

## PANETTA VISITS 9/11 MEMORIAL AT GROUND ZERO, AFSOC COMBAT CONTROLLER INVITED TO JOIN HIM by Karen Parrish, American Forces Press Service

**September 8, 2011 - New York** -- Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta toured the National September 11 Memorial and Museum site here.

"This Sunday, the nation marks the tenth anniversary of 9/11, the worst terrorist attack in the history of the United States," the secretary told reporters. "We will honor those who died at the Pentagon, 184 of them, but I thought it was also appropriate to come here and honor those, nearly 3,000, who died here in New York City."

Panetta is the first Cabinet officer to visit the site. New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg welcomed the secretary to the site and accompanied him during his visit.

Lower Manhattan's ground zero is still a construction zone, with hard-hat workers, cranes and heavy equipment all busy on new buildings near the former site of the two towers.



*During a meeting with joint service members, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta shakes the hand of U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Robert Gutierrez Jr., a combat controller who was awarded the Bronze Star with Valor for his actions in Afghanistan, following a visit to the 9-11 Memorial and One World Trade Center site in New York City, Sept. 6, 2011. (DoD photo by Tech. Sgt. Jacob N. Bailey, U.S. Air Force) (Released)*

The area where the towers stood, however, will open as part of the memorial to the public this Sept. 11, -- the tenth anniversary of the attacks that killed 2,996 people after terrorist hijackers crashed four passenger jets: one into each of the towers, one into the Pentagon, and one into a field near Shanksville, Pa., short of its likely Washington, D.C., target.

The 8-acre memorial centers on the sites of the former towers, now transformed to square, granite reflecting pools, each about an acre in size. Each pool is fed by 4 30-foot waterfalls that descend from ground level, and the pools drain into what memorial staff members describe as a "center void" at the bottom of each. The theme the pools represent is "reflecting absence," according to memorial officials.

The waterfalls are edged with bronze ledges about waist-high, inscribed with the names of all the victims who died in the 2001 attacks, as well as the six people killed during the 1993 World Trade Center bombing.

The terrorist attacks of a decade ago brought the nation together in a commitment that such horror "will never happen again," Panetta said.

"As tragic as 9/11 was, we have drawn tremendous inspiration [from it]," he said, adding that those who

attacked the United States in an attempt to weaken the country actually made it stronger.

The day of the attacks, Panetta said, he was on Capitol Hill briefing members of Congress on ocean issues. After remaining in Washington for a few days, he rented a car and drove across the country to his home in California.

"It ... was an interesting drive," Panetta said. "It gave me a chance to see how the rest of the country came together after 9/11."

Driving through the Midwest, he saw "God bless America" signs. "It just told you a lot about what this country's made of," he said.

Contrasting ground zero today with the devastation he viewed shortly after the attacks, Panetta said, shows the resilience of the country and the city.

"I think this is going to be a special place," he said of New York City's 9/11 memorial and museum, "for people to ... come to and remind themselves not only of the sacrifice that was made, but also the great strength the American people have in coming back."

During his visit to ground zero, Panetta also toured the Memorial Museum, which is scheduled to open next year on Sept. 11. Seven of the museum's 10 stories are underground, and part of the above-ground structure will display structural components recovered after the towers fell.

Sarah Lippman, a member of the memorial staff, told reporters the site will also feature 400 swamp white oak trees, more than 200 of which already are in place. The leaves of swamp white oaks typically start changing color around the time of the anniversary, she said, and the trees are expected to grow from their current height of about 25 feet to an eventual 60 feet.

Also on the site is the "survivor tree," a pear tree found alive at the site after the attacks and nursed back to health at a nearby nursery, Lippman said.

Five service members who enlisted since 9/11 accompanied Panetta on today's visit. They are:

-- Army Staff Sgt. Ryan M. Celko, who enlisted in the Army in 2004 and deployed twice with the 10th Mountain Division's 4th Base Support Team Battalion out of Fort Polk, La. He is from Middlesex, N.J.

-- Navy Lt. Adam C. Jones enrolled in the U.S. Naval Academy in 2002 and earned his commission in 2006. His was the first class to enroll after 9/11. He is from Annapolis, Md.

-- Marine Corps Sgt. Carlos A. Tovar enlisted in March 2008. Originally from Caracas, Venezuela, he became a U.S. citizen while serving in the Marine Corps. He is from Orlando, Fla.

-- Air Force Staff Sgt. Robert Gutierrez Jr. enlisted in 2002 following graduation from Southwestern Community College. He was wounded by enemy fire on his second deployment. He is from Chula Vista, Calif.

-- Coast Guard Lt. Nikea L. Natteal graduated from the U.S. Coast Guard Academy in 2006 as part of the first class to enroll following 9/11. She is from Yuma, Ariz.

Gutierrez told reporters the visit to ground zero "reminded me why I enlisted."

Gutierrez said he tried to enlist the day after the attacks, but the recruiting stations were closed. When they reopened, a waiting list quickly formed because of the rush of people wanting to sign up for the military, he said, and his own enlistment was final about six months after the attacks.

America's greatest strength is highlighted by its service members, Panetta said. And the young people in uniform traveling with him today, he added, represent the service they and their fellow soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines and Coast Guardsmen have given to the nation.

"Since 9/11, we have achieved significant success going after al-Qaida and ... [its] leadership," Panetta said, adding that, nevertheless, it's critical to maintain pressure on the terrorist organization.

The secretary was scheduled to travel from New York to Shanksville, Pa., and the Flight 93 Memorial there, also set to open Sunday. That segment of his travel was cancelled due to weather.

---

*Editor's note: Air Force Special Operations Command combat controller, Staff Sgt. Robert Gutierrez Jr., was invited to join the Secretary of Defense during a 9/11 remembrance tour in New York. Gutierrez enlisted in 2002 following graduation from Southwestern Community College. He deployed to Africa in support of Marine and Navy special operations elements, and twice to Afghanistan, where he was responsible for directing airstrikes in support of Army Special Forces. Gutierrez received the Bronze Star Medal with Valor and was selected as one of the Air Force's 12 Outstanding Airmen of the Year in 2010. He was wounded by enemy fire on his second deployment. He is from Chula Vista, Calif. and currently is an instructor assigned to the Air Force Special Operations Training Center.*

