

# Serious Business

## Constant Vigilance to Our Responsibilities Required

Editorial, by Jon L. Jordan, MD, JD

**Few of us will ever forget** the images of the aircraft that impacted the twin towers of the World Trade Center on September 11.

That morning, as I was just beginning my daily routine, a staff member announced that an airplane had just struck one of the towers of the World Trade Center and that it was on fire. We immediately tuned in to the news coverage of the event and at that point, it was unclear as to what type of airplane was involved or why it had crashed into the building.

Considering the responsibilities of the Office of Aerospace Medicine, a number of thoughts raced through my mind: Was this caused by some medical or human performance failure? Did someone, somewhere along the way, miss a critical medical factor that contributed to or caused this event? Had we failed in our medical responsibilities for aviation safety?

Then, another airplane impacted the second tower. It became quite evident that this was not an isolated failure of the medical certification system but, instead, intentional acts by those who had command of the airplanes. While this is now confirmed by all that has transpired, I believe that I will forever be reminded of my initial thoughts and concerns regarding the responsibilities we share for aviation safety and for the need to maintain constant vigilance in respect to those responsibilities.

Considering the enormity of what happened and the complexity of ensuring aviation safety, it also reminds me that no one person or organization can accomplish the mission of aviation safety and that it must be shared by many.

In the U.S., we have enjoyed a remarkable aviation safety record. This is especially true in respect to medical factors as contributors to or causes of accidents. While I think this can, in large measure, be attributed to the certification system that has been established to ensure the medical fitness of airmen, I know that only one simple failure in the system, whether by intent, mistake, or oversight, could lead to a catastrophe.

When accidents are a rare occurrence, it is all too easy to become complacent. We begin to think that, since an accident has not happened, it will not happen. There is also a tendency to ignore details and perhaps even take risks that we might not otherwise take. Maybe it is some of this kind of thinking that led to the opportunity the terrorists had to take over four airplanes

and inflict horrendous damage.

I cannot think of anything that our medical certification system could have done to avert the destruction that occurred on that September morning. We should take this as a lesson, however, that this is a serious business we are in, and the American public is depending upon us to do our jobs well. This means taking great care in all we do.

As aviation medical examiners, your principal responsibilities are to conduct careful and complete examinations, make judicious, up-front decisions, and report the results quickly and accurately to us. While we in the Federal Aviation Administration may have the ultimate responsibility for making the medical certification system perform to the public's expectations, we also recognize that you are the foundation that makes the system work.

My thanks to you who have so conscientiously met your responsibilities for public safety. I trust that the events of September 11 will serve as a lasting, vivid reminder to us all about just how significant are our responsibilities in aviation safety.

**JLJ**