

A SPECIAL ISSUE | THE REALITIES OF GROUND ZERO . . .
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UNITED . . . INSIDE THE HOLY WAR . . . MEMO TO THE PRESIDENT

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AT GROUND ZERO

THE FIRST HOURS

TIMOTHY TOWNSEND, 32, is a financial reporter. He was just blocks away from his office at the World Financial Center when the first plane crashed. He grabbed his notebook and ran outside.

THE FIRST THING I SAW in the parking lot across Liberty Street from the South Tower was luggage. Burned luggage. A couple of cars were on fire. Half a block east, a man who'd been working out in a South Tower fitness club was walking barefoot over shards of glass, wearing only a white towel around his waist; he still had shaving cream on the left side of his face. Bits of glass were falling to the ground like hail. I ventured a block south, away from the towers, and that's when I started seeing body parts. At first, just scattered lumps of mangled flesh dotting the road and its sidewalks, then a leg near the gutter. Someone mentioned a severed head over by a fire hydrant. Hunks of metal — some

silver and the size of a fist, others green and as big as toasters — were strewn for blocks south of the buildings. Shoes were everywhere.

"Oh, Jesus," I heard someone say. "They're jumping." Every few moments a body would fall from the North Tower, from about ninety floors up. The jumpers all seemed to come from the floors that were engulfed in flames. Sometimes they jumped in pairs — one just after the other. They were up so high, it took ten to twelve seconds for each of them to hit the ground. I counted.

What must have been going through their minds, to choose certain death? Was it a decision between one death and another? Or maybe it wasn't a decision at all, their bodies involuntarily recoiling from the heat, the way you pull your hand off a hot stove.

Moments later, a low metallic whine,

quickly followed by a high-pitched whoosh, came out of the south. I looked up to see the white belly of an airplane much closer than it should have been. The South Tower of the Trade Center seemed to suck the plane into itself. For an instant it looked like there would be no trauma to the building — it was as if the plane just slipped through a mail slot in the side of the tower, or simply vanished. But then a fireball ballooned out of the top of the building just five blocks from where we stood.

People were running south down the West Side Highway toward Battery Park — the southern tip, the end, of Manhattan — and west toward the Hudson River. I ran with the crowd that veered toward the river, looking back over my shoulder at the new gash in the Trade Center. Once relatively safe among the

tree-lined avenues of Battery Park City, people hugged each other and some cried.

After about ten minutes, a wave of calm returned to the streets. Police were trying to get the thousands of people south of the World Trade Center off the West Side Highway, east to the FDR Drive, over the Brooklyn Bridge. And still people were throwing themselves out of the North Tower: You could see suit jackets fluttering in the wind and women's dresses billowing like failed parachutes.

But about five minutes later, a sharp cracking sound momentarily replaced the shrill squeal of sirens, and the top half of the South Tower imploded, bringing the entire thing down. It was the most frightened I've ever been. Screaming and sprinting south toward Battery Park, we all flew from the dark cloud that was slowly funneling toward us. At that moment, I believed two things about this cloud. One, that it was made not just of ash and soot, but of metal, glass and concrete; and two, that soon this shrapnel would be whizzing by — and perhaps through — my head. A woman next to me turned to run. Her black bag came off her shoulder and a CD holder went flying, sending bright silver discs clattering across the ground. An older man to my right tripped and took a face-first dive across the pavement, glasses flying off his face.

In the seconds, minutes and hours following the World Trade Center attacks, hundreds — maybe thousands — of ordinary people would find their best selves and become heroes. And then there were the rest of us, running hard, wanting only to live and to talk to someone we loved, even if it meant leaving an old guy lying in the street, glasses gone, a cloud of death and destruction creeping up on him.

I'd always wondered what I'd do in a life-or-death situation. Until that moment, I'd believed I'd do the right thing, would always help the helpless, most likely without regard for my own well-being. All across lower Manhattan at that moment, people were making similar decisions, so many of them so much more critical than mine. September 11th, 2001, at 9:45 A.M. was not my finest moment. As I turned back to help, I saw two younger guys scoop the fallen man up, and we all continued running south.

After about three blocks, I hid for a moment behind a large Dumpster on the west side of the street. But when I looked back toward the towers, I could see that my Dumpster was no match for the cloud, and I took off again. I ran the last few blocks into Battery Park, where the cloud finally did catch up with the thousands of us fleeing it. I could see only a few feet in front of me, and so I followed the silhouettes I could make out. Because Battery Park is the tip of the island, it wasn't much of a surprise that the crowd would wind up dead-ending at the water. When it happened, the people in the front panicked. So they turned around, screamed, and ran back toward us in a stam-

pede. We had nowhere to go – there were thousands of people behind us and hundreds coming back the other way.

As the crowd doubled back on itself, I jumped over a wrought-iron fence and landed in a flower bed. I stayed down for a second, thinking I'd wait out the panic low to the ground. But then I felt other people jumping the fence and landing near me. Thinking I was about to be trampled, I got up and ran behind a nearby tree. In a minute or two the panic subdued, and I hopped back over the fence and onto a park path. But now the air was heavier with debris and there was no clear path out of the park. I took off my tie and wrapped it around my face. People were coughing and stumbling. Some were crying, others screaming. It was difficult to breathe or even keep my eyes open.

Soon, there was another wave of calm and quiet, and the ash that fell from the sky and settled on the grass and trees gave the park the peaceful feel of a light evening snowfall. Eventually, I found a path that led me out to the east side of the Battery area, and I followed a crowd to the FDR. Thousands participated in the exodus up the highway and into Brooklyn. It was now just past ten, and we looked like refugees. In a way, we were. My tie wasn't doing much good against the ash, so I took off my shirt and tied it around my head. We walked in the falling gray dust for fifteen minutes, still hacking, and rubbing our eyes. Then the cloud broke, and, covered in soot, we were in the sunlight again. There wasn't a lot of talking. Some walked in groups, desperately trying to stay together. Others walked alone, crying out the names of friends, co-workers or loved ones from whom they'd been separated.

At 10:25, as I getting ready to cross the bridge, another cracking sound came out of the west. We looked behind us and to the left to see the remaining tower collapse. Soon, that ash reached the Manhattan foot of the Brooklyn Bridge, and the bridge was closed. Three hours later, I was finally back in my apartment in Brooklyn. It was nearly one o'clock. There was a thin layer of ash all over my kitchen from the blast. I made my phone calls and cried with my fiancée. Then I called some friends who'd left messages, checking on me. I called my friend Sully in Boston, and we went through the list of names of our friends who worked in the financial district. I was one of the last to be accounted for. When we'd gotten through most of the names – Sims, Kane, T-Bone, Molloy – Sully said, "It's not all good news. Beazo called his wife from high up in the second building to say he was OK, but she hasn't heard from him since it fell." Beazo – Tom Brennan to those he didn't go to high school or college with – still hasn't been heard from.

As it turns out, when I was watching that tower fall, I was watching my friend die. His wife was at home, in their brand-new house in Westchester County, amid their still boxed-up life. She'd already turned off the TV when Beazo's building collapsed. Their seventeen-month-



“I see water and buildings. Oh my God!” cried American Airlines flight attendant Madeline Amy Sweeney in a phone call, according to the “Los Angeles Times.” Illustration by **MATT MAHURIN**.

old daughter is too young to have seen the images of her father's death, but someday – maybe on a distant anniversary of September 11th when each network commemorates the tragedy – I'm sure she'll be able to see it, along with her little brother or sister who is due in two months.

I hung up with Sully and turned on the television to see what I had seen. Places where I once ate lunch or shopped for a sweater or bought stamps were now buried under piles of concrete and metal, as were thousands of people – some of whom I probably rode the subway with every day. One of whom was my friend.

Since then, I've been freakishly fine, given what I'd seen. Maybe it's because I realize how lucky I was – my experience was like Christmas morning compared to what other people went through. Maybe it's because I lack the imagination, or the will, to realize the scope of what I'd seen. But sadness works in bizarre ways. The second night after the attack, I sat in front of the news, alone with my eighth or ninth beer, and I listened to a report about NFL officials considering a postponement of the second week of games. I thought about what a nice gesture that would be, and I cried and cried. ★