

Ten years ago this week America came under attack. A Melbourne war veteran spoke to **Christopher Gillett** about his own narrow escape from the September 11 terrorist hijackings that changed the world as we know it.

Invitation from PM a lifesaver

MACKENZIE Gregory was, alongside his wife Denise, due to die 10 years ago.

The couple were half a world away from their Melbourne home holidaying in Washington DC. Their trip was last-minute. Their timing was bad.

The CBD-based couple were originally booked to fly with American Airlines. That plane — number 77 — made international headlines when it crashed into the Pentagon on September 11, minutes after two planes had been flown into New York's World Trade Center.

About a week earlier, Mr Gregory — a World War II navy veteran who prefers to be called "Mac" — got a call from the Australian Government, inviting him to go to Washington.

President George Bush was presenting the USS Canberra ship's bell to Prime Minister John Howard to mark the 50th anniversary of the ANZUS Treaty.

Mac was invited because of his longstanding association with the Australian navy.

On the morning of September 10, the pair met Mr Howard. The former Liberal PM warmed to the couple and asked them to join him the next day at Arlington Cemetery in Virginia, where he was to pay his respects to a fallen Australia soldier.

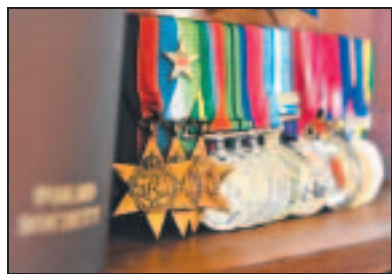
On the morning of September 11, Mac and Denise woke up early. They were excited.

They walked together to collect photos they had taken the previous day with Mr Bush and Mr Howard.

They arrived back at their hotel to a ringing phone.

Their daughter Jayne, back in Melbourne, had the news the world was watching — two planes had been flown by terrorists into the World Trade Center.

She called her parents, who had no idea what had just unfolded.



"It was quite scary. We didn't know what was happening," Mac said.

"Washington went mad — it was mayhem."

A scene not out of place in a Hollywood movie soon erupted.

Police cars, fire trucks, the CIA and FBI added to a growing car stampede.

Helicopters circled overhead while stunned bystanders asked questions.

"Our embassy rang to say: 'Stay where you are, we have John Howard safe in the cellar,'" Mac recalled.

Above: Mackenzie "Mac" Gregory, former PM John Howard, former US President George Bush and Denise Gregory.

Right: Mac at home in his CBD apartment. **Inset below:** Some of Mac's many war medals.

Pictures: MITCH BEAR and AFP

The following afternoon, on September 12, Admiral Harrington from the Australian Embassy spoke to Mac and supplied a terrifying piece of information.

The plane Mac and Denise were originally booked on to fly out of Washington was the one hijacked and crashed into the Pentagon, killing 125 people inside the building.

In a remarkable stroke of good fortune, Mr Howard's invitation for them to join him at Arlington Cemetery had seen them cancel their booking and save their lives.

Mr Howard played down his role in the couple's reprieve when he spoke to the *Leader* last week.

"I don't pretend to have known that would have happened," Mr Howard says. "I am so pleased their lives were spared."

He described Mac as a humble, genuine man.

In the aftermath of the tragic events of September 11, Mac and Denise were desperate to fly home, but flights in America didn't resume for another week.

As they boarded another American Airlines flight, they passed a huge wreath placed in memory of all those lost.



Lucky escapes a way

Mackenzie Gregory is rarely called by his real name. He prefers "Mac" — short and simple.

The 89-year-old has an obsession with the past. Scores of war books line the walls of his home library. Multi-coloured war medals hang with precision close by.

At 13 he joined the navy. At 17 he went to war (pictured). "It was a pretty great

adventure until we got into it (World War II)," Mac said.

Originally from Geelong, he has cheated death more than a few times. He made it through WWII unscathed. He stood on HMAS Canberra while it sunk and was in the Tokyo Tower when an eight-magnitude earthquake hit Japan in the 1980s.

After 20 years in the navy, Mac bought a house in

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