

There but for the Grace...

By Marilyn Litvak

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The elevator doors closed and we were quickly whisked to our destination over 100 floors above the building's lobby. The 15 or so passengers, most strangers to each other, exchanged mildly anxious glances as the structure creaked, groaned, and swayed gently on its non-stop journey. For some it was an eternity, but actually within minutes, we arrived at the lobby of Windows on the World.

The date was May 12, 2001, and the elevator's destination was the restaurant complex on the top floors of the North Tower of New York City's World Trade Center.

In a few days, I would begin escorting a group of prominent Southern Californians on a 10-day trip to include the City and the Hudson River Valley area. A welcome cocktail reception at the Windows on the World's bar was planned for the first day of the group's tour. And I wanted to personally check on arrangements for the event, since all my prior contacts with the more-than-helpful staff had either been over the phone, by fax, or e-mail.

Mounting a short flight of stairs from the dark elevator lobby to an equally dark reception area, I was overwhelmed as I entered a large, bright, split-level room with floor to ceiling windows that faced east, south and west. Although I'd been told to expect a spectacular sight, I wasn't prepared for the absolutely breathtaking views those sunlit windows provided patrons of The Greatest Bar on Earth—a well deserved name.

Spread below to the east and north was the mass of densely packed buildings of New York City. Easily visible were a dwarfed Empire State Building, the Brooklyn Bridge over the East River, and, in the distance, Long Island. To the south and west was the tip of Manhattan with nearby Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty. Verrazano Narrow Bridge connecting Long Island to Staten Island stood guarding the gateway to the Atlantic Ocean with an occasional freighter passing underneath. Sailboats could be seen gracefully tacking on the Hudson River below. Planes flitted through the air busily taking off and landing at the nearby LaGuardia, Kennedy, and Newark airports. It was a sight to remember and cherish.

The cocktail party was a huge success. All the tour's participants reacted as I did to the breathtaking views below while savoring the wonderful food and excellent service. But...

Then came September 11 and it was all just a memory never to be enjoyed again—nearly 3000 lives lost; an American icon destroyed. And what happened to the Windows on the World service personnel who'd help me plan my group's successful event? This is a question I've always been reluctant to confront because I know what the answer must be.

Only when I read the August 2004 report from the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States did I realize just how fortunate I'd been. The report stipulated that according to the captured Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, Bin Laden had ordered an attack on the World Trade Center for May 12, 2001—the very date of my elevator ride to the top of the North

Tower. The date was chosen to coincide with the seven- month anniversary of the USS Cole bombing in the Middle East.

Now some may ask why an attack on a seven-month anniversary? The answer is complicated and harks back to ancient times when seven planets were identified and the notion of a seven-day week was conceived. Since then the number seven has gained in importance in many civilizations and major religions.

However, as I read the report, I could only recall the proverb dating from the 16th century, “There, but for the Grace of”