

TWA FLIGHT 800

17 Jul 1996



By Patricia A. Golden,
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FOLLOWING THE LIGHT

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Many news stories, and television documentaries covered this horrific night. Theories and speculation of an explosion that caused this Boeing 747 to fall from 13,800 feet, ten miles off Long Island is still a mystery. The individuals that compose of the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), and other agencies involved with this downed flight, have performed a superlative job trying to place all the pieces of this puzzle in their particular order. Yet, there is a very small piece of the puzzle remaining, which has not been found: The hard work and long hours of dedication to solve the mystery of Flight 800 continue.

When I was asked to write this story, my mind wandered to the many important people I encountered over the four years I was stationed at Group Moriches. My role as the senior Health Service Technician of the Medical Department was self-full filling, and a job that I enjoyed. The Group office had two active duty medical positions, and one reserve position. Theresa, my reservist Chief John Phillips and myself took care of the medical needs and trained about 350 active duty and reserve personnel, comprising of 6 units and one 82 foot cutter scattered from Jones Beach to Montauk

In the fall 1993, we recognized the need for continued medical training for the boat crews. I asked Chief Warrant Officer Ray Handle, then head of Emergency Medicine at Coast Guard Headquarters, a good friend and confidant whom I had known for well over 17 years. To authorize a Basic National Registered Emergency Medical Technicians class for the members of the Search and Rescue Detachments (SARDET) from each unit and surrounding ships. The instructor's of this class Mike Fink and his sister Ellen were nothing short of fabulous, and the three and half-week course flew by with all the students passing. I met Arnold Becker, through Mike and Ellen; Arnold was the Assistant Director of Emergency Medicine, for Suffolk County. He taught me many things about being an EMT, and he gave me the opportunity to meet the men and women at the Suffolk County 911 dispatch center, and the East Moriches Community Ambulance Company.

I always took advantage of getting underway on the boats with the SARDET crews, they taught me so much about the inlet and law enforcement, and it was a change in pace from working in my office. In the fall of 1995, the Group Operations Department, East Moriches Ambulance crew, Coast Guard Auxiliary, SARDET, and I staged a mock multiple boat disaster in the inlet. It went well and we learned a lot. Timing was perfect and it proved to be a good opportunity to meet the (gang) from East Moriches Ambulance, Steve Garms, and Frank, the assistant chief. They became my extension to sickbay, and I felt safe knowing they were less than 10 minutes from the Group.

July 17, 1996 was like any other typical day at the Group. Theresa and I had traveled to the small boat station at Montauk and spent most the day doing a routine drug urinalysis on the crew. I was pretty beat by the time I got home to Westhampton Beach that evening. My two kids “where doing their thing:” my daughter was on a sleep over, and my son was upstairs in his room playing on his Sega. At about 8:45 p.m., I was just sitting down to have my cup of tea, when my friend Eileen came bounding through my back door. I remember looking at her thinking “What in the world?” But by the time I heard what she was saying, she had already said it twice. Her words I will never forget: “ They just called John to the Group, a 747 just went down in Moriches inlet!” “What, no way!” I replied. “Patti I’m telling you they just called John to the Group. A 747 just went down! Call them!” I preceded to pick up the phone and called the Operations Center, Danny Phee answered, “Danny, it’s Patti, what’s going on? Did a 747 go down in the inlet?” Danny replied, “You better come in!” “O.k. I’m on my way!” I turned to Eileen, “It does look bad, they want me to repot too.” Eileen, who is a medical technician, stated “If you want me to come in and help, call me Patti, please!” “Let me see what I have, I’ll call you if I can!” Turning on my heel, I ran up the stairs to my bedroom, changed my clothes and told my son Adam that I had to go to work because a big plane went down in the inlet “What mom?” He replied. “Adam a 747 went down off of Moriches, I have to go to work, I don’t know when I’ll be home!” he looked so confused, “Never mind Adam, I have to go!” I gave him a kiss and hug and left the house. By this time, it was 8:55 p.m.; it takes about 20 minutes to travel from Coast Guard Housing in West Hampton Beach to the Group in East Moriches. I sped through the entire trip, thinking to myself and praying out loud to anyone who would hear me, “Please don’t let this be true. How can this happen?” I never saw one

fire truck, not even an ambulance. The night was so calm. How could this be? Nothing was amiss. Then I started talking to myself, “Okay, I know Steve and Frank will be there, we’ll set up what we have to. The boat bay can be the morgue. Do I have enough supplies? Can anyone survive this?” Before I knew it I found myself at the stop light at Montauk and Atlantic Avenue, a policeman was just putting up the first cone at the light. I put my blinker on and yelled out my window to him that I was the head of the medical department, I was called in to the Group, and he let me through. The road leading to the group was long and dark; the night sky was so clear it seemed you could touch the stars. When I pulled into my parking spot next to sickbay, no one was there except for the normal cars in the parking lot from the duty crew.

Entering my sickbay from the outside door I still wondered if this was all true, had I been dreaming? Or am I still in the dream? My sickbay was small, however there was enough room for a patient treatment area with a curtain. I quickly changed into my work uniform, and headed to the second floor where Operations was located. Commander Ken Burgess, the Executive Officer was standing behind the counter. From this point in time the only thing I can tell (you) is that my time clock was off. I like to refer to it as my-space time-continuum. Everything seemed to be in slow motion, even though it was actually happening in real time. Commander Burgess turned to look at me. He was so pale; sweat beaded his forehead and trickled down the side of his face. He raised the back of his hand and wiped the sweat off his brow, a moment in time I will never forget. “Commander?” I asked hoping that he would confirm my reality, that this was a dream. “A 747 has exploded about five miles outside the inlet.” Such a simple statement, and then I knew my reality was real and not a dream. “I’ll empty my medical stores sir, East Moriches Ambulance should be arriving.” I left the Operations Center and headed up another set of stairs, to the recreation room on the third deck where we held our training and meetings, it also has many closets and cubbyholes for storage, and this is where I kept my supplies. I grabbed a box and started filling it with all the supplies I had: gloves, battle dressings, bandages, intravenous solutions and lines, masks, goggles, protective garments and whatever else I could carry. I proceeded back to the boat bay and strategically placed out all my supplies. I heard the sound of sirens coming closer, thinking we would need the Critical Incident Stress team for the Coast Guard, I headed towards my sickbay to call

Senior Chief Jim Greer who was stationed at Air Station Cape Cod. He was my chief at the Coast Guard Academy and a good friend. We kept in touch with each other through the years, and I knew he would be coming. I called the Air Station Operations Center, Lieutenant Allemand answered the phone, I explained to her who I was and that I needed to speak with Chief Greer. She promised to call him; I stood by the phone and paced the floor.

My sickbay had a huge picture window facing the entrance to the base. As I looked up from the phone, the sky from the main gate and past was lit aglow with swirling red and blue lights. A line of fire trucks, ambulances, and Suffolk County police cars entered the main gate, then in sequence, like in a chorus line, they lined up starting at the helicopter pad side by side. What a sight to see! I knew there sirens were on, but I didn't hear them. The phone rang and it was Jim Greer. He was already notified to pack his bags, he would be at the Group as soon as he could get there, and then he prepared me. "Listen to me, you'll feel like you're in a battle field, this won't be easy!" "I know Jim, I know." His words, which reached the core of my soul, were a reality check! I've taken care of the deceased before, but never on this scale and we still hoped to find someone alive. I wanted to find Steve Garmes as I knew the East Moriches Ambulance had come in the gate with the rest of the rigs.

Exiting the side door of sickbay, I stood on the porch for a few moments trying to get my bearings on all the ambulances and fire trucks in front of me. All the EMS personnel were starting to emerge from their rigs and were heading to find their Chiefs. I spotted Steve at the end of the entrance ramp to the Group, radio in hand. He had become on-scene ambulance chief for all the ambulances. I told him the latest "scoop" that I received from Commander Burgess, and what I had done for the boat bay and my supply locker. I'm not sure if he heard me or not. His mind was on many other things, so I found the rest of the crew and repeated myself to them. I then headed back up to the Operations Center.

Commander Burgess asked me how many body bags we had? "Not many," was my reply. He stated the ships on-scene needed body bags and fuel for the small boats. I told him I would gather whatever I could find from the ambulances. I also requested if there were any boats available, if they could come get me. I felt I needed to be out with the small boat crews. Commander Burgess then stated "The Coast Guard Cutter ADAK is the

on-scene commander for the search and rescue, other ships will be arriving.” “ That’s where I need to be, I replied on the ADAK, where I could coordinate body recovery with the Group and the boat crews from there.” As I left the Operations Center to head for the boat docks, I remember hearing Danny Phee saying, “Take a radio with you!” The passageway leading to the stairwell was full of rescue personnel and police. As I worked my way down the stairs through the crowd, I just made the corner to the first floor, when John Phillips opened the back door. “ Patti! Thank God you’re here!” I said, “John, grab a life vest we’re heading out as soon as they can find us a boat!” We were standing in the entry foyer, when the back door leading to the boat ramp opened, and there before me, was a reserve Lieutenant Colonel, who had shown up wearing fatigues. “Golden, your boat is ready, get out on the docks!” John and I looked at each other in utter amazement.

We headed out the back door of the Group and down the ramp to the end of the pier. As I looked down at the boat, I observed a 21foot pleasure craft loaded with supplies and five men. One of the men I knew was a Coast Guard Auxiliarist, another one said he was in the reserve (I’m not sure if I believed that), and I didn’t know the other three. I thought the boat belonged to the Auxiliarist. The Lieutenant Colonel continued giving orders to John and I: “You have your body bags and fuel, remember white bags are for parts, black bags are for whole bodies!” Before I knew it, John and I were on our way to the crash scene. We sat in a huddle at the back of the boat and reviewed what we were going to do once on scene. Then out of the blue, the boat came to a dead stop! I looked up at the driver of the boat, and asked “What happened?” No one moved right away. I stood up, looked around and got my bearings. I had been in this part of the inlet before, the Group was behind my left shoulder. We had run aground. “Who are you?” I asked the driver of the boat. “I’m Frank, the owner of the boat, that guy in fatigues said he needed the boat for supplies.” “Oh, I see.” “ Frank do you have a radio?” “No, I don’t, that guy said you would have one.” I shook my head remembering Danny’s last words to me: “Take a radio!” “Oh Danny is going to kick my hinny when I get back!” I looked down at Frank’s console. There was nothing on it but a gas gage. I looked at John, I said “We need to head back this isn’t safe.” John replied, “We can’t they need the supplies, and do you want to face that Lieutenant Colonel again?” “Not really.” I thought to myself. “What do the rest of you want to do?” Frank spoke “ I’m here to help.” The rest agreed. “Frank what do you have

for lights?" I asked. "I got a flashlight." "This is getting worse," I thought. I said "Ok guys we'll do this, I'll get us to the inlet, we'll wait there for a marine boat or one of our boats." We got out the boat hooks and with our one flashlight we slowly moved the boat from the shallow water into the inlet waterway. It took a while; I'm not sure how long. Fire trucks with lights flashing lined the edges of Dune Road to mark its opening. We proceeded through the inlet. During the incoming tide or a storm I had seen this inlet, become torturous with 6-10 foot swells, but tonight it was semi-calm. The tide was coming in and white caps began to form on the crest of the ripples. Once outside the inlet in front of us was open ocean. I asked Frank "Did that Lieutenant Colonel tell you in which direction the crash was?" "No, he said you would know." "Ok, we're staying put, we'll wait here, someone's got to come by."

I couldn't tell how long we waited (it seemed like hours) but I know that was my space-time-continuum in play. A fishing boat came by us, its arms extended for the catch. I had Frank move to get us out of its way. The boat was silent, each of us in our own thoughts. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath and let it out slowly. I began to pray, "You know God, you have me on this mission, I'm not quite sure why you have me here, but if you want me to complete it, I need a sign from you, I need your help!" I repeated this to myself over and over again. I called upon my guardian angels for their protection, to guide us and keep us safe. I never remembered praying as hard as I did at that single moment. We were looking through the blackness of the horizon and heard the sounds of the ocean lapping on the shore behind us. I stood up from my seat by John and went to the helm and stood by Frank. Frank asked, "What do you want to do? You're the Captain now." "I know some one will be by Frank." We continued to stare into the horizon. Moments passed, then like the Fourth of July, the sky lit up in front of us. We all gave out a yelp, "That must be it, the crash site!" We all agreed, "Now what?" said Frank. I said, "Well, they said in operations that the crash was about 5 miles off shore. We can follow the lights in the sky and hope they stay lit until we get there, or we can continue to stay put." John said "We could sit here for hours, we have their supplies, they need us, lets do it!" The rest of the men agreed, "Ok then that's what we do, steady on course Frank, head for the lights in the sky."

The trip to the outer perimeter of the crash field seemed endless to us. As we approached, we started to see the twinkling lights of the search and rescue ships, helicopters from every agency, the lights that lit up the sky so well were fading only to be replaced by a fresh one. I prayed for those lights to stay lit until I could contact another vessel. The sea was calm, a heavy haze of smoke from the burning jet fuel lingered on the surface I asked Frank to slow the boat down and grabbed for the flashlight. We passed a huge section of the tail fin of the plane, TWA written predominately on its surface. I asked everyone to keep an eye on the water I knew we would have bodies on the surface and I didn't want Frank to hit anyone. The ships were becoming larger as we entered the area where the plane went down. I don't recall hearing any sounds from the many vessels that were working the grid, one following the other, but separated only by a couple of feet. Just their search lights roaming the surface in search of life. Only then did I look behind me. I wanted to see if the radio tower at the Group was still on my left shoulder but there was nothing but the blackness of the sea with no radio tower, no landmarks. I looked at John, "We're more than 5 miles out." As I got my bearings before me, I noticed a small boat starting to head in our direction. To catch his attention, I aimed the flashlight in his direction and turned it on and off. He must have seen it because he headed right toward us, I recognized the blue strip on the side of the vessel as the Suffolk County Marine Police, I think at this moment we all thanked God for his guidance. I told them who I was and that I needed to find the ADAK, "No problem," they replied, and they escorted us right to her.

Within moments we were along side of her. I turned and thanked Frank for all his help. Such a brave man for putting up with me. I spoke with the men in the Suffolk County Police boat, "Make sure he gets back to the Group o.k., he has no navigation, he'll have to follow you." "Not a problem," they replied, "We're heading back that way." Now came the task of climbing the side of a 110-foot cutter in the middle of the night. The lights that lit our journey out to the crash site were still shining brightly. The task was not an easy one, Arnold the Coast Guard Auxiliarist who is in his 60's was first to climb up. We off-loaded all our supplies, then John and I took our turns. Once onboard the ADAK I thanked Frank again for all his help, and we waved goodbye.

I turned from the rail of the ADAK knowing Frank was safe and on his way back to the Group. The sight before me was devastating. The fantail was full of victims covered

with white sheets stained red, one body ever so gently placed on top of the other about seventeen in all. Lifeless souls who just hours ago were filled with joy of the adventure that lay before them. My head began to spin, the scene before me was playing out, the reality we all trained for, but never expected to happen. I looked into the night sky above the fantail the bright lights I learned were from the Air National Guard, Parachute lights they called them. They were now beginning to fade, and as brightly as they lit the night sky, they now plunged the ADAK and surrounding area into darkness. Only the searchlights from the ships and hovering aircraft lit the crash scene now. I gave a silent prayer of thanks for their purpose, if they only knew how they guided our journey that night. I turned towards John his face ashen and somber, "Did you see that? They're out!" "Yeah, weird," was the only statement he could muster. He was so tired since his wife had delivered their second child just a few days before, and this would be another night with out sleep. "Come on John, let's get a soda, we need a break." We headed below decks. The galley was so clean you could eat off the deck. The men of the ADAK were proud, you could tell by the atmosphere of the ship and how well they kept her clean.

As John and I emerged from below decks, I took a moment to observe my surroundings. My first impression of the crew was a smooth functioning team, and the Commanding Officer exceptional and caring. They worked together without a break for hours hoisting lines, and lowering small boats into the smoked-filled curtain that lingered on the ocean surface, which hours earlier was a blazing inferno of flames reaching 15 feet into the night sky. Young men, who had never seen such a tragedy, and who will undoubtedly feel its effects for years to come. They reached deep inside themselves to find every ounce of strength they could muster to pull these lifeless, heavy, and in some instances dismembered, human forms from the relentless, unyielding grip of the ocean. They placed them into their small rigid hull inflatable boats, and then transported them to their mother ship, the ADAK.

Time stood still, I will never forget this scene. Jim Greer was right when he said, "You will feel like you're in a battle zone." John and I began to open up the boxes of body bags to prepare the victims for yet another journey back to Moriches. We started to show the crew the disaster tags, and how to use them, however, what was the point, when we knew the outcome. From what I observed, I was beginning to doubt there was anyone left alive.

Maintaining composure was difficult, but I knew John and I were the only Coast Guard medical representatives out there, and the crew was relying on us to do our job. The Executive Officer, approached and stated, “We have changed on-scene commander to the BAINBRIDGE ISLAND, they also have bodies, and there in desperate need of your supplies.” I looked up at him, “Ok. sir, we’ll get ready.” I said. Speaking to John, “We’ll leave Arnold behind he can help them finish bagging, I don’t want him climbing up and down the sides of these ships.” After speaking to Arnold, John and I prepared once again to climb down the side of the ADAK, a zodiac had pulled along side and was waiting for us.

We lowered our supplies into it and then climbed in, I took the center seat, John behind me. The driver handed me a flashlight and stated “ If we see any bodies in the water on the way over we’ll pick them up, shine the flashlight in the water.” “No problem” I stated. I chuckled to myself, “Another flashlight!” I had no idea what time it was, the trip across the crash field didn’t take long. I observed a lot of debris from the plane floating on the surface. There were several hot spots still burning from the jet fuel, and the fuel slick shimmered endlessly. Being in a zodiac you’re much closer to the surface so you can see much more. The curtain of smoke was still quite thick; the smell of jet fuel was heavy in the air as several items bobbed by us, mostly styrofoam cups from the galley, dishware, and several parts of the fuselage could be seen, but in this area no bodies. I thought of the crew from SARDET Moriches and Station Shinnecock, I knew they were out here, somewhere. As their corpsman and friend I was worried about them.

We arrived at the BAINBRIDGE without incident. It was harder getting up her side than the ADAK, because of the size of the craft we were in, and being lower to the ocean surface we had further to climb. I looked up at the crewmembers looking down at me, and once again I climbed up the rope ladder, as I neared the top of the rail several crewmembers grabbed my arms and pulled me on to her deck. Safely onboard, a Chief greeted me, “ Hi I’m Butch.” I introduced John and I. The crew were running short of body bags, and were preparing five female victims for transportation as I started to get our supplies in order, I knew this night was going to be long, I just didn’t realize how long it was going to be. The crew from Station Montauk pulled alongside in their forty-one foot boat; it was good to see familiar faces. We passed the five bodies to them, and they told us

the Group was swarmed with people; I could just imagine. As they pulled off and headed back to the Group, John and I again waved goodbye to our fellow comrades. The few crewmembers left on the fantail with John and I began cleaning the deck with bleach, then hosed it off. By this time I finely looked at my watch. I couldn't believe it was 4 in the morning. The Commanding Officer came down from the bridge and stated " Things are quieting down. Get some rest while you can, we'll continue the search a first light."

John and I proceeded below decks to the galley. As I looked around I thought, "Another well kept ship." We made some coffee and settled down for some rest. I couldn't sleep, so I sat at the table and shut my eyes. Cutters have there own distinct sounds and sailors become accustomed to these sounds as they become one with their vessel. Being on the BAINBRIDGE brought back many memories of the Cutter MELLON. I was one of the first groups of women to go to sea for the Coast Guard back 1979. She was moored in Hawaii back then. The newer model cutters of today are much quieter than the older models. The rush of the ocean against the hull can act like a lullaby and before you know it, you're asleep. It can also act as an alarm, because when there is an uncharacteristic sound, it can wake you up like an alarm clock. Tonight the sounds of the BAINBRIDGE diesel engines were humming. The galley is located at her water level and as I listened to the distinct characteristic sound of plane fuselage lightly tapping against her hull, I knew she was gently making her way through the debris field.

At sunrise, I woke John, and we proceeded to the fantail. The sunrise was like no other I had seen. Soft rainbow colors of pink purples and blues greeted us on the horizon. The ocean was smooth as silk, except for the jet fuel that continued to shimmer on its surface, and plane debris interrupting its calmness. Several Coast Guard cutters now on scene were diligently working the search grid. The Commanding Officer of the BAINBRIDGE came down from the bridge. Another body had been found and we were going to pick it up. A flare had already been dropped to signify its place and the Zodiac was launched with 2 crewmembers onboard. John, Butch and I stood next to the rail watching. As the zodiac came about to the flare I knew it was bad, when one of the crewmembers started to get sick over the side. We looked at each other and I looked at the Commanding Officer, his gaze intent on his men. "This is a bad one." I said. Moments of silence passed as we watched

these two brave men struggle to bring the victim onboard the zodiac. Once accomplished, they headed back to the BAINBRIDGE.

The boat davits were extended and the zodiac was lifted to deck level. Butch grabbed a shower curtain and placed it over the side of the zodiac and onto the deck. With Butch next to me and John behind me, we moved as one to lift “her” from the zodiac and onto the deck. To gain momentum, I then straddled “her,” because there was nothing to grab onto. Her lifeless form was shredded from the plane explosion, her face unrecognizable and her torso separated at her midriff. As we moved her, the contents of her chest cavity came out and onto my hand, I gently placed them back in. My first thoughts were, “She was a grandmother, excited for the trip and adventure she was about to embark on.” The one thing that sticks in my mind to this very day, was her right hand and the fact she was covered in glitter, small pieces of flakes sparkled in the sunlight off her hair and torso, reds, yellows, blues, and greens. All rescue personnel have one sense they remember during a tragic event whether it is a sound, a smell, or something they see. Whether we want to believe it or not, we have one thing that stays with us and this is mine. Her right arm was left intact, her hand palm up with forefinger extended, her remaining fingers left in neutral position. I felt she was saying, “I’m here God, reach out, take my hand, bring me home!” This image reminded me of Michaelangelo’s painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, where God’s hand is extended to Adam. Their forefingers never touched, but then again they don’t have to; God’s power has no boundaries. John was ready with the body bag behind me and placed it below her torso. I moved her through my legs to him. He slid her into the bag and zipped it up.

It took all of us a few moments to recover. I asked John “ Have you been noticing all this glitter all over the place, where is it coming from?” “I have no idea, maybe it’s from the fire on the seat cushions?” he said. “Could be the fabric?” I stated. In any account it was everywhere. The twenty-one foot ridged hull inflatable boat, arrived from the Group to pick her up, I was surprised to see my next door neighbor and coworker Kevin Carlson onboard. I knew the Group had utilized all available personnel however Kevin’s rate (Yeomen), is administrative and ensures the rest of the active duty personnel receive pay and entitlements. Some say they have a thankless job, but without them the Coast Guard wouldn’t run. His presence reaffirmed my opinion that it doesn’t matter what rate you are.

During a catastrophic event that involves human life, limb or property, the Coast Guard merges as one to form a complete orchestrated symphony.

The zodiac was once again lowered and the boat crew began recovery of all the surface debris. As they filled their small craft with plane fuselage, seat cushions, clothes, shoes, luggage, Mickey Mouse dolls, letters, and anything else they could find, I knew this event which began well over thirteen hours ago was far from over. The boat crew would then come along side the BAINBRIDGE and off load, by handing each piece individually to Butch, John and I. Butch would then mark the debris with the grid numbers in which it was recovered. This process was repeated over and over. At one point, John and I were standing on the forward section of the fantail, one of the younger crewmembers let out a small scream and swiftly moved to the other side of fantail. John and I looked at each other, a sense of knowing in our eyes. We moved to the piece of fuselage where the non-rate had been standing, "O.k. Now what?" I said. From that point on, John and I knew what the rest of our mission was. Recovery meant everything no matter how small and if it just happened to be human remains, then so be it. I knew by this time, the County Coroner would be thinking, "DNA." I asked Butch and John to find me a hazardous waste bag and scissors. I proceeded to cut around the flesh that was entangled in the fuselage. After careful removal of the piece, I placed the remains in the bio-bag. John and I started looking at the debris and other plane pieces more carefully, removing any remains that adhered during the explosion. The morning was long and by noon I was ready to head back to the Group. My stomach was starting to feel queasy from the smell of the diesel engine. I requested the Commanding Officer, to contact the Group and have a small boat pick us up. With a body bag and a bucket of remains in hand, we waited for our ride to come.

The forty-one foot small boat from Station Fire Island arrived. As she pulled closer to the BAINBRIDGE I noticed the aft section was full of several cameramen and women from different news agencies. Once again John and I shared looks. The Coast Guard does not give in-depth training on public affairs. They cover the basics and the rest you do the best you can. But this type of coverage was different. I was upset they were even out there. "What business was it of theirs anyway?" "My God, how the hell am I going to get these remains on board with any type of grace?" I thought to myself. As the forty-one pulled up to the BAINBRIDGE, John and I thanked the Commanding Officer, Butch and the crew for

allowing us to help them. John jumped onto the bow section first, I handed the remains to him, and he helped me on board. I knew all the cameras were on us, but what were we going to do? John handed me back the remains. As we were stepping down onto the main platform, a female reporter obstructed my way into the main cabin. "What's in the bucket?" she asked. "Human remains" I answered, then I lifted the bucket slightly towards her nose. She immediately placed her hand over her mouth and turned on her heel away from me. I felt great pleasure in the fact that I had given just reward to those individuals who had violated the sanctuary of a private matter between the deceased, their families and their rescue personnel. I swiftly moved into the main cabin, said "hi" to Randy Ryan the coxswain, then proceeded below deck to the forward cabin where I placed the body bag and bucket on a bench. I returned to the main cabin and remained there. John headed towards the aft section of the main platform with all the reporters.

The journey to the Group seemed endless to me, I guess I was restless. I was standing at the doorway to the main cabin, when the reporter from "Inside Edition" approached me. He started to ask me all kinds of questions such as, "What do you do for the Coast Guard?" "Were you in the main crash field?" "How do you feel?" "Can you tell me how it was out there?" "What did you see?" There is one thing I learned from my time in the Coast Guard: "Think, (intelligence), and never say more than you think your Commanding Officer will allow you to say." I gave this reporter very vague answers, I wasn't sure at that time what the news media new about the crash, and I wasn't about to be the one to spill the beans. He requested that I join him on the pier when we docked. "We'll see," I stated. I spoke with Randy the coxswain about this. I requested that some of the crew shield me as I left the forty-one and delivered the remains to the boathouse. We drew together our plan for the event to protect my precious cargo and me from the news media.

On our approach to the dock at the Group, I was amazed by the complete transformation of the base: The back porch was full of news media, with wall-to-wall people. A "Tent City" had grown on our lawn surrounding the Group buildings, and cars were everywhere. Police, from every agency, fire emergency and ambulances took their place in any available open space. Helicopters were in a holding pattern around the Group waiting for their turn to land. The Red Cross had erected a tent and was serving lunch, the dock surrounding the Group was full of men and women in white protection suits, sorting

through and categorizing everything that was brought to them by rescue personnel. Randy pulled the forty-one into its place, amongst all the other small boats that now occupied our boat slip, the lines were thrown to the men standing on the pier. Once we were secure, I went below decks to retrieve my precious cargo. I stalled long enough to ensure that our passengers had departed, then as planned the crew surrounded me and we made our way to the boathouse. The boathouse door was open, as I entered I knew the corner had arrived and my plan to make the boathouse the morgue paid off. The deck of the boathouse now had a black tarp that was taped down to the cement. Towards the center of the boathouse yellow tarp was placed at the end of the black tarp. Buckets lined with bio-hazard bags were placed in this area. An abundance of police, FBI, medical personnel, and the corner's staff lined the room, I felt like the eyes of the nation were upon me when I stepped up to the yellow tarp, no one said anything they just stared at me. "Do I put this here?" I asked firmly to the table of people in front of me. They nodded, "O.k. then." I proceeded to place the remains in front of them. Why did I feel so angry? Emotions and feelings of the preceding night were starting to surface, and the fact the boathouse was filled with personnel only doing their job. They had no clue what we had been through or who I was, my impression of them and the climate of the boathouse at that time were cold and uncaring. I left the boathouse through the side exit, entering the foyer, then into admin office. I needed to freshen up and see what was going on in my sickbay.

The admin office was full of Coast Guard Public Affairs personnel from Boston and New York. Kevin was once again behind his desk taking phone calls with the rest of the yeoman. John came through the door behind me "The Red Cross is serving lunch, you need to eat and rest." he stated. "Not really hungry John, but let me check out sickbay and we'll have something." After looking in on my office, it was empty, I guess Jim hadn't made it yet. I wondered where Theresa was? The last time I saw her Commander Burgess was directing her to Station Shinnecock, because he didn't think the forty-one and forty-four foot small boats could make it through Moriches inlet. She was going to coordinate recovery there, however during the early morning hours the small boats arrived at Moriches with no problem. Recovery and coordination of this event continued at Moriches.

I followed the hallway to the bathroom to freshen up, after splashing several handfuls of cold water on my face I looked at myself in the mirror, the reflection of a women met

my gaze, the eyes no longer glistened, face pale and wind blown. I wondered if we would all be the same again. After drying my face, I found John and we headed out to the Red Cross tent to get some food and drink. The station's back yard was so full of people, tents, and vehicles maneuvering was difficult. We grabbed a sandwich and water, and preceded back to the dock to sit, on our way we found Randy, "They want me to head back out." He stated. "What type of crew do you have today Randy?" "Were they on last night?" I asked. "No, there fresh." He said. "Well, do you want John and I to go back out with you?" "We've been finding remains on the fuselage, I don't want to subject these guys to that." "Sure, that's a good idea." Randy said. "Ok, but we need to load supplies, do you have any body bags, water, or food on the forty-one?" I asked. "No, some food and water." He stated. "What time do you have to leave?" I asked. "By one, they want me to take the reporters back out." "We'll meet you at the boat by one." I said. John and I grabbed gloves, white protection suites, hazardous waste bag, face masks, and body bags, we headed back to the forty-one foot, dropped off the supplies then went back to the Red Cross tent to grab more food, cookies and water. I didn't eat my sandwich.

Reporters from CNN, the Associated Press, Inside Edition, FOX t.v., and other new agencies boarded the forty-one, Chaplain Larsen from the Coast Guard came a board. John, Mike Spute from the Aids to Navigation unit, and Ron an EMT from Westhampton Beach ambulance, and myself took our place in the aft section called the well deck. The ride out didn't seem as long, as the night prior and we arrived at the search area in no time at all. Several vessels from the Coast Guard and Suffolk county Marine Division were continuing their search grid. We moved forward deeper into one of the debris areas, the water was thick with jet fuel, glitter continued to sparkle on the surface with plastic containers, clothing, shoes bobbing up and down, letters to loved ones, pictures of loved ones and seat cushions from the plane. Randy slowed the forty-one down, leaning over the side, John, Mike, and I began to pull in everything we could get our hands on. The reporters took pictures and video taped the debris field and us working, out side of the clicking of the cameras they were very quiet. I noticed the seats were numbered, as we pulled them in, I mentally took note of the numbers, thirteen, sixteen, nineteen, twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-six, twenty-seven, and they continued. The fabric was so charred, "John, I wonder if these were the ones in the fire ball?" I asked, "Could be." He stated." Keep a look out for

you know what?" I told him. "Oh I am!" He said. We moved from one debris field to another filling up the back of the well deck. I was sitting on the spool for the towline John was next to me, the sun was so hot and the white protection suits, and gloves didn't help matters. To make things worse when I was pulling up a heavy piece of plane fuselage the splash from the propellers caused me to get sea water and jet fuel in my mouth and on my face. Now all I tasted was jet fuel and my lips were dry. Ron got us all water, we continued to work. John and I were looking at the cushions and plane parts at our feet; he nudged me and pointed. "Do you see that?" he said. I looked in the direction of his finger and nodded. A large piece of skin tissue looking like a section of elbow was between the seat and armrest. I nudged Ron on my right side, "Quietly, go get the medical waste bags and a bucket." I told him. When he came back the reporters already knew something was up and their cameras were on. I whispered to the guys, "Cover me as much as possible, so they won't get too much of this on tape." They did, but the reporters still got a good news clip for the evening story that night, and of course every woman nightmare a good shot of my hinny.

With the well deck full Randy turned the forty-one in the direction of the JUNIPER, one of our newer class buoy tenders, two hundred twenty feet long, they had just commissioned her just weeks prior. Now as we pulled along side she looked very haggard and her hull was no longer smooth, her paint job was ruined, you could tell many small boats had been a long side her that day. We off loaded all that we had; the Commanding Officer invited the reporters to take a look at her. At first I'm not sure if they wanted to go, but they finely did. One of the reporters that began his climb up the rope ladder became unsteady, he was trying to hold onto his large camera and the line at the same time, "Very expensive to drop don't you think?" I said "Do you want me to hold it for you?" He looked at me then the camera "I won't drop it." "I promise." I said. He handed me the camera, and the men on the JUNIPER helped him over her side. I handed the camera up to him. The reporters were on board for about thirty minutes, John, Mike, Ron, Randy and myself took the time to relax. Mike and I had come across a large envelope full of letters in one of the debris fields. We plucked it out of the ocean and I hid them under the space between the towline and the deck. I didn't want the reporters to know we had them, I would bring them back to Moriches myself. I took this time to look at them, I knew they

were love letters and notes from family members in France, they were written in French, some were in English. They would get to their destination if it were the last thing I did.

When the reporters were safely back onboard Randy pulled away from the JUNIPER with ease, I trusted him so much as a coxswain. We headed back into the debris field and continued to pick up more plane debris. Randy received a call on the radio to meet the forty-four from Shinnecock, which was out on another search grid. They had remains for us to pick up. Swiftly we sat back down at our spots, Randy yelled, "Throttle up!" The forty-one swiftly rose above the ocean surface and moved effortlessly through the debris field. It was late afternoon, the sun was making its slow decent into the Western Hemisphere. I glanced at my watch noting it was four thirty, had John and I been out here that long? Twenty hours had passed since our first notification of this event; I couldn't help but think that in some small way, we would never look at life the same way. The trip to the forty-four seemed long, I wasn't sure if I was tired or if my adrenaline push was starting to wear off. The taste of jet fuel still lingered in my mouth, no matter how much water I drank my lips were dry, and as hard as I tried to wet them with my tongue the worse they became. My face felt burnt and dry from the sun, as long as Randy kept the forty-one moving the breeze kept me cool, and the wind felt good upon my face. The forty-four from Shinnecock was in another thick debris field, as we approached, Randy drew back on the throttle and slowed the forty-one down. Chief Keller and his crew looked just as tired as were he stated he had found an engagement ring that was floating on the surface. The reporters swarmed the side rail and took pictures; he then handed us a bucket and a few bags of remains. We waved our good-buys, "Time to head home." Randy said. "Yea, I've had enough." I replied. A hush came over the forty-one, the sky with blended streaks of blues, pinks, and purple hues added to the tranquility of the ride. Each one of us silent in our own thoughts, even the reporters who were sitting on the deck were dozing.

Randy maneuvered the forty-one through the inlet with ease; our approach to the station was unhampered. The men and women in white protection suits were still sifting through wreckage and baggage on the pier; we approached the dock and off loaded what we had to them. Randy then backed the forty-one up and turned her bow into the boat slip. The reporters were grateful for the ride and thanked Randy. With two bags of remains, a bucket, and a large envelope of letters in hand, John and I once again headed for the

boathouse. On our way up the ramp, a voice called out “ Hey there stranger!” I looked up to see Jim Greer, a welcome sight. I paused went back to him and stated “I’d give you a hug but, I’m afraid you’d blush!” he chuckled. After dropping off the contents to the boathouse I spotted Theresa working diligently on the pier, she was in charge of getting the boat crews cleaned up after they off loaded the deceased into the morgue. Theresa was very good for logistics, with an exuberant personality she had the knack of getting whatever supplies you requested. John and I headed back down on to the pier to hand over the large envelope of mail we had found. Then Jim escorted me to the decontamination area, were I discarded the white protection suit and cleaned up, it was now seven p.m.

The Coast Guard Critical Incident Stress Debrief team arrived on Thursday. Christine Sullivan our district coordinator and Jim took up residence in my sickbay. We were all given rides home that evening, as we left the gate to the base; Satellite City had formed in the small park on the entrance road. A site to see with twenty five satellite dishes and over four hundred media personnel from all over the world. The police had erected a total of six checkpoints you had to pass through them, to get on to the base. As I arrived home my kids were waiting for me, my youngest Athena was happy to see me, as she went to give me a hug, she stopped on her tracks, “Oh mommy you smell bad!” she exclaimed “ Thanks Athena, I love you to!” “Mom everybody has called and called again, you need to call Aunt Jobie.” “Ok Adam after I get cleaned up.” I stated. I was beginning to feel the effects of no sleep, and my body being on overdrive. With the numbing feeling in the pit of my stomach I still could not eat. Jim tried to get me to eat at the Group, the Red Cross had laid out a great spread, but there was no way I was going to eat chicken, seeing it made me nauseated, between the jet fuel, diesel fuel, and heat stress all I wanted was my shower. I headed up the stairs and into my room, discarding my work uniform I knew it would never be the same, the shoes were ruined so I tossed them in the garbage. The shower felt good even though I took a long one, it didn’t feel long enough. I could still smell the jet fuel no matter what I used for soap the smell did not go away. It was after ten thirty the last time I had slept was Tuesday night. Forty-two hours had passed; history was now changed for 230 souls. The pan that I used to heat my tea up in was still in its place on the stove where I had left it the night prior. Feeling restless, I turned on the burner to heat up my left over tea. I turned on the television, every channel was reporting that days events involving the

tragedy of Flight 800. “If they only knew! Walk in my shoes for the day, you’ll have all your answers to your speculations.” I said out loud in my living room. I decided to turn it off and I went to bed.

I lay in bed awake what seemed like for hours; my mind wouldn’t shut up! Many thoughts and questions about the event’s that hurtled John and myself into our place in history kept repeating themselves. I was up set with the Army Lieutenant Colonel who had placed John and I in a civilian boat that had no navigation, upset at myself for allowing it to happen and not saying, “You fool do you know what you’ve done?” to him. Guilt, at the fact I should have stayed by the inlet and waited for better transportation. I was upset over the loss of two hundred thirty lives, and that it could possibly be a terrorist attack. Scarred at the same time that if it was? It was hitting to close to home! Every time I tried to breathe deeply through my nose, jet fuel lingered. Restless sleep came, the sounds of helicopters filled my head, search lights moving as if in a danced choreographed over the ocean floor. Dancing in rhythm with many heartbeats, the Colonel yelling, “The white bags are for parts, black ones are for whole bodies, make sure you get it right! The picture before me changes we’re on the ADAK, the crew is yelling, “Their to many!” We can’t handle them all!” John and I are trying to bag them, as fast as they placed them in front of us. “The pile is getting too high!” I yelled. Suddenly these lifeless souls began to sit up! Our eyes meet their ashen white faces with wet hair hanging in strands about their faces only obscures their pain. The picture moves in closer and I begin to focus more intently on their gaze, and I noticed that their mouths were beginning to move! “What are you telling me?” I begin to ask them, “What do you want?” The Colonel continues to yell! The helicopters come in closer, I cover my ears from the sound of the rotors, the searchlights get brighter, and now several bodies begin to stand up and walk toward me! “What are you telling me?” I repeated “What do you want?” Anger is poring from every core of my being, and the Colonel yells!

Bolting straight up in bed, my breathing was rapid, and feeling my pounding heartbeat in my chest gave me a sense of reality, “Where am I?” My night cloths and bed sheets were soaked with perspiration, but I was so cold. Shivering, I pulled my hair back it to was drenched in sweat. Desperately I took a few deep breaths and tried to calm my pounding heart, my chest hurt it was difficult to breathe. I’ve never had such a vivid

nightmare like this before. I glanced at my clock three in the morning, another few hours and another day will begin. I got out of bed and went to my bathroom for some cold water, and then returned to the comfort of my bed. The silence of the room was stifling but I knew I needed to get some sleep to regain the strength that had been zapped from my spirit in the last two days, if not for myself, then for my children. I tried to close my eyes once again, sleep was difficult to accomplish, and the sounds of hovering helicopters and images of bodies being placed on the decks of rescue ships continued to play and repeat in my mind. Pale wet faces of innocent victims continued to try to speak to me about their last moments of their journey.

When I arrived at work Friday morning, I had to show my identification card to each police officer at six checkpoints. The base had grown in population from 65 to well over 1500, the press was moved from the main building to outside the gate. Where a small park with beach front scenery now acted as a back drop for well over 500 media personnel from all over the country and world.

My sickbay now occupied the Coast Guard Stress Debrief Team. Trailers and tents were coming onto the base by the handfuls. The Red Cross served all kinds of food including the donations made by McDonalds. Needless to say it would be needed, as the base populace would continue to grow. John arrived and we decided to take a walk around to see whom we could find from the Coast Guard crew. As I proceeded out my side door I inadvertently stumbled into a cot, with a body sleeping on it. Several cots, now occupied lined the porch that surrounded the main building. The East Moriches ambulance crew continued to hold vigil just outside the sickbay. There was not much else we could do but watch the activity going on around us. I was beginning to worry about patient care. We had enough EMS personnel and Red Cross on the base. But with the growing population I knew this was an accident just waiting to happen. My savings grace was Arnold Becker the Assistant Director to Suffolk County, I met him by the helicopter pad, “ “Arnold you’re here!” I stated as I saw him. “Hi Hon, how are you holding up?” He replied. We hugged each other. “I’m alright I guess, but I’m worried, I have no one and no place to take care of people if they get sick or injured. The stress debrief team has taken over my sickbay.” I stated. “Not a problem, let me do some research and I’ll get back with you.” He stated. By Tuesday, July 30th the Stonybrook University Mobile Hospital van arrived and set up

home in front of my sickbay entrance. Dr. Burnstein, the emergency room doctor, a paramedic, and a nurse were now on call until we no longer needed them. We did keep them busy in the first week, several of the station crewmembers became ill and had to be treated for signs and symptoms of post traumatic stress and gastrointestinal problems. The divers were suffering from an entourage of different alignments, which we were later to learn were the early signs and symptoms of dysbaric injury. Dr. Peter Hackett, Director of Suffolk County EMS and Dr. Joe White of Mather Memorial Hospital established a means to treat all the divers, up to two a day at pre-arranged hyperbaric sites. Their sick call list was heavy and I was thankful to the University of Stonybrook for having them there with us. Dr. Peter Hackett and I were to become good friends; we spent many hours conversing on the crash and how we could have done things better. I hold the belief that we meet certain people in our lives, which will make a direct impact on our future, and that nothing happens by chance. It's up to each one of us to understand and recognize those individuals when they come into our lives. Dr. Hackett, Arnold Becker and Chief Warrant Officer Ray Handel, were my three important messengers that were interconnected with me. My friend Jeanne once told me that we play out a sequence of events in our lives, and that our life is an interwoven pattern where all the parts work together to make a whole. We are not just apart of the tapestry, but part of the tapestry. This is so true in retrospect.

Saturday, July 27th was my day for debriefing; I was really tired, and upset how things were running. I had no control over the trauma suffered by my fellow shipmates, so many of them came to sickbay in tears. Grown men with hearts of gold who would have stayed and worked until they dropped if you would let them. Their concern for one another was nothing short of phenomenal. So many different stories of extreme heroism were being told through out the Group, right down to the Electricians Mate who had to step over several victims to get to the electric panel on the forty-one footer that had shorted out. He stayed and did his job until it was finished, even though he was sitting next to a pile of bodies. He knew the forty-one had to get back underway and the job had to be finished for the mission to be complete. I listened as long as I could; with exhaustion starting to make its appearance I asked the forty-four small boat crew if I could chat with them out on the pier; fresh air was what I needed. As we were talking my friend Jim Greer came to join us, He stated "Patti can I talk with you?" "Sure I said. He sat down next to me and looked

intently at me, and stated, “When are you going to come back to me?” Such a simple statement, that had a complete and profound impact on my being. Had I retreated to my own world? Was I just a shell going through the motions for the last four days? My concern over my shipmates and my children were uppermost in my thoughts, and nothing I felt I had been through compared to what my shipmates had experienced. I stood and started to walk away, “ I’m fine Jim really, just tired!” I said. He followed “ Patti, you’ve been through a lot when your ready, I’ll be here to listen.” I stopped just behind the boathouse, turned and starred out at the pier, gazing intently at all the personnel from different agencies working diligently side by side. “So much death we’ve seen here Jim, it’s on our clothes, in the air we breath, it surrounds us! How could this have happened?” Tears began to flow down and onto my cheeks, I was so tired, everything that happened in the last four days just seemed to pour out of me. We talked for what seemed like hours. Other stress debrief team members stood silently nearby and listened. It was now mid afternoon, the heavy vale that I was shrouded in began to lift. I questioned myself time and time again, had I made the right decision to go out of the inlet? Where was the Lieutenant Colonel who put John and I out on that boat to begin with? I wanted to have a little chat with him! How could we ever be the same? Then Jim made a simple jester; he took off his Senior Chief Anchor and placed it on my collar. “ I know this can’t be done, but if it were my choice I would field promote you to Senior Chief you deserve it.” He stated. “ Thanks Jim, that means a lot.” Touching the anchor, I wondered if someday I would make Chief. That evening when I returned home I went straight to my room. I have a special Indian mandella, where I hang all my treasures that I’ve received from important people in my life. When my Uncle Benny passed from cancer, I was given his Navy anchor off his hat before they closed the casket, and now the Coast Guard anchor with the Silver Star, sits next to it.

When I arrived at work on Sunday, I was told that Jim had to head back to Cape Cod, his son was sick. I wished him well and thanked him for being there for us. Sunday was uneventful until the trucks pulled in to pave and enlarge the helicopter pad. With a full day ahead of us, I learned that two stress debrief team members were heading out on the forty-four footer to check on the crew from the cutter CAMPBELL. I asked if I could tag along for the ride. Needing to get away from the base I enjoyed my boat rides, with the warm sun

and wind on my face, it felt good to be in open ocean again. The forty-four's are very slow, and they rock like crazy. Petty Officer Melvasti did a great job as the coxswain. Everything was going fine until we heard from the Group to go to secure radio frequency. I listened intently as the Group gave him the co-ordinance for a floater that had been spotted by Brooklyn Air Station's helicopter. Petty Officer Melvasti quickly pointed the bow of the forty-four in that direction. As we came in closer to the body the helicopter was hovering slightly above it and to the left. I was watching the flight mec, pointing to where it was then out of no where, a Suffolk County Fireboat was approaching us at a very high rate of speed. We didn't want the Fire Boat to run over the body, so we directed them away from the forty-four. Seas where choppy and we were pitching and rolling like crazy, as we pulled up to the body we tried to grab her but we were unsuccessful. I told Petty Officer Melvasti that the Suffolk County Police boat would be better. Her body was so bloated from being in seawater it would take all of them to pull her in. We pulled away from her, and the Suffolk County police pulled along side her, and pulled her onto their deck and bagged her. I told Petty Officer Melvasti that I was done, I no longer wanted to head out to the Campbell, and asked him to request permission from the Group so I could go back with the police boat. My thoughts were with our last surface victim found from the crash. I wanted to ensure she made it back to the Group ok. With approval granted, the Suffolk County Police boat pulled along side and I jumped over. I was beginning to think that I was getting pretty good at boat hopping, I hadn't landed in the water yet. I headed into their pilothouse and introduced myself; I asked them how long they had been working and if they were on scene Wednesday night. They were there all right. As we continued to talk I told them that I had flagged a Suffolk County Police boat to escort me to the ADAK, they all piped up at once "Ya, that was us!" "Oh my god, small world!" I stated, then I continued " Did you escort that boat I told to follow you back to the Group? Did Frank get back ok?" "Oh yes he did, he did ok." They said. I couldn't help but think that our reunion was planned by something higher, I felt so much better knowing Frank was ok. As we pulled up to the Group everyone on the pier stopped working and watched us, the driver of the boat expertly maneuvered the craft next to the dock. Several men in white protection suits came out onto the dock from the boathouse, you could here a pin drop complete silence surrounded us. I watched as they brought her into the boathouse, then I noticed

Chaplain Applegate standing on the grass, just passed the ramp, I walked slowly over to him. “Ok, Chaps, I’m done!” We turned together and left the pier.

In the days that followed, TWA personnel came to the Group to visit, they brought with them, red and white ribbons that were held together by a pin (an angel surrounded by a heart). We were allowed to wear them, and now it sits next to the two anchors on the mandella. . We also received many letters from children and caring rescue workers from all over the world, including a note from the Oklahoma City, Housing and Urban Development Office. One line of the letter states and I quote “ The strenuous task you have been dealt, will forever change your lives.” I can not speak for others but I can say that this statement is true. We are all united in one way or another to this tragedy. I also learned from a higher official, that TWA was caring 800 pounds of glitter as part of her manifest, which explained the glitter that covered everything. John, Theresa, and myself continued to work and support the many agencies up until the last trailer pulled away in mid November of 96. Five months of sick call, assisting with dive injuries, lacerations, seasickness and a couple of good fractures suffered by members of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

On 1 November I was advanced to Chief Petty Officer, the anchor now sits on my collar and with my tour of duty completed. I stayed at the Group long enough to participate in the one year anniversary of TWA. The memories of that day and being with the people I care most about, John Phillips, Arnold Becker, the crew at the East Moriches Ambulance, Dr. Hackett, and the personal at Group Moriches, saying goodbye was the hardest thing I had to do. With my orders in hand I departed Group Moriches on July 20, 1997. I looked to the future and a new duty assignment, as Clinic Supervisor of Kaehler Memorial Medical Clinic, at Air Station Cape Cod. I could only wonder what challenges lie a head. Within the year at Kaehler and networking within the emergency service system, I met Glen Luedtke, Director and Larry Heidenberg, Assistant Director of Cape & Islands EMS. Kaehler Clinic is an integral part of the Cape and Islands Emergency Service System, with our own small community here at Otis we have our own fire and ambulance service. Larry immediately took me under his wing, and introduced me to many of my fellow EMS brothers and sisters. We would come to share many of an adventure during my time at Cape Cod, and soon share the biggest adventure of them all.

In the last couple of years I've often thought back to the night of July 17, 1996 when a 747 carrying 230 passengers perished ten miles off Long Island, and once again I questioned myself, and the choices I made that evening. Being a part of the Chief's Mess here at the Air Station was a blessing because once again through a series of events, I met a thirty-year veteran of the Coast Guard. A spirited man and what we call in the Coast Guard an old salt, a man of wisdom and knowledge, who knows his seas and how to be a Boatsman's Mate. Master Chief Dave Sweeney came into my office at the clinic one day this past summer. I have a navigational chart of the flight path and ping hits of the wreckage of TWA on my wall. This led to an in-depth discussion about that evening and the choices I made. He in turn told me about many of his experiences with the Coast Guard, some of his rescues and the lives he saved during his thirty-year tenure. The room went silent for a moment each of us in our own thoughts, and then he made a statement that had a profound impact upon me. He leaned forward in his chair, his deep blue eyes gazing intently into mine and stated "Everyday you have to make a choice, and what you do with that choice is what you have to live with. The question I ask you is this. When the Coast Guard called, did you step up to the plate?" "Yes Master Chief, I believe I did." I stated. Then he continued, "There are many people in our business that have a difficult time stepping up to that plate. It's by choice wither you want to step up and take that swing or not! It's your choice and all that matters is when they called, you stepped up!" I sat back in my chair. Memories of tense moments in the inlet, our journey out to the crash site, with all the questions, self-doubt, guilt, and emotions that had shrouded my soul, lifted with that simple statement. "Master Chief, your so right!" With tears in my eyes I stated "Thank you for saying that."

The summer of 99 was a busy season for the Air Station, Group Woodshole and Cape and Islands EMS. With the tragic loss of John F. Kennedy Jr. on the third anniversary of TWA Flight 800, the Otis Air Show with the Blue Angels, and the NASA Space Shuttle Training for Kaehler Clinic. I never imagined the next event would ever take place again during my tenure in the Coast Guard. The phone rang at 6:30 am on October 31st. "Good morning Chief, this is Jim Thomson at the clinic." "Hi Jim, what's up?" I said looking at my clock. "You don't by chance have your television on do you?" He said. "No Jim I was sleeping, what's wrong?" I repeated. "Group Woodshole, LTJG Jaramillo would like you

to call him, Egypt Air 990 with 214 passengers onboard has gone down seventy miles off of Nantucket.” He stated” I was silent for a moment, letting my mind register what I just heard. “Ok Jim, give me the number.”

THE END