August 21, 2011

Huntington Station Deadly Stabbing

Aisha Al-Muslim
By Robert Brodsky
robert.brodsky@newsday.com

From 1,000 feet above lower Manhattan, Lt. Col. Warren Ratis looked down on the smoldering rubble and twisted steel of the World Trade Center. The devastation was everywhere and the pain, one day after the nation was rocked by the terrorist attack, still raw.

An airborne photographer in the Civil Air Patrol assigned to document the destruction, Ratis didn’t have time to mourn the victims, including 18 former co-workers. He had instructions from the highest reaches of government. Ratis picked up his camera and began shooting.

Nearly a decade later, he and Lt. Col. Jacques Heinrich, the mission’s pilot, are talking publicly for the first time about the aerial mission.

“I was totally devastated by the damage,” said Heinrich, a 41-year veteran of the patrol’s Long Island Group, based just outside Long Island MacArthur Airport. “But we had a mission to do.”

After the attack, the Federal Aviation Administration grounded every commercial and private airline in the country. But the Bush administration and its intelligence agencies didn’t know the full extent of the damage.


“They needed a vertical shot,” said Ratis, 56, of Lake Grove, who has spent 17 years with the patrol. “They wanted to see the damage from above.”

The mission had special significance for Ratis, who worked on the 79th floor of the north tower for 10 years. A systems engineer, he left the job nine months before the attacks. None of his former colleagues made it out alive.

As the Air Force’s official auxiliary, the patrol performs search and rescue and training missions, and mentors cadets. Its members are volunteers and are unpaid.

Heinrich, Ratis and Lt. Col. Andrew Feldman, now retired, took off from MacArthur at 4:30 p.m. on Sept. 12 in a Cessna 172. As the single-engine, four-seat plane passed Kennedy Airport, they knew this was no ordinary mission.

The crew’s photos were