
Terrorists Destroy World Trade Center, Hit Pentagon in Raid With Hijacked Jets—Nation Stands In Disbelief And Horror—Streets of Manhattan Resemble War Zone Amid Clouds of Ash

by Bryan Gruley | 12 September 2001 | *The Wall Street Journal*

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They were like scenes from a catastrophe movie. Or a Tom Clancy novel. Or a CNN broadcast from a distant foreign nation.

But they were real yesterday. And they were very much in the U.S.

James Cutler, a 31-year-old insurance broker, was in the Akbar restaurant on the ground floor of the World Trade Center when he heard “boom, boom, boom,” he recalls. In seconds, the kitchen doors blew open, smoke and ash poured into the restaurant and the ceiling collapsed. Mr. Cutler didn’t know what had happened yet, but he found himself standing among bodies strewn across the floor. “It was mayhem,” he says.

Around the same time, Nestor Zwyhun, the 38-year-old chief technology officer of Tradecard, an international trading firm, had just stepped off the New Jersey commuter ferry and was walking toward the World Trade Center when he heard a sound “like a jet engine at full throttle,” he says, then a huge explosion. Smoke billowed in the sky and sheets of glass were falling everywhere. “I stood there for two seconds, then ran,” Mr. Zwyhun said.

More than 100 floors above him at the Trade Center offices of Cantor Fitzgerald, someone put a call from the company’s Los Angeles office on the speaker phone. What was happening there? The Los Angeles people heard someone say, “I think a plane just hit us.” For more than five minutes, the Los Angeles people listened in horror as the sounds of chaos came through the speaker phone, people screaming, “Somebody’s got to help us. . . . We can’t get out. . . . The place is filling with smoke.” Then the phone went dead.

Three hundred miles to the south, in Washington, D.C., a jet swooped in from the west and burrowed into the side of the Pentagon building, exploding in a tower of flame and smoke. Mark Thaggard, an office manager in the building, was there when the plane hit. People started running this way and that, trying to get out. “It was chaotic,” Mr. Thaggard says. “It was unbelievable. We could not believe this was happening.”

The nation stood in shock and horror yesterday after three apparently hijacked jetliners, in less than an hour’s time, made kamikaze-like crashes into both towers of the World Trade Center

and the Pentagon, killing hundreds, maybe thousands, of people and leaving countless others maimed and burned.

The streets of downtown Manhattan were strewn with body parts, clothing, shoes and mangled flesh, including a severed head with long, dark hair and a severed arm resting along a highway about 300 yards from the crash site. People fleeing the attacks stampeded through downtown and streamed across the Brooklyn Bridge while looking over their shoulders at the astonishing sight of the World Trade Center collapsing in a pile of smoke and ash.

Andrew Lenney, 37 years old, a financial analyst for the New York City Council, was walking to work a few blocks from the trade center when, he said, “I saw the plane out of the corner of my eye. You’re accustomed to a plane taking up a certain amount of space in the sky. This plane was huge. I just froze and watched the plane.

“It was coming down the Hudson. It was banking toward me. I saw the tops of both wings,” he said. “It was turning to make sure it hit the intended target. It plowed in about 20 stories down

dead center into the north face of the building. I thought it was a movie," Mr. Lenney said. "I couldn't believe it. It was such a perfect pyrotechnic display. It was symmetrical."

Outside the Pentagon, hundreds of workers who felt the building shake on impact poured outside amid spewing smoke. Inside, lights had switched off and alarms were blaring. "We heard a loud blast, and I felt a gust of wind," said a civilian Pentagon worker who asked not to be identified. "I heard a loud explosion, and somebody said, 'Run, let's get out of here.' And I ran."

The president learned of the initial plane crash in New York before joining a class of schoolchildren in Sarasota, Fla. At 9:04 a.m., Chief of Staff Andrew Card whispered word of the second attack into his ear as Mr. Bush was reading to the children. About a half hour later, he appeared on television to inform the nation that terrorists were behind the tragedy. He said he had ordered a full-scale investigation to "hunt down and to find those folks who committed this act."

Shortly before 9 a.m., American Airlines' Flight 11 from Boston, hijacked by suspects with knives, slammed into one trade center tower. Eighteen minutes later—as millions watched the first tower burn on live national television—a second hijacked jet crashed into the other tower. By midmorning, the south tower had exploded and collapsed, raining debris and sending choking dust and smoke across lower Manhattan. Within half an hour, the second tower caved in.

As that scene unfolded, a third hijacked jet crashed into the Pentagon. The side

of the building caved in, with secondary explosions bursting in the aftermath and huge billows of smoke rising over the Potomac River, where they could be seen all the way to the White House.

A fourth plane, also hijacked, crashed about 80 miles south of Pittsburgh. United Airlines said it was a Boeing 757 en route from Newark, N.J., to San Francisco. It crashed in a remote field, killing all 45 on board. Virginia Rep. James Moran, a Democrat, told reporters after a military briefing yesterday that the rogue plane could have been headed to the Camp David presidential retreat in the mountains of southern Maryland.

The FBI, with 20 agents at the site, said that it was treating the crash as a crime scene. Early reports indicate that there were no ground fatalities.

In Pennsylvania, Daniel Stevens, spokesman for the Westmoreland County public-safety department, confirmed that its 911-call center received a call from a man aboard United Flight 93 over Pittsburgh at 9:58 a.m. The caller, claiming he was locked in a bathroom, said "the plane is being hijacked," and repeatedly stressed that his call was "not a hoax." Mr. Stevens said he thinks the call was bona fide. On the same flight, a flight attendant from Fort Myers, Fla., called her husband on a cellphone shortly before the plane crashed.

A federal official said a crew member on one of the American flights called the company's operations center and reported that several crew members had been stabbed and relayed the seat number of one of the attackers.

The crashes shattered a placid, clear morning in New York and Washington. By early afternoon, fighter jets were

patrolling Manhattan, and downtown New York hospitals were turning away people offering to give blood because of long lines. With cellphones not working, people swarmed pay phones and huddled around radios. And the trade center towers had disappeared from the skyline.

Vincent Fiori was on the 71st floor of the first tower that was hit. "I'm sitting at my computer and I heard a rumble and my chair spun around," he said. Most people weren't sure what had happened. On the street, people gazed up at the gaping, smoking hole in the building, some holding handkerchiefs over their mouths, more curious than frightened.

The mood changed quickly when the second plane hovered into view and swerved into the other tower. Mr. Zwyhun, the Tradecard executive, was on the upper deck of a ferry, returning to New Jersey, when he saw the second crash and realized "this wasn't an accident."

Panic ensued, as stock traders, secretaries, construction workers and store clerks ran for cover. But there was bizarre calm, too, as some businesspeople rescheduled meetings on cellphones. Police showed up in numbers, ordering everyone to move uptown as fast as possible.

The top floors of the buildings were engulfed in smoke, and people began leaping from windows, one at a time, hitting the ground, shrubbery, and awnings. On the Brooklyn Bridge, dust-covered New Yorkers trooping homeward jammed the pedestrian walkway. A man in shorts and a T-shirt, running toward Manhattan with a radio to his

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ear, shouted “The Pentagon is burning, the Pentagon is burning!” and a young woman talking on her cellphone shouted, “My mother works there. I don’t know where she is. What is happening? What is happening?”

Pedestrians streaming off the Williamsburg Bridge were met by local workers who had dismantled office water coolers, stacked mountains of plastic cups and hauled cases of water to the foot of the bridge. Tom Ryan, a burly ironworker who was handing out cups of water, said, “Our lives are never going to be the same. Now we’re going to go through the same things as other countries.”

Ferries, police boats and pleasure craft cruised up to the side of the promenade near the towers to whisk people away—children and the injured first.

Paul and Lee Manton, who moved to New York only a month ago from Australia, were holding their two children, ages 3 and 5, and frantically trying to find out where to go. The family lives near the towers, and after the planes hit, Mr. Manton stared out his window at the flaming buildings. “I said, ‘These are going to go down,’ and just as I said it the building started falling.” Fifteen minutes later, he and his wife rushed their children outside in search of escape.

For more than 45 minutes after the second plane smashed into the second World Trade Center tower, the skyscrapers still stood—burning but apparently solid. Workers in the nearby buildings flooded out, and the promenade along the Hudson River was where many of them went. When the tower started to cave, it began with a low rumble.

Slowly, amid a dark cloud of smoke, the debris rained down. “My God, it’s falling,” someone shouted. Mesmerized, no one moved.

A firefighters union official said he feared an estimated 200 firefighters had died in rescue efforts at the trade center—where 50,000 people worked—and dozens of police officers were believed missing.

Father John Doherty, a Roman Catholic priest, was on the street not far from the Marriott Hotel adjacent to the World Trade Center. “I was buried and dug my way out,” he said, speaking on a stretcher in Battery Park City a few blocks south of the ruins. He paused to spit, and out came a wet, gray wad of ash. In the pitch dark of the smoke, he said, he made it to safety only by following a guard rail that runs along the riverside. “It’s only the finger of God that saved me,” he said.

Timothy Snyder and two other employees of Thermo Electron were in their 85th floor office in the North Tower of the World Trade Center when the plane hit three floors above them. They didn’t know it was a plane; Mr. Snyder believed it was a bomb.

“We were just working,” he says. “All of a sudden, we heard this slamming sound that was so loud. The debris started falling outside the windows, and the door to the office blew open. The building started swaying, and it was hard to say if the building would remain standing. I was in my chair, and I just grabbed onto my desk.

“After five or 10 seconds, the building stopped moving, and we knew we had to leave. We all grabbed our bags and headed out.” They walked down to the

78th floor where they were guided to another stairwell, crossing a lobby with a bank of elevators. The marble walls of the lobby were buckled.

As they walked down, the stairwells were crowded but calm. “There was air you could breathe,” he says. “We didn’t feel we were being suffocated.” They were guided through the mall under the World Trade Center. Just as they came out, World Trade Center Two collapsed. “Being in the cloud of smoke was like being in this very dense, unbreathable air that was so black no sun was getting through.” He ran for safety and made it.

“We feel, since the plane hit only three floors above us, amazingly thankful we’re all alive. But there were emergency workers going up those steps while we were going down. They were trying to save others and they didn’t make it.”

In New York, officials set up a triage center in Jersey City, N.J., in front of the Datek Online Holdings building on the Hudson River. At Chelsea Piers, a recreational complex along the Hudson River, emergency officials set up a makeshift trauma center in a cavernous room that appears to be used as a set for TV shows and films. “Trauma” was spray-painted in orange letters over one entryway, and inside there were more than 50 beds—many converted from fold-out tables and lit with the aid of television studio lights. Some 150 surgeons, in town for a medical conference, reported to the trauma center and were prepared to take patients. Emergency workers prepared several dozen volunteers who were to be assigned one-on-one to accompany patients as they came in for treatment.

But as of 4:30 p.m. more than seven hours after the first plane struck one of the World Trade Center towers, there weren't many patients—only a handful of emergency personnel had come in for treatment of minor injuries. One emergency official, communicating through a bullhorn, told the waiting doctors, nurses and emergency medical technicians that the New York Fire Department at the scene wasn't permitting rescue workers to head into the rubble. "It's still too hot," the official said. And the city's hospitals still had vacant beds.

Mike Athemas, a 46-year-old volunteer fireman, headed downtown once the bomb went off and didn't leave until midafternoon. "Everywhere you turned, there was someone taking bodies out of the rubble," he said. Making matters worse, documents that had been blown from the building were catching fire and igniting vehicles outside the World Trade Center. "There were 20 cars and trucks—police cars and emergency vehicles—on fire," said Mr. Athemas. One New York city firefighter sobbed aloud, "My company is dead. They're all dead."

After the first plane hit the World Trade Center, New York City firefighter Craig Gutkes was part of a ladder company in Brooklyn that was called in to Manhattan. When he was still on the Brooklyn side, his company saw the second plane roar over their heads, "It sounded like a freight train," he said. They watched that plane plow into Tower No. 2. When he arrived on Liberty Street, "It was like a war zone when we got there. There were body parts all over the street."

In midtown, in front of St. Bartholomew's Church, an Episcopal church, assistant rector Andrea Maier stood in the street in white vestments, handing out a specially printed prayer for peace to the dazed throngs walking uptown. Dozens of people prayed inside the church. Special services for peace were being held every hour to accommodate people walking in off the street to pray. "We'll just do this all night if we have to," said the church rector, the Rev. William Tully.

Amir Chaudhary, a 24-year old taxi driver, watched the second tower collapse from across the Hudson River in Jersey City. "In a blink of my eye the Twin Towers were gone. There was no boom even. Didn't hear anything. Guys were on their knees crying, begging me to give them a ride away. I feel like maybe it's a bad dream: If I wake up, I could get the Twin Towers back."

Although the White House was not damaged, its people were not untouched by the tragedy. Barbara Olson, wife of U.S. Solicitor General Theodore Olson, was on board the Los Angeles-bound airplane that took off from Dulles Airport and crashed into the Pentagon. Ms. Olson, a frequent political commentator, used a cellphone to call her husband just moments before she died. Late in the day, President Bush took time from his security briefing to call Mr. Olson and offer his condolences.

Before sending his aides home, Sen. John Warner of Virginia recalled to them, "I was in Washington when I heard about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. This is another Pearl Harbor, and now your generation will have to meet the challenge."

By yesterday evening, military vehicles were patrolling the city, and police had cordoned off a three-square area near the White House.

In Arlington, Va., abutting Washington, fishermen plunking for catfish at a marina near the Pentagon said they could feel the heat from the explosion. The White House, the Capitol, and the Treasury and State departments were evacuated shortly after the crash at the Pentagon. "Get out! Get out!" police yelled as they swept through federal buildings. As legislators streamed out of the Capitol, the memorial chimes across the street played "God Bless America."

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