

## **Heroes At The Taj**

Michael Pollack, "Heroes at the Taj", *Forbes*, December 1, 2008

[http://www.forbes.com/2008/12/01/mumbai-terror-taj-oped-cx\\_mp\\_1201pollack.html](http://www.forbes.com/2008/12/01/mumbai-terror-taj-oped-cx_mp_1201pollack.html)

My story begins innocuously, with a dinner reservation in a world-class hotel. It ends 12 hours later after the Indian army freed us.

My point is not to sensationalize events. It is to express my gratitude and pay tribute to the staff of the Taj Mahal Hotel in Mumbai, who sacrificed their lives so that we could survive.

They, along with the Indian army, are the true heroes that emerged from this tragedy.

My wife, Anjali, and I were married in the Taj's Crystal Ballroom. Her parents were married there, too, and so were Shiv and Reshma, the couple with whom we had dinner plans. In fact, my wife and Reshma, both Bombay girls, grew up hanging out and partying the night away there and at the Oberoi Hotel, another terrorist target.

The four of us arrived at the Taj around 9:30 p.m. for dinner at the Golden Dragon, one of the better Chinese restaurants in Mumbai. We were a little early, and our table wasn't ready. So we walked next door to the Harbour Bar and had barely begun to enjoy our beers when the host told us our table was ready. We decided to stay and finish our drinks.

Thirty seconds later, we heard what sounded like a heavy tray smashing to the ground. This was followed by 20 or 30 similar sounds and then absolute silence. We crouched behind a table just feet away from what we now knew were gunmen. Terrorists had stormed the lobby and were firing indiscriminately.

We tried to break the glass window in front of us with a chair, but it wouldn't budge. The Harbour Bar's hostess, who had remained at her post, motioned to us that it was safe to make a run for the stairwell. She mentioned, in passing, that there was a dead body right outside in the corridor. We believe this courageous woman was murdered after we ran away.

(We later learned that minutes after we climbed the stairs, terrorists came into the Harbour Bar, shot everyone who was there and executed those next door at the Golden Dragon. The staff there was equally brave, locking their patrons into a basement wine cellar to protect them. But the terrorists managed to break through and lob in grenades that killed everyone in the basement.)

We took refuge in the small office of the kitchen of another restaurant, Wasabi, on the second floor. Its chef and staff served the four of us food and drink and even apologized for the inconvenience we were suffering.

Through text messaging, e-mail on BlackBerrys and a small TV in the office, we realized the full extent of the terrorist attack on Mumbai. We figured we were in a secure place for the moment. There was also no way out.

At around 11:30 p.m., the kitchen went silent. We took a massive wooden table and pushed it up against the door, turned off all the lights and hid. All of the kitchen workers remained outside; not one staff member had run.

The terrorists repeatedly slammed against our door. We heard them ask the chef in Hindi if anyone was inside the office. He responded calmly: "No one is in there. It's empty." That is the second time the Taj staff saved our lives.

After about 20 minutes, other staff members escorted us down a corridor to an area called The Chambers, a members-only area of the hotel. There were about 250 people in six rooms. Inside, the staff was serving sandwiches and alcohol. People were nervous, but cautiously optimistic. We were told The Chambers was the safest place we could be because the army

was now guarding its two entrances and the streets were still dangerous. There had been attacks at a major railway station and a hospital.

But then, a member of parliament phoned into a live newscast and let the world know that hundreds of people—including CEOs, foreigners and members of parliament—were “secure and safe in The Chambers together.” Adding to the escalating tension and chaos was the fact that, via text and cellphone, we knew that the dome of the Taj was on fire and that it could move downward.

At around 2 a.m., the staff attempted an evacuation. We all lined up to head down a dark fire escape exit. But after five minutes, grenade blasts and automatic weapon fire pierced the air. A mad stampede ensued to get out of the stairwell and take cover back inside The Chambers. After that near-miss, my wife and I decided we should hide in different rooms. While we hoped to be together at the end, our primary obligation was to our children. We wanted to keep one parent alive. Because I am American and my wife is Indian, and news reports said the terrorists were targeting U.S. and U.K. nationals, I believed I would further endanger her life if we were together in a hostage situation.

So when we ran back to The Chambers I hid in a toilet stall with a floor-to-ceiling door and my wife stayed with our friends, who fled to a large room across the hall.

For the next seven hours, I lay in the fetal position, keeping in touch with Anjali via BlackBerry. I was joined in the stall by Joe, a Nigerian national with a U.S. green card. I managed to get in touch with the FBI, and several agents gave me status updates throughout the night.

I cannot even begin to explain the level of adrenaline running through my system at this point. It was this hyper-aware state where every sound, every smell, every piece of information was ultra-acute, analyzed and processed so that we could make the best decisions and maximize the odds of survival.

Was the fire above us life-threatening? What floor was it on? Were the commandos near us, or were they terrorists? Why is it so quiet? Did the commandos survive? If the terrorists come into the bathroom and to the door, when they fire in, how can I make my body as small as possible? If Joe gets killed before me in this situation, how can I throw his body on mine to barricade the door? If the Indian commandos liberate the rest in the other room, how will they know where I am? Do the terrorists have suicide vests? Will the roof stand? How can I make sure the FBI knows where Anjali and I are? When is it safe to stand up and attempt to urinate?

Meanwhile, Anjali and the others were across the corridor in a mass of people lying on the floor and clinging to each other. People barely moved for seven hours, and for the last three hours they felt it was too unsafe to even text. While I was tucked behind a couple walls of marble and granite in my toilet stall, she was feet from bullets flying back and forth. After our failed evacuation, most of the people in the fire escape stairwell and many staff members who attempted to protect the guests were shot and killed.

The 10 minutes around 2:30 a.m. were the most frightening. Rather than the back-and-forth of gunfire, we just heard single, punctuated shots. We later learned that the terrorists went along a different corridor of The Chambers, room by room, and systematically executed everyone: women, elderly, Muslims, Hindus, foreigners. A group huddled next to Anjali was devout Bori Muslims who would have been slaughtered just like everyone else, had the terrorists gone into their room. Everyone was in deep prayer and most, Anjali included, had accepted that their lives were likely over. It was terrorism in its purest form. No one was spared.

The next five hours were filled with the sounds of an intense grenade/gun battle between the Indian commandos and the terrorists. It was fought in darkness; each side was trying to outflank the other.

By the time dawn broke, the commandos had successfully secured our corridor. A young commando led out the people packed into Anjali's room. When one woman asked whether it was safe to leave, the commando replied: "Don't worry, you have nothing to fear. The first bullets have to go through me."

The corridor was laced with broken glass and bullet casings. Every table was turned over or destroyed. The ceilings and walls were littered with hundreds of bullet holes. Blood stains were everywhere, though, fortunately, there were no dead bodies to be seen.

A few minutes after Anjali had vacated, Joe and I peeked out of our stall. We saw multiple commandos and smiled widely. I had lost my right shoe while sprinting to the toilet so I grabbed a sheet from the floor, wrapped it around my foot and proceeded to walk over the debris to the hotel lobby.

Anjali and I embraced for the first time in seven hours in the Taj's ground floor entrance. I didn't know whether she was dead or injured because we hadn't been able to text for the past three hours.

I wanted to take a picture of us on my BlackBerry, but Anjali wanted us to get out of there before doing anything.

She was right—our ordeal wasn't completely over. A large bus pulled up in front of the Taj to collect us and, just about as it was fully loaded, gunfire erupted again. The terrorists were still alive and firing automatic weapons at the bus. Anjali was the last to get on the bus, and she eventually escaped in our friend's car. I ducked under some concrete barriers for cover and wound up the subject of photos that were later splashed across the media. Shortly thereafter, an ambulance came and drove a few of us to safety. An hour later, Anjali and I were again reunited at her parents' home. Our Thanksgiving had just gained a lot more meaning.

Some may say our survival was due to random luck, others might credit divine intervention. But 72 hours removed from these events, I can assure you only one thing: Far fewer people would have survived if it weren't for the extreme selflessness shown by the Taj staff, who organized us, catered to us and then, in the end, literally died for us.

They complemented the extreme bravery and courage of the Indian commandos, who, in a pitch-black setting and unfamiliar, tightly packed terrain, valiantly held the terrorists at bay. It is also amazing that, out of our entire group, not one person screamed or panicked. There was an eerie but quiet calm that pervaded—one more thing that got us all out alive. Even people in adjacent rooms, who were being executed, kept silent.

It is much easier to destroy than to build, yet somehow humanity has managed to build far more than it has ever destroyed. Likewise, in a period of crisis, it is much easier to find faults and failings rather than to celebrate the good deeds. It is now time to commemorate our heroes.

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