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The World Trade Center Tragedy: An eyewitness account

BY JEFF JARVIS
FOR NJ.com

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Jeff Jarvis is the president of editorial content at Advance Internet, the parent company of NJ.com and other information Web sites. Jarvis was on his way to a meeting in lower Manhattan when he was caught up in the commotion at the World Trade Center where Tuesday's terrorist attack began.

Yes, I am blessed to be alive.

I was a block away from the World Trade Center, at Broadway and Liberty Street, when the first of the two towers collapsed Tuesday morning. Completely engulfed in its debris, I joined a mob running away, screaming, unable to see, unable to breathe anything but the black cloud.

As the first of the tidal wave of debris bore down on us, some people crouched behind large concrete planters, believing they would protect them. But I kept running. I fell. Others fell around me. I got back up and kept running. I heard large pieces of the destroyed building hitting cars on the street. I heard more terrified screams.

There was no air. I breathed through my handkerchief and even so, my mouth, nose and lungs were filled with black. There was no light. I could see nothing, only black. I slammed into a building, and a tree, and another building.

I heard people and asked where we were. No one answered. I kept going and finally saw light at Chase Plaza II, where the building managers opened the doors, letting us refugees and much smoke inside.

People wretched up the black soot of the tower. They splashed water from any sink they could find to try to clean off the inch-thick layer of destruction. They took showers in bottled Poland Spring water, even Snapple from a lobby deli that volunteered to be looted by us.

We went down in the building, lower and lower, told it was safer down there, though no one knew for sure. A half-hour later, we ventured back up. The worst of the cloud had passed. We joined a larger, slower mob moving east, away.

I saw people covered in white, like me. I saw a line of people snaking up and across the Brooklyn Bridge. Some cried. Some just stared. Many of us said to each other and to no one that we were lucky to be alive.

Not much more than an hour earlier, at about 8:45 a.m., I had arrived at the World Trade Center on the PATH train from New Jersey, just moments after the first plane had hit the first tower.

As we commuters came up the escalator, we heard an eerie noise: almost silence. When we arrived up on the concourse, we saw smoke behind us and the floor was almost empty, except for shoes, scores of shoes abandoned by their owners, fleeing too fast.

We fled up and out. "Run, run!" the police said. We all ran across the street and turned from survivors into spectators.

The crowd standing across the street, by the Century 21 Department Store, was sober and quiet. We didn't yet know what had happened. We all just looked up at the flames bursting out of One World Trade Center and the black smoke that cascaded out and away, marked by tiny dots of white: papers pouring out of the offices, floating down below.

And then, as one, the crowd let out a sound of horror. We saw the first person falling out of the building. And then another. I saw at least three people fall from the burning floors.

Stunned. Sickened. Almost silent. We stood and watched.

Moments later, Two World Trade Center exploded, sending out flames that licked its neighbor. I didn't see the plane that hit, just the flames.

Stupidly, I stayed. I'm a newsman still. I tried to call into NJ.com and the *Star-Ledger*, paying a deli owner \$10 to use his phone. No one's cell phone worked. I called home and left a message saying I was OK (a message that would cause great concern until I left a second message much later, saying I was still OK).

I kept wandering the financial district, watching, soaking up what we in the news business call color: observations, not facts. There were no facts yet.

One woman had just escaped the 46th floor of one of the towers, her shoulders covered in sprinkles from the sprinklers, her hand shaking as it held a cigarette.

"I tell you, he's crazy if he doesn't close the exchange today," said a man in the uniform of Wall Street.

"See, that's why you go back to working in White Plains," a woman said.

People stood around a manhole cover where a worker had a radio. They laughed at the radio misinformation: "The streets have returned to normal," the radio said.

I read the papers that had drifted out of the towers: financial reports, PowerPoint printouts, airplane receipts, telephone bills, employee manuals, office telephone directories, singed and scattered.

I wandered back up Liberty Street where a foreign businessman asked me to take his picture in front of the burning tower. I refused. I said this was a tragedy. He said, "I know, I want to see myself and remember I am alive." I still refused.

I hope he still is alive.

A minute later, the spreading fire high up in Two World Trade erupted into a mighty explosion and the building collapsed, sending its debris down and my mob running.

After surviving the collapse, I walked and walked uptown.

We heard another horrid explosion. We kept walking.

I saw the people on the bridge and decided it was better to go north.

The black cloud was spreading across the river to Brooklyn. Many of us were covered in white soot with fleshy circles around our eyes and mouths. Even hardened New York cops asked me whether I was there; how bad it was; was I OK?

The farther uptown we got, the more we stood out. Some people looked a bit frightened. Some, classic New Yorkers, looked away. Many offered sympathy and help.

"You sure you're OK?" some nice stranger asked.

"I just look like a ghost," I said, still shaking off the white dust. "Better to look like one than be one."