

# 9/11: Helping at Ground Zero – a life altering experience

**Publisher's note:** *This is one in a 12-part series running from Sept. 1-12 about how Lake Tahoe is tied to 9/11.*

**By Solange Schwalbe**

On Dec. 20, 2001, I traveled to New York City to celebrate my annual Christmas holiday that I have traditionally done since 1980. Only, this time the world had changed. Not only were the World Trade Center Towers and the five other WT buildings destroyed, the destruction changed the face of the entire world.

The towers were a part of my Christmas tradition. Losing them was like losing a friend you look forward to seeing once a year.

After Christmas Day, my friends and I embarked on a journey that would change my life.



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9/11.

We visited the perimeter of Ground Zero like thousands of other people. I was taking photos of what used to be there. Of

nothing. I don't know why.

When I realized what I was doing, I turned to my friends and asked about volunteering. Suddenly, I was full speed ahead to do just that.

Salvation Army has a 24-hour respite center that offered food, counseling, supplies, massage, anything the rescue workers may need. The food was rich and wonderful. All of the local restaurants donated their high-calorie dishes. Volunteers from Salvation Army served and cleaned-up the dining area 24-hours a day. Three shifts. I worked mornings, 7am-3pm.

Busing tables, I was able to connect with so many rescue workers. I would say, "Hi, my name is Solange, but call me 'Hollywood' – it's so much easier!" When I go Jeeping in the Rubicon, my handle is Hollywood. Everyone called me Hollywood.

A week before my time was up, a man came up to me and offered me a job because I could talk to anyone. He said his workers would listen to me. "What? I'm a sound editor in feature films. I don't belong here. I've never worn a hardhat in my entire life."

Two weeks of training and I was working with pay in the Pit for three months. My dad thought I was still volunteering.

I worked as a safety monitor in WTC6. This building was located in the northwest corner of the "Bathtub". It was built against the North Slurry Wall. Tower One fell on WTC6. In order to demolish the rest of WTC6, the Slurry Wall needed to be reinforced. My job was Safety Monitor for 30 drillers for a "Confined Space" – like a mine, no air and no way out. We were located underneath the debris pile of Tower One.

The being of my life was put into a box, put into the closet, shut the door and walk away. I ate, breathed, laughed, cried, wore, felt, saw Ground Zero 16 hours a day. Every day. No days off.



Solange Schwalbe says rebuilding her house after the Angora Fire was less stressful because of her experiences at Ground Zero.

The sight of the destruction was so overwhelming that we would use humor to get around the pit. I'd get a call on the radio, "Hey Hollywood, what's your 20?" "I'm at the pool boss, by the diving board!" The sound was overwhelming. Loud all the time with heavy-duty excavators and vehicles. The "Back-up Beeps" were heard all the time. The Nextel Chirps were always going off. The drone was never-ending.

Touch. What looks like dirt was really Zone Dust. Cement, glass, metal, and every possible element of our lives pulverized around us. It was really sticky and it smelled bad. The smell was like disgusting burnt hair. Everything was chemically and biologically based. Hideous.

The past 10 years has been way too difficult. My life in Lake Tahoe was put on hold. I did not work for two years. I stayed with my dad until his wife kicked me out just after the second anniversary of 9/11. I was so distraught I actually learned how it felt to not want to be around anymore. Never have I felt that. It's the sickest feeling I have ever felt.

Thank God one of my colleagues hired me on to his movie, and I landed a teaching gig that allowed me to get a place to live.

In 2005, I was diagnosed with a blood clot in the base of my brain. Ground Zero?

In 2007, my home burned down in the Angora Fire along with 253 other homes. Digging through my ashes for six weeks was like my own personal Ground Zero. This time I was digging for my own possessions. I rebuilt out of anger. My new house is beautiful.

I have my career back as a motion picture sound editor in feature films, and I am still teaching at Video Symphony in Burbank.

I will be attending the 10th anniversary of the terrorist attacks at the World Trade Center like I have every year. The biggest difference this year is that because of the political presence (including President Obama), the families of the victims are the only people who will be able to attend the ceremonies. No firefighters, no cops, no EMS, no rescue workers, no volunteers. If it were my decision, due to the lack of room at the site because of the new construction of the Freedom Tower, the ceremonies would be at Madison Square Garden for everyone. We could have a procession from Ground Zero to MSG.

Every year I am at the WTC Cross at 8am on 9/11. This year the WTC Cross has been moved underground for the new memorial. I am devastated. This will be the first year that I will not be able to be at the Cross.

I feel an incredible amount of anxiety getting ready to travel to New York City for two weeks. There are many events planned for the week prior to 9/11. I will probably not attend any of them. My main focus is to see and be with my Ground Zero family. We all worked together in the pit.

I have been able to heal from the Angora Fire. I will never get over Ground Zero. I have the WTC Cross tattooed on my shoulder. I wear my Cross chain every day. Ground Zero will always be a part of me. I suffer from anxiety disorder because of it. I fear nothing. Things don't matter anymore. How significant a person is in my life has changed. I always wanted to be friends with everyone. Now, I choose a few. My perspective, priorities and how I respond to events have totally changed. I'm more compassionate, less trusting.

How I dealt with the Angora Fire would have been completely different if I had not experienced Ground Zero. I would have been the "victim" in a pity party the whole time. Instead, I felt angry but empowered.

I am not afraid to die.

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## **9/11: Composure in tragedy despite knowing the dead**

**Publisher's note:** *This is one in a 12-part series running from Sept. 1-12 about how Lake Tahoe is tied to 9/11.*

**By Lorenzo Gigliotti**

During a recent interview a reporter noted a lithograph depicting the flag raising at the site of the World Trade Center following the events of Sept. 11, 2001, which led to a discussion of what I was doing on that fateful day, after which I agreed to write a brief column recounting my memory of that day in our nation's history.

Sept. 11, 2001, I was in my third year as fire chief for the

city of Grandview, a first ring suburb of Kansas City, Mo. I arrived at my office in Fire Station 1 at about 6am, and like most mornings parked behind the station and walked through the apparatus bays to the administrative wing of the building. As I was headed to my office to change into workout wear, I found the oncoming and off-going crews glued to the television set which was in the space set aside for physical fitness. Earlier that morning, at 7:59am Eastern time, American Airlines Flight 11, a Boeing 767, crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center.

I recall thinking what a tragic accident.



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However, within about two minutes, a second aircraft, United Airlines Flight 175, another fully-fueled Boeing 767, crashed into the South Tower of the World Trade Center.

I recall being shocked, thinking that this was an intentional act and that we were under some sort of attack.

I contacted my boss, the city administrator, at home to discuss what had occurred. This led to a full day of meetings discussing our preparedness and security levels, not only as a small city within the Kansas City metropolitan area, but the security and preparedness level for the metro area as a whole.

Asked by the reporter if I knew anyone who perished that fateful day, it caused me to recall an experience I had 13 years beforehand.

In June 1988, I found myself standing in a long line waiting to check in at the registration desk, having just departed the bus which delivered 40 of us, fire service professionals from around the country, from the Baltimore/Washington International Airport to the campus of the National Fire Academy to enjoy the next two weeks of coursework in executive development. The National Fire Academy is contained within the National Emergency Training Center that is located on the site that was the Saint John's College for women located in Emmitsburg, Md.



Lorenzo  
Gigliotti

Before the campus was remodeled in the late 1980s, students were housed in communal dorms with anywhere from two to seven students sharing large dorm rooms; bathrooms were located in the halls; and meals were served in the "chow" hall which was and still is centrally located on the campus.

At 11 this particular evening, I completed the check-in process and was assigned a room in "C" dorm where I found myself in a double occupancy room with a gentleman from the New York Fire Department. I got to know this gentleman over the next two weeks. His name was Peter Ganci, and he was, at that time a captain with the fire department of New York. Peter's career progressed to his appointment as the "Chief of

the Department” which is the highest uniformed rank with the New York Fire Department. Chief Ganci was among the 343 firefighters killed during the terrorist attacks on the United States on Sept. 11, 2001.

I have been known to use the catch phrases like “the world is a small place” or “the fire service is a small fraternity,” but little did I know how small until I recalled this chain of events that certainly changed my life.

Lest we forget – 343.

*Lorenzo Gigliotti served as the fire chief for South Lake Tahoe from January 2005 to September 2011.*

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## **9/11: Stage becomes a vehicle to share experiences, feelings**

**Publisher’s note: *This is one in a 12-part series running from Sept. 1-12 about how Lake Tahoe is tied to 9/11.***

**By Susan Boulanger**

On Sept. 11 at 2pm, the LTCC Theatre Arts Department will have a special theatrical presentation to commemorate the 10th anniversary of 9/11. I am excited and grateful that members of various branches of South Lake Tahoe law enforcement and fire departments, as well as several other LTCC staff members, have joined with me to present several events that will follow the play, including a panel discussion, and a special commemoration of the Victims and Heroes of 9/11 at the Ledbetter Terrace. This event will culminate in honoring our



present-day heroes in Lake Tahoe – law enforcement, fire, military, and all public safety personnel.

So, the question posed to me was – “Why are you doing this?”

I don't have enough space to fully express my feelings or thoughts, or to describe my need and my joy to use my art to reach out to my community. But I will try to put some of them into words.



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To me, the events of 9/11 were staggeringly horrific. It's 10 years later and I still can't get my mind around it; I still feel for the victims, the heroes, the rescue workers, and all of the families; and a nation that was deeply wounded.

Like so many other people, I wanted so much to go to Ground Zero to help, but that wasn't possible. And what could I have done there to help?

So, I donated what money I could afford. I prayed. I attempted to comfort one of my students who had lost a brother in the World Trade Center. I wept for the victims and was in awe of the heroic efforts of so many people. I tried to comprehend it all. And I felt helpless.

On the 10th anniversary of 9/11 I can do something. I can use

my abilities as a theater artist to help this community pay tribute, remember, and hopefully, heal a little.

Some playwrights in the world of theater wrote plays connected to the impact of 9/11. Some of the plays dealt with personal experiences; some were fictional, and some were taken from the real-life experiences of people near Ground Zero. "With Their Eyes – A View From a High School at Ground Zero," edited by Annie Thoms, is a collection of real-life accounts of students and staff members at Stuyvesant High School in the shadows of the towers.

A year after 9/11, a play called "The Guys" by Anne Nelson was performed in New York. Based on a true story, this play deals with a NYC fire captain who lost eight of his men in the towers and now must try to find the words to honor each man's memory. While the world was calling these men "heroes," (which, of course, they were), this play reminds us that each of those heroes – everyone who ran into the horror to help – was human, an ordinary person who selflessly gave of themselves to help others.

I had the idea to do this commemoration a number of years ago. I knew that I wanted to do something to mark the 10th anniversary and, as a theater artist, I knew it would have something to do with the stage. When I was hired as the director of theater at Lake Tahoe Community College two years ago, one of my first thoughts was "I will have a place to do this commemoration!"

I started with the idea to do the two-character play, "The Guys," but once I was at LTCC, I wanted to include more people. That is when I decided to incorporate monologues from several different plays. I now have 18 actors involved.

Some of the play will focus on the immediate experiences of people – what happened at the moment of the attack and directly following. Some of the play will focus on the

aftermath.

Most important for me, though, are the parts of the presentation that focus on the people who were the heroes – this presentation speaks directly about the firefighters who were lost, but I look at it as a representation of all of the public safety personnel who were lost that day.

Theater is such a unique medium. The immediacy of it, the live actor/audience give and take, provides an experience that is unlike any other art form. Theater provides a connection for the audience that allows a deeper experience. I am hoping that this piece of theater, and the events that follow, will provide a meaningful experience to the members of our community.

Given the scope of what happened that day – and what has happened since – this project is a small thing.

But, it's something I can do.

*Susan Boulanger is director of theater arts at Lake Tahoe Community College in South Lake Tahoe.*

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## **Reno Balloon Race to honor those who died on 9/11**

The Great Reno Balloon Race board of trustees, together with officials from Nevada, Reno, Sparks and Washoe County will honor the heroes and remember the lives lost in the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the last day of the Great Reno Balloon Race – Sept. 11.

The official ceremony, which will take place at 6:30am before

Mass Ascension, is scheduled to commence with a brief address from Gov. Brian Sandoval.

During Mass Ascension, all balloons will carry an American flag to decorate the sky in remembrance.

For early risers, the music tribute will begin at 5am with accompanying patriotic music and commentary during the Glow Show and Dawn Patrol.

The Great Reno Balloon Race is a nonprofit event provided to the community at no cost. The event celebrates its 30th anniversary Sept. 9–11, 2011. For more information, go online.

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## **9/11: Tahoe awakens to tragedy, Reno airport in chaos**

**Publisher's note: *This is one in a 12-part series running from Sept. 1-12 about how Lake Tahoe is tied to 9/11.***

**By Susan Wood**

The early morning started out like any other day for me – in pursuit of coffee from the kitchen. Along the way, I turned on the television news and couldn't believe my eyes. A jet was flying into a high-rise building later identified as one of the Twin Towers in New York City.

Like most Americans on Sept. 11, 2001, I was transfixed. How could this be? Was the pilot suicidal or asleep?



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It didn't take long before terrorism seeped into my cynical brain when I saw a second plane hit the next building.

Being a news reporter forced me to jump out of my workout clothes and onto the telephone, where I woke up the newspaper's editor, Michael Green. He had no television, so I had to describe this unprecedented event on the East Coast and convince him it was bound to reverberate to the West.

The newsroom was rocking with activity that most community papers never see. It reminded me of the old days at larger newspapers. The conference room became a designated "war room." Assignments were handed out readily to journalists who I'd never seen make it to work before 8am.

My primary assignment was clear and evident. I would drive to the Reno-Tahoe International Airport, where I certainly expected chaos.

On the way, I called the Federal Aviation Administration and got on a mass media conference call in which it was difficult to hear yourself think. Questions thrown out by journalists across the United States peppered the line. The FAA was shutting down airspace across the nation. The fear was astounding. Thirty-plus airplanes were unaccounted for, and aviation officials ran out of answers – abruptly leaving the

conference call.

With another plane flying into the Pentagon and another into a Pennsylvania field by midmorning, targets all over the country became a real threat.

When I arrived at the airport, traffic was backed up. Police shuffled people away from the doors of the terminal as the airport was being evacuated. Frantic passengers crowded the rental car counters to make their destinations – the long way. They ran out of vehicles that day.

I've never seen such cooperative negotiation. I heard many accounts of people sharing vehicles headed to states thousands of miles away from each other. Who knew when we would be able to fly again?



Susan Wood keeps covering stories that impact the Lake Tahoe Basin.

The thought entered the mind of Adam Mayberry, the airport's public information officer at that time. Now an Airport Authority trustee and spokesman for the city of Sparks, Mayberry was forced to go into overdrive 10 years ago. He established a few news conferences, kept a line open for him at all times and even spent the night at the Best Western across the street from the airport.

Sept. 11 started with a shrug by Mayberry, then disbelief turned into tragic shock and a long working day.

While law enforcement and maintenance crews were removing trash containers and shutting down roadways, Mayberry, who is a pilot, was concerned with the public safety message. With all the tools and tactics for various scenarios, nothing matched this event.

“We have all these emergency plans in place, but there’s no scenario in that red binder of a national grounding as a result of a terrorist attack,” Mayberry recently told *Lake Tahoe News*. And to top it all off, Airport Director Kryz Bart was struggling to return from a meeting in Canada.

Mayberry characterized the closing of the region’s airport as surreal. That was a good description. I stayed long enough that day for it to become a ghost town.

The few stragglers left to fend for themselves in trying to get home stayed glued to the televisions. I understood. It took me a few days to pull myself away. It was as though if I kept watching, the outcome would change.

It dawned on me what day it was – 9-1-1, an emergency call sign. I wondered why little mention was being made to that irony.

Instead, I concentrated on my work upon my return to the office late that afternoon. It was as active as the morning. I went home late that night exhausted – mentally, physically and emotionally. Nonetheless, I summoned enough energy to watch rescue efforts in New York pan out on television.

Outside of work, people’s consciousness in the days that followed fluctuated between a general haze and willingness to share. In times of crisis, we often pull together. There was an evident return to home and hearth as loved ones appreciated each other more and strangers in the remote town of South Lake

Tahoe formed a kinship.

Forget talking about the weather. Our lives appeared to become more grounded in our roots and genuine humanity.

*Susan Wood was a reporter for the Tahoe Daily Tribune on Sept. 11, 2001.*

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## **Toccatà performance in honor of 9/11 anniversary**

Tahoe Symphony Orchestra and Chorus (Toccatà) commemorates the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 tragedy with a concert series that features famed violinist Elizabeth Pitcairn performing Mozart's Concerto for Violin No. 3 in G Major on the legendary Red Stradivarius

Violin. The program concludes with Beethoven's Symphony No. 9.

### **Performances are:**

Sept. 11 at 3:30pm at St. Theresa Catholic Church in South Lake Tahoe

Sept. 13 at 7:30pm at St. Thomas Aquinas Cathedral in Reno

Sept. 16 at 7pm at Trinity Episcopal Church in Reno

Sept. 17 at 3pm at the North Tahoe Events Center in Kings Beach.

Tickets are \$30 adults, \$25 seniors, (62 and up), and \$5 students. Preferred seating is available for \$40 and can be reserved online.



Tickets may be purchased in advance by credit card online or at the door by cash or check. For more information, call (775) 313.9697.

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## **9/11: Still coping with losing airline friends as nation grieves for others who died**

**Publisher's note: *This is one in a 12-part series running from Sept. 1-12 about how Lake Tahoe is tied to 9/11.***

**By Cindy Trigg**

Sept. 11, 2001, is seared in the minds of all Americans who are old enough to remember. Often it is said that we remember where we were when it happened. Like when Kennedy was shot, when the shuttle exploded, we will never forget.

As part of the American Airline family as a flight attendant and my husband a pilot, both based in New York when it occurred, it is hard to not to forget, especially as the anniversary comes around. Just as it is hard not to forget our colleagues, although when we remember that day as a nation it's hard not to feel like our colleagues are not remembered. There is no ill will at all toward the accolades that the first responders receive every year at this time; sometimes I just hope to hear someone say the crews' families are also in the nations prayers.

There are interviews with passengers' surviving relatives,

with first responders' relatives, with the relatives of the innocent victims in and around the WTC, but barely a whisper about the airline crews. My dear colleagues, flight attendants and pilots, my thoughts and prayers are with your families. I pray they have peace of mind. Always remember your family members are heroes.



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People forget that flight attendants are the first line of defense in a hijacking, and today even more so. The pilots are now locked into the cockpit with a steel door and they tell you, you are on your own, the door cannot be opened, a crewmember will not come out.

Some of you might have heard of Betty Ong. She was one of the two flight attendants who made phone calls to the southern reservation desk who in turn reached SOC, security at American Airlines. She was able to calmly explain to the reservation supervisor what was happening. She gave them the passenger seat numbers of the men who went into the cockpit, gave them the seat number of the passenger who had had his throat slashed, and was able to let them know that one flight attendant, the purser, had been stabbed and was dying and another had been stabbed but was more stable.

Reservations wanted to know if they had called for a doctor.

The remaining flight attendants had moved the balance of first class passengers into coach because what was believed to be mace had been sprayed in the first class cabin. Then flight attendants were comforting the passengers and bringing those who needed something to drink a drink. There was no panic. They did their job and did it well even as one of their colleagues lay dying and another lay injured.

These were the flight attendants on Flight 11, the first aircraft to hit the Twin Towers. These flight attendants were able make sure the central reservation agency knew and confirmed they had been hijacked. Both flight attendants were on the phone with the ground when the aircraft hit; this after being on the phone with the ground for half an hour.

At the end, the flight attendant could be heard saying "we're too low, we're too low" and in the recording you can hear the people on the ground asking if they were still there after the aircraft hit the tower. This was 30 minutes prior to the second aircraft hitting the second Twin Tower. In reality it was almost one hour from the first call until the second aircraft hit. How could it be possible for anyone to remotely consider the first aircraft to be a small aircraft or an accident?

Of course there were three more aircraft that went down that day. Betty and her fellow crewmembers were the heroes who stayed calm, did their jobs and made the calls to allow the system to start working to get the rest of the aircraft out of the air. No one really knows what else was planned that morning because cockpit crews all over the United States could be told to keep their doors closed and land immediately. Other aircraft were not able to take off. These people deserve to be mentioned and thanked during every ceremony and commemorative activity that the first responders received.

**Getting the call**

Having been awakened by the phone ringing at 6:15am, I answered and heard the distraught voice asking, "Where's Bill?" – all I recall is asking, "What's wrong, what's wrong?" while he kept asking, "Where's Bill?" Here, I handed my husband the phone.

"Turn on the TV!" I must not have been moving quickly enough because he repeated it rather quickly and more harsh than I was used to. Together we sat there and watched with the rest of America as the second aircraft slammed into the second tower of WTC.



Bill and Cindy  
in 1999

Our first thought was of course was it an American Airlines aircraft with our crew and colleagues aboard. Sadly, we learned in a very few minutes in fact the first of the aircraft indeed was one of our own.

It is beyond comprehension that anyone in our government, especially our president, could have mistaken the first plane as a small aircraft or a "not a very good pilot" as was later reported. As I am recalling in memory of my colleagues I will not voice my political opinions, however I cannot leave out what all of America learned later. President George W. Bush was given a briefing on Aug. 6 that Osama bin Laden determined to strike in America. Later on there was confirmation that some of the chatter had indicated a hijacking. The response by Condoleezza Rice that "we thought it was only a conventional hijacking" can lead one to think that there is no value to the

lives of our crew or our passengers. Only a conventional hijacking? If that were the case, where was heightened security that was implemented prior to the eve of 2000.

Bill went back to New York the first day the flying ban was lifted. That had to be one of the most fearful days I can recall. I think of the flight attendants who had to work in those early days after 911. There were opportunities to ask for the time off, but there would be no paycheck. Most flight attendants scheduled to fly did not have much of a choice if they were supporting a family. Those were heroic crewmembers.

Actually, today is no different; they are the first line of defense. My flight attendant friends say they don't think about it unless something big happens in the Middle East, which is all too often.

### **Going to New York**

We went to New York together about five months after the tragedy. It seemed like it was miles long, the fence that held pictures of victims, hats, memorials. What you could see of Ground Zero was devastating as it was three years later when I took three seniors from Whittell High School to New York for the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. We stayed near Ground Zero the first day. They gathered items and notes from the community to take with them and today it is in the small museum that stands at the St. Paul Chapel of the Trinity Church. From everything they received they rotate the items from around the world to acknowledge the brave and fallen. When Bill and I were there five months after the attacks, there were still the piles of ash on the grounds of the chapel cemetery. Some piles were so high it covered the head stones.



Ground Zero—  
New York City.  
Photos/Cindy  
Trigg

Interestingly, as close as the chapel was to Ground Zero not one piece of glass broke in the chapel. The large oak in the back entering the cemetery split in half and was the only thing on the chapel ground that was destroyed. Going back with the cheerleaders we were given a tour with the docent of the chapel. The pews in the chapel were scratched and damaged, they were going to repair them but thought it was better to leave them be as a historical marker. This is where the first responders came in and literally collapsed for moments at a time to rest. Their equipment that they wore and did not even take off is what damaged the pews. The special area and chair that President George Washington sat in for his inaugural church service was used for the first responders to sit in to soak and relax their feet. Some of their boots were melting to their feet because of the heat from Ground Zero

### **Tragedy continues**

As it turned out, after 25 years of working as a flight attendant I never returned to American Airlines as a crewmember. At the time of 911 I was on a leave of absence for an injury sustained on the aircraft. I was conflicted on whether I wished to work again in that capacity, not because of fear, but because of my son. His dad had passed away the year before. Two months later, practically to the day, American Airlines experienced another disaster – the crash of an American Airlines Airbus 300 over New York on Nov. 12,

2001.

This was the type of aircraft my husband was flying at the time. All aircraft have tail numbers that help identify the aircraft and it's always on the paper work. My husband had flown the aircraft that crashed on Monday morning two days earlier, on Saturday. Now, it really hit close to home. The morning of the second crash the same friend called again, "Where's Bill, where's Bill?" at 6:15 in the morning. Bill was in New York and I had spoken with him the night before, but it was already after 9:15 and not being quite awake it was a bit confusing.

Again Dave was saying turn on the TV. I was able to let him know right away that Bill was spending his day off in New York and that he was OK. Unfortunately, my husband was standing outside of the terminal and was able to see the plume of black smoke that suddenly came off the horizon. Briefly he hoped it was a fuel storage tank, which if you have flown out of JFK, you can see the maze of those fuel storage tanks. He said the minute he walked back inside the terminal he knew. He went to operations and as soon as the elevator door opened he knew it was an American Aircraft from the sound of the crying and the exclamations of disbelief. And then he found out that one of the best co-pilots on the "Bus" was working the flight. He had had a chance to see them that morning before they went to the aircraft and he got ready to go to the hotel.



Cindy Trigg,  
kneeling, and  
Whittel

cheerleaders  
with New York  
firefighters.

The phone rang all day. After calling Bill's daughter, mother and my mother and father I reset my answering machine with an out going message, "Thank you for calling, Bill is safe, leave a message."

It was so much more difficult because we were not together. We spoke often that day, but it was like we were all on hold, the speculation if it was another terrorist attack was rampant. It was the last thing the airline industry needed, the grief of so many families, families that were affected or killed on the ground that were first responders in the WTC attack, the worry of another attack, the delicate scab being ripped from the heart of so many who new what the pain was all about and another group of 11 colleagues as well as passengers.

### **Trying to cope**

It is so hard not to be morbid at times. When you know what it feels like to be frightened by something you hear or feel the airplane do that you are not used to, you know how it feels to try and get out of that jump seat to peek out of that little bitty window and then everything is OK except when it is not. It is too easy to put yourself in the same position. There is only one place for a particular flight attendant to sit, same closet in front of you, same galley across from you, same first class or coach seat that you can see or not see. There are no variables, you always know where and what your colleagues were doing when you find out who was on the flight and what position they were working.

I thought 911 would be the worst I would ever see in the airline industry and I hope to God that it is. Over the 25 active years of working, there were probably more air disasters than I can think of. My first year there was the



DC-10 on Memorial Day weekend in Chicago, Flight 191. The airlines usually retire a flight number when it has been in a disaster. There was the Delta flight in DFW, another 191, an American flight in Arkansas with a Check Airman, and who can forget the TWA incident that happened over the Atlantic just after take off from New York. These are just a few, and it is when it happens right after take-off or before landing that chills you because that is where we are always in the same positions.

In reality, when you take into consideration all those people who have died on our roads, it is a safe career. It is sensationalized and we see the pictures on TV over and over again. For that very reason, I could not see myself going back to working in the cabin until my son was older.

There are so many stories to tell about how wonderful this group of workers is. I will tell you one. There is a couple who fly international out of Chicago, they used fly out of Los Angeles. I remember flying many times with Ernie. They always flew in and out of Frankfurt to Chicago. During the early years of the Iraq war when our soldiers were being deployed and they started coming home for the first time, Ernie and his wife would bring a fresh roll of grass sod with them on their trip, haul it to the hotel. This is by no means a light item and they would bring it individually if they were flying by themselves. Haul it back to the aircraft for the return flight to Chicago. The agents would always let the military men and women board first. They would walk down the jet bridge and Ernie or his wife would have rolled out the sod from the jet bridge to the inside of the aircraft and they would welcome them back to American soil. I cannot tell you the stories we heard about those military men and women getting down to kiss that soil, the tears, the emotion. The agents always waited for the flight attendants to let them know they were now ready for the other passengers making sure the tears were dry and that roll of sod was now in the hands of the military men and

women.

There was the crew I flew with that I will never forget when we were flying to London and Princess Diana died. We were there four days from that Sunday morning when the headlines broke until the day of her funeral. We were there with the ground crews and flight op people from London when Elton John sang and for the moment of silence. We stay at the Forum Hotel in London, which is literally right down the street from Kensington Palace. How do you forget the people you spent those kinds of days with?

### **Healing process**

Such conflicting emotions. Do I write about the drama and the tears? But then we are so lucky to have been touched in such a minimal way? 9/11 was shocking, shocking to all America.



People who died and were involved in 9/11 came from far and near.

I still fly, travel, encourage my son to travel and travel with my family. I always pray that we are safe.

It is really funny a lot of times, in fact most of the time we speak about the aircraft in terms of "she". It's hard to explain, like when the crash in AK happened, watching the pictures on TV of the aircraft it was so personal. Maybe it would be the same if the building you worked in caught fire

and all you could see was the shell. I still look at an airplane taking off and it's hard to believe you can make a living in that skinny silver tube. Watching Air Force One taking off in Reno I just automatically think to myself, "OK girl, climb, climb, climb." It is still so remarkable to me.

One thing I do know for sure, I would not trade my years as a flight attendant. I loved my career and colleagues; in fact I married one, my husband, who is still a captain with American Airlines.

When speaking about our crews it's hard to give you an example of how we all treated each other as family. Charles Burlingame was the captain of American Flight 77 that went into the Pentagon. Before I had been on leave I was commuting from to New York from Reno usually through LA. Capt. Charles "Chick" Burlingame was one of the last pilots I flew with. On one occasion my husband and I both commuted home with him as captain. The last time I flew with him he allowed me to sit in the cockpit for take off and landing because there were no more seats. This was definitely not OK, but that was how things were before 9/11. The crews took care of each other.

Other crewmembers were family, and the cockpit crews were especially nice to those of us who were living with or married to a pilot. That was another thing, I refer to Bill as my husband throughout the story but we did not get married until March 2002. We decided to get married after 9/11 and the crash in New York in November. We had been together for 13 years, had accumulated some real estate and had other investments. We did not want our families to have to sort things out if anything happened. I tease and tell him I finally decided to say yes, actually he was the one who finally relented. It's hard to explain why we finally actually got married. Of course we had loved each other for many years, but each having our own children it did not seem necessary. There was a sense of wanting to know that we were together, wanting to know there was an "ever after."

The crash in New York was too close to home and the realization hit hard that it is quite possible that it could be our own loved ones. The odds go up when you do it for a living, but you really never think about it, at least not before 9/11 or the crash on Nov. 12.

Since 9/11, when I fly standby, which is the only way I fly, I do not get the least upset about missing a flight or getting bumped. If I belong on the flight, I will get on, if not, grab a good book and wait for the next flight. If I get home, I get home. If I have to spend the night, I spend the night even if it means sleeping in the airport, which is really not so bad with a good book and a big coat.

I was very proud of the job we did and I still miss it every day. And I was never as proud as I was of my colleagues as I was on 9/11. I always knew we were trained well and always knew they would do their best under the most extreme conditions. Unfortunately, they had an opportunity to prove me right.

Please remember these heroes when we commemorate the 10-year anniversary. If you're traveling at that time, let your crewmembers know their friends were heroes, too.

*Cindy Trigg lives with her husband, Bill, in Stateline.*