Ceremonies honor POW/MIA's, remember 9/11 anniversary

By Penny Randall
Editor

Naval Air Station Meridian paused on Sept. 9 to remember POW/MIA's and mark the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

A ceremony held in the chapel on board the base was attended by nearly 250 military personnel and civilians including members of the Patriot Guard and VFW motorcycle rider groups.

Pfc. Eric Gutierrez, now 23 years old and a student at Marine Aviation Training Support Squadron One on board the base, sat quietly in the audience thinking back on the day his hometown of New York City changed forever.

"For us from New York, it's special that people from other states remember and honor Sept. 11 in such a formal and significant way," said Gutierrez who was sitting in his seventh grade math class in downtown New York at the moment the first plane hit the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001.

"We could see it happen from our classroom – that's how close we were," Gutierrez said. "As young kids do, we were making jokes at first, but within five minutes the principal came on the intercom and told us that something serious had happened at the World Trade Center – she didn't say what."

Gutierrez and all the other students were eventually gathered together in the gym and told what had happened, but no one was allowed to leave until their parents came to get them.

"It was the weirdest day – I'd never seen it so quiet -- when it is usually loud and crazy in New York City. That day motivated me to join the military," he said.

NAS Meridian Command Chaplain Lt. Cmdr. Allan Ford took time to recognize the POW/MIA's during the program, and the POW/MIA table ceremony was conducted to honor them.

"This is a day of remembrance, we shall never forget," Ford said. "There are more than 7,800 Americans still unaccounted for from World War II, 8,100 from the Korean War, 1,800 from Vietnam, 120 from the Cold War and two from the Gulf War. These courageous Americans who dedicated their lives to preserving and protecting our freedom will never be forgotten," said the chaplain.

The City of Meridian Police Department Chaplain John Temple was on hand to deliver a prayer for first and second responders who give their lives in dedication to their communities each and every day just as they did 10 years ago.

"On Sept. 11, 2001, everyone went about their daily routines… little did we know that our lives would change forever. Nineteen men from foreign nations had conducted the most horrible attack on the United States. When the dust settled 2,998 lives were lost and 6,291 were injured," he said.

Temple also stated that 411 emergency personnel including fire fighters, policemen and medical personnel were killed.

"In honor of those who paid the ultimate sacrifice, let us pause and pray for their families who carry on," said Temple. "Even after 10 years our hearts struggle to understand how hatred and hostility can yield such an unthinkable act as 9/11. We should all let admiration fill our hearts for all the first responders who knew the danger and entered anyway."

The ceremony's guest speaker was Jim Didlake, director of the Mississippi Baptist Disaster Relief based in Jackson, Miss.

Didlake shared memories of his mission service at the Pentagon and in New York City where his group provided food, counseling and ministry service to thousands of people following the terrorist attacks.

On Sept. 11, 2001, Didlake was traveling to south Mississippi to a speaking engagement when he got the call on his cell phone from relief organizers asking for the Mississippi unit to help.

Within 24 hours the unit was organized and on its way to Washington, D.C.

"It was one of the most unusual days of my life," Didlake said. "We drove straight from Jackson to Washington, D.C., without ever seeing a plane in the sky until we got to the Pentagon and saw the military jets circling above. There were very few people on the roads that day."

Didlake's unit remained at the Pentagon for nine days, and he said the bravery of the people who work at the Pentagon was amazing.

"Many of the personnel were in shock, they had lost comrades that they worked with for years," Didlake said. "It was a very somber time, but it was also interesting to watch the different agencies come together – the military, FBI, ATF and CIA where all in the same area. It was a proud moment for me as an American to see how all these people worked together."

Following his time at the Pentagon, Didlake's unit moved into New York City to feed the police, emergency workers and cleanup crews at the World Trade Center. One of the first places Didlake visited was the fire house closest to the World Trade Center which was the first to respond to the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001. This fire house lost every fire fighter who initially responded.

"As we began to visit with them and with those all across New York, people would ask me the same question, 'Why us?,'" said Didlake who admitted sadly that he never had an answer for the question. "We would do our best to pray with them, to talk with them, and just walk with them so they could share their thoughts."