

Escape From the 82nd Floor

By Christopher F. Hardej

I was sitting at my computer with my back to the window on the 82nd floor of Tower No. 1 at the World Trade Center Tuesday morning when I heard an air rush, a semi-long (2 second) “swoooooosh.” Then there was a thump that rocked the building forward which then sprang back. It took a second to register before I started my escape out of the building the morning of 11 September 2001.

I am a Senior Transportation Analyst with the New York State Department of Transportation. We are actually a transportation planning organization known as the New York Metropolitan Transportation Council (NYMTC). I was in the office by my usual 7:30am start time. My desk was by the windows on the north side of the building – the side of the impact. I was within 150 feet of initial impact as the plane entered the lower nineties. I sat with my back to the windows as I do a large amount of computer work. That particular morning, I was working the organization’s mail list in an Access format. Therefore, I did not see the plane approaching, although one secretary reportedly saw the underside of the plane.

The impact was over relatively quickly. I equate it to the mid-air collision scene in the movie “Fight Club” which gave me a quick flashback. It happened so quickly that it was over before you knew what had happened. It did not seem as violent to me. Since my chair had wheels, I remained in my seat. One co-worker on the east side of the building saw the wall bend while absorbing the impact. The people on the far end of the build were knocked to the floor with the furnishings in their cubicles.

After the impact, I got out of my seat and turned to look out the window, which did not shatter. I recall thinking that this is something that one did not see everyday. It looked like a tickertape parade with large amounts of paper, metal fragments, and shards floating down. I’m also a military person. Instinctively, I hit the deck behind the desk to protect myself from anything that might come through the window. I then crawled to the middle of the office to get away from the window.

One of my co-workers tripped over me and he said to head for the exit. The lights in the office were still on at this time. Being a flyer, I did not hear the engine noise. I had noticed that was a beautiful day for flying looking out the window before the attack, so I knew it wasn’t an accident.

So we quickly walked through the aisle and amassed by the reception area just like in the fire drills that we had several times a year. There was no panic, but everybody had a look of concern on their faces as we momentarily awaited instruction as in previous fire drills. Even though our office was lit, the hallways were dark and filled with smoke as the fuel-fed fire made its way down to our floor. Out of the darkness, I heard a fellow employee by the stairwell yelling in an overpowering, bellowing voice, “Come to my voice.” He continuously kept on yelling that. That was what we needed to overcome momentary

paralysis and get us moving out of the office although we all knew where the stairs were. We would later find out that three men elected to stay behind.



Figure 1: Chris Hardej in temporary Long Island City Office (John Lopez, NYMTC)

When we got to his voice, we scurried down the stairs. Unlike in the previous attack of 1993, the stairs remained lit. We did not run, but moved at a quick pace. As we started down the stairs, I noticed that there were not many people in the stairway yet. It was relatively calm and easy getting down to about the mid-sixties. Then due to all the people leaving the lower floors we came to a standstill. Now we started to measure progress one floor at a time, then a half of a floor. I looked in the gap down the middle of the stairs and saw people for as far as the eye could see.

While waiting in the stairs, it was like take a number and wait your turn as there was nothing you could do. There was no panic, but again everyone had that look of concern. We let two hysterical people pass to get them out of the area. All this time, there were some communications throughout the stairs from several Port Authority people with hand-held radios. I remembered taking in everything skeptically as I suspected the rumor mill would be running rampant. I would take care in prefacing my remarks with “I heard” or saying “supposedly”. Even the White House reportedly was hit. I figured that I would get the real story when I got home. It was quite a while after the initial impact, when we were in the sixties, that the second plane hit the other building. I didn’t recall noticing it in the stairwell, nor hearing it. Upon hearing rumors in the stairwell and then

confirmed by the radios, I thought it was a small business-type jet that hit the other building.

While waiting in the stairs, there was a lot of small talk going on to pass the time. Typically, “I was here in 1993 and here we go again.” After a while, Snapples appeared as they were passed up the stairs for anyone to share or drink – something to momentarily ease you. I realized that my white-collared shirt wasn’t doing anything on my back, so I took it off just in case I would need to cover my mouth and nose in a smoke-filled environment. Before doing so, I took my Metrocard out of my shirt pocket and put it in my side pant’s pocket. I thought that when I got down stairs, I would simply grab my card and get on the subway at the other end of the concourse and work on that Access file at home. I told my boss my intention to do so in the stairwell. We still had a grouping from our office together as we started out in several groups.

As we slowly made our way down to the 45th floor, a transfer point “sky lobby”, we were directed to another stairwell. As there was a large crowd of people not moving into the stairwell, my boss turned backed to the original stairs and I followed. That was where we separated from the others in my office. It turned out that was a mistake as those who waited for that stairwell were well ahead of me and away from the building before the collapse. Again, we scampered down several flights of stairs with false hope only to find the tail end of the mass gaggle in the lower forties.

The stairwell comfortably held two across. After awhile, the injured started coming down and we would yell “injured” while moving to the right to make room. One man was burnt from the waist up. One woman was badly burnt walking under her own control, but like a mummy with her arms painfully straight out in front of her. Seeing her unescorted, my boss escorted her down the stairs. I also saw the man with the seeing-eye dog. It made sense that he would be leading the dog down as he would probably tumble otherwise. I thought that was a lot of stairs for a Labrador, as my previous dog was a Labrador prone to hip problems. We made way for them as well.

As we were going down past the upper thirties, we started seeing the first firemen making their way up. By now, it had been around forty-five minutes. With forty plus more flights to go, it seemed like a losing battle. They looked like they were so out of shape, but understandably – they had walked more than thirty plus flights in full gear with a hose on their backs. I was amazed to see the dedication of a team of two carrying a litter. The one on the front looked like he was going to drop any second. The trailer said, “Let me take the front.” But he wouldn’t hear of it saying, “I can do one more flight.” I noticed that the firemen opened approximately every fifth floor (35th, 30th, 25th.....) as a rest area to catch their breath.

I found out later that the plane entered in the 92nd floor. One person on the 86th floor turned toward the window while getting up and saw the hijacker eye-to-eye. Being a couple of floors tall, the aircraft took out three floors to include the core in the middle that contained the stairwells. With only nine floors of stairs remaining above me, I now know why I did not see many people as I started down the stairs. I did not hear of anyone above the 91st floor getting out.

All we knew at the time was that a plane hit the building and the building was built to withstand the impact, as it did. Therefore, there was still no need to panic throughout our trip down the stairs. In the twenties, we were starting to move at a better pace. I noticed a smashed Snapple machine passing one of the open floors and I felt a cool breeze as I surmised that someone busted some windows open.

When we finally got down to the 12th floor, things started to open up as there was no longer a backlog of people in front of us. I also noticed, for the first time, that the floor was wet. When we got to the lobby I stepped into an inch or two of water. The two co-workers I was just in the stairs with were no longer with me. In spite of the now apparent dangerous conditions and against better judgement, I stopped at the base of the stairs to wait for them. After waiting about 30 seconds which seemed eternally long, I was beginning to think that I should go – but I waited and my co-worker appeared. I asked him, “Where is Larisa?” He said that she was right behind him. She did not appear for another lengthy feeling delay of 15 seconds.

I saw the doors on the elevators twisted and mangled and it looked like a bomb scene. I heard a story of a person in the elevator coming out on fire, as I assumed the fuel from the plane naturally drained down the elevator shaft. I saw one elevator full of firemen going up to the 45th floor and I thought that they were lucky to get a ride part of the way versus those I’d seen walking up.

With the stopping in the stairs, it took me over an hour and ten minutes to get down. I felt relieved to walk out of One World Trade Center, but it was only just the beginning.

We went through the only sprinklers I saw going and we got drenched with cold water for about twenty feet. I noticed that although the ground floor of One World Trade Center had no lights, the lights were on in the connecting concourse area. The concourse was the underground maze of shops that inter-connected the World Trade Center complex. The concourse looked perfectly normal and intact, except everything was closed. There were several small groups of people, still exiting, though most people had cleared out by now. As we passed the Coffee Station, I recalled looking to the right down the corridor towards Two World Trade Center while walking towards my subway straight ahead. No sooner than thirty feet past that corridor, I heard a tremendous rumbling and crashing, and something similar to that whoosh, that rush of air, behind me. It was building No. 2 coming down.

As the concourses connected, the falling building was pushing a wall of air and debris through that concourse. As I looked over my shoulder and saw that tsunami-like wave coming at me, I had to react quickly. I didn’t want the ceiling and the plaza above to cave in and crush me, so I was looking for the closest support beam. As I was running to that marble support beam between Sephora and Banana Republic, the windows from all the stores were bulging and blasting out around me from the pressure and rumbling. Jan later recalled that it looked like I was making love to the beam. Not knowing what to expect from that approaching wave, you better believe I was holding on for dear life! I was literally sandblasted with fiber particles among everything else imaginable pulverized by the crashing down of that tower. As my two co-workers laid down to protect themselves, the force moved them along the floor. At that time everything went

black as the electricity went. The continual crashing was so bad, that for the first time, death momentarily crossed my mind. So this is what death feels like? It was a fleeting thought as my mind raced to think of what to do next. Should I try to go into the store through where the windows were? Would I get hit with falling debris in the store? I elected to stay with the beam while praying that the marble on the beam above me would not dislodge and crush me.

I couldn't breathe for two to three minutes as that wave was supersaturated with fine particles. Every time I opened my mouth to breathe, I got a mouth full of sand. My shirt was still in my hand holding the beam. I put it over my mouth, but that didn't help. You couldn't even see your own hand in front of your face. After a while, it did dissipate enough to breathe. I did see a dim light fifteen feet away. I shuffled through the glass to the light as a staging point. I noticed it was the entrance to the Downtown #1 subway that stops there. I faintly heard the shaken voice of my co-worker calling out for me. As they were on the floor in the middle of the corridor, we could not see each other. I told Jan to come to the light. He told me that he lost his glasses and couldn't see. So I kept repeating for him to "come to my voice" until I saw his figure appear out of the darkness with Larisa shortly behind. We spent a minute assessing the situation.

It became apparent to me that we needed to move on and that we could not wait there all day. I was thinking that we could go into the subway and take the tunnel to the next station and escape the area. I opened the door and noticed a white smoke and dust filled staircase going down. Not knowing what was below, I discounted that plan. Two other people crossed our path and said we have to go that way, pointing back towards Tower No. 1. I told them no as we just came from there. He exclaimed how they must have been turned around in the mayhem and got disoriented.

By now, my night vision started to let me make out some of the large pieces of debris in the dark. I told everyone to hold onto each other and follow me as we formed a human chain. At that time, there was a lady who said she could not walk through the glass as she did not have on any shoes. Many women discarded their heels going down all those stairs. As I was about to offer my back, another guy next to me gave her a piggyback out. I was free again to lead out the train. I could barely make out enough to walk gingerly through the debris and avoid the large signs and everything that fell off the ceiling onto the floor. It was like walking through a mine field not knowing what the next step would be. Jan later recalled walking past the Godiva Chocolate's place. There was some official in the distance saying, "Come to the light." I could not see it, and he had stopped yelling. So I called for him to keep yelling. I continued towards his voice. Eventually, I saw his flashlight swing back and forth over his head. There was a brief discussion between him and three firemen who wanted to send us up the escalator to the plaza level. He replied, "No @\$*^% way!" That was all I needed to lead my group to the street level exit. I was later told, there were ten to twelve people in that human chain behind me. People near the corridor to Tower #2 by the Coffee Station, thirty feet behind us, did not get out.

When we finally got out of the building on the side of the initial impact, I saw at least a foot of debris literally everywhere. Cars were destroyed. It seemed that we were slowing down and letting our guard down again. Whether the two that I was with were pulling

out cell phones or just catching their breath, I was concerned with our pace. I don't recall stopping, but I remember telling my two fellow employees, "We have to get out of here as there is a lot of glass above us." I was afraid that glass or debris would come down on us. We picked up the pace and walked around the corner past the Post Office. I remember distinctively walking right down the centerline of the street not trusting anything on either side. We were three blocks away when we turned around to look at the devastation to our building. I was amazed as I looked at the impact as there were not many floors between my office on the 82nd floor and the top. We stopped at an EMT truck for Jan's eyes and Larisa's leg. With those injuries being minor, we were dismissed as they were awaiting real casualties from Ground Zero a few blocks away.

As we continued our walk north, we heard this tremendous crashing from behind us. Suspecting that it was Tower No.1, we started running, not for a moment looking behind us as my concern was getting away from there. That was about twenty-five minutes after the collapse of the other building. After we were clear of the area, one of my fellow employees broke down as he reminded me of all the firemen that were in there. My prayers were with at least the 35 firemen I saw going up there.

As we continued up north, my main focus was now to get word to my wife. I knew that if I got on camera, word would filter out to my family that I made it out of there. So I was actively looking for a camera, not for an interview, but just to be seen. Getting wet then sandblasted during the initial collapse, I looked like the mud people or the other survivors shown on TV. Therefore, I didn't have to try hard to find a camera as the cameras found us. My segment is archived in the New York Times website under (Link no longer valid):

<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/11/national/11AP-VIDEO.html>
Tuesday, September 11
Eyewitnesses describe what they saw at the World Trade Center;

If unable, it can be reached directly at (you will need RealPlayer to view):
<http://play.rbn.com/?url=ap/nynyt/g2demand/0911nywounded.rm&proto=rtsp&mode=compact>

Although at least two TV stations and several free-lance photographers captured our images, I was not going to stop until I knew my wife knew that I was fine. All the phones had lines of twelve deep. Cell phones were limited as the lines were saturated and the towers on the Trade Centers were gone. The north-south block that we were still on was now packed with pedestrian traffic, both onlookers from the north and survivors from the south. I noticed that the parallel street a block over was empty. So, I redirected us towards that street in search of an empty phone. There it was – a public phone with only one person. As I approached it, a finely dressed German man took one look at me and handed me the phone cutting his call short. As I do not carry change, I called the 800 number at the National Guard unit to get a phone patch. As I was sure that my home line would be busy, I directed the person in operations to continually dial two numbers to get word to my wife. This also got word to those at the base that I was fine as they saw me on the television as well.

Store fronts were handing out free bottles of water. One woman offered up her home for us to bathe.

I would still not be convinced that my wife got the word until I had confirmation that she did. So, my trek home was my only task at hand. Since the city was closed down, I knew I had to walk into Brooklyn. The trip would be two hours, so I knew I had to find a restroom. I stopped at a school like building – they have restrooms. As all the students crammed into one door, we walked towards the three other unused doors. All of a sudden, the doors opened like the “Pearly Gates,” as hidden people came to our aide. It was New York University (NYU) which is affiliated with the medical center and they had set-up a processing center for survivors staffed with a doctor, counselors, and others. They were expecting many, but I saw none.

The first thing they did was log us in with our name, address, phone, etc.... I sensed that when the doctor took what seemed trivial information, they were assessing our mental being at that time. I had those fine fiber glass particles embedded in me, giving me a porcupine sensation. Jan had particles in his eyes that would require antibiotic eye drops. Larisa needed to wait to be taken to the medical facility, as she needed three stitches to close a minor cut. After an x-ray, they found a sizeable piece of glass they needed to remove. After the doctor checked us, Jan and I went to the men’s room. Seeing a mirror for the first time, we looked bad. Although there were showers down stairs, all I wanted to do was wash my face and arms to get on my way. NYU gave us new shirts, as I discarded my blackened tee shirt in the hand towel waste basket on the wall between the two sinks.

I just feel extremely lucky. We were just below the initial impact where 30 to 100 feet made the difference. As the plane lined up, I assumed he put in full power. As a plane speeds up, it will climb. There were reports that it climbed near the end. It missed the 82nd floor. Then it took a long hour and ten minutes to get down the stairs. Although it was bad being in the concourse when the first tower came down on top of us, what if we were a little quicker or a little later? The concourse protected us from the falling debris. Where we were in the concourse made the difference. People by the coffee bar by that intersection just behind us did not get out. What if we waited for help instead of working our way out of the dark? We were three to five blocks away when our building came crashing down behind us. That twenty-five minute window between the two collapses was that window of opportunity that we needed.

But my wife STILL did not know of my whereabouts. As far as she knew, she was a widow. Anyone who saw the pictures and knew that we were on the 82nd floor, thought I was a goner. My brother-in-law upstate said, “We were sure he was dead. We didn’t find out until maybe one or two in the afternoon. My daughter is 12, and we told her the truth. She came home from school about 12:30 and she knew Uncle Chris was in there. I’m thinking, he’s dead, he’s dead. There’s no way he could have made it out of there.”

My daughter’s school was letting the students out early. She told her gym teacher she was concerned for her father. The teacher asked her where I worked. When my daughter responded the Trade Center, the teacher cringed with nothing to say. The husband of a good friend of my wife walked three miles to keep my wife company during this time of uncertain waiting.

I left NYU still focused on that one last task. Getting home was now the only way to ensure that my wife knew that I was fine. The phones were sporadic at best. Walking was the only way home as the entire subway system was still not running. Now was the time to say goodbye to my two co-workers that I've shared an experience of a lifetime with. I said, "Jan, you need the north bridge. Larisa, you are staying in Manhattan (she still needed those stitches). We've made it and I need to get going to the south bridge. So, it is time to say goodbye." With that, I made my way to the Manhattan Bridge.

Upon reaching the bridge, all the bridges were still closed with the occasional emergency vehicle racing in towards the city. A policeman stopped me half wise-cracking, half seriously saying, "What do you want, a bomb to go off and fall into the river?" I replied, "I just walked down 82 flights of stairs - I'll take my chances." He did not want to hear that. I left it at that and I took a seat on the wall near him and just waited. Within five minutes, the bridges finally opened for limited use. I walked over the Manhattan Bridge in a sea of people migrating out of the city. I probably walked three miles by now into Brooklyn. Flatbush Avenue was packed with one side full of pedestrians and the other with standstill traffic going nowhere. There were buses full of firemen heading inbound towards Manhattan, and buses full of passengers moving away in the opposite direction. We were moving on foot faster than the traffic. It was another two and a half miles to the F subway line in my old Park Slope neighborhood. If any line would be running, that one would be. Sure enough, it had just opened and as I wanted to do four hours earlier, I took out that Metrocard and walked through the turnstile. By now, I had blisters from the wet shoes and socks walking those 5 miles.

Although the train did not stop in my neighborhood, it would get me closer for a shorter mile and a half walk. The train came in and there was only one other person in the car. I removed my shoes and it felt refreshing to put my damp socks on the cool floor. I got off the 18th Avenue station and noticed an intact public phone that was open. I again called the base to get through to my house. I did get through to my wife, the first word that I was alive, more than five hours after this attack started. She was startled that it was me and in Brooklyn no less. She couldn't hear me speaking as the background erupted with numerous people cheering. I told her to pick me up at the station. Being in no condition to drive, that good friend drove her to the station. As I stood on the corner, neither one of them recognized me at first. With a kiss and a long hug, I had to tell her to get in the car. There was a crowd of people waiting for me outside the house. That was when she got word that several people saw me alive on television. My close uncle in England also saw me on CNN to the relief of all my relatives there.

There were two schools of thought: those who were numb fearing the worst and those who knew that I would make it based on my background (or they wanted to believe that). My ten year old daughter is of the latter school of thought and knew I would make it. She probably pictures me with a big "S" on my chest.

There is nothing like sitting in your own house, and on that day, I could do no wrong. I wanted pizza, so my other brother-in-law got me my late lunch. Tired of hearing all the preliminary reports filled with all the speculation, I figured I would watch the news the next day when details would be sorted out. With infected sinuses from breathing all those particles, I went to rest as my wife took all the calls. The smell of death, as it was

called, was in the air for days. One night, I had my air conditioner on to keep the smell out. For two days, I had black solid residue coming out of my nose.

You cannot keep a Guardsman at home. I did watch all the news the following day. That got old fast, but you could not pass up any news reports as everyone was fixated to the tube for days for any information. I was already scheduled to fly Thursday night that week. Two days after the Attack on America, I was airborne on a mission for the New York Air National Guard as the skies were shut down. It was eerie being one of a few planes airborne and then passing the aircraft carrier group protecting New York's harbor.

Before this happened, I already had orders to deploy in support of Operation Southern Watch in Southwest Asia. I previously volunteered for all three rotations of two weeks where only one two-week rotation was expected of the traditional Guardsman. The Trade Center tragedy was my ticket to stay home. No one would have questioned my decision being ten floors below the impact at Ground Zero. But, I wouldn't have felt right staying home while my guys were in theater. Fifteen days after the attack, this New York State Guardsman was on his plane heading east.



Figure 2: Major Hardej deployed to Operation Southern Watch for the one month anniversary (Master Sgt David Nolan, AFN)

Although I have previously deployed to Southern Watch, this time was different. In the past, you would have “Ground Hog’s Day” syndrome. Now, I had a renewed sense of resolve. We were now sitting in the back yard of the “Axis of Evil.” I was waiting for something somewhere. Tensions were higher than usual. Then it finally happened, operations in Afghanistan under Enduring Freedom kicked-off. I was able to watch as

things were happening while doing what I needed to do. Two weeks into that campaign, I had my flag fly on one of the bombing missions.

One month to the minute after the Attack on America, I was on a fly infested tarmac in the middle of the desert being interviewed by the military media. “Amazing Grace” played at the remembrance service back in New York. It was strange being so far from Ground Zero after being so close that day, yet so close again a month later. Two months to the day after the attack, I fulfilled my duty landing back in the United States on Veteran’s Day. Three months to the day, I got word that we may go somewhere earlier than planned. It is no secret that Guardsmen were being activated. Four months to the day, the rumor was confirmed. Five months to the day, I was activated for my next tour. There is something about the 11th of each month.

By the end of February, I was again leading our planes back overseas – this time to Operation Northern Watch. Ironically, the six-month anniversary passed-by quietly. We were so far removed from New York, that if you did not watch television, you would have to be consciously aware of the date.

What did my wife think about me deploying? She thought that I should have taken a pass and not gone. She thought I was pressing my luck. No one would have questioned me. I did feel for her, as she had been through a lot. She was home watching the television all morning knowing where I worked and awaiting for any word about me.

How has this affected me? Either I am hardened, or so focused that I saw limited goriness, or it has not hit me yet, or some combination thereof. I have been constantly busy and I tend not to think of the past. People feel funny asking if I mind telling the story, but I am just happy to be around to tell it. That is how I’ve been dealing with it.

Did everyone get out? Out of the sixty something people that work there, only about thirty were probably there. We also had at least three visitors. We did lose three employees that I constantly think of. They found the remains of one fellow employee three to four weeks after the attack. They had a memorial service for the three about a month after the attack. I did not attend as I was deployed overseas. The toughest part, that I probably wouldn’t be able to deal with, was the children left behind.

What training helped you get out? That is a tough question to point out specific training. The survival instinct, along with a base knowledge of years of training, kicked in within seconds of the impact and then became apparent when trapped in the complex after the collapse. I was disciplined to stay extremely focused on the task at hand and then the next task. Except for hitting the deck out of habit, evacuating the office was like the fire drill training – this time for real. We all knew where the stairs were. I took my shirt off in anticipation for breathing, which I later would not have the time to take off. I relied on split second decision making to react as the complex was crashing around us. With attention to detail, I knew the set-up of the concourse at the onset of the collapse and then in the dark after the collapse. I was able to formulate plans and assist two co-workers and several others out. Leading, instead of waiting to be led, were some of the leadership qualities demonstrated. I was also able to instill a sense of urgency without panicking as others were letting their guard down on several occasions. People thirty feet behind us in that corridor did not make it out.