

The Sky is Falling

by Arthur Weingarten (1977)

July 28, 1945 was a foggy day. Martha Smith had a premonition if he flew that day, she would never see him again, but how could she tell him that? Col. Bill Smith had just come home from WWII. Bill was a west Point graduate & excelled in everything he did. There was a conflict with civil air control & how the incoming military pilots flew.

That morning the cloud cover kept lowering & so did the pilot to keep a visual contact. Then ground fog rolled in & he mistook a landmark & lowered his landing gear. But soon found himself at 500' in downtown Manhattan. He went into a left bank & started climbing with all he had. He cleared some buildings by only 25', but unknown to him he was flying right towards the tallest building. At 9:55am the B25 hit the north face of the Empire State Building at 975' [79th flr] & it shook like an earthquake. At 250 mph the 12-ton plane effortlessly invaded the building. Landing gear went through the entire building exiting the south face & landing on the Waldorf roof below.

Elevator operator Mary Scannell felt the explosion from the floor below & was burnt severely. One of the plane's engines dropped down elevator shaft #6 & sent Betty Lou to the basement. The 78th floor was unoccupied as the left wing came through. The people on the 80th floor [Caterpillar Tractor] found safety by digging a hole through the wall to get away from the smoke. Don Molony [medic just passing by] rushed into the drug store to get first aid supplies as he went to help.

Firemen struggled to climb the stairs as hundreds evacuated, but rescued the dozen people in the east office [Ameritrade] of the 79th floor. They thought all had perished in the west office [Catholic War Relief Services], but 7 survivors were trapped in the back office & would soon perish. A photographer saw them, but he vanished. But Harold Smith was persistent until a fireman finally listened to him & saved them.

Died ...Bill Smith [pilot], Chris Domitrovich [crew], Albert Perna [passenger], Joseph Fountain, John Judge, Patricia O'Conner, Paul Derring, Jeanne Sozzi, Anne Gerlach, Mary Lou Taylor, Mary Kedzierski, Maureen MaGuire, Margret Mullins, Lucy Bath, Anna Regan [12 from CWRS]. 26 were critically injured.

It was Betty Lou Oliver's last day on the job as an elevator operator. She miraculously survived the 1000' plunge in the elevator with a broken back & legs. Kay O'Connor survived, but had respiratory ailment the rest of her life [from smoke]. Theresa Fortier threw her ring out the window when she thought they would die [it fell on the Waldorf roof below & was returned]. Monsignor Patrick O'Boyle went to mass & hadn't arrived at the office yet [he later became Cardinal]. Father Ed Swanstrom was getting a haircut at the time [he later became Bishop]. Mayor La Guardia decorated Don Molony for his bravery in helping more than a dozen victims.

Site History: 1799 farmer John Thompson paid \$2600 for 20-acres [later would have the intersection of 5th Ave & 34th St & the future site of the Empire State Building]. 1827 William Astor bought it for \$20,000. 1859 mansions were built & 5th Ave became Millionaire's Row. 1893 He tore down his mansion & built the Waldorf. His uncle built the Astoria next door & in

1897 merged & became the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. It was the first hotel to install telephones. The roaring 20's brought new money & taller buildings to the area. John Raskob [co-founder of GM] had a dream of building the tallest building in the world. 29aug1929 Raskob wrote a check for \$16M to buy the 2-acres & tore down the Waldorf-Astoria [who moved]. Two months later the market collapsed. Met Life gave him a \$27M loan & he built the Empire State Building [competing with Chrysler for the prize]. The 8-inch fire pipe req'd 542 psi to raise water 1250'.

Misc: at 24,000' it can get 40 Degrees below zero [they did not have pressurized cabins yet]. When Hitler realized he was losing the war his propaganda gave his people an outlet for their anger & he issued a "kill order" & they killed any Allied military they found.

Quotes: "Time was the widow's enemy." (AW)

Books: Higher by Neal Bascomb