

The day a B-25 Bomber crashed into the Empire State Building

by Gloria Pall

I was there, 56 years ago, on July 28, 1945, when an Army Air Corps B-25 Mitchell bomber flew directly into the Empire State Building. Ever since I was six years old, living in Brooklyn with my parents and brother in a basement flat six steps below the ground, I yearned for heights and wanted to fly. By the time I was 16, World War II was in full swing, and I was taking flying lessons and learning to be an aircraft mechanic.

I left home to work at a huge air depot in Rome, New York. There I learned to service all the military planes used in the war. I had been working for the government for a couple of years when the war in Europe came to an end. Berlin fell on May 2, 1945, and Germany announced Hitler's suicide. The unconditional surrender terms were signed on May 8, which became known as VE (Victory in Europe) Day.

I was in New York City watching the ticker-tape parade, standing outside the 5th Avenue entrance to the Empire State Building, when I was suddenly caught up in the crowd's excitement and pushed inside the revolving door entrance to this 102-story, 1,250-foot high marvel of architecture.

Built in the early 1930s, it fronted on Fifth Avenue between 33rd and 14th streets, and at that time, was the tallest building in the whole world. I suddenly realized I wanted to work there, high up.

The elevator captain told me there were two openings. One was for a Catholic War Relief Services Group, nice and high up on the 79th floor, but they turned me down because I was Jewish.

The other opening was for the United Services Organization Headquarters on the job because I wanted to work in the Empire State Building the 56th floor, Although the take-home pay was only \$21.00, just like the lowest-ranked soldiers were getting, I took the job because I wanted to work in the Empire State Building.

I was a stock and file clerk and my work week included a half-day on Saturday, every other week. My boss, Mr. Rader, was a grumpy guy, a chronic complainer who was nasty to everyone.

I loved looking out the window at the Statue of Liberty, when Mr. Radar wasn't around, and watching the troop ships returning from World War II, moving slowly like a giant snail into New York Harbor. I couldn't help but wonder if my favorite neighborhood boyfriend, reportedly killed in Europe, might actually be returning with them.

I had helped my friend Joan get a job. On our lunch hour we would go up to the observation deck to watch the troop ships arriving. We'd use our purse makeup mirrors to reflect the sun and get the attention of the troops on deck. With our binoculars we could see them waving back, then they would flash their shaving mirrors at us—probably in Morse code. We would flash back at them, but since neither of us knew Morse code we didn't know what we were flashing. As I think back now, I hope we didn't say anything dirty or too awful. We just wanted to say "Welcome back boys, we love you. You're our heroes."

On a normal weekday, there were usually about 13,000 people working at the Empire State Building, but on July 28, since it was a Saturday, there were only about 1,000 people in the building. The building—and most of New York City—was heavily enshrouded in a London-type fog with broken, low clouds.

I didn't mind working that particular Saturday because it wasn't a "beach day." (I frequently went to the beach during the summer to keep my "Brighton Beach Tan.") It was nearing 10 a.m., and I was in the stockroom with my co-worker Grace, while some of the skeleton crew was downstairs having a coffee break. I was peacefully standing at the file cabinet, disappointed that the pea-soup fog blocked our view, when suddenly there was an enormous explosion like we had been bombed!

I was thrown across the room with great impact. Grace went sailing across the room in her steno chair, smashing against the wall while I crashed into her desk, unable to stop myself. I hurt my arm, but got up to help Grace back to her wheeling chair. She had hurt her knee. I felt sorry for her since her husband was expected on a troop ship arriving that day and she wanted to be in perfect condition for him.

Joan, who had been working in the next room, came flying into my office absolutely hysterical.

"What kind of a job did you get me here?" she said. "What happened?" Nobody knew.

All of a sudden the skeleton crew ran into our office; some of the ladies were frantically screaming.

"It's the German Buzz Bomb!" yelled Sarah, who was usually calm. "They tricked us. They didn't really surrender!"



One of the R-25 engines, and part of the landing gear, went through the building, tearing a hole 18 by 20 feet

Another lady screamed that it was Martians.

"We're being invaded," she yelled. "I just know it. We're not getting out of here alive!"

Joan's boss, Hazel, a short, rotund sweet-faced redhead, was calmly sitting in front of her Danish pastry and coffee. She was still on her break and had just returned from the first floor coffee shop.

"Come on Haze," I yelled. "Let's go. We've just been given orders to vacate the building!"

"I'm just going to sit here at my desk and enjoy my delicious Danish

and coffee, no matter what!" she answered calmly, as she gently stuffed a big piece of Danish into her rosebud mouth.

We all ran into the halls to find our way out of the building. While we were crowding in the hallways near the elevators, we were being ordered by a self-appointed boss to wait for the elevators.

My instincts told me to head for the stairway.

"Let's go down the stairs," I said as I grabbed Grace. "It's safer."

"No, I can't," Grace replied. "My knee hurts too much. I'll wait for the elevators and take a chance."

"Not me," Joan exclaimed. "I'll go down the steps with you."

Each floor had two long flights of steps between landings. As we were running down the steps, hundreds of people poured in from the lower floors forcing us out of their way so they could join the terrified procession. We were showered with falling debris consisting of broken glass and plaster. It covered our faces and clothing. It was falling on us from every which way.

As we were running down the steps, we noticed that they were covered with red liquid. We didn't know what it was, but I thought it looked like gasoline.

"Oh God, please don't end my life here today," I prayed with all my heart, every step of the way. "I'm just eighteen and I haven't lived yet. Please spare me and I will forever do your bidding and honor you."

He heard me above the cattle-sounding roar of the horror-stricken crowd that raced down the steps like a stampeding herd. We heard the sound of hundreds of screaming sirens getting closer. One hundred and twelve flights later—out of breath and with legs so sore and muscles

so cramped we could hardly walk—we were on the ground floor!

As we dashed out of the building the crowds behind the roped-off area applauded us. We were safe! The Red Cross brushed off our clothes as they donut-ed and coffee-ed us. We were survivors, but of what? Why this hero's welcome?

I had forgotten all about my arm hurting, but then it started to ache.

"What happened?" I asked the nurse as she put my arm in a sling. I still didn't know, but I thanked God we arrived safely to the ground floor.

"Look over there," said the nurse, just before she turned to help someone else, "then go to 5th Avenue and look up."

I looked, and saw a large aircraft engine on the ground. At 5th Avenue, suspended in full sight high up in the side of the Empire State Building, I recognized the fuselage and tail end of a twin-engine B-25 bomber!

"I thought it was a bomb, but it was a bomber," I said to Joan, who was hanging on. To me, still badly shaken, and added, "I know all about that plane and its engines."

I asked a policeman what floor it had hit, and he abruptly said, "79th," as he continued pushing back the noisy crowds.

My heart skipped a beat and I turned to Joan.

"I applied for a job up there two months ago," I exclaimed. "Those Catholics saved my life. If they had hired me I might not have been here to tell this story."

"Gee, they might have hired me," giggled Joan, who was Catholic. "Then I'd be a dead duck." Not so funny.

It was later determined that three employees, who had been sitting at their desks in the Catholic War Relief

office when the plane hit, had been killed instantly. We later heard that some people panicked and jumped out of windows, landing on nearby parapets.

What happened?

The North American B-25 Mitchell medium bomber was called "Old John Feather Merchant," and had been used just for training. It had never seen combat and its bomb-bay doors were welded shut. When Germany surrendered, and training duty had been finished, the mechanics stripped away the olive drab paint and revealed its bare shiny aluminum.

With the war over, this B-25 had been refurbished with benches and other amenities, and was being used mostly to transport politicians and high ranking military personnel. It was based in Texas and had hosted 32 training crews in its lifetime.

The pilot on this last flight of the Feather Merchant was Colonel William Franklin Smith, Jr. He was a heavily decorated B-17 pilot that had recently returned from flying more than 50 missions in 18 months over Germany and France. He was on a flight from Bedford, Mass., to pick up his commanding officer at Newark, New Jersey en route to Sioux Falls, S.D.

Sergeant Christopher Domitrovich, the B-25's crew chief, was also aboard. Colonel Smith was both navigator and pilot. At the last minute a young sailor Machinist Mate Albert Pema, came aboard on a special furlough. His brother had been killed during a kamikaze attack on the destroyer Luce, and he was going home to be with his parents.

Colonel Smith took off from Bedford at 8:55 a.m. as "Army 0577." Despite the bad weather conditions, he was not flying



The North American B-25 medium bomber.

an instrument flight plan, but was flying "contact," (visual flight rules) depending on ground references. He became lost, and passed up an opportunity to land at LaGuardia Field when he appeared unannounced in their landing pattern. He insisted on flying contact to Newark. At about 9:50 a.m., he apparently mistook some bridge and river landmarks, since he lowered his landing gear and must have thought he was approaching Newark Airport as he descended.

Colonel Smith was flying at over 200 miles an hour about 500 feet above Manhattan. As the aircraft screamed down 42nd street, he made an abrupt turn over Rockefeller Center, then, banking sharply left, then right again, he found himself flying almost straight down Fifth Avenue.

His gear was coming up, his engines (Pratt and Whitney radial engines, weighing 2,700 pounds each) were at full power, and his nose was in a climbing attitude when the 12-ton B-25 slammed into the 79th floor of (the fog-enshrouded Empire State Building, 975 feet above the ground. He and the two passengers were killed instantly. Eleven other people were killed, and 26 people were seriously injured.

The aircraft's high-octane fuel from the ruptured tanks exploded, hurtling flames racing across the

79th floor, down the side of the building and inside through hallways and stairwells all the way down to the 75th floor. One of the engines, and part of the landing gear, went through the building, tearing a hole 18 by 20 feet, and emerged on the 33rd street side, crashing through the roof of a building on the other side of that street, and starting a fire. That was the one we saw at first.

Unaware that the plane's other engine and parts of its landing gear had fallen through the elevator shaft, severing the hoist and governor cables and weakening the ropes to other cars, rescue workers used elevators to transport casualties.

Betty Lou Oliver was a pretty elevator operator I would greet each day. She was retiring that day, because her husband was just returning home from the Navy.

As the plane hit, Betty Ann was blown out other post on the 80th floor and into the hall, badly burned.

After receiving first aid, she was put in another car to go down to an ambulance. As the elevator doors' closed, rescue workers heard what sounded like a gunshot but what was, in fact, the snapping of elevator cables weakened by the crash. The car, with Betty Ann inside, went into a free fall, plunging 1,000 feet to the sub-basement.

A 17-year-old Coast Guardsman, Donald Molony, and others, rushed to help Betty Ann. The Coast Guardsman scrambled down the shaft, into a mass of rubble, brick, cables and steel around the elevator car. Betty Ann had broken both legs and her back, but she recovered from her injuries in only eight months.

As Joan and I went over to look at the engine on 33rd Street, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia came over to us to ask how we were, and congratulated us on our

survival. As we turned to go, my boss pushed his way through the crowd and approached me.

"You ought to come in next Saturday because you didn't even work two hours today," he said, oblivious to my disheveled appearance, and the fact that I had my arm in a sling and traces of debris still on my clothes and face.

"What a grump," I thought, "With all these people applauding us, he's punishing me for surviving! How insensitive!" Joan and I turned, climbed over the rope that partitioned off the building, and limped our way down the street to the BMT subway so we could get back to Brooklyn.