to his

Walkman and I was glued to my small radio. There were repeated updates of the situation in New York, Washington, DC, and the other plane, which had gone down near Pittsburgh.

We visited another station after Del Norte, which was 19th Street Oakland. It was a successful day for our testing and commissioning as everything worked. We all shook hands and someone said, 'We won't forget this day of testing'. There was a BART station agent saying goodbye to the other BART guy and he said, 'This is a sad day for America. May God bless us'.

Lunch and heading back to the office on September 11th

At around 2pm I decided to have some lunch in downtown Oakland. I walked a few blocks down to 12th Street, City Centre. A lot of shops and fast food places had closed for the day. The only fast food place I found open was a small Mexican taco place, so I bought a small meal and sat outside. It was so quiet and there was hardly anyone to be seen in this usually busy square. I could see the sadness in people's faces as they walked by.

Around 3pm I headed for the train station and waited for the next train back to the office. I was amazed to find someone already selling an afternoon edition of the Oakland Tribune with a full size colour picture of the World Trade Centre collapsing. By the time I made it back to Concord I saw flags at half-mast. I arrived back at the office around 4pm, things were quiet and everyone looked stunned. We tried to proceed as normal but it was too difficult. I tried phoning home to Australia but could not get through. The phone system was just overloaded. At dinner that night we ate at a local restaurant and the place was virtually empty. Everyone was silent. That was September 11th 2001.

An Australian perspective of the day

At the end of the day we were just young people caught up in a world-changing event. As Australians in America on the day, we were foreigners who just happened to be in the USA at that time. However, being in the US we could feel the sadness and terror that the Americans were experiencing. We were glad that it was not happening to our country but still we knew that this day would forever affect Australia. For some of us it was just another day and for others it left a lasting mark but won't be forgotten by any of us. One of us became so scared and terrified, he just wanted to go home. He was supposed to fly home on September 12th. Others had planned a trip to Las Vegas on September 12th and their enthusiasm died very quickly. Regardless of each person's situation, it was a surreal time to be an Australian overseas.



Christian Flurschein is an Australian citizen living and working in the San Francisco Bay Area since April 2001. His assignment in the US was his second overseas. He had previously worked in Hong Kong between 1997 and 1999. He is a Software Engineer and works for an Australian company. He has been fortunate enough to be transferred here and there.

Background

Christian Flurschein was born in Hong Kong and his parents migrated to Sydney Australia in 1978. His mother was a qualified secretary and Australia, at the time, was seeking skilled secretaries on their entry list. He grew up in Sydney's eastern suburbs and, for most of his early years, was the only Asian in the class. He grew up like many normal Asian-Australians, went to university, worked in Australia and then pursued the working overseas scenario. He and his wife now live and work in the US, after being married in Perth in October 2002.

The focus of this story is the day before the 'world changing event', September 10th 2001, and the morning of September 11th 2001. September 10th was a normal day for him in the US. By this time he had been in the US for about 4 months. He was living in a hotel and searching the area for an apartment. The hotel he was staying at was the Embassy Suites in Pleasant Hill. Pleasant Hill is a city (suburb in Australian standards) located about 20 miles east of San Francisco. His office was located in the next city, Concord, about 5 miles away.