

# An Interview with Mike Walter, Pentagon Eyewitness

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di Hammer

English: This is the unabridged, unedited original text of an interview by email with Mike Walter, USA Today reporter and eyewitness to the Pentagon crash. An Italian translation is available [here](#).

Italiano: pubblichiamo qui l'originale dell'intervista rilasciata via mail a Undicisettembre da Mike Walter, testimone oculare dell'impatto al Pentagono, di cui è già stata pubblicata la [traduzione italiana](#). Il testo di Walter è riportato tal quale, senza modifiche.

USA Today reporter Mike Walter is one of the best-known eyewitnesses of the Pentagon attack, partly because his words in a CNN interview on 9/11 have often been twisted and deliberately misquoted by conspiracy theorists to support their claims that the Pentagon was hit by a missile. This misquoting has been reported by many sources, including [Der Spiegel](#) and Undicisettembre's Italian-language documentary [Misteri da Vendere](#).

Since 9/11, Walter is strongly committed to explaining to the public the actual course of the events of that day. He recently completed a documentary, [Breaking News, Breaking Down](#), in which he reports on one of the less-known aspects of the 9/11 tragedy: the pain and distress that since then accompany anyone who witnessed it directly.

The Undicisettembre group recently contacted Mike Walter, who granted us an interview. This is an opportunity to dispel once and for all many of the most popular conspiracy theories, including Massimo Mazzucco's [creative explanation](#) that Walter actually mistook a missile for an airliner.

We would like to thank Mike Walter for his kindness and for the time and attention he has granted us.

Undicisettembre: Hello Mike, it's an honor to speak with you and to share your words with our Italian readers, who are often hindered by the language barrier. Thank you for taking the time to discuss your experience once again. Is it OK if we deal with the conspiracy theory stuff first and get it out of the way?

Mike Walter: Yes of course. I would first like to say thank you for giving me this forum to communicate directly with the people of Italy on this very important issue. For someone to witness the horror that I did that day I think it's very important to honor the people who died by being an honest witness to what happened. I believe those who twist the facts for whatever reason do a great dishonor to the people who died and the loved ones they left behind.

Undicisettembre: Can you give a brief account of what you saw and experienced that morning? What do you recall, generally speaking?

Mike Walter: I was on my way to work which at the time was about 5 minutes away from the Pentagon. I would drive on the freeway to highway 27 that took me right by the Pentagon. I would end up on the road to the Pentagon North Parking lot which would swing around and put me on 110. So this wasn't some random thing that I was there as some have suggested. I was running late that morning and stuck in traffic.



I was listening to radio accounts of what was happening in New York. I was very frustrated because I was the senior correspondent for the national newspaper USA TODAY. I rolled down the window to my car and heard the jet. I looked up to see it's underbelly, then it gracefully banked and began a steep decline. It would dive into the Pentagon.

Undicisettembre: The next question is inevitably about the size of the hole in the face of the Pentagon. Some people say it was too small for an airliner. What's your opinion about this topic? Did you get a good look at the hole before the section of the building collapsed?

Mike Walter: Yes...I have heard this account...but all I can say is when you are traveling with this force, over 500 miles an hour and you are going into a concrete structure, something has to give. As the jet smashed into the Pentagon it was traveling at such a high speed that when the wings hit they basically just folded back...that explains why the hole isn't so large.



Undicisettembre: Some other people on the Internet claim that you couldn't see the impact directly, because your view was blocked by some trees. Is that correct?

Mike Walter: This is from an earlier interview that I did here in the United States. My view was very good. There were some trees...so I was being honest....I wasn't exactly sure if the plane skipped before entering or just crashed into the Pentagon at a very low point in the building. But as far as my view...that was the only part that I had any question about..the exact way it entered. I saw the plane go into the Pentagon, there is no doubt, I had a very good view. I saw the wings fold back; I saw the huge explosion, the fireball and everything else that happened that day.

Undicisettembre: An Italian conspiracy theorist said you might have mistaken a cruise missile for an airplane. I guess you can rule out this crazy idea too, right?



Mike Walter: Here again people have taken my words and twisted them. The fact that I mentioned the trees has been used to discount my testimony.

This cruise missile notion also comes from an interview that day when someone asked if I thought the plane was really aiming at the Pentagon or was it simply an accident.

That's when I said "It was like a cruise missile with wings and it went right over there." I gestured to the area of impact. My point was that the plane was no longer a plane... Whoever was piloting the jet had every intention of turning it into a weapon... like a missile. But the notion that it was a missile and not a jet would be laughable if it wasn't so sad. I think it is really sad because some people actually believe this stuff.

Undicisettembre: Did you see any wreckage of the airplane on the ground?

Mike Walter: Yes I did. But I wasn't alone, other witnesses and some reporters and photographers who were there to cover the attack also saw the wreckage.

Undicisettembre: Did you see any of the survivors or hear anything from them? What can you tell us about them?

Mike Walter: The story was broken up and different reporters covered different aspects of the story. I did not talk to any of the survivors inside the Pentagon who got out. I have spoken to people who were inside the Pentagon and got out, but they were other parts of the Pentagon. As I'm sure you know the Pentagon is enormous and it's made up of rings. Most of the people that I know and have spoken to were in other rings.

Undicisettembre: What can you tell us about the firefighters and the rescuers?



Mike Walter: They were really impacted by what they did. The hours they put in were long, and the work intense. I do know that many were traumatized by what they saw in the aftermath of the attack.

Undicisettembre: What's your reaction to being a witness of such a huge tragedy and then hearing the so-called "truthers" claim it all was fake?

Mike Walter: At first I thought these people were laughable and would go away, but unfortunately many people believe their accounts. In this age of the internet lots of wrong information can circulate... and the more it circulates the more traction it gets and the more people tend to believe it. I know a lot of young people believe this stuff... because my daughter is 22 and some of her friends have questioned me at length about this because they have seen so much of the stuff on the internet and are confused.

Undicisettembre: Many journalists here in Italy believe the MIHOP (made it happen on purpose) or at least the LIHOP (let it happen on purpose) theories. What's the situation among your colleagues in the US?

Mike Walter: I think my colleagues here ignored this movement for a long time. I started to see this phenomenon early on and was concerned about it. I was contacted by a French journalist about 6 months after the attack, which was after Thierry Meyssan had come out with a book saying that the attack was an inside job and there wasn't a plane.

I was alarmed when I heard that the book was a best seller. I felt like it would be good to do a story on this surge of stuff on the internet, and to do something about the false quality of this material. But initially American journalists thought it was crazy that people were saying this and they ignored it.

Now they do stories on these people as a curiosity. But unfortunately every time they approach the story that way they give these people more credence, more credibility. I feel strongly that they should spend more time putting together reasoned reporting that discounts their wacky theories.



Undicisettembre: Do you think there's anything even vaguely reliable in the various conspiracy theories?

Mike Walter: I think there is a general distrust in authority, and I think people find it hard to believe that one of the strongest nations in the world could be vulnerable to an attack like this. So you combine both of those things and you have the seeds for a conspiracy theory.

Undicisettembre: Leaving aside all the conspiracy theory rants, are there any aspects of 9/11 that you think deserve further investigation? Any unsolved mysteries, nagging gaps that need to be filled, perhaps to bring closure to the emotions surrounding the event? Which avenues of 9/11 investigation and research would you recommend to journalists?



Mike Walter: Unfortunately I'm the wrong one to ask. I have no doubts about what happened that day... because I saw it with my own eyes. The one story I would like to see reported on about 9/11 is this... the impact on journalists.

I've done a documentary on how it impacted me psychologically, but I think there are other medical ailments associated with 9/11 and there are lots of reporters and photojournalists who are now seeing medical issues associated with being involved in the reporting from New York on 9/11 and the days that followed. David Handschuh, a photojournalist in New York, is doing a fascinating study on this, and there are a lot of reporters suffering from doing their job that day and the days that followed.

Undicisettembre: OK, no more conspiracy stuff. Let's move on to somewhat more personal questions. How did this tragic event affect your everyday life?

Mike Walter: It really impacted me quite a bit after the attack. To see this horror was very difficult. I had covered mass murder trials in the past... but I had never seen a case of mass murder right in front of me.

A few days after the attack I had to interview a young widow with her two little children playing in the distance, she had kissed her husband that morning and he had headed off to work and she never imagined that his life might end just a short

time later. To see this woman shattered emotionally and to see others who lost their loved ones on that day was tough because I had witnessed their final moments and saw the instrument of their deaths just moments before it hit.

That is tough to take. So I was plagued by nightmares' about what I saw, and also pretty depressed after the attack. So I'm hoping my film will help others who have had to deal with tough stories or tragedies in their lives. That way some good can come out of that bad day.

Undicisettembre: On 9/11 you went from being a reporter to being an eyewitness, from being an interviewer to being the interviewee. Has this changed your reporting? Has it given you new insight into the art of journalism?

Mike Walter: This is a very good question, and very insightful. Yes, there is no way that you can cross over and not be impacted. I feel like it would be great exercises to have reporters have to be on the other side of a camera on occasion. I think the biggest change for me is that I don't want to waste my time on stories like Paris Hilton and Britney Spears. I want to do journalism about things that matter. I think I was always a compassionate reporter who had tremendous empathy... but now I think those skills have been strengthened.

Undicisettembre: Do you think the country and its people have recovered from the tragedy? Do you feel like the nation is still living in fear, or has it regained its standing in the world?



Mike Walter: I think this latest election, this is just my personal view, and this latest election was a referendum on that subject. Were we going to be a country of fear or a country of hope? I think the previous administration had spent a lot of time working on the fears of Americans.

Having said that, I do hope that we don't lose sight of what happened that day. Unfortunately there are people who hate us. We can take the fight to them as President Bush suggested, or we can try another way of doing things, of trying to understand why there is this hatred. I think hatred in most cases comes from ignorance. If people learn to understand one another they can find common ground and avoid war and tragedies like I witnessed on that day.

I do think as a result of the vote that we have recovered to a degree. I think the attacks on that day impacted different parts of the country in different ways. I know months after the attack when I would travel to California and people there would seem to be moving on, whereas here on the East Coast the people were still dealing with the after affects of that day.

So in closing I would say I hope we have recovered, but I hope we never forget, in fact we must never forget what happened that day. We must also never forget that there were a lot innocent people, mothers, dads, sons, daughters, sisters and brothers who died. Their families will move on, but their lives will never be the same.