

Remembering the 9/11 Terrorist Attacks 20 YEARS LATER

Survivors tell us what they saw and what they've learned in the intervening years

By Steven Greenhouse, AARP



SEAN ADAIR/REUTERS

It's hard to fathom that teens now entering college — or serving in the armed forces — were not yet born on that unforgettable Tuesday morning. Nearly 3,000 people died in Manhattan, at the Pentagon and in a Pennsylvania field on September 11, 2001, in what remains the deadliest act of terrorism in history. To mark the 20th anniversary of that infamous day, we asked people with a connection to the attacks to reflect on what they experienced then and what it means to them today.

Bill Keegan, a lieutenant* in the Port Authority Police Department: The World Trade Center in lower Manhattan was a beacon to the whole world. It said, "We want to know who you are, we want to work with you, and we want to trade with you." Trade allows us to understand different cultures and different people, and for them to understand us. I think that's why these terrorists targeted the towers.

8:46 A.M.

American Airlines Flight 11 from Boston, bound for Los Angeles, crashed into the World Trade Center's North Tower, between the 93rd and 99th floors.



HIRO OSHIMA/WIREIMAGE

Margaret Lazaros, a systems analyst for Empire Blue Cross Blue Shield, who worked on the 27th floor of the building: It was unbelievable. It's even hard to explain. It was such a noise and such an impact that you actually felt it. It felt like the building shuddered. I thought everything was going to fall down. We just all stood there, looking at each other, and I remember I said to my girlfriend, "Something bad happened. I think we need to get out of here."

Vincent Green, a top anti-corruption official in the city's Department of Investigation, who was in an office that faced the twin towers: We didn't think it was an attack at that point. We thought it was some pilot who didn't know what the heck he was doing.

9:03 A.M.

United Airlines Flight 175, also headed from Boston to L.A., crashed into the World Trade Center's South Tower, between the 77th and 85th floors.



KELLY GUENTHER/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX PICTURES

Investigator Green: I saw the second plane come around and go into the building. I told my colleague, "This is no accident. We're under attack."

Michael Lomonaco, chef and director of culinary operations at Windows on the World, a restaurant on the North Tower's 106th and 107th floors: I'd been in the shopping center on the lower level when the North Tower was hit. They evacuated us very quickly. I made a couple of calls to let people know I was safe. Then I heard a roar of jet engines. I looked up at the South Tower and saw the moment of impact. A fireball exploded. This was a tremendous shock. I thought of all my friends and colleagues at the restaurant, and I started to do a mental list: Who's up

there now? Who's working? We had 72 of our Windows family working that morning. We also had more than 100 people in a private dining room. So, after the second plane hit, I became emotional and felt tears well up in my eyes.

Salvatore Cassano, a Fire Department assistant chief of operations who became chief of operations right after September 11: The World Trade Center was built to withstand a plane crash. Well, it withstood the plane crash. It just didn't withstand a fire from the thousands of gallons of jet fuel that were incinerating everything in there.

Systems analyst Lazaros: We got into the stairwell, and it was so quiet. Everybody knew something really bad had happened, and everybody just wanted to get out of there. We all just started walking and walking and walking down. We saw the firefighters, a lot of them. They started coming up the stairwell. So, we all moved over for them. They had so much equipment on them. And it was smoky, and they were sweating already. They were walking up the stairs. We asked them, "Where are you going? Where do you have to go?" They said, "Oh, we have to get underneath the fire. But you go." They had all these ropes and things, and all those guys never got out of there. Never.



We got to the end of the stairwell and went through the open door. At first we had no idea where we were. I said, "This must be some kind of old subbasement, somewhere that's full of debris." It was the lobby we had come into in the morning, but everything had been destroyed.

9:37 A.M.

American Airlines Flight 77, bound from the Washington area to L.A., crashed into the western side of the Pentagon.



LARRY DOWNING/REUTERS

Specialist Beau Doboszinski, a soldier with the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment who was working as a Pentagon tour guide: All of a sudden this one airman comes running up the bottom ramp, and he's just beet red. He screams, "We've got to get out of here. A plane just hit the Pentagon." It was a lot of chaos. We had people that were on fire. We tackled them and put them out.

9:59 A.M.

The South Tower collapsed.



AARON MILESTONE/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Principal Dolch: We had evacuated all the students to the south, toward Battery Park. As we were crossing into the park I heard the sound that I always describe as snap, crackle and pop. I looked back, and I thought the world had come to an end. Every time I think about it, I shiver. It was just a tsunami wave of dirt and debris, just behind us.

Chef Lomonaco: Suddenly, as I was looking at the twin towers, one of them disappeared in a cloud of smoke. It literally disappeared. There were mothers with strollers; there were elderly people; there were thousands of people who were running north on Church Street, away from this collapse.



AP PHOTO/FILE/SUZANNE PLUNKETT

10:03 A.M.

United Flight 93, headed to San Francisco from Newark, New Jersey, crashed into an empty field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania.



TIM SHAFFER/REUTERS

Stephen M. Clark, currently the superintendent of National Parks of Western Pennsylvania, which includes the Flight 93 National Memorial: The airplane was taken over by the terrorists at 9:28 and didn't crash until 10:03. So what happened during that time frame is nothing short of miraculous. The passengers knew they were part of some type of suicide mission, yet they had the courage to take a vote and then implement a plan to try and retake control

of the plane. They simply ran out of time. There were 33 passengers, five flight attendants and two pilots on board, along with the four terrorists. That airplane was only 18 minutes away from Washington. That particular morning, both houses of Congress were to be in session. You had over 4,500 people working in or near the Capitol building. You had congressmen and -women; you had the incredible symbol of democracy; you had employees; you had visitors. So, there's no doubt that those 40 people saved countless lives.

10:28 A.M.

The North Tower collapsed.



JOSE JIMENEZ/PRIMERA HORA/GETTY IMAGES

Robert Snyder, an American studies and journalism professor at Rutgers University in New Jersey: I was walking past South Street Seaport, and I felt a rumble under my feet. Then I looked over my shoulder, and I saw that the second tower had fallen. The scene was absolutely apocalyptic.

Systems analyst Lazaros: I could see the North Tower coming down, and I said, "Oh, my God, that's our place." It was unbelievable. There were so many people that were still on the upper floors and couldn't get out.

After the towers collapsed, friends and family members began a frantic search for loved ones who worked in or near the complex.



MARIO TAMA/GETTY IMAGES

Christy Ferer, founder of Citybuzz and Vidicom and a former television correspondent who was married to Neil David Levin, the Port Authority's executive director: I went down to the site with pictures of Neil and handed them to the rescue workers and said, "Please look for this guy." It was probably irrational, but I did it. I guess it was about four days later that I really admitted he was gone.

Systems analyst Lazaros: It just broke my heart when children walked around looking for their parents, with pictures and posters, asking, "Anybody seen my mother, my father?" Because all I could think of was, *It could be my daughters doing that.*

For nine months afterward, workers searched Ground Zero.



PORTER GIFFORD/CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES

FDNY Lieutenant Berkman: We're looking to see if there's anybody there, and people keep coming up to us and saying, "Have you seen my cousin?" "Have you seen my father?" The Fire Department people were looking for their family, friends or fire company. Because we knew there were thousands of people potentially trapped in that burning pile of debris, including possibly thousands of first responders.

9/11 widow Ferer, who later became New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's liaison to families who lost loved ones on 9/11: Many of the families were just crumbling under the weight of the sorrow, the uncertainty and the lack of closure. A lot of their emotions turned to anger down the road. Many of them did not find body parts. I believe that something like 40 percent still have nothing to bury.

FDNY Lieutenant Berkman: I figured it out, at one point, that I must've worked with about 250 of the 343 firefighters who were killed that day. The guy whose gear I borrowed that day, Captain Vinnie Brunton, from Ladder 105, he was killed. When you have 12 or 14 FDNY funerals a day — I had to make a decision a lot of days: Whose do I go to?

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In the years that followed, survivors and families pushed forward.



ANGEL FRANCO/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX PICTURES

FDNY Assistant Chief Cassano: As much evil as there was that day, there was also much good. I mean the people who came to help us from all over the country, all over the world. We couldn't have done it alone.

Systems analyst Lazaros: You learn to hold everybody closer and don't take anybody for granted. I never get off the phone with anybody I care about without saying, "Hey, love you."

Principal Dolch: There was a long time during which I didn't take care of myself, and emotionally I was a mess, but I didn't really know that until a good two years later. I finally asked myself, *Why do I feel almost catatonic most of the time? Why am I still jumping every time there's a siren?* I did a lot of resiliency work — talking, writing. Learning to appreciate the moon, the stars, the skies and the creator of the moon, the sun and the stars.

Port Authority Police Officer Lim: Several months after September 11, I attended a concert of my 14-year-old daughter's school orchestra. Ravel's Boléro was on the program, and Debra had a clarinet solo. All of a sudden, I broke out crying. I told my wife, "I'm so lucky to be here to hear this." It taught me to appreciate the important

things in life. And at the same time, it was hard to come to grips with the loss of my canine partner, Sirius. Every time I talked about it, I would always say, "Well, the people were more important than a dog, obviously." But I was told by people smarter than I was that until I accepted the loss of my friend, my dog, that I would never get over this completely. Now I can finally say I have.

Today the world remains irrevocably changed.



ALEXANDRE FUCHS/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Alice Greenwald, chief executive of the National September 11 Memorial & Museum at the former World Trade Center site: We have young people and people starting careers who have no memory of this event. And yet they are living in a world that has been defined geopolitically, and in terms of security consciousness, by the events of 20 years ago. This next generation has grown up with the sense that terrorism is the norm, and that breaks my heart.

Port Authority Police Lieutenant Keegan: This country came together. We found that what makes us human together is that people hurt the same way. No matter what your political affiliation is, what your color is, what your religion is. Seeing how we came together and seeing the goodness of people, I think that's something we need to take forward into this COVID situation and further on.

Chef Lomonaco: We also learned that we can rise from the ashes. We learned that we can rebuild our lives.



RJ CAPAK/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES