

On 9/11/01, I was a Probationary Firefighter on a training rotation assigned to Engine 10/ Ladder 10. I was about 10 weeks through a 14 week training assignment where I was to spend 7 weeks on the truck and 7 weeks on the engine. Having completed my truck time first, I was in the middle of my time on the engine. The FDNY's new plan was to have us probies go back to the academy to graduate after our training rotation was over.

The Captains in Tenhouse were great because they allowed me to do 24's even though I was a probie. I'm sure part of the reason was that Captain Keltz, the engine captain, knew my aunt Louise, who worked with his brother at the fire marshal's office. While in the engine, I had partnered up with Kevin Wachter for 24's. I pretty much just did whatever he needed, because he was senior and assigned to the house. I was just happy to be able to do them.

This set of 24's was one of the few times that I actually asked Kevin if I could work a particular half. Since my wife, Shirley, and I were going to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, I needed to do the second half of the set, which was Monday (9/10) night and Tuesday (9/11) day. Kevin worked Sunday night and Monday day for me so that I could stay in Lancaster an extra day.

The night tour was rather uneventful. We had a couple of runs, ate dinner and cleaned up. Since it was a beautiful late summer night, I spent most of the rest of the night sitting on the front bumper of the truck with the bay door open bullshitting with Jeff Olsen. It rained out for a little while, which made for a nice cool night afterwards. He was telling me about his time on the rotation, especially at Ladder 175, which was a busy "A" house in Brooklyn. He told me he had caught a bunch of work while there, and he had been dreading coming back to Engine 10, his assigned company, because there wasn't much fire duty to be had in Lower Manhattan. Once he got back, though, he said that he had settled in and now felt comfortable there.

Jeff was a fun guy to be around. He was very animated, loud and boisterous. I remember him grabbing the house mike in house watch one day in the afternoon and then broke out in song, serenading the entire firehouse. He also took the time to help out us probies with pointers and advice. He let us bounce things off of him, and answered any questions that we had, no matter how stupid. I grew to respect him for these things in very short order.

I told him that after putting up with the police department for 9 years, I would be happy with the worst house in the fire department. As long as I could keep doing my 24's and only have to work twice a week, I would stay in the sink for the next 11 years and be happier than a pig in shit. I also told him about my master plan to use a hook to get into Ladder 114 in Sunset Park (where I worked as a cop) after graduation, and if I didn't like it in a relatively busy house (though L-114 wasn't nearly as busy as I thought at the time), I knew that I could always come back to Tenhouse.

The night was quiet and I hit the rack just after midnight. Since I could never figure out where to leave my cell phone near the bunk without stepping on it or forgetting it, I would always leave it in my locker overnight. Because of that, when we got a run around 6:00 or 6:30 that morning, I didn't have it with me when we turned out.

The early morning run was for a transformer fire in a street vault on Fulton Street. We ended up

waiting for a while for Con Ed to show up before we could open the vault up. During our wait, we got some coffee from a corner store that was just opening for the day, and a Daily News truck driver threw us a few free newspapers. I remember sitting around bullshitting and at one point, Jeff and Mark Dulski hopped back into the rig and looked to be passed out cold.

When Con Ed did finally show up, they opened up the vault and the fire had extinguished itself. Lieutenant Greg Atlas called me over to the open vault so he could show me what it looked like. I really couldn't make anything out other than blackened, burned wires and cables. Lieutenant Atlas was a great guy who liked to bust balls a lot. He had family on NYPD, so he would bust my balls a bit more, but it was always good natured and he was always helpful.

Since we were no longer needed, we loaded back on the rig and headed back to quarters. We backed into quarters between 8:00 and 8:30 am. Since I was working the day tour, and I was the junior man, I checked over the rig and tools. I was intending to get a jump on committee work since we would be going out shortly after roll call for morning building inspection, but, since it was almost time for roll call, I decided to just have a cup of coffee and read the newspaper as I sat in house watch. Jeff had taken up on one of the truckies since he would be working the truck on the day tour.

At 8:46, there were a few guys standing on the apron awaiting roll call when I heard what sounded like an airplane. It started out faintly, but became very loud very fast. I was able to tell that it was very large, very close, very low, and traveling very fast. I actually heard the turbines accelerating as it neared.

The guys on the apron looked up and said that it was going to hit the Towers. I thought, because I am a probie, they are just trying to see if I am going to jump up to look. Of course, I had to take a look, only because it sounded so close. As soon as I lifted myself off of the chair, the plane hit the North Tower and I could feel the force of the impact resonate through my body. It was like a concussion grenade going off right in front of me. I watched the plate glass windows of house watch vibrate to the point that I was amazed they didn't shatter. The explosion that accompanied the impact was unbelievable. It was louder than any I have ever heard.

I immediately ran to the open apparatus door to get a look at what just happened. As I looked up, all I could see was a huge fireball and debris falling down towards the ground and me. The fireball was hot enough for me to actually feel the heat all the way down at street level. Every civilian on the street was running into the open doors of the firehouse to get away from the rainstorm of debris. I asked all three guys that were standing on the apron what kind of plane just crashed, and, despite the fact that all three had just witnessed the very same thing a split second ago, they all gave me differing answers. One said it was a small commuter plane, another said it was a small jet, and the third said it was a jumbo jet.

I ran back to house watch to call a verbal alarm in the dispatcher and to turn the companies out. Then I ran over to my gear to get dressed, and was trying to get the civilians out of the firehouse as we turned out of quarters, but it was like trying to push sand uphill as there were too many of them coming in too fast. We all jumped up onto the rigs as we pulled out of quarters and it was tight because we were riding heavy with the guys who were getting off duty. Already, my heart

was in my mouth, and it felt like it was pounding about a thousand times a minute. I was on auto pilot at the moment of impact.

The truck turned out of quarters first with the engine following. Johnny Morabito, the truck chauffer, turned left onto Liberty Street, and the engine followed. At first, we thought the plane had hit the South Tower and Danny Peritore, the engine chauffer, stopped to drop us off at the Tall Ships restaurant before heading down the block to secure a hydrant. We ran up into the restaurant still not being sure of which tower was hit as hundreds of civilians were running down the stairs past us.

It was tough getting into the restaurant because of all the civilians who were trying to evacuate out the same doors. We got halfway into the restaurant when we realized that the North Tower had been hit. Since Danny had already pulled away with the rig, we ran around the corner to the entrance of the North Tower, which was on West Street. While we were running on West Street, I noticed that there was no vehicular traffic. It was a very weird feeling not seeing any cars on this road in the middle of a weekday morning and just had an eerie feeling to it.

As I neared the entrance to the North Tower, I noticed one of the guys from the truck who had been getting off duty, Terry Rivera, bent over someone in the middle of West Street. Terry had no Scott pack on and he was watering down the person lying in the street with a water extinguisher. I looked at the victim on the ground and seeing pink from head to toe, for a split second thought it was the training dummy from the Fire Academy. After taking another step towards Terry, my mind snapped back to reality when I remembered what I had just witnessed, and realized that the victim was burned over most of their body.

After passing Terry and his burn victim by, we went into the front door of the North Tower. The foyer, which was rather small, had an outer set of doors and an inner set of doors. The plate glass windows which bounded the foyer were mostly broken, and inside this area was yet two more burn victims. I initially thought to myself, how in the world did not only two people survive the plane crash and fall to the ground, but how did this one get inside the building after falling to the ground from outside?

Both of the victims inside the foyer were burned over most of their bodies. The closest one, a female, was still very much alive as I could hear her gasping for air and gurgling. The farther one, a male, was not moving and appeared to be deceased already. Both of these victims, however, did not have anyone attending to them. In order to get into the lobby area, we had to step over the female victim who was still alive, and as I did, I felt sick to my stomach. All I could think about was trying to resist the natural urge to stop and at least to try to give this woman some measure of comfort. I had to keep reminding myself that I didn't have any EMS equipment with me and my job was to hump the hose that I had so I could put the fire out. Despite all the reminding that I did to myself, stepping over that woman was one of the most difficult and disturbing things that I had ever done in my lifetime.

Before exiting the foyer and entering the lobby, I also had to step over the second male who was near the inside door of the foyer. As this man was already expired, stepping over him did not cause me quite as much difficulty as the woman, but I was very cognizant that I was stepping

over a possible crime scene victim and still felt a knot in the pit of my belly.

Once inside the lobby area, all I could do initially was to fixate on all of the physical destruction. Since this was our primary response area, I had a good recollection as to what the lobby should look like, and this was not it. Most of the glass windows that were inches thick were blown out and broken. The marble slabs that were affixed to the walls were broken in numerous places and lay shattered on the floor. Multiple elevator doors were broken and askew. There were hundreds, maybe thousands of civilians pouring out of the building in every direction while dozens of firefighters came in from everywhere.

Lieutenant Atlas told us to stay together and stand by while he went to the command post at the lobby desk to get our orders. As we waited for what seemed like an eternity, I saw several guys that I knew. To this day, I do not recollect who it was that I saw, but I do know that there were at least a handful of guys from my probie class there. Mostly, we either just exchanged a "what's up," "be safe," or a simple head nod. There was one friend from probie school though, who told me "be careful what you wish for" meaning wishing for a good first due job. I told him that I was happy enough without any fires and that I certainly didn't wish for this!

By now my heart was in my mouth and I felt like I had crapped my drawers a hundred times already. As we stood in the lobby, we were trying to get a handle on the situation and get a game plan together, but it was impossible because we were inside the building already and couldn't do a good size up from outside. While waiting, Johnny Schroeder gets spooked and begins telling me that things are really bad. I think, "No shit, John, stop reminding me." He doesn't stop, instead he keeps telling me over and over that this is real bad and people, meaning us, are going to die. Now I am almost losing my mind, because I know the situation is bad, and that it's not going to get any better when we get up to the fire floor, but now I've got a senior guy who I'm looking to for a little bit of leadership and to be a calming influence, losing his friggin' mind telling me how some of us are going to die today!

Adding to the chaotic atmosphere was the constant crashing sounds and breaking glass. When some companies would come in, they would just break the remaining glass from the window frames and walk in that way. At first I thought they were just asshole truckies getting their rocks off by breaking things, but then I realized they were simply doing it to get inside the building as fast as they could to escape the being in the line of fire of the jumpers that started to rain onto the streets. The guys breaking windows were doing so to get inside as fast as possible to get out of harm's way. Now that it was pointed out, all I could focus on was the sickening periodic thuds as the bodies began hitting the pavement outside. Once in a while, the bodies would hit the glass canopy over the entrance to the tower and there would be this spectacular sound of glass shattering along with the aforementioned thud.

Thankfully, about this time, Lieutenant Atlas comes over to us and tells us that we are partnering up with another engine company, Engine 5, and going up the stairs to meet the fire. We all grab our gear and head for the elevator banks where the stairwells are. Once there, we find that there is total chaos and we have to wait to get into the stairwell because of the large numbers of civilians still evacuating the upper floors. Since the exit door for the stairwell was just the size of the average doorway, and we had so much gear on, we had to do a one for one at the doorway.

One civilian would exit the stairwell, and one firefighter would enter. This made for a very slow and tedious process.

While we waited our turn, there were dozens upon dozens of firefighters waiting to get into the stairwell; I notice several elevator banks whose doors are bent, twisted and just generally askew. I could also smell the burnt jet fuel that had come down the elevator shafts. As we wait, we could hear at least a couple of elevators come crashing down inside their shafts. It definitely added to the “oh shit” feeling. I remember not wanting to stand too close to the shafts just in case anything came crashing out, or just in case I got nudged against one of the doors that weren’t so stable. There were about eight or nine sub-levels down below that I didn’t care to see, especially express.

As we inch closer to getting into the stairwell, we huddle up one more time to remind each other to stay together. We check to see if we all have radios and all of our gear. We kind of ask each other and ourselves “are you ready?” As we turn towards the door, we realize that Lieutenant Atlas has already gone into the stairwell without us. Now we start to push towards the door to get in, bypassing some companies waiting as well. One of us tries to get Atlas on the radio, but there is just too much traffic going on, so we just start heading up, hoping to catch up to him.

Once inside the stairwell, the chaos that was present in the lobby disappears. The flow of civilians coming down and firefighters going up is eerily quiet, calm and orderly. The staircases themselves are rather narrow for an emergency egress, especially considering how many people need to use them. Everyone, civilians and firefighters, stay to their right in a single file. The civilians are coming down against the wall, and we are going up near the well hole. As we climb, many of the civilians are offering up words of encouragement, thanks, prayers and water. We simply brush off the praise, secretly hoping that we don’t need the prayers, and pass the water back to another civilian coming down, who, in turn hands it back to another firefighter. I don’t imagine any of that water was consumed that day.

The climb up gets harder and more monotonous with each step taken. With all of the equipment and bunker gear, which was in excess of 100 pounds, I start to sweat profusely by the time we have reached the third floor. I can feel my heart pounding and my breathing becoming more labored. I start to think about recent firefighter deaths caused by heart attacks and can’t help but dwell on the fact that I have high cholesterol and am a good candidate for the big one because of it. Now I start sweating even more worrying if I’m going to have a heart attack in this stairwell.

Thankfully, after about 10 floors or so, the boys up front decided to take a blow on one of the floors. We pull off of the stairs and into an office area. The office is pretty nondescript, a lot of cubicles with desks, computers and phones. While we sat, I decided to try to call my wife, Shirley, from one of the desks, because even though I had no idea what time it was, I knew that she would be at work by now, and this has probably made the news by now.

When I get her on the phone, she sounded a little nervous so I tried to calm her down by letting her know that I was okay, and that we were waiting to go up higher in the North Tower. I told her everything would be all right and that we were just going to climb up to meet the fire and that we would put it out. No big deal. Besides hoping to calm her down with that BS, I was hoping

it would have the same effect on me, but it didn't because even I didn't believe a word I was saying. I told her that I loved her and that I would be careful. Before I hung up, I said I would call her later on after we finished and not to worry.

After I hung up the phone, I heard a partial transmission over my radio. It was something about a third plane being in the area. Since it was only a partial transmission, I wrote it off as either me hearing wrong, or someone not knowing how to count. With that, I walked over to the window that looked out onto the plaza where the sphere sculpture was. I was amazed at the amount of papers flying around. They seemed to almost cover everything and it looked like a war zone at street level.

Shortly thereafter, we mounted up again and set out to resume our climb. In the stairwell, it was more of the same, calm, quiet civilians going down, and seemingly calm, and quiet firefighters going up. The difference now, however, was some of the civilians coming down were injured. There were bruises, cuts, scrapes, burns and broken limbs. Some were in pretty bad condition and were being helped down by other civilians. I couldn't help but to feel sorry for them and guilty as well for not stopping to help them. The guilt was there despite me not being able to do any more for them than was already being done by the good-Samaritans.

The thing that amazed me the most was the fact that despite some of the injured being hurt so bad that they were taking a long time to get down the stairs, the people behind them didn't push or jump ahead, they all waited their turn and stayed in an orderly line. It was so calm it almost didn't seem real. There was almost an atmosphere amongst them that they had done this all before and I imagined that many did during the '93 bombing.

As we continued up, I noticed that Johnny began to lag behind a bit and the guys up front were still going at a good clip. Not wanting to leave Johnny behind, I began to fall back a bit, trying at the same time to catch the attention of the other guys ahead. At this point, I was afraid that Johnny was the one who was going to have a heart attack. About the same time, one of the Engine 5 guys starts complaining about having chest pains. We all stop to check him out, and after a few moments, he convinces his Lieutenant that he is okay and we keep climbing. The other guys from my company were too far ahead and had no idea that we had stopped and kept going up.

Thankfully, they had stopped for another blow around the 20<sup>th</sup> floor, and we caught up with them shortly thereafter. Unfortunately, the Engine 5 guy that we had stopped for was again having chest pains and they seemed to be getting worse. His Lieutenant decided to have him wait for the medics so they could check him out better and take him back down if needed. About this time, one of our guys had made radio contact with Lieutenant Atlas. He was way up in the 40's and said he would wait on us but we had to get moving now. We let the Engine 5 Lieutenant know about Atlas, and he told us to go ahead, adding that he would be right behind us as soon as the medics got to his guy.

By this time, many of the civilians had started to thin out, and it seemed as though we had more of the staircase to ourselves. As we started to head up this time, it was with more urgency and at a quicker pace as we were trying to make good time to meet Lieutenant Atlas. We wanted to

make sure that got to him in as little time as possible, because we all knew that he would not wait on us for long.

After getting up a few floors, to about the 23<sup>rd</sup>, everything changed. We began to feel this incredible rumbling and the floor began to sway left and right so much that I felt as though I was on a ride, or that there was an earthquake. As I braced myself against the wall, the lights went out and the emergency lights activated. The next thing I knew, smoke began to roll up from the lower floors and I masked up along with the other guys. Since we were riding heavy, one of our guys didn't have a mask, but I had no idea who at this time as there was too much shit going on for me to think about that.

As fast as the rumbling and swaying began, it seemed to end just as quickly. The only thing that any of us could think of to explain what had just happened was that another plane had just hit our tower. Now we knew for sure that it was a deliberate terrorist attack and thankfully we were all on the same page and decided to evacuate. I told all of the guys to just drop whatever wasn't attached to them and we could always pick it up later if we came back up. Thankfully, we all chose to evacuate on our own despite not having received any orders to do so over the radio. In fact, we didn't receive any information over the radio since we got into the stairwell as they were working only intermittently. Had one of us decided that we should stay, we all would have done the same and kept going up. We all also would have died.

On the way down, the smoke had cleared enough for us to be able to take our masks off in an effort to conserve our tanks. After taking off my face piece, I quickly realized that it wasn't smoke at all, rather it smelled and felt like some kind of dust. After a few good hits, it definitely seemed like concrete type dust as it would burn the lungs just a bit when taking a deep breath. Thankfully, the further down we got, the more the dust dissipated.

Being the probie, I was following the senior guys' lead and ended up at the tail end of our Conga line. As we were descending, we passed so many firemen from other companies who were either still going up, or who were parked on some of the floors taking breathers or awaiting further orders that would never come due to the lousy radios. There were still other firemen who had also opted to self-evacuate and were entering the stairway from various floors to mix in with us and the cops who were also heading down.

Some of the firemen who were not heading down with the rest of us began yelling at us for evacuating without having gotten any orders to do so from the command post. At the same time, some of the cops who were evacuating with us were yelling back that they had gotten evacuation orders from their command post. Having been a cop for so many years, I knew that their radios were much better and they were able to communicate with a central dispatcher instead of the point to point crap that the Fire Department had. A few of the firemen standing pat or still going up even called us cowards for leaving, saying we were no better than the cops.

Despite this, and because no one from Engine 10 thought otherwise, we kept evacuating and trying to get ourselves out. The lower we got, the more crowded the stairwell became. Thankfully, most of the civilians were out and it was mainly first responders in the stairwell and with each floor we passed, more of them poured into the mix. While it was becoming more

crowded with first responders, at no point did it become log jammed and we were able to keep moving at a steady pace at all times.

On one of the floors, two Port Authority cops entered the stairwell just as I was approaching the doorway. They ended up cutting right in front of me and they were assisting a middle-aged white male who was very heavyset and noticeably out of shape. Now I was stuck behind them with no way around them as they were walking down three abreast. I was cut off from my company with no way to catch up with them as they were descending faster than the cops and civilian in between us.

As I watched the cops carrying this gentleman, I noticed that he was not even attempting to walk as his feet were dragging behind him and the tops of his shoes were dragging along each step. Basically, he was forcing the cops to carry dead weight as he protested their assistance and begged them to leave him. He had become overwhelmed and physically crippled with fear and had just given up. I found myself becoming enraged at the thought of his having given up at the expense of not only these two cops, but also myself and every other poor bastard behind us.

At this point all I can think of is "I want to live, if you don't, then get the hell out of my way!" I began to think about how I could get around them, but there was simply no physical way to do so short of pushing them all aside at one of the landings. I also pondered the possibility of hurdling over top of them on the stairs as an option. Thankfully, I chose to remain calm as I could and maintain a degree of professionalism. On top of that, I couldn't help but remember the calm and orderly way that the civilians acted on their way down when stuck behind the injured who were being assisted down.

As we slowly made our way to the lower floors, word was coming back up the line that the stairwell was blocked at street and concourse levels for some reason. We had to exit our stairwell on one of the upper floors and switch over to another that was said to be clear. As we snaked our way through offices and hallways, I noticed that all the lights were out and the only way we could see due to the flashlights of the first responders. There was quite a bit of damage as well as water all over due to apparent broken pipes. As I was concentrating on following the line and keeping us all together, I didn't even have a moment to ponder what had caused all of the damage. While navigating the hallways, I was able to finally get around the Port Authority cops and their charge.

When we finally made it to the other stairwell, we resumed descending to the lobby. For some reason, I don't know if this second stairwell was also blocked at street level, we exited the stairwell on the concourse level and we had found ourselves in the elevator bank facing south. I immediately noticed that the entire lobby scene was decidedly different now than it was when I had first went up. There was no one in the lobby area but us exiting the stairwell and it appeared to be a ghost town. There was much more damage than earlier and now there appeared to be debris strewn all over. The other noticeable thing was that everything was completely covered in this ashy dust.

As I followed the line of people exiting the stairwell around to the right, I now found myself heading towards the northern side of the North Tower. As I approached the door, I saw everyone



bunching up at it and wondered why they weren't just getting the hell out. I soon realized why, as I watched each person, one by one, open the door, look up, and then run like hell to the overhang of 6WTC. They were each making sure that there was no debris or bodies coming down that would hit them as they sprinted the 20-30 yards.

As I patiently waited my turn, a heavyside black male in a uniform said to me and a few other first responders that we still had some civilian stragglers and that we needed to form a human line around 6WTC to direct them to Vesey Street. Me, being the good Probie that I was, said "okay" and took my turn at the door by looking up. Having not really paid attention when looking, I didn't really know if anything or anyone was coming down towards me. I just ran as fast as I could and hoped for the best.

Once under the overhang of 6WTC, I felt relatively safe and was able to relax slightly. I stood fast and was the first person that people were getting to after making their dash. As fast as they would get to me, I would shoo them eastbound to the next responder. One by one they came, but there was a pause between each as they went through the ritual of looking up first. While waiting for someone to get to me, I began to focus on the sounds that I was hearing. There were whistling sounds that grew louder just before an impact that would send a dust cloud up from the debris that was strewn about. I remember wondering for a moment where all of this dust and debris had come from but then had to focus on the next person running towards me, and forgot all about it.

With each subsequent impact, my anxiety level increased. Because of my vantage point and angle, I could not see what was falling just before impact, only hear it coming. After several minutes of this the two Port Authority cops with the heavy set civilian had caught back up to me. At this point I decided that boss or no boss, I have had enough and I needed to get the hell out of there. After taking a few steps, I began to hear a rumbling.

Not really sure of what was going on, I paused and noticed the rumbling getting faster and louder. It sounded like a freight train starting out slowly from far away and getting faster as it neared. At this same time, I felt a huge gust of wind that seemed to come from out of nowhere. Not knowing what was going on, but knowing whatever it was, was bad and happening fast, I instinctively knelt down and faced 6WTC. As soon as I did, the debris of the North Tower began to cascade towards me. At this point the only protection that I had was the building in front of me, 6WTC, the support beam for the overhang to my right, and my air tank on my back. My left side was the only thing totally exposed.

The debris first began hitting my feet and ankles. Then it started to pile up and began hitting my knees, then my waist, and up to my chest and shoulders. With each piece of debris that impacted me directly it felt as though each was larger and hurt more than the last. By the time the debris had buried me up to my shoulders, I had come to the realization that this would be the day that I die, and being buried alive was how it would happen. As soon as I reached that conclusion, my mind began to race and numerous seemingly random thoughts began popping in and out of my head almost at will. I thought of how I was about to die, being buried alive, and tried to imagine how long it would take, and how excruciating it might be. I thought about my wife, Shirley, and how we had only been married for two years with no kids yet. I also thought of the irony of her

not having wanted me to switch to FD, contending that it was more dangerous than PD. Now I had to admit that she was right despite working in one of the slowest fire areas in the city, I just wouldn't be able to tell her that. Just my luck, I thought, I get killed by the biggest job in the city's history in the slowest area.

As if those thoughts weren't enough, I turned my attention to how they would find me when they finally dug me out and realized that I would be in the fetal position that I was currently in. To me, that was the absolute last straw, and was determined to not let them find me like that. I decided to attempt to stand up, fully expecting that I would immediately be cut in half or crushed by a beam as the debris was still coming down. Accepting my apparent fate of death, I surmised that either option would be better than being buried alive as each would be quick and cut down on my suffering measurably.

Pushing up to stand, I was hoping that I was not pinned down by the debris. Thankfully, I was not and was able to stand fully upright. As I did so, I noticed that the windows of 6WTC were all busted out and gone. Instantly, I decided to jump head first into 6WTC. Shaking my legs and feet to ensure I wasn't pinned by something, I dove into the building realizing that I was free and clear to do so. While doing so, I then thought about whether or not there was a floor inside of the building for me to land on, or whether I would be tumbling down several stories into the sub-basement levels of the complex. Thankfully, I became hung up on some debris just below the windowsill facing up on my back. Within seconds of my dive, the rumbling and rain of debris suddenly stopped.

I now found myself on my back enveloped by this massive cloud of who knows what, and a mouthful of powdered dust. It is pitch black and I cannot breathe, nor can I hear anything. I feel as though someone as flipped a switch and turned off every one of my senses and I am now unable to see, hear, smell, or taste. Realizing that I am still alive, and that the worst appears to be over, at least for now, I lift myself up off my back, and climb onto the windowsill. I am now on my hands and knees and attempting to spit the powdery dust from my mouth. It is totally bone dry and I can't even muster up an ounce of saliva to even attempt to spit. I then remove my glove and literally scrape the debris dust from my tongue and swipe my fingers around my mouth to get as much as I can out. It feels as though the minute that I am able to get some saliva flowing, the remaining dust in my mouth acts like a super sponge and soaks it up almost instantly. After several repeated attempts to get the dust out of my mouth, I am able to finally get up enough saliva to make it work and am able to get much of it out.

While dealing with my cotton mouth problem, I try to turn on my flashlight so I can see what I am scraping out with my hand, but because the dust is so fine, the flashlight on my chest is only visible when pressed directly on my eye. At this same time, I cannot even hear my own breath or heart beat and feels as though I have been stuck inside of a super quiet hearing test booth. Breathing is a challenge as well because the dust is so thick and the particles so small. Whenever I do breathe in, my lungs feel like they are on fire from the pulverized concrete. I reach down for my face piece that is dangling, shake the debris out and try to take a hit from the full air tank on my back, but the pressurized air only forces the dust particles stuck in the crevices of the face piece even deeper into my lungs. I decided it best to stick with the shallow breathing for now.

As I am doing all of this, the dust cloud is slowly beginning to dissipate and settle. I can begin to see rays of sunshine trying to peak through from up above, and I am unsure if I am inside or outside, or if there is even a roof left to 6WTC. I can now see the beam of my flashlight and it is traveling further and further as the dust settles. I can also start to see the beams from other flashlights moving around through the dust cloud, so I know I am not the only one who survived and am not alone. I can hear the muffled sounds of voices off in the distance where the lights are coming from, and try to shout back at them even though they are too muffled to be understood. There are pockets of fire all around in the rubble and I notice that there is much more of it than prior to the collapse. The entire plaza area under 6WTC where we were all running and walking through is now almost impassable. There are beams, concrete slabs, papers and mountains of dust everywhere.

In the middle of the debris field is the heavyset civilian and he is calling for me to help him. I immediately look around for the two Port Authority cops who were assisting him and cannot find them. I tell the gentleman to hang on one second because he is noticeably buried up to his waist and he is pinned down. I finally locate one of the cops just beginning to get his bearings. He either had the same idea as I did and dove to safety in 6WTC, or he was blown in there by the cascading debris. I call to him to let him know the civilian is pinned and ask where his partner is. He gives a cursory look and answers that he doesn't know. Turning his attention to the civilian, he says that we have to get him out and we begin to see if we can wriggle him out. After some digging around him by hand and some tugs on the gentleman, we are able to free him enough to get him out from under the debris. The problem then becomes how to navigate over the debris field as it is not simply helping him walk, we now have to carry him.

The cop suggests strapping him to a backboard, but I tell him that we are not going to be able to carry him as he is too large and heavy and we do not have solid footing since we are going to have to carry him through this debris. I tell him that we could use a stokes basket and pull him over most of the debris and pick him up only when needed. The cop concurs, adding that we are going to need more help due to the size of the civilian and the terrain that we will be navigating, and he sets off to find another first responder. I help the civilian to the windowsill that I was on and tell him that I am going to get something to help him out of the area and to stand fast. He begs me to not leave him, and I can't help but think about the irony of him now wanting to live. I explain that the only way for us to get him out is to get someone else to help us and to get something to put him on. He again asks for me to not leave, pointing out the pockets of fire. I tell him that they are far enough off that they are not an immediate danger as I take off my mask and show him how to use it if needed. As he is still pleading I head into 6WTC to find a clear way to Vesey Street to grab a basket from one of the rigs.

As I climb, stumble and slide over the uneven and at times sharp debris, I notice that the few surviving first responders that I had seen as the dust settled, are now gone. They apparently found their way out while I was digging the civilian out. As for the PA cop, he is still looking for someone else to give us a hand and I let him know that I'm going to get the basket for the civilian. The going is slow trying to get to the northeastern side of 6WTC because I have to stop periodically to ensure that the debris pile is secure enough for me to either climb or step on. Nothing in the building appears to be familiar or recognizable as an office, just piles and piles of

debris.

After an eternity trying to navigate through the building, I finally emerge on the other side in one piece. I am now standing on the northern most part of the concourse level, a few stories above street level. As I make my way to the staircase to the street, I have a clear vantage point of Vesey Street all the way to Church Street and a bit further east past St. Paul's church. The scene is unbelievably odd and I am taken aback as I am looking at rigs on fire, crushed cop cars, yet more debris, dust and papers. The other immediately noticeable thing is that there is not a living soul on the street, it is completely empty and I am left to wonder where the hell everyone went to. I slowly make my way down the stairs as I continue to take the whole scene in and am now just mindlessly putting one foot in front of the other.

As I hit street level, I remember that I am supposed to be looking for a stokes basket. The closest rigs are completely destroyed by fire and debris and I cannot raid them for any needed gear as it has also been destroyed. I methodically keep walking in the direction that I was facing after descending the stairs, which was east. With each subsequent step that I now take, the more horrific the scene becomes and I slowly forget what I was looking for. By the time I hit Church Street, I have become so engrossed with what I have been witnessing that I have now forgotten about the remaining PA cop and his civilian. I simply keep walking east at the same mindless pace as I look around. At some point while walking, I remember that I do not know where the other members of my company are, or what happened to them. I wonder if they got out or stopped on a floor to wait for me and maybe I passed them without knowing it. I think about whether or not they were inside the building waiting for me when the collapse happened. I try to make radio contact, but the air is dead and I get no response. I find myself thinking that they may have died looking for me and am the only survivor from the company. Guilt quickly sets in and takes its place alongside the shame from our self-evacuation out of the building

Approaching Church Street, I look at Century 21 and see every window busted out and the entire building is covered in the same dust that now covers everything. I find myself thinking about how long it will take them to clean and fix the store up and note that Shirley won't be shopping at her favorite store anytime soon. Shortly thereafter I find myself walking along the cemetery behind St. Paul's church and see that each tree has been stripped of its leaves and is also covered from top to bottom in ashy dust which makes them appear dead. The tombstones below the trees are covered in inches upon inches of grey powdery dust that is swirling mixed with thousands of floating pieces of paper. I think about how that is going to be a mess to clean up. Intermittently, as I walk and take in these sights, I look back at the Towers to get a size up of the current condition, not realizing both are now gone. I believe that I cannot see them due to the smoke and dust and surmise that because of the short amount of time that the debris was falling, there was only a partial collapse of the North Tower. I also anticipate that should they fail, that they will topple over like a domino and I try to figure out how many city blocks 110 stories would cover. Not knowing which direction they would fall, and not being able to calculate the number of blocks that I would need to go, I just keep walking east on Vesey Street.

With each stride that I take I find my boots kicking up mini clouds of dust and papers that cover every square inch of the streets and sidewalks. Coupled with everything else that is covered in grey ash, I can't help but think of how this scene resembles what I would think a nuclear winter

to look like, dreary, grey, and desolate with a swirling wind periodically kicking up dust and loose debris. I try to calculate and estimate the magnitude of the event but am overwhelmed simply by what I can see.

At the intersection of Vesey Street and Broadway, I can finally see some live bodies milling about at a frenzied pace and continue directly towards them. The closer I get I can see that the firefighters there have set up a command board and have unbelievably intense and determined looks on their faces which is also laced with fear and apprehension. Covered in dust and helmetless, I slowly amble past each and every one of them. Not one acknowledges me as I pass. I begin to wonder if I am in fact dead, thinking to myself that I don't know what happens when you die. Maybe you become a soul that just wanders around aimlessly while no one else can see you. Maybe this is purgatory, or a temporary stop before heading on to heaven, or hell. Who knows? Certainly not me. The only thing that I knew for sure at that moment was my shitty feeling had just gotten even worse.

Because the dust was still hanging in the air and was periodically kicked up by all of the activity around me, I made a bee line for an office building on the corner and went inside. All around the lobby were first responders from every agency, sitting, standing and lying down. No one seemed to acknowledge me inside the lobby either. As I sat exhausted, a PD chief approached me to offer a bottle of water. Taking it from him, I realized that I was in fact still alive. Either that, or the chief was dead also and stuck with sharing in plight. Another fireman nearby began talking to me and I was soon relieved of any of my fears of being dearly departed. I soon found out that this other fireman had also become departed from his company and we determined to find our respective companies together.

Leaving the office lobby, we headed north on Broadway, but veered right as we continued and soon found ourselves at the mouth of the Brooklyn Bridge, right near City Hall. Realizing that we went too far, we headed back down towards Vesey Street and Broadway where the command post was. This time, we realized that there were hundreds upon hundreds of firefighters standing in a semi formation awaiting orders. They were all in only bunker gear, no masks or tools, and they were clean, no ashy dust covering them. I happened to see one of my Lieutenants standing in the formation and went over to him. I found out he and the rest were off duty and there on recall. He asked for the names of who I was working with on the engine and I gave them to him. He then asked about the guys on the truck and I drew a complete blank, not even able to provide one name. Fearing that I might be injured after asking where I was and what happened to me, he instructed me to go over to the Woolworth building to get triaged. As I begin to walk away, I suddenly remember the civilian and PA cop that I was supposed to be getting a stokes basket for. He asks what location they are at and tells me again to stand down and get triaged. He says that he will have someone go check it out.

At this point I have no fight left in me and there are literally thousands of firefighters now standing around awaiting orders, so I head to the triage area. It is set up in the lobby of the old Woolworth building on Broadway. As soon as I enter the lobby, an EMT has me sit down and I get the once over. Within minutes, I am cleared and now I am back to meandering about with no discernible purpose. I am without a company and without a firehouse to go back to, or so I thought at the time. I happen to bump into a couple of guys, firefighters, on recall from

Tenhouse inside the lobby. Seeing me covered in ash, they ask what happened to me and where I was.

After telling them what I could remember at the moment, they then fill me in on the rest of the happenings of the day. Up until this moment, I had no idea that a second plane had struck the South Tower, nor did I know that it had collapsed. They also told me that the North Tower had fully collapsed and was now gone as well. I listened incredulously as they also told me about the Pentagon getting hit as well as another plane going down somewhere in Pennsylvania. All I can think of at this point is how a shitty day just got shittier. After sitting there with them for a while, letting all this new and overwhelming information sink in, I decided that I needed to talk to my wife and set out to find a phone.

I had heard that there was a phone bank somewhere in one of the offices in the lower level, so I made my way down the stairs. I came upon an election headquarters which had a phone bank of dozens of phones. I tried a couple but they weren't working. I kept trying and finally came across a dial tone. I quickly dialed up my wife's number and was able to get her on the phone. I let her know that I was okay and tried to reassure her that I would see her soon. I didn't want to unnecessarily alarm her with the horrific details of what had just happened to me, but I knew that she would have an idea just because of the news coverage.

As we talked, I could hear her crying and I could also hear the fear in her voice. She kept asking if I was okay, and each time I reassured her that I was, she would ask again. Then she began to repeatedly ask me if I had all of my limbs and with each affirmative answer, she would get more specific, asking about my arms, legs, hands and feet, as though I was lying to her and she would catch me by being specific. As the frustration of the repeated questions mounted, I almost said to her that, yes, I had all of my limbs, but my head was cut off. It just didn't seem appropriate at the time, so I thankfully kept my mouth shut.

After talking for a while, I told her that I had to go so I could get back to work. She reluctantly let me go after pleading with me to be careful. After hanging up, I went back up stairs and I realize that my head is pounding and I am in excruciating pain. I now went in search of some aspirin. Thankfully, there is a drug store in the lobby of the building and I head in that direction. The store has two entrances, one from the street, and one in the lobby. As I enter from the lobby, my head is down perusing the shelves for my coveted aspirin. At the same time, there is another firefighter who has entered the store from the street entrance and also has his head down searching for batteries and flashlights.

Because neither one of us were looking, we slammed into each other with enough force that we were both knocked back a bit. As I looked up, I realized that it was my cousin John Mucciolla, who was a Staten Island firefighter there on recall. The feeling of joy that came over me at that moment was indescribable. It was good to see that he was okay and also very comforting to see a familiar face. My eyes welled up and my throat felt like there was a baseball in it. We immediately embraced in a bear hug with John patting me as he did. With each ensuing pat, a cloud of dust and ash was set free from my bunker coat. John asked me what had happened to me and where I was, and I recounted yet again what I had endured so far that day. He told me that he was on recall and looking for any batteries or flashlights that he could find. He asked if I

had spoken to my wife and I told him that I did. He told me how glad he was to have seen me and said that he had to get back to his company. I told him to be safe and that I would see him later. I then found my aspirin and went in search of a phone in the Woolworth building.

I went back down towards the command post to see if I could find anyone from Tenhouse. I ended up bumping into Brendan Ielpi from my probie class. He was also on recall and looked frantic. He didn't even bother to ask what had happened to me as everyone else did, instead asking if I had seen his brother, Jonathan. I replied no, but was thinking that even if I had, I had never met him before, so how in the hell could I possibly know that it was your brother? No sooner than I had answered him he was on his way to look for Jonathan.

I then milled about some more, still not knowing what I should be doing, wondering about my helmet, when I bumped into another class mate from probie school, Smith. He also was on recall and asked what had happened to me. After once again telling my story, he then asked what had happened to my helmet. My reply of "I don't know", coupled with my dazed demeanor led him to believe that I might have been hit in the head and he grabbed a nearby nurse. After answering the same questions from her as I had Smitty, she threw me into the back of an ambulance and told them to get me to a hospital.

As we drove away from the site, I remember this overwhelming feeling of guilt coming over me for leaving the rest of the Brothers. I felt as though I was abandoning ship as I was physically intact and had nothing more than a splitting headache. I yelled to the driver to turn around and take me back to the site, but he just ignored my pleas by saying that he was taking me to the hospital. Again, with little fight left in me, I simply relented and figured that I would make my way back a little later.

After what seemed like an eternity, I found myself in the ER bay of Cornell hospital on the upper eastside. As the ambulance stopped, I could see dozens of doctors and nurses converging on the ambulance through the rear windows. As I opened the doors, someone immediately grabbed me and threw me into a waiting wheelchair. Despite my protests about being physically fine, they shoved me back into the chair as I tried to get out. Being exhausted with trying to fight everyone, I just sat back and figured I would let them do their thing and do what I needed to do afterwards.

When they turned me around to wheel me into the ER, I got my first glimpse of the gauntlet of doctors and nurses that surrounded me on my way into the ER. Realizing that all of these people were waiting for victims that would never come, simply overwhelmed me. Coupled with the ever increasing guilt of being at the hospital despite not being injured, I again began to breakdown and did everything I could to hold it together.

When they got me into the ER, they transferred me to a gurney and there were so many people around it hovering over me that I could barely see the ceiling. Within seconds, I was stripped first of my bunker gear, then my uniform, and lastly my underwear. I now lay buck ass naked on this table in front of dozens of well-meaning strangers and I could care less. They poked and prodded, took my temperature, blood pressure and pulse, checked my eyes and ears, and checked

every inch of my body for lacerations, contusions and broken bones. They found nothing. At one point, as they rolled me to my side to check my c-spine, I felt a gloved hand swiping through the crack of my ass. I immediately protested and was told that I had some glass and debris in there. I said thank you, but I'll take care of it myself later.

Soon, it was over and I was offered a phone to call my wife. As I sat there, I drew a total blank and could not remember her work number, her cell number, or even our house number. It took several minutes of trying to clear my head and get my bearings before I could recall any of them. After several unsuccessful attempts, I finally was able to get her on the phone. A feeling of relief and comfort overcame me upon hearing her voice. I could hear the terror in her voice when I told her that I was in the hospital, and I tried my best to keep her calm. Without missing a beat, she said that she was coming to get me. I told her not to, but I did really want her to. I told her that she wouldn't be able to get into the city as it was locked down and the trains weren't running. She repeated that she was coming to get me. I asked her to bring me a change of clothes if she was able to make it because they had taken all of my gear.

After lying in a curtained area of the ER for an eternity, listening to loved ones trying to locate their husbands, wives, and children, I heard Shirley's voice. As I stepped down from the bed, I saw her zoom past my bed through the slit in the curtain. I called out to her, but she didn't hear me. Just as I was going to open the curtain, I saw her uncle, Berto, passing by and called to him. He stopped dead in his tracks and called out to Shirley. She ran back and threw her arms around me with what felt like a death grip. I simply broke down because I couldn't hold it in anymore and broke down in her arms.

She gave me the clothes that she had brought, and we checked out. After gathering up my two garbage bags full of gear, we set out for the long walk to the train station. Not knowing if or when a train would be coming, we sat and waited. When we did finally get on the train, we were met with lots of stares from the other passengers on the train because of the gear in my bags.

When we got to Brooklyn, Berto drove us back home, stopping by George's restaurant to grab some takeout as I had not eaten all day. As I ate, I turned on the news and sat intently for hours trying to make sense of it all. After watching the coverage into the wee hours of the morning, I went to bed where I passed out cold until the next morning.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'James (Jimmy) Brown III'. The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping 'J' and 'B'.

James (Jimmy) Brown III

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