

BMW NA 50th Anniversary | 50 Stories for 50 Years

Chapter 36: "Terrorism hits close to home: BMW of North America responds to 9/11"

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If you were alive on September 11, 2001, you undoubtedly remember a fall day that dawned crystal-clear in the New York metropolitan area. You undoubtedly remember, as well, the exact moment you learned that a pair of passenger jets had been flown into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City,

followed by a third into the Pentagon and a fourth into a Pennsylvania field.

"I had ridden my motorcycle to work that morning, and I distinctly remember the deep blue, cloudless sky and the crisp fall air," said Tom Plucinsky then General Manager of BMW Motorcycles. "The air was so clear that the Manhattan skyline—including the twin towers—were backlit beautifully as I rode south on Highway 17 towards the office in Woodcliff Lake. To this day, I think of those conditions as 'September 11' weather."

As the crow flies, the World Trade Center is barely 25 miles from BMW of North America's headquarters in New Jersey. Most senior managers were out of the office on September 11, attending the Frankfurt auto show, and those who remained in Woodcliff Lake were just starting their work day when the first aircraft hit the tower at 8:46 am.

"My assistant came into my office and said, 'I just heard that a plane flew into one of the twin towers,'" Plucinsky recalled. "Our initial thought was that a private pilot in a small plane had somehow hit one of the towers. We only had one television in the building, so I went down to the cafeteria to see what was on the network news. All of the stations were breaking away from the morning shows to live footage of the tower burning.

"Then, on live TV, the second plane hit [at 9:03 am]. All of us huddled around the TV knew that it was no accident, and that we had just witnessed a terrorist attack on American soil using passenger jets as weapons."

Half an hour later, at 9:37 am, American Airlines Flight 77 crashed into the Pentagon, making it clear that a coordinated attack was taking place. A fourth jetliner had also been hijacked, but it failed to reach its target—presumed to be the White House or US Capitol—after its passengers overwhelmed the hijackers and forced the plane to crash.

That was United Flight 93, en route from Newark to San Francisco with 44 passengers and crew. The flight had been delayed at takeoff, and left the runway at 8:42 am, just as the first plane hit the World Trade Center just across the Hudson River from New Jersey. Some passengers might have seen that happen by looking out the windows, while others found out about the attacks via cell phone messages from people on the ground.

Forty-six minutes after takeoff, hijackers stormed the cockpit, attempting to turn Flight 93 into another weapon of mass destruction.

Its passengers didn't let that happen. Instead, they fought the hijackers for control of the aircraft, and the plane went down near Shanksville, Pennsylvania at 10:03 that morning. None on board survived, but a greater disaster had been averted.

Like the planes flown into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Flight 93 had been hijacked by Al-Qaeda terrorists. Their attack claimed the lives of 2,977 people in the initial incidents, followed by many who later died from exposure to debris.

Among those killed on Flight 93 was BMW of North America's Environmental Compliance Manager, Linda Gronlund. Gronlund was traveling to San Francisco with her boyfriend, Joe Deluca. Following a business meeting, Gronlund and Deluca planned to celebrate her 47th birthday in the Napa Valley.



Gronlund had worked for BMW NA since 1990, having joined the company after five years in Volvo's product compliance office. She was a serious foreign car enthusiast, having grown up working on cars with her father in Sag Harbor, New York; later, she served as chief of flagging and communications for the Sports Car Club of America in Northern New Jersey. She'd studied English and chemistry at Southampton College, then earned a law degree at American University in 1983.



At BMW, Gronlund was able to combine her love of cars with another of her passions: the environment. As Environmental Compliance Manager, her responsibilities ranged from obtaining permits for BMW Manufacturing in South Carolina to overseeing the installation of BMW's hydrogen refueling station in Oxnard, California.

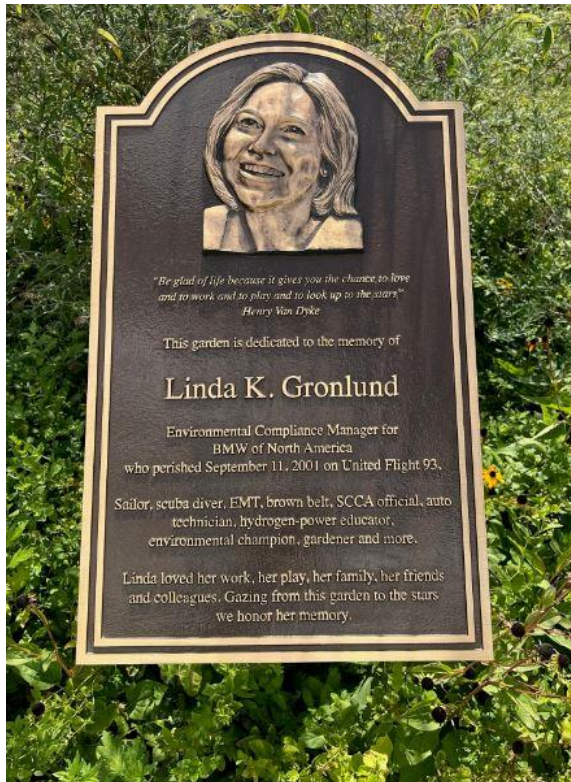
Some 45 minutes after Flight 93 took off from Newark, Gronlund called her sister Elsa. As reported in Sag Harbor newspaper 27 East in 2021, Gronlund told her sister that the plane had been hijacked by terrorists who said they had a bomb. A few

minutes later, several passengers rushed the cockpit in an attempt to thwart the hijacking. Trained in martial arts, Gronlund may have been among them. They were unable to take control of the aircraft, and the pilot crashed the plane into a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania before it could reach its presumed target, the White House in Washington, DC. All 44 people on board were killed.

A day or two later, the news that Gronlund had been on Flight 93 reached BMW NA headquarters, bringing the terrible events of 9/11 even closer to



home. Gronlund had been a valued colleague, of whom BMW NA's General Manager of Engineering Karl-Heinz Ziwick said, "I could rely on her to do anything. She got things done and she got them done right. Always."



Her colleagues held a memorial for Gronlund at BMW NA, which was livestreamed to BMW Manufacturing in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Shortly thereafter, BMW of North America endowed a scholarship for female engineering students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, while her home town of Sag Harbor, New York, renamed a nature preserve in her honor. In Woodcliff Lake, BMW of North America installed a permanent memorial to Linda Gronlund—a garden and bronze plaque—between the 200 and 250 buildings of its headquarters campus.

In 2012 the BMW Group partnered with the National Park Foundation making a \$10,000 contribution to the [Flight 93 National Memorial Campaign](#) as part of our commitment to remembering and celebrating the life of our former colleague. With the contribution, BMW of North America became a co-sponsor of the project to beautify the memorial through the planting of thousands of trees. The crash site and memorial is atop a former coal mine which had been devoid of any natural beauty.

In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, BMW of North America donated \$1 million in cash to the American Red Cross Disaster Relief Fund and the City of New York. (BMW NA continues to support the American



Red Cross, most recently by making two donations of \$1 million each in the wake of Hurricane Helene and the wildfires in Los Angeles.) The company also donated \$2.4 million in vehicles—ten new X5s and 100 ex-CHP police motorcycles—to replace those lost by various agencies on September 11.

The Pentagon had lost vehicles and equipment in the attack, too, along with 125 of its people. Following an initiative by VP of Legal Affairs Howard Harris, BMW NA donated ten bikes to the Pentagon Police, which was happy to receive them. Over the ensuing decades, the agency has purchased several more authority motorcycles from BMW.

Though the story of 9/11 is one of terrible loss, every tragedy contains stories of lucky escapes like the one made by BMW enthusiast Colonel Mark Volk, whose office in the Pentagon took a direct hit from American Airlines Flight 77. "He had just left his office for a cup of coffee," said Kenn Sparks, then a Communications Manager at BMW Manufacturing. "He immediately ran back to rescue people, and he was one of the great American heroes of 9/11."

Sparks heard Volk's story during a Roadster Homecoming at BMW Manufacturing, which Volk attended as a Z3 owner. "The keys to his Z3 were in his briefcase, and he couldn't get back to his office to see if his keys were still there," Sparks said. "Two

weeks later, he found the remains of his briefcase. The keys were still inside, and he drove his roadster home."

The Spartanburg plant itself had an accidental connection to 9/11, thanks to a fortuitous display of patriotism. Since 1999, BMW Manufacturing had constituted BMW's sole assembly facility for X5s. In July 2001, an engineering pre-production X5 was damaged in a crash during an internal management ride and drive event. The vehicle was sent to Performance Center workshop across the highway from the plant for repairs. There, it would be repaired by technicians and body shop personnel under Workshop Manager Dan Doot.

By August, the bodywork had been repaired, and the vehicle was ready to be painted. Rather than the original silver, Doot, always ready for an interesting paint project, opted for an American flag motif inspired by the fuel tank on the motorcycle ridden by Peter Fonda in the film *Easy Rider*. Since this wasn't an officially approved project, Doot and some of the Body and Paint STEP students painted the vehicle on evenings and weekends, taking about three weeks to finish it. When it was due to be returned to the engineering department, they didn't appreciate Doot's initiative and insisted that it be repainted back to silver. Doot refused, and a stalemate ensued.

Shortly after 9/11, BMW Manufacturing Vice President Carl Flesher saw the flag-painted X5 at the Performance Center and immediately saw its potential as a communications tool. He requisitioned for it to be transferred to the Corporate Communications department and placed it in front of the Zentrum, where it could be seen by drivers passing by along Interstate 85.

In the wake of 9/11, said Business Communications Manager Kenn Sparks, the flag-motif X5 "took on a life of its own. People started taking photos of it, and it became an icon of BMW's commitment to the US."

Doot's X5 ended up being used in parades around the country. The vehicle has made countless public appearances, including a trip to SEMA in Las Vegas with wheel manufacturer BBS, outfitted it with a set of BBS wheels that remain on the vehicle today.

The flag X5 remains one of a kind, though it's not the only BMW with a patriotic paint job. It has a counterpart within the BMW Classic USA race car collection, the #6 E46 M3 GTR that won the final round of the 2001 American Le Mans Series. That race was scheduled for October 6, barely three weeks after the attacks.

"We were debating whether to pull out, what's proper after that horrible event," said Bill Auberlen, one of BMW's factory drivers that year.



The 2001 season had already been challenging for BMW of North America's Team PTG, which was racing against not just archrival Porsche but a two-car team entered by BMW Motorsport Team Schnitzer. The German team's technical

advantages had allowed it to take five wins to just one for BMW of North America's Team Prototype Technology Group (PTG), and the American team was considered the underdog going into the four-hour Petit Le Mans at Road Atlanta. In the wake of 9/11, Team PTG would race under the weight of a national tragedy, too.

The PTG livery already featured red fenders and spoilers to distinguish the BMW NA cars from their white-blue BMW Motorsport counterparts. For Petit Le Mans, PTG boss Tom Milner replaced the logo of tire sponsor



Yokohama with a blue field covered in white stars, turning the hood, roof and rear deck lid on each of the team's three M3s into a rolling American flag.

Two of three PTG entries went out of the race in the early running, but PTG's #6 car had been fast throughout. As the laps wore down, the car driven by Auberlen, Hans Stuck, and Boris Said was in a position to defeat not just the Porsches but both M3s entered by BMW Team Schnitzer. "We just ran it like crazy," Auberlen said. "I came in for the last pit stop on the lead, and Tom [Milner, head of PTG] wanted to put on super-soft tires just to rub it in."

After four hours, Auberlen took the checkered flag one lap head of the second-place #43 BMW Motorsport Team Schnitzer car. "That race was very emotional," Auberlen said. "The only time we had that paint job, it wins. People didn't know whether to smile or cry."

Today, the #6 E46 M3 GTR is a treasured part of the BMW Classic USA collection, as is the American flag X5. Both vehicles serve as poignant reminders of the tragedy of 9/11, and the unity of spirit that followed.

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