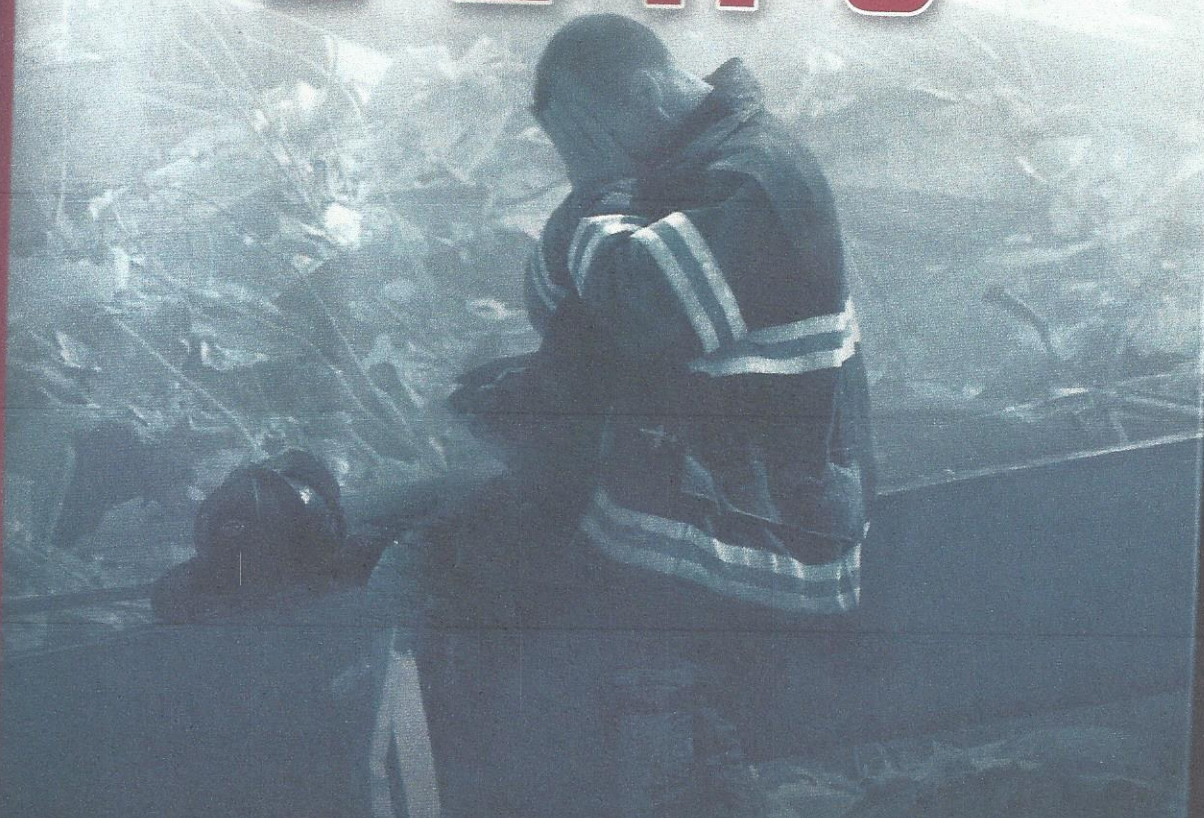


DENNIS SMITH

AUTHOR OF THE FIREFIGHTING CLASSIC
REPORT FROM ENGINE CO. 82

**REPORT FROM
GROUND
ZERO**



THE STORY OF THE RESCUE EFFORTS AT
THE WORLD TRADE CENTER

there, and we were all wearing the same color made out of the same cloth. We only have a twelve-hundred-man police force in Port Authority, but we all wear shields, we all wear uniforms. We all had a job to do. ■

Firefighter Phil McArdle

Hazmat [Hazardous Materials] Unit 1S

■ I get off early because I am going to a meeting with Chief Fanning. We are developing a new training program for hazmat, and so we are going to meet at the Rock [the training schools on Randall's Island]. Chief Fanning worked in Engine 82 and Ladder 31 for a few years, and he is well known in the job as an innovative fire officer.

I am bringing a new system to show Fanning, and I am just going onto the highway when I hear on the radio about the planes. So I run out to Randall's Island but miss Chief Fanning by about five minutes. Fortunately, he leaves Jeff Polkowski behind for me, so Jeff and I put some breathing apparatus in the suburban and also some Stokes and skids—transport [equipment] for the injured. We head down the F101 Drive, go under Battery Park, and come up on West Street. Just as we pull out of the tunnel we see a whole bunch of people running towards us and can't figure out why. Jeff stops the suburban because he doesn't want to run anyone over. We don't see it at first, but the building, the south tower, is actually coming down. Steel and debris from the building now covers the car and showers us with debris. We can hear the sounds of the people hitting the pavement.

It seems like a clear path for the people running south on West Street, but then all the debris comes down, and visibility is [near] zero. I can hear the sound of people running into parked cars and into other structures.

I was going to meet Jack Fanning at the command post, and now I begin to worry about him.

We leave the suburban right there in the middle of the street, and start to walk [upward] right into the incident. Because of the high concentration of dirt particles and debris in the air, people can't breathe, so we take our masks off and give them a shot or two. They appreciate that, and start to walk out.

At the transverse that crosses the roadway, which has not collapsed yet, we find a photographer who is lying on the ground. His leg is badly damaged, and we tell him that we have to move him. Because he is under the transverse he figures he is under cover, but we say, no, you aren't safe here. He insists that he wants to stay. He is in a lot of pain, but there is no way to move him safely without hurting him. So we pick him up, and carry him.

We put him inside of a deli right behind the World Financial Center, out of harm's way, and tell him that somebody eventually will get to him. Somebody had apparently broken the deli's window [and because] there is so much debris and stuff in everyone's eyes, they were taking water out of the deli and just pouring it over their heads, and into their eyes.

We return to where we had been at West Street and are starting towards the north tower when, suddenly, we look up and we see that the second building is starting to come apart. It looks like sparkles—I guess from the reflection of the sunlight hitting the glass and metal that was starting to come down.

I say to myself, *Thank God this building is so tall. If it was lower to the ground, we would not have this time to run.* I am not very fast, but I am at least fast enough to beat this rubble pile.

We run across the street back towards the World Financial Center and get to those big floor-level windows. Luckily for us the glass had been knocked out when the first building came down, so we [were able to] jump into the [lobby] and hide behind a large column just in the interior. But with all the windows out, it is like a large, open garage space. Then, hiding behind this column, my arms crossed like a mummy, I begin to feel the power of all the debris and rubble rushing past. And there is a great deafening noise. It feels like the world is falling apart. If you've ever been at a demolition site, where you hear a building coming down, if you magnify that by a hundred or a thousand, it might have given you a good idea [of the sound].

So I stay pressed against the column, and first I feel a positive wave of energy go by, and then a negative pressure because it is creating a vacuum, and I am hoping that it doesn't suck me out. And then I can't breathe. I try to put my mask on, and then there is a tremendous amount of heat, but it only lasts for a minute before everything goes black. I don't know how long this blackness lasts. It is very hard to keep

track of time, to keep track of everything. I know that I have to remember my bearings, which way was the back of the building. I don't want to get disoriented and not know where I am. I know I have to head in the direction of the river, because that is the way to safety.

All the time I am hoping that this will end. And then, after a few minutes, the noise stops just as suddenly, and I think then that I might be okay. We are still alive, anyway, and Polkowski and I begin to crawl out the back of the building, for it is now filled with debris all over, and we can't see for two feet. I never thought about myself. I never thought about my family. It was really odd. I just kept saying, "Jeff, come on, we gotta get in there. Our guys are in there, and we gotta get to them."

We try to find people in the department, at least somebody in charge, and the first person that we see is Chief Cruthers. He looks pretty stunned, and is trying to get everybody to regroup north of Vesey Street. He says, "If you find anybody, send them up this way." So we begin running into people. It is strange: I always used to say to people, "How you doing?" But now people are saying, "It's nice to see you, it's good to see you." I guess they are saying that because we are not seeing anybody alive. Usually we find [survivors] in collapses. But here, it is just nice to see someone, because you know that person is alive.

There is so much debris, just so much. It is almost impossible to comprehend. I don't know in a situation like this what's right or what's wrong. Do we start digging immediately, or do we try and get everybody together and regroup because we still have a fire situation? Who's in command? What do they want us to do? What do they want us to do first? What are the best things to do? I don't think anybody knows, really.

We search a few of the vehicles on West Street, right near the pedestrian overpass, the first one that collapsed, to see if there are any people trapped. Then, also, we search the rigs to grab some forcible-entry tools. Everyone is doing that—cops and EMS people are grabbing Stokes baskets, first aid kits. We throw everything into a Stokes and just yank it out of the rubble so that we could set it up somewhere to be available.

We then start to regroup, and one of the first things that I want to do is a survey of the area, for radiation, and for some of the hazards that we all trained for, the weapons of terrorism—secondary devices and secondary agents. Our job in hazardous materials is "force protection"; to make sure it's safe for our operating force at the site from an environmental point of view. It is a paramount concern. We set up two

teams, and each starts at one point and works its way around the perimeter searching for radiation, nerve, and blister agents. We don't worry about incendiary devices, just the chemical agents and radiation, and we aren't worried about the biologicals at this point.

[After completing the sweep] we want to at least tell somebody who is in charge that radiation and chemical agents aren't a problem. At some point, somebody is going to ask that question.

Afterward, there is plenty to do. Because I had [been involved with this type of] work in Oklahoma City, I know what had to be done with the bucket brigades. I help a few of these guys get in line and show them how to take all the big pieces of metal that could be moved and start to put them in piles. Then we [begin to gather] all of the soft stuff into five-gallon pails. Once it is searched, we dump it in one pile. Then we start to set up different piles for metal, soft debris, concrete, and rebar. We make a number of inroads into the site doing this, and we continue to make these piles until after midnight.

During this time I begin to think about my experiences in Oklahoma City. There was a team from New York, [including] Ray Downey and Jack Fanning, who went out there for six days. Here at the World Trade Center, the intense heat from the fires is still below us. Oklahoma City has 13 floors; here we're talking 110 floors. The compression difference between the two is so tremendous. At Oklahoma City we had large chunks of concrete, steel, and debris; at the World Trade Center, it is pulverized concrete, a very fine powder. We are not moving large chunks of concrete, but very, very small pieces. This, in some respects, makes some of the searching easier, but it also tells us what we are going to find when we start to find bodies.

All this time I want to call my wife. It took me about five hours to find a landline. She was fine, she said, up until the point where people started calling her and saying, "Did you hear from Phil?" I had two brothers who were at the site, too. One's a police officer, an emergency service unit lieutenant, and the other's a fireman in one of the volunteer companies that responded to the site. She hadn't heard anything from anyone, and so that relieved her to hear from me.

At 12:30 A.M. I am told that I am to leave the site and report back the next day at 9 o'clock. I now go to one of the eyewash stations because my left eye is extremely irritated. They wash it out fourteen times, but there is so much debris that it really doesn't do much good.

I leave the site and return to the firehouse. But my eye begins to hurt even more, so I go to Elmhurst Hospital, where they put a catheter in it and rinse it out until 2:30 in the morning.

We are missing nineteen men in my firehouse. This has taught me, and I think it's taught a lot of the guys, how fragile life is. After this is over, I will spend more time with my kids and my family. Also, here in our department and in my firehouse, in spite of everything that we are suffering, I think today a lot of the guys are closer because of it.

We don't really have time now not to be strong. We have to be strong for the people who survived, and we have to be strong for the victims' families. When all of this [happened] I started to get a lot of e-mail because I teach on the outside. Somebody would send me something: I'd answer, "Thanks," and move on to the next one. One word was all I had time for. Finally I sat down and composed a letter, which I sent to everybody asking them please not to write me, call me, or anything because I have to stay strong for the families. We have nineteen families to deal with. That is what is important. With all of this stuff that people were sending me, I was afraid that I was going to crack. ■

Battalion Chief Tom Vallebuona

Battalion 21

■ We are at a false alarm, and a firefighter receives a cell call from his wife about a plane hitting the WTC. I got out the binoculars and can see that the north tower had been hit. We are near the quarter of Marine 9, and we had a pretty good view of the twin towers from this part of Staten Island. The fire didn't look that bad. *We can put this [out], I thought. The next thing I know a plane is flying almost over our heads and goes across the harbor and into the other tower.*

The dispatcher ordered me to Brooklyn, and when I got there, I was told to take another chief into the city. We loaded up the rig with a bunch of air bottles, and as we were leaving, the Brooklyn dispatcher said please come back if you can. They did not have any chiefs in Brooklyn, and I thought, if they don't need me [at the WTC] I will certainly come back.

I stop right on West Street because I can see the rigs are starting to

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bunch up. I don't want to get blocked in, in case they didn't want me. I start walking up West Street until I get under the overpass, the pedestrian walk at Liberty Street.

I see a couple of guys setting up a command post there. There were three chiefs. I looked up at the burning building, and I said, you know, this is ridiculous, of course they need me. I went back to get my gear. When I get to the rig, about half a block down West Street, the building came down. It is the most amazing thing I have ever seen in my life.

At first I look up and I hear a boom and a strange noise. I can't really describe it. And it starts to bellow out. It looked like a fountain, like one of those fireworks fountains. I said, boy, that really looks pretty, and I must be back at the firehouse sleeping. This can't be happening, it just happened so fast. And then I suddenly realize that I am not in the firehouse, that I am here, and I am not far enough away from this thing. Chiefs and their aides don't normally hold hands, but I grabbed Steve's hand, and we have never held hands better. We hold each other, and then we get engulfed in that cloud right away. And we don't know what it is. It is such a weird color, and we don't know if it is going to light up or not. It is very hot.

We are in front of 90 West Street, just across the street from the south tower, and we really try to outrun it, but the cloud hits us so fast that we cannot run anymore. And I am thinking, *Firemen don't run in emergencies*. So we start crawling, me and Steve, as fast as we can.

I am now doing the Hail Marys. I have done a few through the years, but now, between this and the Waldbaum's fire I was in, I thought I really had it all when it came to being next to death. As we are crawling, trying to work our way south, we find a wall along the street, follow it in the dark, and eventually work our way into a store that is open. There are some civilians there, and other people are coming in. It is phenomenal just how dark it is, how little I can see of anything. You know the old saying—I could not see my hand in front of my face, because of the smoke condition. And this is at 10 o'clock in the morning of a clear day. Imagine. And breathing this stuff is like eating it.

When it starts to lift, after about twenty minutes, we go back to the rig. I grab my mask and give Steve his mask, and say, "Put this on, it's only going to get worse."

Then I saw Chief Frank Cuthbert and went to talk to him. To ask