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## Hello, Sailor, You're No. 500,000!

By [DAVID W. DUNLAP](#)



Lt. Jeremy E. Vellón of the U.S.S. Kearsarge, who was designated the 500,000th visitor to the Tribute WTC Visitor Center, flanked by Lee Ielpi and Jennifer Adams of the center. (Photo: The Tribute WTC Visitor Center) [Enlarge this image.](#)

No matter whether he was technically visitor No. 499,999 or No. 500,001 to the [Tribute WTC Visitor Center](#) opposite ground zero, Lt. Jeremy E. Vellón, an assistant air officer on the [U.S.S. Kearsarge](#) was officially designated this morning as the half-millionth person to attend the center since it opened in September 2006.

Center officials were not counting every head that walked through the door in order to find Lieutenant Vellón. Rather, they had calculated in advance that they would reach the 500,000 mark sometime between 10 a.m. and noon today. After that, it was a matter of choosing a likely candidate. And Jennifer Adams, chief executive of the [September 11th Families' Association](#), which developed the center, acknowledged that it was destined — during Fleet Week — to be a sailor or a marine.

“We definitely wanted to honor someone from the military for their service,” Ms. Adams said. “We saw Jeremy and took him off the line.”

The lieutenant was given a quick advance briefing on the tribute center, at 120 Liberty Street. He and five family members then

received a tour from Lee Ielpi, a retired firefighter who has been a prime moving force behind the center.

As it turned out, Lieutenant Vellón was an ideal choice for the honor, since his own experiences have intersected 9/11 in deeply personal ways. “From losing my friend and classmate [Darin Pontell](#) at the Pentagon,” he told tribute officials, “to deploying that week on board U.S.S. Bataan for Operation Enduring Freedom, to leaving my wife, Jeanie Gander, behind to wait patiently, I was affected.”