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Interview with [REDACTED]

Interviewer: [REDACTED]

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ORIGINATING AGENCY

[REDACTED] - INTERVIEW

(BEGIN SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE.)

[REDACTED]: This is [REDACTED]. Could you state our name for me?

[REDACTED]: Okay. This interview is unclassified. Are you doing this interview under your own will?

[REDACTED]: Yes.

[REDACTED]: And do you grant the U.S. Army Center of Military History all access to your statement?

[REDACTED]: Yes.

[REDACTED]: All right. We are going to just basically talk about September 11th, and start out with a little bit about your career. If you could tell me a little bit about it.

[REDACTED]: About my career?

[REDACTED]: About your career.

[REDACTED]: I did 7-1/2 years in the military, and I came into the military after college, and I was stationed in Korea. After Korea, I was stationed here at Fort Belvoir, and I was at For Belvoir for 6 years or 5-1/2 years.

I did a lot of things when I was there. I was the Fort Belvoir NCO of the Year, and the Military District of Washington NCO of the year, and air assault instructor, and I ran the instructor training course for the Military District of Washington.

[REDACTED]

And the Rape[REDACTED] master air assault school, the Army Aviation Association of American NCO of the Year. I did a lot of things when I was in the military, but the only reason I came in the military was to get training for air traffic controlling, and to get out and do that.

So when a job opportunity opened up, I had no choice but to take it. It was hard to turn down the money, and actually it was more than I was making. I had just ended up making E-7, but it was still time to go. Actually, the only reason I came in was to get that training, and I felt it was the time to do it.

And I did that working on the civilian side for three years, and I had the same boss and everything. I used to run the Pentagon Heliport when I was in the military, and so we had a female that was running the heliport, and she got picked up at Dover Air Force Base, and so when she did, they needed somebody to go up and replace her, and so they sent me up there, and I have been up there ever since.

[REDACTED]: So you report to the same place or the same people?

[REDACTED]: The same people.

[REDACTED]: So your official title is air traffic controller?

[REDACTED]: Correct.

[REDACTED]: What about your family? Do you have any family?

[REDACTED] I have a wife and she is in the military also, and works at the Pentagon.

[REDACTED]: And what does she do?

[REDACTED] She is a training NCO for the Secretary of Defense. They run their side and it is the mess. She coordinates all the dinners, and reductions that he has, and she does all the training for the military folks that works there. So she has been there for nine years.

[REDACTED] Do you have any children?

[REDACTED] No children.

[REDACTED] Really?

[REDACTED] Not yet.

[REDACTED] Tell me about a typical day on or since September 10th. The day before everything happened. What kind of security or what kind of things did you do?

[REDACTED] Actually, at the Pentagon, it kind of fluctuates, you know. Some days you might be busy, and some days you might not have anything. On September 10th, it was kind of busy because the President flew out. He flew out that Monday, and whenever the President flies out, it is always a dog and pony show, you know.

[REDACTED] Right.

[REDACTED] You have got the Secret Service guys coming around and the dogs sniffing, and everything. So it was kind of like a big old deal. And so on September 10th, you know, it was really kind of busy. And he was scheduled to come back on September 11th.

So we knew it was going to be another dog and pony show, but we didn't think it was going to happen that soon. So it was a typical day up there, you know, 7:30 to 5:30, and like I said, some days are bad, and some days are slow.

Most of the days are really slow, you know, and you get a lot of guys -- you know, as of late there has been a lot of [RECORDING INTERRUPTED BY AIRCRAFT NOISE.]

But September 10th was a pretty busy day, and you had a lot of guys coming up there for training flights, and like I said, the President was flying out of there. So, September 10th was kind of busy.

[REDACTED] Now, the helipad, tell us about that.

[REDACTED] It is for helicopters. It is helicopter service for the services. You know, the Army, Navy, Air Force, and the Marines.

[REDACTED] And so it must be very busy there.

[REDACTED] Sometimes. It all depends on what is happening in the world, and who is flying in and out of the Pentagon.

[REDACTED] Okay. Do you get to see the air patterns for Reagan? Do you see the traffic?

[REDACTED] We see the aircraft when they are landing, and we see them when they are taking off. We pretty much see them. You know, you can see them when they take off and when they are boxing them around, or when they are landing on final approach, and when they are taking off. If they are taking off to the north and looking out the window, we are going to see them fly right overhead.

If they are landing to the South, then you are going to look out the window and see the airplanes lined up coming towards it, and I think that day all the aircraft were taking off to the north.

[REDACTED] September 11th, you wake up and where did you go from there?

[REDACTED] You know, to be honest with you I always say my prayers at night before I go to bed.

[REDACTED] Me, too.

[REDACTED] I always do, and on September 11th, the first thing I did when I got out of bed was say my prayers. That was the first thing.

[REDACTED] Was it a feeling or was it a need?

[REDACTED] I don't know what it was, you know, and I was talking to [REDACTED] You know how some days things don't feel right, and I am not saying that anything was going wrong.

[REDACTED] Right.

[REDACTED] Nothing was really going wrong, but it was just that feeling in the air that something is just not right. And it was that type of feeling on September 11th.

And we were just at work, and we were doing our normal routine. I would come in with my breakfast, and I eat my breakfast, and she may come in there if her PT is on, and go back there and get dressed. So that part of the day was like a normal day.

But it was still like -- it was like in the air that there just was something wrong, and we usually come in, and I get on the computer and we type out the logs, and open up the facility, and turn the television on, and just watch the news a lot of times in the morning.

And that's pretty much how we do our day, you know. If it is kind of slow, and we don't have anything to do, and we are not talking to anyone, and so we just turn on the television and watch something like the news, or Maury Popovich, or something.

So that particular day, you know, we were just watching the news and we saw the first World Trade Center get hit, and when the plane flew into the first World Trade Center, and we were just looking at it and we were thinking that must be a dumb pilot. How can someone fly into a building. And as we were watching it, we see the second plane fly into the other building.

But when the second plane flew into the building, we were thinking that maybe that is just a reenactment of the first one, because we didn't actually see the first one. We just saw the flames coming from it. So we thought maybe they are just showing footage of that plane actually going through the building.

Then you hear the news anchor saying that we are watching history unfold, and so when they said history, and that a second plane had flown into the second World Trade Center.

But even when you look at it, the reality of actually having people inside that building doesn't really hit you. You know what I mean?

[REDACTED] Yes, it is very surreal.

[REDACTED] Right. And the plane is going through the building and what an idiot, you know. And then you stop thinking that there must have been people on the plane, and then there must be people inside the building.

So the reality is still not there yet, because you can't really believe that a plane is actually flying into a building.

[REDACTED] Right. And how did you feel when it went from, boy, what a stupid pilot flying into the building, to god, we are under attack, or did you put the two together at the moment?

[REDACTED] To be honest with you, it never hit me. That reality never came across to me until like maybe later on that evening when I was actually looking at it, and you see in the news reports that this amount of people died.

Then that is when reality really hit, but up until that time I knew that the planes were flying, and I knew that the President was flying back in at 12:30 or something like that.

So I had some clothes in my car that I needed to take inside to the cleaners, and we had a break until the President actually flew back in. But I said with all of this going on, he will probably fly back in earlier.

So we were watching the news, and we see him in Florida talking to the elementary kids, and you see one of his guys come up and whisper something into his ear, probably telling him about the attacks at the World Trade Center.

And so I am thinking to myself, okay, with this happening, he is probably going to come back in earlier. So I will just wait and take my clothes to the cleaners after he leaves.

[REDACTED]: Right.

[REDACTED] And [REDACTED] and I were talking, and I was like, you know, I'm surprised that nobody has ever flown into the Pentagon, and I am not even talking about terrorists. I am must saying that Washington's airport is right on the other side of the Pentagon, and she said that you have been saying that for 3 years.

And I am not even saying terrorists. I am just saying about aircraft that makes a mistake and actually flies into the building, because it is so close to the Pentagon.

[REDACTED] Right.

[REDACTED] I mean, you can look up every day and you can actually see the landing gear on the aircraft. You can read the numbers on the aircraft and so it is that close. And she said that you have been saying that for like 3 years.

And she said I will be back. I am going to the restroom. She said keep your eyes on the planes. And she was just joking, you know. And she was down there for like 5 minutes.

And I was just looking out the window and just looking out at the ground to see if everything was okay, because I knew that my boss was coming back up there that day, and I knew that because the planes had hit the World Trade Center that the DPS guys at the Pentagon were going to shut down everything.

Nobody was going to be able to get in unless like you belonged there. So I was going to try to find his number to call him, and so I am looking out the window, because I knew that the DPS guy was going to come out there and shut down everything.

And so I am looking out at the road, and I see the traffic has liked stop, and I look out the window and I just hear a -- I just see like the nose and the wing of an aircraft just like coming right at us, and he didn't veer.

And then you just heard the noise, and then he just smacked into the building, and when it hit the building, I am watching the plane go all the way into the building.

[REDACTED]: Oh, my gosh.

[REDACTED] So once the plane went into the building, it exploded, and once it exploded, I hit the floor and just covered up my head. It was like glass shattering and ceiling tile was falling, and --

[REDACTED] It is amazing that you reacted that quickly.

[REDACTED] I know, and I think that a lot of it had to do with the actual impact of that plane, because when it exploded, it kind of shook our building. So it shook our building, and from there --

[REDACTED] And you went down anyway.

[REDACTED] Yes, instinct, and I hit the ground, because you know we are surrounded by glass. So when something explodes like that, glass is going to be the first thing to shatter. And, you know, it was dark, and like all the lights were out. So we had like the alarm system was just blinking, and you could see the flashing light and it was blinking. And with the glass and all kinds of stuff was just like on the floor. So I tried to get out of the building, and I went to pull on the door, and the door was kind of shut, and so I just kept pulling on it.

And I looked down the hallway, and the hallway was like completely dark, and we just had a staircase and three levels of stairs. And the ceiling tile, and fixtures from the lights and all of that was falling like in the middle of the stairs.

The railings had collapsed, and all this stuff, and it was just like smoke, and so I am trying to get out of there.

[REDACTED] How did you get out?

[REDACTED] I don't know. To be honest, I don't know. It was like part jumping, and part -- well, I don't know how I got out of there, but I got out of there. And I know that one railing had actually come out of the wall, but I kind of rolled it down a little bit, and I got to the next staircase, and I pretty much just jumped.

Maybe it was like one staircase and I just jumped down to the bottom, and I saw [REDACTED] trying to run back up the stairs, and I was telling her to get out of the building, because we have a stove downstairs that we use and that we share with the firefighters, and I was like, look, get out of here.

Because I am thinking that the stove is downstairs, and if that stove explodes, then we are all dead. So I was just telling her to get out, get out of the here, get out of the building. So she went out of the building.

And when she got outside, I grabbed her, and we ran maybe like 25 yards, and we both just fell to the ground and looked back at the building, and just looked at the Pentagon, and she didn't even know what had happened. She was in the restroom.

And so she said what happened, and I said a plane had just flew into the Pentagon. I was looking at a plane fly into the building. A plane. And she said we were just talking about that.

But the reality of people actually being dead, or people actually being on the aircraft, all those things had not even hit us yet. I guess at that point that we were more concerned with our cars, and if our cars were on fire.

Man, look, look at our cars, and our cars were just like engulfed with flames, and we both were just looking at the cars.

[REDACTED] You were probably more in shock than you were anything else, and that's probably why the sadness didn't come until probably later.

[REDACTED] Right. And then when I look up and I see -
- another reason why it didn't really hit us at that point was because on that side of the Pentagon, they were doing renovations.

So we were actually looking -- I know that I was looking to see if people were actually going to be running out of the building, but I didn't see anybody running out of the building on that side.

So I am looking up and I don't see any people. The only people I see are the people that have been around, like the firefighters, and me, and her. And then I look up and I see the Defense Protective Service guys, they are running out, and they are forming -- they are coming and they are running towards the impact.

And they were like get out of there, and you all need to get out of this area, and get out of this area and just go up that way. So we went up walking towards the mall booth, and that's when we see all these people coming out. We see all the people coming out of the building.

And we are still just looking back at the building, you know, and then we see the flames, and then I am thinking about my wife. You see, my wife is on the other side.

[REDACTED] Right.

[REDACTED] So my pager is going off, but I can't call anybody because my cell phone is inside the building. And someone lets me use their cell phone, and I can't get into contact with her. So I finally see this guy that works with her, and he told me that she was okay, and she was on the other side.

So she was worried about me and didn't know if I was okay, and she couldn't call me, and so that was the toughest part. And then [REDACTED] was trying to call her husband, and all the cell lines were out. So we were just pretty much out there.

Then that is when the reality really hit me and that it was something serious, because you see everybody that was in the Pentagon is now outside. So I remember someone saying that they had mass casualties, and they needed other people to go in and try to pull the bodies out. So now I am having like mixed emotions.

You know, it still is not real to me, but then I hear these guys talking about bodies, and so I would cry, and then I would be strong. Then I would be like, you know, this is not real. It's just a plane that flew into the Pentagon. It is nothing big. It just a plane that flew into the Pentagon.

But then I would cry again, and so it was just like mixed emotions, and then I looked at myself, and I just looked down, because at that time I wasn't really thinking about myself. I was just trying to get out of there.

[REDACTED] Right.

[REDACTED] And I had like a burn and a cut on this arm, and cuts on my elbows, and cuts on this elbow. And I looked at my shirt, and my shirt has like blood on the side of it, and I remember someone asking me what happened and was it a little Cessna, and I said, no, it wasn't a Cessna. I knew it was a pretty big aircraft. It had to be like a 757 or 767, and I remember talking to this lady, and they had a camera in my face. You know, it was like that fast, and I was talking to --

[REDACTED]: So you were on the news already?

[REDACTED] Right. And so a lot of people didn't know that I was alive, because the place that the plane hit was the place where our old tower was in. We had just built that new tower.

And the new tower was -- you see, we used to have a tower and then we had a fire station. Well, they renovated the area and so they put the tower guys and the fire station in the same building. And they didn't build a new building. They tore down the old fire station and they tore down the old tower.

So some of my old friends that had heard on the news that the heliport had just been hit, and when they look at the news, they don't see that old tower. They are thinking it just wiped out the whole tower.

So then you have got people who are just concerned, and everybody is calling. I remember that [REDACTED] and I, we both -- I think she had a cut on her leg, and so they was trying to take us to a triage area, and we had to actually walk past the impact area, and all the way to the other side of the Pentagon, and closer to the Navy Annex. It was like an underpass, and they had a triage area set up over there.

And as we were walking past, we see people that were actually burned, you know, and I remember seeing this lady, and I remember like her whole body was like just burned.

[REDACTED] Oh, god.

[REDACTED] And so they had a sheet on her. But her legs were still exposed and her arms were exposed and she was like on her stomach, and they were like running her down the street on like this gurney, and trying to put her on a MEDEVAC helicopter that landed in the middle of the street.

And I just remember that she was laying on her stomach and she was just having a fit. So I look at that, and that's when I kind of lose it, you know, because that could have been anybody. It could have been my mom, or your mom, and it could have been anyone.

And then I look at how close the actual impact is to us and I was like --

[REDACTED] All of that realization just came in like a flood?

[REDACTED] Right, because 25 more yards and it was us. The whole building would have been taken out. And then I think about myself, you know, and everybody else is downstairs, and here I am, I'm the only one upstairs.

[REDACTED] Right. You could have been easily sheered off.

[REDACTED] Right. I could have been the only one gone. So I just -- you know, all these things are like just running through my mind, and then I see this other guy, and the same thing, his body is burned, and he is laying on his stomach, and he's like this, and they are running him down the street on a gurney trying to get him on a MEDEVAC helicopter.

And they get him, and they put him on the helicopter, and they lift him out of there. And then the whole time that we are there at the overpass, in the triage area, there is a lot of people over there. But you see people that were injured in a lot of different ways.

You see some people who are burned, and some people who had smoke inhalation. So you see everything, and it was just like a madhouse. It seemed like everything was just going a hundred miles an hour. It was like nothing was really real.

[REDACTED] Everything was moving, but everything was going like a hundred miles an hour?

[REDACTED] Right. And so we get over there and then they come over there and they treat us. But we are on flight status, and we are air traffic controllers, and so we still have to be cleared by a flight surgeon.

So they gave us the stuff, and they wrapped us up, and the next day we went to the Flight Surgeon's Office. But that particular day, it was like a psychologist, and she was -- I don't know if she was part of FEMA or who she was a part of, but she was out there.

And she was pretty much just walking with us the whole time. So she asked us if we wanted her to take us to her office in Arlington, and I'm thinking, no, I've had enough for the day. I want to go home. So we ended up walking back to her car, and she took us home. Well, she tried to take us home. The traffic was so bad that we pulled over and we went inside this hotel, and they took care of us. They fed us, and --

[REDACTED] Oh, really?

[REDACTED] Yes. They offered us a room.

[REDACTED] Was it others who came to that area?

[REDACTED] I don't really think so. I would say that I think we might have been the only ones that were actually injured, but as soon as we got there, it was like what do you guys need.

[REDACTED] What hotel was it? Do you remember? It is not important.

[REDACTED] I know that it is in Crystal City, and I know that they have a sports bar. But there is like a sports bar advertised in the front of the hotel in Crystal City.

I mean, it is easy to find. It is right off of -- I can't even remember the street. But I would know it when I see it.

[REDACTED] Were you surprised by the hospitality?

[REDACTED] I was in a way. I mean, I really was, because they guys were like what do you need, and my people live in North Carolina, and so they were freaking out, because they looked at television and it said that the heliport had been hit.

[REDACTED] Right, and they know that you are there?

[REDACTED] Right. And they had not heard from me. They called me, and said they couldn't get in contact with me. They called my house and they couldn't get in contact with me.

They couldn't get my wife, and so my whole family had like taken off, and everybody had met at my house, or at my mom's house. So everyone was there, and they were waiting, and everyone was crying, and so when I get there, these people are like do you need to use the telephone.

So the first thing I did was like call them, and when I called them they found out that I was okay, and they were relieved after that. But up until that point -- you know, this thing happened about 10 o'clock, and so I really didn't get in contact with them until maybe 3:00. And so during that entire time they were just sitting there and waiting. That was the toughest part.

[REDACTED] How did you finally get a hold of your wife?

[REDACTED] Actually, what happened was that the guy -- I saw a guy when I ran out, and that worked with my wife, and he told me that she was okay, and so what he did was that he ended up walking back around to the other side of the Pentagon, and he found her, and he told her that he had seen me and that I was okay.

And so when the lady was trying to take us home, I just kept using a rent-a-car or not a rent-a-car, but her cell phone and trying to call my wife. And I finally got her. I finally got through on the cell phone, and she was okay. She told me that the guy finally had told her that I was okay. But she still had not heard from me up until that point.

[REDACTED] Wow. It's amazing. What is your most memorable scene out of all of that? You have seen so much. I mean, if you -- it somebody says to you September 11th, what are the first images that pop into your mind?

[REDACTED] The plane.

[REDACTED] The plane?

[REDACTED] You know, the thing that is weird about this is that we worked -- my wife is at the airport right behind us, and so every day we see these guys flying in and out of there.

But sometimes -- because at the Pentagon, we don't have any airspace. The airspace belongs to Washington Airport. So sometimes guys that aren't coming into the Pentagon won't talk to us. They are still talking to Washington, and they are just flying past.

[REDACTED] Right.

[REDACTED] So we would actually be sitting up there and working, and hear a helicopter fly past, and we look at, and we say okay, that guy is talking to Washington.

But this particular day, we heard something. We heard a roooooooooah, and so [REDACTED] was like what was that, and we both looked out the window, but we didn't see anything.

And that was the airplane, and he had flown past us, but we didn't see him, but we heard it. And so had we had seen that aircraft sooner or maybe realized how low he was, we could have probably called Washington and asked them if they were talking to him, and I don't know if we would have had enough time to do that.

[REDACTED] You probably wouldn't have. It was probably too late after that.

[REDACTED] But still we heard it, you know, but the things that I think about on that particular day was just that the aircraft, and the flames, and the fuel on fire. You know, it is a different type of fire. It is not like a camp fire. It is like a burnt orange color that will always be embedded in my mind.

You know, seeing my car on fire, and seeing that lady laying on her stomach, and pounding her first, and seeing that guy laying on his back, and things just moving like this. Those are probably the things that I will always remember about it.

[REDACTED] And this is a question that you almost don't even need to answer. Are you a changed man now? Is there anything about this that you feel about yourself is different now?

I know that I wasn't here, and there is things about me that I feel much different about.

[REDACTED] I don't know if I am changed. I went to church with my mom two weeks after this happened, and just being up in the church with my mom. I don't know. It is kind of hard to say if I am changed. It taught me to celebrate, and it is hard for me to say that I'm glad that I am alive.

Those things are hard for me to say when I realize that people didn't make it, because the worst thing a person can actually say to me is, well, it wasn't your time, because I don't think under those terms.

'That particular day -- there is a guy here on Fort Belvoir that I call my brother, and I have been calling him my brother ever since I have known him. His mom has her own business down in -- I want to say Centreville, but her secretary had a daughter on that plane, and that was only 10 or 11 years old.

And her only fault or problem that day was that she was just too smart. She had been picked to go out to this National Geographic thing out in California, and so she was on that plane.

So when people say it wasn't your time. I don't think it was her time, you know, and I always tell my mom that it is hard for me to celebrate and say that I am -- you know, people say you were close, and that was close. I mean, I realize how close it was, but I can't say that I have changed because of that. I am grateful for all the people that called me, because to me that is what real love is and where the real love came from.

Where people are like, well, I have to get a hold of you, and I listened to my messages on my cell phone, and I had like 53 messages on my cell phone, and you have got people like, look, I just want to hear your voice. Just let me know that you are okay. I saw where the plane had hit.

And there were people from Germany, and from Korea, and from all the world. So to me, that was more important.

[REDACTED] As far as how you feel about the rest of the world, are you any more leery or any more aware of other people? If you are working back in the tower do you get nervous at all?

I mean, it seems very natural that you would, but --

[REDACTED] Well, I will tell you this. Ever since the accident happened, and you asked me if I have changed, and I don't know if I have changed, but I have seen the beauty of what the world should consist of. You know, when I went back up to the Pentagon the Saturday after the accident happened, I went up there, and I told the FBI this, that I had to go back.

You know, I can't work up here at Fort Belvoir. I have to go back up there, because in order for me to be at peace with myself, and I have to see some of the faces that I saw before that happened. If you put me down here and never send me back up there, and I don't see those guys, it is something that I have to deal with for the rest of my life, because I don't know what happened to those people.

[REDACTED] Right.

[REDACTED] But I need to go back up there. So when I go back up there, and I see people, and everybody knows me there, and so I know the car that I know drive, and when they see me, it is just like an outpouring of love. Everybody is like, oh, man, I'm glad you are alive.

And people that I see, it actually tears me, but on that particular day, you know, there is no race, you know what I mean? There is no black against white, and there is no Christian against Muslim. There is just love. There is love. And when you walk out to that parking lot, and you see where all these agencies have come together to feed you and to give you what you want, that is what America is, and that is why we were here.

It is not, you know, well, we can't get along because we grew up in two different neighborhoods. And we can't get along because we don't look alike. There it didn't matter, you know.

At that particular time, it wasn't anybody else. It wasn't you and I, and it wasn't me and somebody who was a gangster. It wasn't anything like that. At that particular time, it was we are Americans, and we love each other, and so we need to stick together.

And that to me is a change, and it is sad that the world had to experience that in order for all of us to come together, but if you look around today, people are just sticking together these days.

And if you ask me if I am scared or if I am nervous, when I go back up to that Pentagon, and I just hear somebody just putting something into the dumpster, I jump. Even now, you know, and I am up there. I have been up there for the last three weeks. And they are doing construction on that side and tearing apart the Pentagon.

So a lot of times they get all these bricks together, and they just throw it into a dumpster, and so I can be sitting up there, and I can pretend like it doesn't bother me, but you can tell me you know me that it bothers me because I jump or I flinch, because everything that happens sort of brings back that thought of that date, and what I actually saw and what it actually sounded like.

And I don't know if I will ever get over that. It is more or it is worse up there than it is here, but I don't know if I will ever get over that. It will probably take a long time.

[REDACTED] And you have been through so much, and I appreciate you taking the time and talking with us about it, and letting me know the inside part of it, because that is the part that is most important is how it affects people. Is there anything that you want to add, because I have no more questions. You have given me a wonderful interview.

[REDACTED] Thank you.

[REDACTED] Is there anybody else that you can think of that we might like to talk to, or --

[REDACTED] Have you talked to the firefighters?

[REDACTED] Yes, we did the Fort Myer firefighters.

(Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)