“The Day the Twin Towers Fell” – as Remembered by Paula Huffell

Tuesday, September 11, 2001, began as a routine work day - with a 90 minute bus/subway commute from City Island in the northeast Bronx to Bowling Green at the southern tip of Manhattan. It was about 9:05 a.m. when the first unusual thing happened. I had just transferred at Brooklyn Bridge station from the #6 to the #4 train and was on the last leg of my journey to Bowling Green when an announcement came over the loudspeaker: “This train will not stop at Fulton Street. The next stop will be Wall Street.” There was a bit of grumbling by some passengers over the inconvenience, but not too much, probably because the weather was beautiful and an extra walk of a few blocks could be considered a pleasure rather than a hardship.

A larger than usual crowd got off at Wall Street and the usual crowd, including me, got off at the next stop, Bowling Green. I had been traveling in the rear car of the train and was one of the last passengers to reach the subway exit. As I started up the steps to the street, dozens of people were running down the stairs, hollering, “Don't go out there! Get away from here! You don't want to go out there!” I did what any rational person would do and followed my curiosity. I exited the subway at the foot of Broadway and Whitehall Street and was immediately mesmerized. Mobs of people were running frantically in every direction while others stood rooted to one spot, like statues, looking up. Large horizontal funnels of black smoke were billowing across the sky. The air held an acrid smell of things burning. I asked some people who were rooted next to me if they knew what was going on. “Two planes just crashed into the World Trade Center,” came the answer. Something was wrong with the picture. “Two planes? Did they crash into each other before hitting the Towers?” “No,” came the reply, “I saw the second plane hit! It’s a terrorist attack!”

It took a few seconds for the words to sink in but they finally made impact. The upper floors of both buildings were engulfed in flames and thick black smoke. The flames were out of control and kept shooting higher and higher. “Oh my God,” were the only words I was able to speak. The words were coupled with unspeakable images that took over my brain. People were burning alive in the hideous inferno.

All at once the people who had run into the subway station to get away from the area now came running out in a state of panic, shouting more unnerving news: “There's no train service in either direction! What do we do now?” It must have been those last few words that returned me to a state of decisive movement. I headed down Whitehall Street to my office building at One Battery Park Plaza. I passed a kiosk as I walked and wondered why it was still open for business. I concluded that the vendor was Muslim as he was wearing a *kufi.* As if it were an ordinary day, I bought an apple turnover to bring to the office. It did not occur to me that it was an odd thing to do at the time. I can only account for that action as a subconscious attempt to keep things normal while the events that were happening around me were off the charts.

When I reached the entrance to my building, there were dozens of people standing outside. Many of them were my co-workers from Seward & Kissel. I joined the S&K crowd. Most of them were crying and talking about what they had seen. One of my co‑workers told me that she saw the second plane hit and then saw people jumping out of windows from the highest floors. One couple were holding hands as they jumped.

Many were at a loss to know what to do about their own safety. Linda Charette, our firm’s Director of Administration, joined the Seward & Kissel employees who were gathered there and told us that the building was being evacuated. Everyone was advised to leave the area. The recommended route was to stay close to the East River. Most people had already left. Reports were out that no trains or buses were running, all traffic was at a standstill, and the bridges and tunnels were closed. The only conceivable way of leaving the area was to walk. As the crowd dispersed, most people headed toward the East River. Some said they would walk north to a less affected area of Manhattan; others would walk over the Brooklyn Bridge. In my case, the distance to my City Island home was about 20 miles and I worried about needing a bathroom en route if I should make the attempt to walk. I made my decision and entered the lobby of my office building. In spite of the urgings of security personnel to evacuate, I took the elevator to the 21st floor.

On the way up, I thought of my boss of 24 years and good friend, George Seward. He had celebrated his 91st birthday on August 4, 2001. His corner office on the 21st floor looked out at the Twin Towers. He had no appointments that I knew of that morning so I assumed he had kept to his usual schedule and arrived at the office somewhere between 8:00 and 8:30 a.m. When I arrived at the 21st floor, which is the topmost of the three floors occupied by Seward & Kissel, I was heartened to see a few familiar faces still there. All were planning to leave soon. Mr. Seward was in his office and had no thought of leaving. His advanced age had made the decision for him. He said that a few minutes before nine o’clock (8:45 a.m.) he heard two huge explosions about one second apart, presumably the first being the plane (American #11) hitting the building and the second being the fuel exploding. He received several subsequent phone calls from concerned family members and friends, and then tried to send some email messages. While he was so occupied, he heard the second plane (United #175) explode into the South Tower (9:03 a.m.). He was glad that I had come to join him. At 9:30 a.m. the carnage was still in full view through the glass walls of his office. As difficult as it was to watch, it was even more difficult to look away.

I tried to call my husband Walter at home but got a recording that all circuits were busy. I resorted to long distance and got through on the first try to my mother in Florida. She was tearfully relieved to hear that I was okay and said she would call my husband to pass on the news. That left nothing else to do but deal with the rest of the day.

I went back into Mr. Seward’s office. He had his radio on. We shared the apple turnover. The news kept getting worse. A third plane (American #77) had hit the Pentagon at 9:41 a.m. Hundreds more were killed. A fourth plane (United #93) had crashed in a Pennsylvania field. It was thought to have been heading for either the Capitol or the White House. One station was broadcasting a woman caller. She was giving a close-up account of what she could see -- fire and smoke streaming out of a huge gaping hole in the South Tower. People jumping out of windows. Suddenly, she cried out, “Oh my God, the building is collapsing! It’s going down! I can’t believe what I’m seeing! The building disappeared! It’s gone!” In the matter of seconds that she was saying those words, our building rumbled and vibrated like it was experiencing an earthquake! From our windows we watched and felt the South Tower fall. It was 9:58 a.m.

A mighty cloud of ash and debris rose up like a tidal wave and rushed through the streets. Everyone who was not trapped in the landslide ran for their lives. From our 21stfloor position we heard the cries of panic in the streets and watched a multitude of people running down Broadway to escape the pursuing menace. The cloud rode over a large portion of the downtown area. Only a residue reached the Battery. We heard the terrible reports of lost firemen, policemen, emergency workers and civilians. The North Tower continued to burn.

At 10:28 a.m. our building began to tremble again. No broadcast was needed to tell us that the North Tower was collapsing. It imploded before our eyes, taking itself down in a shroud of thick black smoke, along with the people who were still in it.

The collapse of the second Tower, combined with the fall of the first, produced a dense cloud of gargantuan proportions. It rose up over the entire width of the downtown area, reaching out with its tentacles toward Battery Park and the East River. The scene could have been taken from the motion picture, “The Fog.” The cloud passed over our building, leaving a thick blanket of ash over the windows. For several minutes it was impossible to see outside. The strange pervasive odor of things burning intensified. When the air finally cleared sufficiently to allow vision through the layer of ash that remained on the windows, the space where the Twin Towers had once stood was empty.

Finding a way to get home became our foremost priority. Four Seward & Kissel partners, John Tavss, William Munno, Peter Pront and Arrial Cogan, came by Mr. Seward’s office. They alerted us that Con Edison might be shutting down all electric power in the downtown area. They were leaving and urged us to join them since we would otherwise be left alone. Mr. Seward and I both needed transportation beyond Manhattan so we decided to take our chances and stay at the office. We kept the radio on and waited for news that trains were running again – at least from Grand Central Station.

As far as Mr. Seward and I knew, we were the only two people left in our 35‑story building. We kept the radio on and eventually heard that there was limited train service out of Grand Central Station as well as limited subway service north of 42nd Street. That was good for both of us. Getting to 42nd Street became our prime objective.

It was about 2:00 p.m. when Mr. Seward and I finally left the building to investigate possibilities. Luckily, the electricity had not shut down and the elevators were still running. We were glad to see a few of our usual security guards still in the lobby. No one could tell us anything about transportation but they did give us face masks and advised us to wear them outside. We took their advice.

The neighborhood resembled the final scene from the movie “The Day After.” Nuclear winter. Dust and ash covered everything. As we walked, it settled on our shoes, clothing, hair and skin as well. We walked to a nearby subway station and found there was still no service. Not ready to give up, we attempted to walk to the Brooklyn Bridge train station, located north of what is now known as Ground Zero. We were hopeful that a subway train or bus would be running from there. As we walked in that direction, the layer of ash that covered everything got thicker. Debris of all shapes and sizes, some of it burned, covered the streets. It became increasingly difficult to breathe. We saw a large fleet of ambulances and other emergency vehicles lined up and waiting. I asked one of the drivers if we could get a lift out of the area, and pleaded my case by telling him that Mr. Seward was 91 years old and unable to walk long distances. He told us they were waiting for survivors and were not available for any other detail. We found out later that there were no survivors.

Police were now setting up barricades and checkpoints and directing all human traffic toward the East River. We decided it would be wisest to return to our office building and camp there until the situation improved. As we attempted to do so, a new barricade manned by a police officer barred our way to the shortest route back to our office building at One Battery Park Plaza. We tried to convince him to let us through. The policeman, undoubtedly following orders, insisted that we take the route he was prescribing. Despite being 91 years of age, and maybe because of it, Mr. Seward was not easily intimidated. He told the police officer to go ahead and shoot him, then nudged the barrier aside and walked through. I bravely followed. Fortunately, this is America and the officer didn’t shoot.

When we arrived back at our office building, the lobby guards told us that shuttle buses had just started to run from the Battery to 34th Street. That was welcome news. We found the shuttle bus, boarded with our MetroCards ready. “No charge,” said the driver. We silently applauded Mayor Rudolph Giuliani for the gesture as it gave us confidence that forces were already at work to ease the great catastrophe that had just engulfed New York City.

The bus was less than half full when it left the Battery. It was the only vehicle on the road as it traveled up the FDR Drive. Everyone on the bus was let off at 34th Streetand First Avenue. From there, Mr. Seward and I walked to 42nd Streetand then started across town. It was now quite hot outside and walking became uncomfortable. As we started across town, an air-conditioned cross-town bus came along and took us the rest of the way, free of charge, to Grand Central Station. We arrived there about 5:00 p.m.

Midtown Manhattan seemed to be functioning almost normally. I noted with disbelief that people were strolling and shopping and talking about everyday things, as if nothing had happened. Nevertheless, it was a great relief to have reached an oasis. Mr. Seward and I marched like dusty, battle-weary soldiers into the nearby Grand Hyatt Hotel and comforted ourselves with a martini and buffet dinner. Afterward, each of us was able to get a train home. Again, there was no charge.

Seward & Kissel and most other firms in the downtown area were closed for the rest of the week. On Monday, September 17th, our firm reopened for *business*. When I arrived at the office at 8:55 a.m. that day, Mr. Seward was already there. As usual, we shared an apple turnover.

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*Epilogue –*

*George Seward continued coming to his office on a regular basis beyond his 100th birthday.* *He was interviewed during a celebration of that event by a variety of newspapers and by CNN Money, which aired on international TV.* *(I am the proud owner of a copy of the CD – since I am in it.)* *Mr. Seward died peacefully at his home in Scarsdale, New York on February 15, 2012, at the age of 101, 6 months and 11 days.* *I continued to assist him until the day he died. – PH*

***P.S.*** ***In the 34 years that we spent together as Boss & Secretary, and then as friends, I never called him anything other than “Mr. Seward”, and he never called me anything other than “Mrs. Huffell”.***

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