



The Day One of the Towers Fell...then 9/11 Hap...

by JamesPagett

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The Day One of the Towers Fell...and then 9/11 Happened

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Larry Ginocchio graduated from the University of South Carolina in May of 1992 and was well on his way to a successful career in the aviation industry. At 6' 4" with an athletic build and boyish good looks, his friends (and he had many) looked up to him and girls chased after him. One of Larry's closest friends, Marty McClure, was also one of my closest friends and therefore through Marty, Larry became a friend of mine. Marty, who also stands at 6' 4" tall with an athletic build was, physically speaking, Larry's equal and when they were together they looked like a set of bookends. I often thought, when standing side by side, that these guys look like the twin towers and, incidentally, they were both a lot of fun to be around.

On the morning of September 6th, 2001, I was driving to work in Columbia, South Carolina when my cell phone rang. It was Marty and he sounded very serious. Marty is typically pretty laid back and I even poked fun at the serious tone of his voice until he muttered, "Larry Ginocchio".

"Yeah, how's Larry doing?" I responded.

"He...he was killed in a hunting accident yesterday in Canada. He's dead."

I felt like my teeth had been kicked in and the wind knocked out of me. Marty was devastated and I was in shock. How could this be possible? He was just in Columbia the previous weekend for the Carolina football game. Larry was the epitome of a young, healthy, smart and ambitious young man. He was an accomplished aviator and triathlete. He had landed an incredible job with the Cessna Aircraft Company selling state of the art airplanes to our nation's most affluent people. In my mind, he was one of the "twin towers" and now one of those towers was gone.

I arrived at my office, closed the door and cried. Shortly after, I received an e-mail outlining the funeral arrangements in his parents' hometown of Kilmarnock, Virginia. The funeral was to be held on Tuesday morning, September 11th, 2001. Marty had flown to Richmond the next day and from there had driven due east to Virginia's outer banks where Kilmarnock, a picturesque, small coastal town is located. Larry's parents, two brothers, a sister and his serious girlfriend, Julie, were receiving Larry's closest friends and family at their home and subsequently at a wake on Monday evening.

I woke up on the morning of Monday, September 10th and did not know how I could possibly go the nine hundred miles round trip to Kilmarnock with my wife and a twenty-two month old baby. The demands of my job were pretty intense, as well, and I was concerned about being away for what would amount to, at least two, maybe three days. As I drove to work that morning, I passed the exact location where I was when I first learned of Larry's fate and it hit me like a bolt of lightning! I would go to Larry's funeral by myself and I needed to leave immediately. I turned my car around, called my boss (who was very supportive) and went home. My wife, Frances, helped me pack my bags and I left within the hour en-route to Virginia.

As I was driving on Interstate 20 that morning heading to I-95 North, my friend Bert, his wife Shannon, and another college friend Barry passed me in the left lane in Bert's large SUV and they were heading to the same

destination. There's an old saying that it is better to be lucky than good. Well, luck was on my side that morning as Bert suggested that I leave my car in the parking lot of a Comfort Inn hotel that his family owned just north of Florence, South Carolina on Interstate 95 and ride the rest of the way with them. I took him up on his offer and we all arrived in Kilmarnock late in the afternoon.

The Holiday Inn Express was sold out due to all of the people in town for the funeral; however, this was also a time for friends to pull together. Marty had a spare bed in his room and Bert and Shannon would stay there. Larry's other best friend, Rob and his wife Tricia, also had an extra bed in their room and Barry and I would have to share the spare. After a grueling trip earlier in the day and a very sad wake that evening, we all went back to the hotel and had a couple of cold beers and several slices of pizza in the hotel break room. I was sure that the hardest part of the trip was behind me and I went to sleep that night wondering what Larry's funeral would be like.

The following morning, September 11th, 2001, I awoke to an extraordinarily beautiful day. The Virginia sky was a rich shade of blue with hardly any clouds to be seen. I went downstairs to partake in the complimentary breakfast, bumped into Rob and we ate together. We didn't have a whole lot to say as Larry was on both of our minds and we were tight on time. There was only one shower for four adults and the funeral began at 10:00 AM sharp. Rob finished breakfast first and went back to the room to get ready; I followed shortly thereafter.

As I exited the shower and began to shave, the world began to change forever. "Jim, come quick!" Rob called, "a plane flew into the World Trade Center and it's on fire!" I remember being shy about entering the room with just a towel on and shaving cream on my face, especially in the presence of Tricia but the events occurring in New York put my humility into perspective. It was at that moment, standing in a hotel room in a towel, surrounded by Rob, Tricia and Barry, that we all saw the second plane hit the South Tower. At first, I didn't comprehend what I had just witnessed...I thought that the explosion was a result of the raging inferno in the North Tower but instant replays made clear the exact horror that had been perpetrated on New York. A second commercial airplane had slammed into the World Trade Center and it was no accident. America was under attack.

As much as I wanted to stay glued to the television as the rest of the nation was, I had to compose myself. I needed to get back in the bathroom, finish shaving and get ready for the funeral. For a self-proclaimed news junkie, it was torture but I had to stay focused. At around 9:15, I was completely dressed and had a little time to spare before we left for the church. I called my father from the phone in the room and we talked about the situation in New York as I relayed him information that I was viewing on CNN. My mother and father worked at the United States Department of Health & Human Services in Washington, D.C. and my gut was telling me that maybe they should head home. My father scoffed at the idea of leaving work and said he appreciated the updates on New York and he would keep an eye on the situation.

As we were prepared to leave at around 9:40, the reports of an airplane hitting the Pentagon began to surface. I tried to call my father back but could not reach him. Then at 9:50, as we were walking out the door, the South Tower collapsed. I couldn't believe the irony that one of the towers was really gone and we were on our way to Larry's funeral. There would be no more phone calls to my father because my cell phone was not getting a good signal in rural Kilmarnock and the funeral was to begin shortly. As we drove, I asked Bert to turn on the radio and it was then that I heard, although it turned out to be erroneous, that a car bomb had just exploded in front of the State Department. Now my worst fears had been realized!

Washington was under attack, as well, and if the Pentagon and the State Department had already been hit, my parents were right in the line of fire on Independence Avenue. Not to mention that my brother-in-law was the chief-of-staff to an Illinois Congressman and I presumed he was at work

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in his Capitol Hill office building. With all that being said, there I was in a town that I had never been to before, in someone else's car with no television and no ability to call anyone. The funeral for Larry Ginocchio had begun and my wife & daughter, mother & father, and the rest of my family were on their own.

As we filed into the church, I couldn't help but find comfort being in a house of worship at a moment when it seemed like the whole world, as we knew it, was crumbling around us. But as I looked at Larry's casket, the reality of the dire situation became crystal clear. The world, as the Ginocchio's knew it, began crumbling days earlier. The sound of Mrs. Ginocchio crying out her son's name still haunts me to this day. I grieved for Larry's mother and at the same time wondered if my mother was okay. Larry's father was a pillar of strength that morning as he eulogized his son so beautifully and yet at the same time I wondered if my father was in harm's way. As our nation dealt with the trauma of the attacks as it unfolded, every person in that church was coping with two catastrophes at once and there was absolutely nothing that any of us could do that would change our situation. For me, a sense of despair and hopelessness set in and all I knew to do was to pray...and pray I did.

As we arrived at the grave site, I was struck by how serene and peaceful it was outside with the sounds of birds in the air and a slight breeze coming off the Chesapeake Bay. *How could it be so quiet with all that is going on in New York and Washington?* I thought to myself.

I also wondered what my wife, Frances, was doing at that moment although I surmised she was fixated on the television set and wishing we could talk. The silence was deafening. The sky was still beautiful and there were no clouds. But there were no airplanes, either and that added to the silence. It was pure tranquility. I would later hear stories from my parents about the government offices being closed after the Pentagon attack; F-16 fighter jets roaring overhead as the people made their way out of Capitol Hill. Geographically speaking, I was not very far from them but I felt like I was a world away.

The graveside service concluded with a wonderful lunch pulled together by members of the Ginocchio's church and then we all headed our separate ways. Because all flights were grounded, many of the people who flew to the funeral were in a bind. Marty eventually left Kilmarnock in his rental car with a couple that needed to get to Charleston, South Carolina. I had given him my car keys and informed him that my car was at the Comfort Inn just north of Florence on Interstate 95 and he could get dropped off there and drive my car back to Columbia. The couple would then continue on to Charleston and return his rental car there. I would go all the way back to Columbia with Bert, Shannon and Barry and it was a plan that worked to perfection. The only problem was that Interstate 95 was considerably backed up for what seemed to be hundreds of miles due to all of the cancelled flights.

We arrived home very late Tuesday evening and I remember hugging Frances for the longest time. She had been in contact with all of my family and was happy to tell me that everyone was safe. I peeked in our baby's room and watched my daughter as she was sleeping. She looked so sweet and peaceful which was a stark contrast to the evil and chaos that was so prolific that day. Watching her also reminded me with what was right in our world as there is nothing more innocent and pure than a child's mind and nothing more unconditional than a child's love.

Just as Larry was buried on September 11th, so were the thousands of Americans who perished in the attacks and whose bodies were never recovered. In our nation's history, there has probably never been a single incident where so many young, educated, bright & heroic people had their lives taken from them at the same time and the irony is that so many of those who died were just like Larry. I am confident that Larry, who was the first to fall, was standing at the gates of heaven on 9/11 with his positive attitude and reassuring smile waiting for that frightened equities trader,

waiter, fireman, pilot, salesman, flight attendant, soldier and anyone else who died on the tragic morning to comfort and reassure them that everything was okay. I can think of nobody better to be in that position than Larry Ginocchio and I am certain that he and all of the victims of September 11th live forever in a place where there is no hate, no pain, and unconditional love for mankind.

Dedicated in memory of Larry Ginocchio (1966-2001)


To be Continued...

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