

Remembering “the” Day

By Capt. William Glen Lykins
(Continental)

As a Continental pilot based in Newark, I found myself at Ground Zero just days after the 9/11 attacks. The view of the smoldering aftermath outside my kitchen window finally wore me down. I got in my car and began the slow, arduous drive into the city. I needed to make sense of this. A few blocks out, I abandoned my car and started walking. Soot a foot thick blanketed the streets like a heavy snowfall; the air was nearly unbreathable. Finally, I found myself at the foot of the atrocity. Overwhelmed, I leaned against a wall, taking in the enormous mound of steel girders and trash that, only days earlier, supported the massive towers that held up the New York skyline. I was forever changed.

It has taken me 10 years to find my way back.

Last year, as the anniversary of 9/11 approached, I found myself needing to once again pay my respects to all who lost their lives, including the flightcrew members—our brothers and sisters from the four United and American flights.

So, like the decade before, I made my way down Church Street, this time with my family in tow. The event had streets barricaded for several blocks in every direction to provide privacy for families and friends, dignitaries, and the two U.S. presidents who would be speaking. We parked on a side street and walked from there. The closer we got, the more crowded it became. As we inched forward and stopped, we got our first obscured view of Ground Zero. It was a tough one for us all.

As we stood among the crowd, we quietly paid our respects and then walked down a long, sterile street. We couldn't help but feel the weight of history and the times on our shoulders. Finally, we passed through a white tent,



Capt. Lykins and his wife at the 9/11 memorial at Ground Zero.

the last security station before entering Ground Zero.

The memorial was surprisingly peaceful. The park-like setting of trees and benches was serene. Two huge square fountains, in the footprint of the Trade Centers, cascaded into a flat basin then flowed to the center, disappearing into a bottomless smaller square.

The entire perimeter of both fountains was etched with the names of all who were lost. It was tough not to get choked up. Families, police, and firemen from around the world touched the names of loved ones they lost. Some traced names and took pictures, while others stared into the fountains' abyss in prayer, thought, or just remembering a better time.

For my family and me, it all hit home when we approached the names of the lost crewmembers from both the United and American flights. I read each to myself. Some names had pictures taped next to them, while others had personal notes and flowers tucked into the letters of their loved ones' names. One note was

simply addressed to “Mom.” I glanced at my wife as she turned away; just too much to take.

My son and I walked up to a haggard tree in the midst of a beautiful, well-manicured area. An older fireman explained that the tree was found in the rubble of the Trade Centers, crushed and burned but still alive. He said that the city nursed it back to health and that it finally bloomed again.

But in March 2010, a pair of nor'easters brought high winds and rain that uprooted the tree, almost killing it a second time. Once again, it was nursed back to health and now stands in the memorial as a living symbol of hope and recovery after tremendous adversity. They call it the Survival Tree.

Much like I felt when I left Ground Zero the first time, I was forever changed, this time for the better. The Ground Zero memorial is one of the places on Earth where you feel the incredible weight of tragedy. Yet when you leave, you come away with an incredibly uplifting sense of hope. 🌱