

PQRS

A monologue

By Jeffrey Wolf

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Approx. running time: 4:30 minutes

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(At rise, MARK stands looking off stage. He is dressed in a tie and slacks and is middle-aged. He should look like a professional who used to enjoy the casual life. He is quiet for a few moments.)

MARK:

Everyone has stories of where they were and what they were doing on September 11th, 2001. It's one of those events like that. I was in the control room of a TV station.

As a director for a morning newscast, my day typically starts at 4 a.m. We're not like movie directors. I decide which camera takes which shot, make sure all the floor crew knows where to go when. It's kind of like a logistical job. With that shift, typically I go up to the control room just before six, after blocking the show. Control room – I hate that name for it. I think there is no place in the world where you feel like you have less control.

So I went up at my normal time, but I never imagined that on that day, I would not leave that room for at least the next seven hours. That may not be right. Time got blurry after awhile, so I'm not sure exactly how long I was there.

Like most of the country, I was watching live when the second plane hit. It was there and then there was fire. Just like that. One of the producers in the control room told me later he left to go throw up. I didn't notice at the time.

We are an independent station, so we didn't actually have a network feed to dump to like the NBC or CBS affiliates. We had to stay on the air and try to cover it locally. This is hard when you're all the way across the country, but on that day people just wanted to watch TV. They just wanted to see what was going on.

I actually only remember a few specific things from that day. One is my technical director screaming "Oh my God! Oh my God!" as the first tower collapsed live on television. The other is P Q R S. Things are all digital now, but back then at our station we had four tape decks from which to roll video so it gets on the air: They're labeled P Q R and S. As a director, part of what I do is tell the tape operator when to roll them. The tape operator would put the tape in, make sure it's cued and wait for my direction. Roll P. Then, I have to tell the technical director so he can punch it up: Take P. He pushes a button on the switcher that actually puts it on the air.

On that day, in P was the shot of the second plane hitting the tower that we had taken live. Q was a different angle of the crash we had gotten later. No one had shots of the first plane hitting for at least few days. R was the first tower falling into itself, and S was the second tower coming down. So that's how I'd roll them, over and over, P Q R S.

MARK (CONT.):

Down in the newsroom – our control room is actually upstairs – things were frantic. There was all sorts of false reporting that day – from a bomb going off in front of the State Department, to a fire on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. All this turned out to be completely false. At one point, the FAA said they could not locate a total of seven planes, but believed four of them were the ones that crashed. Since three were still unaccounted for, everyone in the newsroom was waiting for three more attacks. The producers in the control room kept screaming what was happening next, and the anchors kept trying to keep up and talk about the latest information. But for me, things became very repetitive. P Q R S. Roll P. Take P. Crash one. Roll Q. Take Q. Crash two. Roll R. Take R. Tower one. Roll S. Take S. Tower two. In between the tapes we'd go back to a live shot of the New York skyline, or of helicopters trying to circle around the plume of smoke. And that's all I did on September 11th – for hours and hours in the control room. P Q R S.

I no longer work in the news department, a TV director. Now, I'm in sales.

(MARK exits.)