

A mad dash for safety saves the life of an Advance reporter

'Death was more than a possibility'

The ground began to shake violently, like an earthquake was rumbling through. Then a guy next to me yelled the building was coming down. I looked up in panic and saw the smoldering edifice, crumbling like a huge house of cards. We made our mad dash for safety from Broadway on down Wall Street.

By this point, the street was thick with people, each one with only one thing on his or her mind: "God, let me get out of here before I'm crushed to death."

The lady directly in front of me tripped in her high heels and fell flat on her face. I wanted to help her up but there just wasn't any time. A thick cloud of sooty smoke mixed with small pieces of debris was cascading down on the narrow street.

With a group of about 12 other frightened men and women, I was able to duck into a little alcove at 14 Wall St. At first we just huddled against the locked metal doors, as the small area began to fill up with thick, acrid smoke. I had clear visions of smothering to death there on Wall Street. Several of the women began weeping pitifully. I was in shock.

The smoke was so thick our little island of safety turned ink-black. You couldn't see your hand in front of your face. My heart racing, I covered my face with my shirt and got as low to the ground as possible.

Several of us began banging on the metal doors. It seemed like an eternity in that inky blackness. I saw myself dead; for the first time in my life I realized that death was more than just a distant possibility.

I banged on that door with all my strength, and finally it opened and a shaft of pure, clean, white light came flooding into that darkness. A middle-aged guy with a beard shouted for us to make haste in coming in, to keep the smoke out of the building.

Escape, then collapse

We went up several flights of stairs into a hallway, where I collapsed near a bank of elevators, not so much from exhaustion as the fear of what had just happened. I must have looked a sight — my hair and face turned an ashen gray from the soot — because the guy who had rescued us kept asking me if I needed medical attention. I said no and sat against the wall, trying to collect my thoughts.



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I got up and made it to a water fountain. I washed my face and gargled some water around my throat and spit, to clear the acrid soot out of the back of my throat. A late arrival came up the nearby staircase and told us the second World Trade Center tower had just come down. He said he had been in a building across the street and had seen it all.

We looked at each other in disbelief. "This is war," one guy shouted.

Stunned, angry, shocked

I had to get a phone. I felt an obligation to call my editor, tell him what I had been through and let him know I was OK. But the phone lines were down. I couldn't reach him. I called my mother to tell her I was all right and left a message for my fiancée on my home phone. I was still kicking. Then I began walking through the building, trying to get people's reaction to what was happening.

The people I spoke with generally expressed shock, anger and fear. Another common reaction was concern that loved ones who worked in or near the Twin Towers or in lower Manhattan, for that matter, were all right. There were reports of another plane circling lower Manhattan and people in 14 Wall St. were scared their building was being targeted. The building fire marshal said he thought it might be best if everybody went down to the basement. We agreed and followed him down the stairs. The turn of events left everyone stunned.

"This is so horrible," said Marguerite Cianci of Great Kills, an administrator for Deutsche Bank, which is located at 14 Wall St. She wondered how civilized people could do such a thing. "I think it's time this country did something about this," she said. "And I mean

whatever it takes."

As we talked, a friend came over to say there had a report of a bomb in Stuyvesant High School. The school was being used as a triage facility.

Mrs. Cianci said she was very close to a mother and daughter who work in the WTC. She had heard the mother was OK but was still worried about the daughter. Her face was a mask of complete shock. An investment banker from Uptown, who identified himself only as "Boyer," said he was nauseous. "If there was anything in my stomach right now it would be coming up," Boyer said, rubbing his already red eyes. He said he and his wife had just moved to the city from Washington. "I guess this wasn't an opportune time to come here," he said.

Still seeking reaction, I walked to a health club in the basement of the building. The exercise machines were silent and people sat watching television monitors to get the latest on the tragedy. One woman sitting off by herself was weeping quietly. Each new disclosure coming over the television was greeted with sighs of shock from those watching.

"This can't be happening," one woman said, as a report came in of an airplane attack on the Pentagon. She burst into tears when she learned the Pentagon was on fire.

"What's happening, what's happening, why is this happening?" she repeated, as if reciting a mantra.

On television, a national news anchor was saying the attacks were "not only a national tragedy but a national security event." When a report came in that Palestinians on the West Bank were celebrating over the attack, the weeping woman turned away from the television in disgust.

Burning rubble

When the dust had cleared somewhat, I decided to walk down to South Ferry and along the way get as much public reaction as possible. The streets of Lower Manhattan were relatively deserted. Merchants had abandoned their hot-dog carts and fruit stands, life being more important than commerce. The roadways and sidewalks were covered with a thick, gray layer of soot that blew up into the air as vehicles moved by. It looked like Christmas in late summer.

Looking back at where the Twin

Towers had been, all that could be seen was thick, brownish smoke climbing skyward as the remains of the buildings continued to burn. People on the street walked along like zombies, some covering their mouths with their hands against the dust, others wearing surgical masks — which emergency medical technicians were handing out along the street.

"I was there when the first tower came down," said Tina Matthews of Dongan Hills. "I thought I was going to die. I panicked." The executive assistant said it was going to take a couple of days before she finds the nerve to come back into Manhattan.

"All I can say is, I'm confused," said David Jerome of Manhattan, a Wall Street trader. "I never thought I'd see a terrorist attack on the city like this. Now we have to find out who's behind it and deal with the situation."

Heading toward the harbor

Nearby, Ai Bonadonna of Flatbush, Brooklyn, was crying unashamedly. "All those poor people in the towers, so many gone," said the maintenance man. "This nation should have been better prepared for something like this."

The Whitehall Ferry Terminal had been turned into an emergency room. More than a dozen ambulances were lined up outside. It was noon when I got there and no really bad cases had been brought in, but EMS Chief James Basile said the emergency medical service was ready for the onslaught. "For all intents and purposes, this is an emergency room," Basile said. There were makeshift cots, bandages, medical equipment and medications.

Basile's people were basically dealing with smoke inhalation cases. Dorma Lindo of Brooklyn said she had fallen in the street on Broadway when the first tower collapsed and lain there, soot-covered, for several minutes, until a firefighter came along and helped her up, then got her to the ferry terminal.

"I've never been so scared as this," said Ms. Lindo, a restaurant worker. In the panic, she said, she lost her pocketbook. "All my money, my keys are gone," she said.

A man who lives in Battery Park City said he had been forced to evacuate his building "because the management told me they couldn't ensure the

structural integrity of the building. They told us to head toward the water, toward the harbor."

As he walked toward the harbor the man, who said he suffers from emphysema, began having severe difficulty in breathing and was brought to the ferry terminal.

"I never thought I'd see anything on this scale," he said. "I just think the Bush administration should have been more forceful with these people. It's time to get rid of Osama bin Laden. Now."

Leaving the terminal, I headed east, trying to avoid the clouds of dust, and hoping to make my way back to City Hall. At that point I didn't know the building and other city structures had been evacuated.

On the way, I passed New York Downtown Hospital. It was pandemonium, as ambulance brought in victims whose injuries ranged from broken bones to smoke inhalation.

To my surprise I saw Jerry Cammarata, the youth services commissioner and Staten Island's Board of Education member. He was not hurt. "The integrity of America was challenged today," said Cammarata. He then launched into a harrowing account of having been in the Office of Emergency Management's offices at Barclay Street near the Twin Towers at the time the two towers began to collapse.

Everyone was told to clear the building, Cammarata said. The office was on an upper floor. When officials got to the ground level and out to the street, he said, they were told to run for their lives. He said the first tower appeared to go down like one of those controlled building demolitions where the floors implode in sequence. He declined to even venture a guess of how many died in the tragedy. "That number has to be significant," Cammarata said sadly.

Then I recalled my own near-brush with death on Wall Street earlier in this remarkable day. As the afternoon wore on, I spoke with a man who said this attack will live on in the American imagination much like the Kennedy assassination.

"Just like with the assassination, everybody will remember where he was on the day this happened," he said.

(Reginald Patrick is the City Hall Bureau Chief for the Staten Island Advance. He has worked at the newspaper for 25 years, and has worked in its City Hall bureau for 15 years.)