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SEARCH → Go

TRAFFIC

NEWS

- Long Island
- New York City
- Nation
- World
- State
- Ground Zero
- Health/Science
- Obituaries
- Columnists
- Student Briefing

SPORTS

- Scoreboard
- Mets
- Yankees
- Minor Leagues
- Jets
- Giants
- Tennis / U.S. Open
- Columnists

BUSINESS

- Stock Quotes
- Retirement / Act II
- Technology
- Real Estate
- Columnists
- Print Edition

OPINION

- Editorials
- Letters to the Editor

ENTERTAINMENT

- Movies
- Pop Music
- The Calendar
- Dining
- Theater
- Television
- FanFare

FEATURES

Survivors Recount Their Trade Center Escapes

This story was reported by Fred Bruning, Kathleen Kerr, Melanie Lefkowitz, Herbert Lowe, Rob Kahn, Dan Fagin, Dionne Searcey and Eric Holm. It was written by Bruning.

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September 24, 2001

The briefcase.

Michael Otten wasn't leaving without the soft, black, leather briefcase his wife, Gigi, had given him for Christmas.

Inside was a Sony mini-disc Walkman with an album he compiled himself - Otten, 35, favored Pink Floyd, the Ramones, Depeche Mode - and an umbrella. There was reading matter, too, for the train ride back to Long Island: a BMW magazine, The Wall Street Journal and literature about diabetes. His 6-year-old son, Nicholas, has diabetes, and Otten is dedicated to finding a cure.

At his desk, Otten scooped up his cell phone it had been charging - when his boss, Yuji Goya, a director of Mizuho Capital Markets Corp., repeated the order he had yelled from the far end of the office a moment before.

Get out!

His supervisor was insistent, and Otten is grateful. "There is a huge chance I am alive because of him," Otten said.

Mizuho was located on the 80th floor of Tower Two of the World Trade Center and, looking north just before 9 a.m. Sept. 11, office workers could see that something remarkable had happened to Tower One.

There was a hole in it. Paper - most of it yellow or white legal-size sheets - was fluttering southward. Beams were poking into the bright, blue sky. There was a fire.

At first, people said a small plane must have slammed into the silvery, 110-story building. Some rookie pilot must have made a terrible

Photos



[The streets were chaotic as people tried to flee the engulfed Twin Towers before they collapse.](#) (Jennifer Altman)

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- Home & Gardens
- Crossword
- Horoscopes

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- Jobs
- Homes
- Cars
- Marketplace

SITE INDEX

ARCHIVES

Today's Newsday

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Spanish Language
Paper

WB11
News/Sports
Webcasts

DSA
Community
Publishing

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mistake in judgment, people said. Still, the gash in the building was big, scary.

Another Mizuho manager echoed Goya's order to clear the office. Otten, of East Islip, stubbornly snagged his briefcase. Then he bolted.

What Otten - and, as far as he could tell, most other Mizuho workers - didn't take was the red nylon emergency pouches they had been issued by the company. After the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in February 1993, Mizuho distributed emergency kits and periodically reminded employees to check the contents: flashlights, water, whistles, a stick that glowed in the dark and breathing masks. Now the anticipated emergency was here, but workers were too frazzled to remember their pouches.

The main thing, though, was that they were heading for safety as the bosses insisted. Delay could have been disastrous.

Tower One had not been hit by the Cessna or Piper that people supposed but by a hijacked, Los Angeles-bound 767, American Airlines Flight 11. While Otten and his colleagues, and thousands of workers from other floors of both towers, headed in generally calm fashion toward staircases and what they thought would be safety, another airliner approached from the south. It was headed for Tower Two.

From that point, the sequence - repeated daily on television - is mournfully familiar: the crash, the smoke, the day-glo orange flames, the collapse of the buildings, the terrible, tumbling cloud of soot and grit that chased survivors fleeing the financial district.

"It felt like somebody poured a bag of sand down my throat," said Donald Jodice, 42, who escaped from the 88th floor of Tower One. "You thought you were going to die."

Thousands did. City officials place the number of dead at 261 and missing at 6,453 but Mayor Rudolph Giuliani warns that the numbers could change. Nor is there an accurate count of those who escaped. The attack came before all 50,000 of the center's workers were at their desks. Most evacuated before it was too late.

Those who managed to get out - Otten and Jodice and Trade Center workers like Howie Cook, Carl Boudakian, Cary Sheih, Juliette Bergman, Robert Leder and others - have a special and stunning perspective. Only they know what it was like inside the Twin Towers on the morning New York will never forget.

Some who escaped chose to talk right away. Others took more time. For all, the memories of the disaster were vivid: dramatic, difficult and often stirring.

One person remembered strangers picking her up when her knees buckled. A janitor named Kenny Johannemann lifted a badly burned man from an elevator and helped drag him to safety. In quiet voices, people recalled workers hanging out windows for minutes before losing strength and plunging 90 floors. A volunteer named Donovan Garcia of the Bronx mentioned a phone call from his brother, a Trade Center survivor. "I see a plane flying real close," Garcia's brother said. "Why does it look like it's flying toward me?"

To understand what it was like inside the buildings between 8:48 a.m. when the first plane hit and 10:29 a.m. when the second of the two towers collapsed, Newsday reporters spoke to dozens of survivors, people who demonstrated as much courage in recounting their experiences as they did in finding ways to survive and in helping their co-workers to get out alive, too. Many of the stories start the same

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way.

Take the Long Island Rail Road or the PATH train or the subway to work. Maybe pick up a coffee with half-and-half and no sugar downstairs at Fine and Shapiro, the food shop, the way Otten did.

Or, like Howie Cook, 46, of Hoboken, N.J., who works for Eurobrokers Inc., go straight to the 84th floor of Tower Two and have an English muffin or a croissant, compliments of the company. Check the government agency bond market: Fannie Maes, Sallie Maes, Federal Home Loan Bank Mortgages. Phone a pal over at Prudential. Settle in.

Carl Boudakian, 39, of Hackensack, N.J., was getting squared away, too. He was chatting with one of the managers of Baseline Financial Services, which occupied the entire 77th floor of Tower Two. The manager, Brian Noody, was showing Boudakian photos from a hunting trip. It was Noody's first day back to work.

In Tower One, Cary Sheih, 29, of Chelsea, a technology consultant for the Port Authority, was reading e-mail in his office on the 72nd floor, as he did every morning. He talked by phone to a traffic engineer. He accomplished another part of his daily routine. Sheih ate a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

Ten floors above, Juliette Bergman, 54, of Fort Lee, N.J., an analyst who worked for the State Department of Transportation on the 82nd floor of Tower One, took off her jacket. She put her purse away. She sat down at her desk. Bergman had been with the department for 20 years. From her cubicle, she could see the Brooklyn Bridge. Beautiful sight.

In the 85th-floor offices of SMW Trading Co, Robert Leder, 29, of Garden City, was about to have a bagel. Nearby, people were rehashing Monday Night Football. The Giants had lost their opener to the Denver Broncos. Keep the faith. It was a long season.

Then the happy, humdrum ordinariness of that Tuesday ended as quickly as a dream.

There was an explosion, or that's what it seemed like. Tower One swayed and shivered as though struck with a sudden chill. Sheih was tossed out of his chair and thought: earthquake. Then he thought again. It was New York. This was no earthquake. What difference did it make? The building felt like it was coming down.

Debris was falling past windows. As the tower swayed, Bergman grabbed her desk to stop from falling. Books tumbled from shelves. Could it be? Was the tower going over? "Oh, my God," Bergman said out loud. "Oh my God. Oh my God."

In Tower Two, people were baffled at first. There was a loud noise - maybe a truck had crashed on West Street or a furnace blew up? - but it was more thud than thunder. Boudakian, director of client services for Baseline, said he wasn't worried. "The thought was that it was an accident."

Someone in Howie Cook's office said: "A plane hit." But it must have been a small plane - terrible thing, of course, but not a disaster. The firm's security guard took charge. Whatever was happening, the guard wanted Eurobroker employees to leave. "Get to a stairwell," he said. "Go downstairs."

In Boudakian's office, people were looking out windows. Boudakian went over to see what was happening. Tower One had a gash in its side, and there were flames. If a plane had hit, Boudakian couldn't be sure. He left the window and is grateful he did. People were jumping

from Tower One. "That's not something I wanted to watch," Boudakian said.

At Mizuho, there was a lot of yelling. One guy cursed, mildly and in amazement. The bosses - including Goya, who is among the missing at the Trade Center - were in the hall helping workers find the correct stairwells.

Otten took a middle set of stairs. It was crowded, but people were moving in an orderly fashion. The staircase was painted a light color, and illumination was good. One woman urged the crowd to move faster, but others said, no, stay calm, if we continue at a steady rate no one will get hurt.

There wasn't much talk, just a little nervous chatter and a few stabs at humor. At each floor, other workers moved into the stairwell. People moved aside to allow the newcomers room. "It was not like the parkways on Long Island, where people don't let you in," Otten said.

If the crowds heading downstairs in Tower Two felt somewhat secure, there was plenty of worry in Tower One.

Donald Jodice could smell what he thought was diesel fuel. There were fires in the corridors, and a secretary in his office had been burned, head to toe. To get to the stairwell, Jodice and his colleagues had to step over flaming debris. They organized a buddy system to make certain elderly co-workers were OK. They helped the secretary, who managed to walk despite her burns.

Once in the staircase, people relaxed a bit. OK, they said to one another, something weird has happened but we'll be all right. "We weren't aware it was a plane or an act of terrorism," Jodice said.

Somewhere along the line, a person with a cell phone or beeper got word that a plane really may have hit the building - a small plane, everyone agreed. How could a pilot hit such an enormous structure, a person near Juliette Bergman wondered. The towers were two of the tallest structures in the world. And it was a beautiful day.

The staircase was getting crowded, Bergman said, but people were considerate. At one point, a man whose shirt was covered with blood joined the procession. "We made room for him so he could walk fast," she said.

Given the dicey situation, things were going pretty well, said Carey Sheih. No more explosions, no smoke in the stairwells - a relief.

Old-timers said the evacuation was a breeze compared with the '93 Trade Center attack, which killed seven and injured 1,000. That time, emergency lights went out, automatic doors locked, ventilation failed. Still, this was no picnic. Larry Silverstein, whose group took over a 99-year, \$3.2-billion lease on the Trade Center in July, was going to be steamed, somebody said, no matter what was causing the trouble.

Suddenly, people began shifting to the right. To their left was a line of people with difficulties: blind people and others with breathing problems and employees who were injured. They got the right of way. Now, people with beepers were getting e-mail messages. Confirmed: a plane had hit the building. But the aircraft was a 767, not some little light plane.

In Tower Two, Howie Cook had been walking downstairs for 10 minutes when he heard an announcement. He thinks it came from a man several floors below who perhaps was using a megaphone. "The building is secure." A security agent on the 55th floor with a walkie-talkie confirmed the information. Tower One had been hit. Two

was OK.

Mike Otten got the same message. It said people could continue down on elevators from the 44th floor. They could rest if they preferred. They could go back to work. Boudakian heard it, too. "You could hear an emergency PA system: 'An aircraft has hit Tower One. Tower Two is secure,'" he said.

That announcement hurts. Many say it should not have been made. "A huge mistake which probably cost people their lives," Cook said. Others insist officials were trying to minimize panic. "They had no way of knowing we were going to be hit," said one worker in Tower Two. "They didn't want pandemonium."

For a moment, Cook discussed the issue with a few other people. Should they go back to work? Almost immediately, they dismissed the idea. "The predominant feeling was, 'No, I'm going down,'" said Cook, who has a wife, Maureen, and son, Alexander, 2.

Just then, an elevator door opened and a group boarded.

"I expected to see a red arrow pointing down," he said. "Instead, as the door closed, the arrow went green. They were going up. I thought, 'My God, what are they doing?'"

Cook took an elevator down to the 44th floor, a point where riders change to other elevators for the trip to the street. It was 9:06 a.m. "As I stepped off the elevator," Cook said, "the second plane hit."

The elevator shook. Bits of ceiling tile began falling. Cook was dressed in "business casual" style: khaki slacks, wingtip loafers. His navy blue polo shirt, embossed with the name of the Troon North resort in Scottsdale, Ariz., was covered with particles. Nearby, a few people screamed. For the first time, Cook believed the danger was grave. "It was a terrorist act," he said. "I knew immediately."

Moments before, Mike Otten also had gotten on an elevator, at the 44th floor. Last to squeeze in was a man with a backpack. The doors couldn't close. The guy's backpack must have been in the way. One, two, six, seven - it seemed like a dozen times the elevator doors started and then kicked back. "A very good thing," Otten said in retrospect.

As Otten waited impatiently for the man to get his backpack out of the way, the plane - a United Airlines 767 - hit the tower.

Otten thought the elevator had gone into free fall. The walls of the cab caved in. Dust swirled. But it was an optical illusion. Otten still was on Floor 44, but he didn't know what to expect next. How could he, with the tower swaying what seemed two, three, four feet? "I thought the building was coming down," he said.

By now, Tower One was a perilous place.

At the 78th floor, an elevator had jammed. The door was only open a couple of inches. Donald Jodice and a couple of other men saw that a pal named Tony was inside. They went to help. The three struggled to pry the door open. They put their feet against the lip of the doors and backs against one another. A fire official told them to give up. "You gotta leave right now," he said, but Jodice and the others kept struggling. Finally, Tony told them to stop. Firefighters were coming, he said. They knew how to handle these things.

Jodice and the two others moved away from the elevator. And Tony? "He's still among the missing."

Tony had been correct about the firefighters. They were on their way, dozens of them, looking exhausted from the hike upstairs but pressing ahead. Mostly, they were young guys, it seemed to Rob Leder, young guys with tanks on their backs heading upstairs when everybody else was going down. "One after another after another," said Leder, a commodities trader.

On the 20th floor of Tower One, Leder and a friend, Bill Forney, 28, of Manhattan, saw a woman who seemed exhausted. She was telling others to pass her by on the stairs. It was Juliette Bergman.

Ordinarily, Bergman wears slacks and comfortable shoes, but today she was dressed in a skirt and heels. Her legs began to cramp. She took her shoes off, but the cramps got worse.

Leder and Forney stopped to help. Earlier, they had faced their own ordeal. Heading downstairs, the two had hit a dead end at 72. The stairs just didn't go any farther, they said. Leder and Forney found a door to another stairwell, but it was locked.

The situation was bad. "There were fires all over" the 72nd floor, Leder said. "No walls, wires everywhere." They found another staircase, but it was packed. Progress was slow. People would walk down five steps and then stop. "We were sweating like crazy," Forney said.

Leder and Forney wanted Bergman to keep moving. "She looked like she was very tired," Leder said. "She had this huge bag, and it looked like she had swept all her belongings into it." They gave the woman some water, picked up her bag, steadied her on the trip down.

Other workers forged alliances, tiny mutual aid societies. In a darkened, smoky staircase in Tower Two, people stayed close to a pregnant woman, Jyoti Dave, who is due in December. She was one of 10 colleagues, including Boudakian, who were evacuating together - "The Baseline 10," as they later called themselves.

The co-workers kept moving. Through one door and then another. Somebody found a flashlight. That made things easier. A few floors down, there was a glow. The lights were on.

"We stuck together," Boudakian said. "We walked as slowly as the slowest person. We were going to live together or die together. Everyone acted as a team." Later in the week, Baseline, which lost four people in the disaster, held a reunion for survivors. The Baseline 10 were all there.

Down and down and down the Trade Center staircases people went. Near Howie Cook, a woman looked ill. The crowd on the staircase, he said, was "tight, kind of like getting on a subway car." One man called out to another fellow who was carrying a paper bag. Give me the bag, the first man said, and the second man obliged. The first man opened the bag and held it for the woman so she could throw up.

Still holding his briefcase, Mike Otten told himself he was OK. After the plane hit Tower Two, there were uneasy moments. There was so much dust that he couldn't find a staircase after getting off the elevator, the one that wouldn't close because of the man with the backpack. Finally, through the gritty mist, he saw a stairwell. Heading downstairs, Otten felt relieved. He was getting somewhere. Then he thought: Relieved? I'm still 500 feet up. "A return to harsh reality," he said.

Things were tougher for Cary Sheih. When he reached the lower floors water started to pour into the stairwell. A pipe had burst, Sheih guessed. Water was up to his ankles. But he was close now, very close. Fifth floor, fourth.

"Then all of a sudden a loud boom, and the building began to shake unbearably again," he recalled. "People started falling as smoke started to rise. Emergency lights flickered and went out. I could hear the steel buckling. Rescuers below shouted for us to go back upstairs."

Sheih returned to the sixth or seventh floor. A firefighter led him through the darkness to another stairwell. Sheih heard one rescuer say something to a comrade. "I believe that the fireman had whispered to another that Building Two had collapsed."

When survivors reached the bottom of the World Trade Center, officials directed them to the safest exits. They took a zigzag route to avoid junk from the broken building. "We ran this way and that," Otten said.

Firefighters and police officers were still coming into the building. At 9:50 a.m., Tower Two collapsed. Thirty-nine minutes later, Tower One gave way. Howie Cook said the firefighters and police rushing ahead at that point almost surely perished.

Donald Jodice had the same sorry thought. "The firemen were going up past us on the stairs," he said. "They're all dead now. They must be."

The sadness is especially acute for Mike Otten. His brother-in-law - who, coincidentally, is named Mike Otten, from another Otten family on Long Island - is a New York City firefighter. The firefighter, and his wife, Marion, have three boys. He is missing. "It's killing all of us," Otten said.

For the survivors of Towers One and Two, the ordeal wasn't over when they reached the street. "I broke down crying at that point," Boudakian said.

Some were caught in the stupendous gray wave that surged through the financial district after the buildings collapsed. Others, trekking uptown, saw the towers go down - painful enough.

It took time to get your bearings.

Leder and Forney stayed with Juliette Bergman. They walked her away from the Trade Center site. They stayed at her side as the tide of dust and debris swamped downtown streets.

In the chaos, Leder and Forney lost Bergman's jacket and handbag. They each gave her \$10 so she could get back to Fort Lee. Everyone exchanged phone numbers.

Alone, Bergman found herself crying. She was confused. Should she go back to her building? Should she look for her belongings?

She collapsed. An Army reservist took her to NYU Downtown Hospital. Doctors gave her oxygen.

When Bergman arrived home, her husband, Brian, 75, was overjoyed. Brian Bergman, a Pole, endured the Nazi onslaught in Europe. "Now," he said to his wife, "you're a holocaust survivor, too."

Failing From The Inside Out: Unique features of the World Trade Center Structure and how they failed after the twin airline attacks.

LOAD-BEARING SYSTEM

A network of horizontal and vertical beams and columns absorbs some impact by redistributing load of upper floors to undamaged portions.

The impact may have scraped the fireproofing off many exterior steel columns

and sheered some of the interior columns. A raging fire, with temperatures likely soaring above 1,000 degrees Fahrenheit, begins to soften columns that remain.

Towers collapse downward after load-bearing columns - and then a quick succession of floors - fail.

Unique features of the World Trade Center structure and how they failed after the twin airline attacks.

INNER CORE

The tube-like design features an interior core of steel columns - housing

elevator shafts, stairwells, bathrooms and utilities - connected by floor trusses to closely spaced exterior columns.

Nature of collapse may indicate a complete failure of the inner core in the

impact zone.

8:48 a.m.

American Airlines Flight 11 crashes into upper floors of the North Tower.

Columbia University's Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory records its first seismic blip, a reading of 0.9 on Richter scale.

9:06

United Airlines Flight 175 plows into South Tower, unleashing enormous

fireball.

Tower sways, but remains standing. Because the plane hit at an angle, it may have damaged exterior columns over more floors and spread fire over wider area than attack on North Tower.

Lamont-Doherty records reading of 0.7 on Richter scale.

9:50

Vertical columns supporting the top floors of the South Tower fail. Floors

above crash site topple toward the impact zone, then collapse downward. A

lower impact could have tipped the tower sideways.

Lamont-Doherty records reading of 2.1 on Richter scale.

10:29

North Tower collapses.

Lamont-Doherty records reading of 2.3 on Richter scale.

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