



REMEMBERING THE DAY

by

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There are very few national or international events in our lifetime that we remember with such clarity of where we were when we heard the news. 9/11 was such an event.

The event touched every single soul in this country, some of course, more than others. If you were a New Yorker, the memories go far beyond the TV images. For Firefighters, Police Officers and other First Responders I'm sure there isn't a day that goes by that they aren't reminded of the brothers and sisters they lost while saving lives that day.

The same can be said for those of us in the Airline industry. I don't think there's one of us who hasn't thought about what the crew's had to endure that day and the ultimate sacrifice they made. For that, We Will Never Forget.

For me, a pilot for Continental Airlines since the late 80s, I was scheduled to arrive into Newark from Hong Kong that morning but at the last minute I dropped the trip because my Dad was in the hospital with a cancer scare.

A day or so later I received a call from crew scheduling, asking me if I'd reposition an aircraft with a number of flight crew members onboard from Los Angeles to Newark so that we could all be in position to fly our scheduled trips once the airspace over America was reopened. The special permit allowed us to move the plane, under the watchful eye of the military from Los Angeles to Newark. I believe we were one of the very few civilian aircraft authorized to be in the air that day.

The next day I found myself in my apartment, trapped with a view of the smoldering aftermath outside my kitchen window that finally wore me down. I got in my beater airport car and began a slow, arduous drive into the city. Finally making my way down to Church Street, I was stunned by the intensity on the faces around me. About 10 blocks from ground zero I came to a red stoplight. Across the intersection, a Police Officer stood, manning a roadblock.

As I sat at the light, I noticed that the Police Officer was occasionally letting cars through; when the light turned green I pulled up to him. He was clearly not happy with me, "hey buddy, this isn't a tourist attraction, get the hell out of here." He vented. I felt a little stupid but my emotions had gotten the best of me, I showed him my airline ID, and told him I was a Continental pilot. I explained that I was just having a hard time, as I knew everyone was with what had happened and respectfully asked if I could go down to the crash site for just a few minutes?

In an instant, the Police Officer's whole demeanor toward me changed; he offered me a weighted smile, patted me on the shoulder, moved the road block aside and said "be careful in there my friend." I thanked him and I drove in.

With each passing alleyway and storefront, soot a foot thick blanketed the streets like a heavy snow fall, higher and higher, the closer I got to Ground Zero. All the apocalyptic pictures we've

all seen a hundred times were pungently alive to me, assaulting all my senses as I drove past each destroyed car and mound of debris that littered the streets. The only souls in sight were first responders and firefighters in full facemasks tackling the gruesome task at hand.

About a block from ground zero I pulled into a parking lot, where an attendant waved me in and said, “park over there, behind those cars”. “Won’t I block them in” I asked? “no,” he replied. “They belonged to people who didn’t make it out.” I paused, on a day where I seemed to be pausing in every direction I looked. One car had a bumper sticker that read “my child’s student of the month at p.s. 134!”

Now at the foot of the atrocity, it was hard to breath. Of course, the air was saturated with a thousand odors from the horrific event. But more so, I was completely devastated from what I was seeing. I couldn’t comprehend how human beings could be so heartless. It was the beginning of a comprehension all Americans would undertake, as we continue to wrap our hearts and minds around individuals who view life as simply expendable.

Overwhelmed, I leaned against a wall, taking in the enormous mound of steel girders and trash reduced now to just a fraction of those massive towers that seemed to hold up the New York skyline, only days earlier.

Through the lingering smoke, a huge American flag hung from a building...

The first sign of recovery.

I suddenly realized that the wall I was leaning against was actually a window. Wiping the soot away, I looked in, remnants of breakfast littered the floor, tables toppled, obviously a restaurant where breakfast was being served at the time of the attacks.

Then, my eye found a pile of rubble that stuck out the street, too tidy in the sea of mess. Closer, a makeshift memorial took shape: a small football and a note that read, “I miss you daddy”. That kid, like so many others, was going to have to grow up without his Dad.

I composed myself then, turned to walk back to my car. Like the space around me, I was forever changed. In the years and decades to come, I knew the soot that clung to me was a microcosm of the residue clinging to every inch of Ground Zero. You could clean up both of us - but the echo of the event will always linger for that space. And for those who wandered into it...

...It took me ten years to find my way back to Ground Zero.

As the anniversary of 9/11 grew near I found myself needing to make the trip to pay my respects, to not only the thousands who needlessly lost their lives, but also the flight crewmembers, our brothers and sisters from the United and American airlines flights.

As the day approached, my Wife and Kids made it clear to me that they wanted to join me on this very difficult day. Security would be a nightmare but I wasn’t going to let anything stop me from doing what I felt I needed to do.

So, much like the decade prior, I made my way down Church Street, this time with my Family in tow, towards Ground Zero. As I expected, the event was blocked off at least 10 blocks in every direction. We parked on a side street, got out, I put my hat and coat on and we began the long trek. This day, in my mind demanded respect through formality, even if it was from a distance.

The closer we got, the more crowded it became. Demonstrators lined the sides of the streets shouting dooms day chants at the spectators who were just trying to pay their respects. Occasionally, the crowd would part as a dignitary in a motorcade would pass through but all in all it was pretty orderly and peaceful. It was a truly moving moment.

As my family and I inched forward and stopped, we got our first obscured view of ground zero. It was a tough one for us all. As we stood, taking it all in, I noticed what I assumed to be a secret service agent looking at me, he approached wearing a half smile.

We began to talk and after a short, pleasant conversation he looked me in the eye and asked me if I'd like to go into the private function at ground zero. I said I would then, gestured to my family. He asked me to follow him and so we began the long escort, through layers and layers of security. Now separated from the crowds we were lead to a table where volunteers pinned ribbons on us then, we followed the agent around a corner.

The surreal events of 2001 seemed to still be making a statement as, suddenly, the hundreds of thousands of people and their sounds just - disappeared.

As we walked down empty streets, there wasn't a soul in sight. No cars, no people, no sounds - the expression "the silence was deafening" was never better served here.

Then we stopped. The agent shook my hand and, much like the police officer on that day back in September 2001, he offered me a weighted smile and pointed out the way we were to go. Then he simply just walked away, leaving us alone, on those empty streets.

As we began to walk down the long, sterol street, you couldn't help but feel the weight of history and the times on your shoulders. Nearing the end, a white tent signified the last security station

before ground zero. Four officers approached and respectfully did what they had to do to ensure the safety of all attending the memorial then sent us on our way.

Rounding the final corner it's difficult for me to articulate my feelings and emotions but I will try. Respect and sorrow hung in the quiet air as if it were blanketing the event from the chaos that surrounded it.

 My family and I entered the Memorial through a makeshift security gate manned by a very capable team of secret service agents. Passing through the gates it was clear that the stage and podium to our immediate left was where the President would speak. Four-inch thick bullet-proof glass incased the stage, on every roof top, a sniper at the ready.

Once in, the Memorial was surprisingly peaceful. I'm not sure what I expected but peaceful is what I found. The park-like setting of trees and benches was serene, the day as well. Two huge square fountains, in the footprint of the trade centers cascaded into a flat basin then flowed to the center and disappear into a bottomless smaller square hole.

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

For my family and I it all hit home when we approached the names of the lost crewmembers for both the United and American flights. Frankly it was all I could do to contain myself from losing it. I read each name to myself, some names had pictures taped next to them, others had personal notes and flowers tucked into the letters of their loved ones names. One had a note that simply said Mom. I glanced at my wife as she turned away, too much to take.

As we were getting ready to leave, my son and I walked up to a, well frankly, a haggard tree in the mist of beautiful, well-manicured trees. There were pictures of Firemen and Policemen on all the branches. As we stood looking at the pictures an older Firemen approached. He explained that tree was found in the rubble of the trade centers, crushed and burned but still alive. Barely. He went on to say that The Parks Department nursed it back to health and it finally began to bloom again. But in March 2010 a pair of nor'easter storms 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 called it the Survival Tree.

Much like I felt when I left Ground Zero the first time, I feel forever changed, this time for the better. If you ever get a chance, I highly recommend you visit Ground Zero. One of the few places on earth where, when you get there you feel the weight of tragedy yet when you leave you are left with an uplifting feeling of hope.

