

**MAJ Michael V. Ciaramella**

**Section 8B**

**L200 Crucible**

On the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, I drove my Jeep with its personalized New Jersey license plate onto base like I had every morning since PCS'ing to Fort Huachuca, Arizona for the Military Intelligence Captain's Career Course. Instead of driving directly to the schoolhouse, I made my way to the post parade field. My class was participating in the Installation Change of Command Ceremony. MG "Spider" Marks was taking command of the Army's center of military intelligence. I already mentally prepared myself to be standing on the parade field for several hours for multiple rehearsals before the actual ceremony commenced. After finding a parking spot on yet another Army base short on parking areas, I heard an odd announcement from the radio DJ. Apparently some idiot had flown a plane into the World Trade Center in New York City. As I shut off the engine and the news report, I chuckled to myself of the mental image of a small Cessna bouncing off the side of the skyscraper before limping off into the sunset like a drunken bumble bee. Little did I know how wrong was my mental image and how different life would be after that awful day.

I quickly joined my classmate in formation. Several folks made the usual parade formation gripes and complaints. Good-natured grumpiness quickly turned into annoyance as our rehearsal start time came and went without so much as a "Stand, Fast!" or "Parade, Rest!" After a 30 minutes delay, an uneasy rumbling began amongst the formation. Apparently others had heard the report about the airplane accident in New York.

"Yeah, I heard that too."

"A Cessna? No, I heard it was a 747."

"Maybe the pilot was drunk."

"A deliberate crash? Are you kidding me? What the hell is a deliberate crash?"

"Could have been some nut-job. Who knows."

Surrounded by Military Intelligence “professionals,” we could not have been more clueless as to what was happening. Finally, a senior NCO called the formation to listen up. He calmly, but sternly, read a report from a sheet of paper that confirmed the crash of a large commercial airliner into the World Trade Center and suggested that we might be under attack by terrorists. Before the NCO could finish reading his report, someone shouted from across the crowd that a second plane had just crashing into the other tower. As if sharing a collective brain, terror gripped the crowd. Minutes later, the Commander of Troops called “Fall-in!” as the ceremony was about to begin.

We marched on the field in utter silence. The ceremony lasted over an hour and a half. As I stood motionless at “Parade, Rest” listening the MG Marks, I thought of my cousin, MJ. I had just spent the weekend with my cousin in Las Vegas, so he was fresh on my mind. MJ was a day-trader on Wall Street. He worked in one of the smaller buildings of the World Trade Center Complex, near the towers. I wondered if he saw the attacks or even heard the impacts. I never once doubted his safety. I would later learn that he wasn’t even at work at the time of the attacks, having decided he was in no rush that morning for no particular reason.

Thirty minutes into MG Mark’s speech, a thought occurred to me that I will never forgive myself for not thinking sooner: Dear God, my older sister worked on the 67<sup>th</sup> floor of the World Trade Center’s North Tower. My heart leapt into my throat. I have no explanation why I didn’t remember this earlier. Perhaps my mind was just protecting itself from a painful realization. Maybe my mind was too preoccupied with my cousin since I had just seen him a day earlier in Vegas. Maybe I’m just a freaking moron. How could I forget my own sister works there? I visited her office every year during Christmas leave when I travel home to New Jersey to see family. Upon this horrific realization, my patience wore thin. My mind screamed, “When is this damn ceremony going to end?!” I needed to call home immediately.

When the Change of Command ceremony finally concluded, I ran to my Jeep. As I raced home I tried to call my family on my cell phone, but all circuits were busy. Two miles from my apartment, I heard a reporter on my car radio utter the most frightening phrase I have ever heard in my entire life: Tower One of the World Trade Center has just collapsed. I recall screaming out loud in horror as I was convinced my sister was dead. With tears streaming down my face, I pushed my Jeep over 80 mph and ran every remaining stop light to get to the land-line in my apartment.

As I stormed into my apartment, I heard noise emanating from my answering machine. I had just missed a phone call. The machine's display flashed 11 messages. Fearing the worst, I pressed play. The messages, all from the same person, told a mother's nightmare. My mother's voice sounded from the machine.

The first message, calm: "Michael, there's been a plane crash at the World Trade Center. Probably nothing to worry about." The next message, more urgent: "Michael, it looks like a terrorist attack. I cannot reach your sister." The next, sheer panic: "Michael, both buildings are down. I don't know where your sister is. She is not answering her phone. It is going directly to voice mail." The last, exhaustion: "Your sister is home. She is ok. Call when you can."

In my own panic, it took me three attempts to correctly dial my mother's phone number. When the call finally went through, my relieved mother's voice answered. She immediately handed the phone to my sister, who I still could not believe was actually alive. Her story is incredulous. She was in the lobby of the North Tower, waiting for the elevator when the first plane struck her building. After a bit of confusion, she left the building and ran into the street. She looked into the sky just in time to see the second plane strike the South Tower. She had no recollection of the next 3 hours. She arrived at my mother's front door covered in dust, soot, and blood that was not her own. She could only surmise that she took the ferry out of New York

City into New Jersey as one of her ferry passes was missing from her purse. We both later agreed it was probably best she didn't recall the details.

On a day of countless horrors, mine is one that never happened. Incorrectly believing my sister had perished is a thought that continues to haunt me to this day. I am still racked with guilt that I stood in formation for almost 2 hours that frightful day without giving her a second thought. My sister and I are much closer since that day. We were never distant, but our bond is certainly much stronger. We talk regularly and visit as often as we can around the holidays. I call her every September 11<sup>th</sup> to check up on her and to let her know I'm thinking of her. I'm not sure how this event changed me as a military leader, but I know they definitely changed me as a person. I am more appreciative of those around me and perhaps value close relationship more than before. Maybe being more human makes me a better leader. Who knows? The attacks on 9/11, and our Nation's response in the days to follow, made me a more committed Soldier, an extremely proud American, but most of all, a better brother.