

America
9-11-01
The World Trade Center

I had made it to the parking lot on time. Just about 7:50AM. I parked in the open Edison parking lot just across the street from the WTC2. This is my second time in the lot having visited our Quantum|ATL Solution Center about 2 months ago to meet with Mike Hingson our ATL VAR territory manager.

After picking up my parking stub, I began to lug my computer bag up the street, past the Marriott on to WTC1. Upon entering the building, I realize that my roadrunner portfolio was back in the car. So, back I went. Got to the lot, found the car (the lot was virtually empty—curious) and scooped up the portfolio.

I remember looking up at WT2. Just looking up. It was an absolutely perfect day. Cloudless. High 60's low 70's. The air windswept and free.

I walked back to WT1. I remember thinking how heavy the bag was and how excited I was about the Solution Center event with my Ingram associates. Joe Santoro, my manager and friend would arrive around 9AM.

Got to the Security Center and was able to have an attendant help right away. The attendant just couldn't get a hold of Mike Hingson. So, I reached for my cell and was able to get a hold of Mike. Then the attendant succeeded as well.

Just as I was being processed, our friends from Ingram showed up. Todd Riley, Mark McClure, Patrick Dempsey, Sheri Leach, Amy Phillips, Lisa Amatura and Jason Hernandez. As I write this, I have no idea if these people are alive.

We all get processed. Sheri and I were having fun poking at the sheer size of her luggage. We then caught a ride. Pat was in good humor and I remarked about the speed of the elevator.

Mark lead the way to the solutions center but let me go in first. Mike was already working the breakfast hot plates, pastries, croissants, bagels, and coffee. Lots of food was in the works for the early arrivals. It was 8:25.

The Quantum|ATL suite is located on the 78th floor of WTC #1. When you enter the suite, a series of 4 rooms runs along the south side of the tower. WTC windows are tall and very narrow, perhaps only a foot wide. Looking out requires a deliberate move toward the window. The viewer was rewarded with a spectacular look at New York harbor and the Statue of Liberty. Pure Americana!

I realized that it would not be preferable to have our reseller guests go through a security check during the actual training sessions, so I went back downstairs and met with the head of security for the day. He showed me a way to fax down an attendee list so that

when guests arrived at security, they (security) wouldn't have to call up each time. I got the instructions, went back upstairs.

Just before going downstairs to see the security manager, the thought that the WT Center was "a target" ran through my mind.

I went back into the suite and began to compose the fax. Todd helped out with the list (Mr. Organized!). I needed to put it all on company letterhead per security's instruction.

After composing the fax, I realized that Mike's letterhead to was "1 Liberty". So, I asked Mike if he had any WTC letterhead.

Mike and I went back to his office leaving the Ingram folks split between the conference room and the extra room with food. He approached the bookcase and rummaged around a bit and then moved away towards his desk. I looked again but found nothing and turned around to Mike. He was about 10 feet from one of the windows.

Our lives changed forever at 8:45.

The explosion rocked the entire structure. Instantly, the windows just above us blew out and debris on fire tumbled past along with tens of thousands of 8 ½ x 11" paper. I thought, "confetti". The "explosion" noise was bright, metallic and deafening.

Simultaneously, the building groaned and leaned south dramatically in slow motion. Would the structure hold? I braced myself with my feet to keep from sliding. Then back we went in reverse. This time I braced with my hands. At this point, I don't remember if we went back and forth again, but I do remember that the swaying stopped, and to my dismay, the structure sunk downward.

Was it a terrorist attack? No. Probably an explosion in an office above connected to a gas leak. But, it's too intense for that. But why would they attack the top of the tower?

The building shuttered to a stop. I think it was Amy Phillips from Ingram, ran into Mike's office, looked out the window and ran out. Mike moved to his desk and immediately got on the phone (to his wife). I ran to find the Ingram people. A smell of what I thought then was gasoline filled the air.

I opened the suite door to the hallway to see all the Ingram people huddled together, lights overhead were out; building and ceiling materials on the floor; light on at the end of the corridor. Mark McClure looked at me with terror filled eyes. I pointed down the corridor and yelled, "GO!"

Back into the suite and to Mike's office. I went to the window, not without fear wondering...and looked up. Just above was a roar of orange light, black smoke, multicolored paper flying, burnt cinders accenting the sky and that smell of gas. Then my gaze fell on WTC #2. I observed a large black hole rimmed with fire and smoke!

Only later Wednesday night did I understand this to be collateral damage from our explosion!

In spite of my emotional reaction to the event up that point, my mind focused like a laser beam and I knew what I had to do. I turned to Mike and yelled, “We have to get out--- NOW!”

But, did we leave immediately. No! We gathered our things. I grabbed my computer bag by the handle and portfolio with the other hand. Mike strapped on his computer bag and reached for his beautiful yellow Lab guide dog, Roselle.

We got to the door and I said, “Mike, you know they will not let you up here whether it’s a terrorist attack or some kind of accident for a very long time. Shouldn’t we turn off the equipment?” Mike agreed.

So, back in we go looking for the “off switch”. I went to the back of the P3000, saw the cables but in the confusion, could not for the life of me find the outlet to pull the plug! Mike had no luck with the front of the machines. So, we abandoned the idea. We used up about 30 seconds.

That Quantum|ATL stuff. It never stops!

Into the hallway corridor headed for the elevator, central corridor. I was immediately concerned. The smoke was heavy and filled with gas (jet fuel).

Made it to the central elevator corridor. Not for a moment did we think the elevators were working. Lots of confusion. Lots of smoke. Lots of sunlight from the east window wall illuminating both. A white shirted WTC employee and a man in utility uniform where running around with rags over their mouths. I noticed that the inch thick dark green marble lining the elevator bank’s walls, had buckled and snapped. Major structural damage. They won’t let anyone in here for a very long time.

Someone mentioned, I believe, that the stairwell was not passable. How would we get down? The man in the dark utility suit went to the stairwell, opened the door. And away we went on a 78 floor journey down a well lit and clear of debris, stairway. Escaping from the terrible fire above. It was about 8:55.

Mike had me get in front of him, Roselle to his left. The first 20 or so floors went smoothly. No one in front of us! Just a few people in back. They were patient but we obviously slowed them down, so we let them pass.

If I remember correctly, around the high 40’s low 50’s, we hit a traffic jam of people in the stairwell. I looked down. Hundreds of heads and feet below us. This was not good. And yet, we were very calm and all the people in the well were well behaved. But, what could go wrong in this space? Should we go onto another floor? The fire was above and

could work itself lower. But what if the stairwell filled with smoke and gas? Where else could we go? Only down!

Several people in line were clearly panicked, sobbing but staying in place. Others saw Mike and Roselle, asked if I was with them and began to call for others below to “move right” to make room for us to come down. What generosity of spirit! No one complained!

Mike had his radio on and others mentioned that a plane had hit our building. That there were 2 planes(?). I thought “midair” which could explain what I saw. So, it was jet fuel after all. We certainly had inhaled a lot of it!

Around the mid 40’s, I think, we heard voices from above yelling, “Move right. Burn victims coming down!”

I caught my first glimpse of her on the staircase above me. She was in her late 20’s early 30’s. She turned the corner towards us. Two or three people behind her. She walked like a zombie. Eyes straight ahead. Expressionless. Clothes burned off of half her body. Third degree burns. Skin falling off her arms, neck and face. Her blond hair caked in gray slime. Fully ambulatory. Totally in shock. What appreciation I have for shock now!

About 15 minutes later, a second woman came down. It was bizarre. She looked almost the same age, height, weight, hair color, burns, emotionless expression. Shock.

As we got into the low 40’s the jet fuel got much more intense to the point where I thought we might pass out. People were clearly suffering the intense fumes and others were clearly beginning to panic. Roselle was not doing well panting heavily and we all needed water. Some people began passing small Poland Spring water bottles up to us from the floor below. This was a real relief. Roselle loved it. It cut some of the fuel taste burning our throats. It eased our sense of dehydration and smoke inhalation. Besides, it was wet.

I opened the door to the 40’s floor and we momentarily stood in the doorway. I looked and saw no one on the floor. Smoke, and the smell of more jet fuel. We kept to the stairway.

Today, I believe that when the aircraft hit the north face of the tower, it’s momentum, driven by the aircraft structure and fuel, vivisected the floor, slicing through the elevator shaft and effectively dumping fuel from the low 90’s all the way down to the bottom. That’s why we kept smelling fuel almost all the way down.

Also, around the 40’s or maybe it was the high 30’s, we ran into our first real hero. A NYC fireman. He was coming up. Walking from the lobby on his way to the low 90’s and right into hell. Clothed in heavy fireman’s hat, fire retardant thigh length jacket and

similar pants (called "bunker gear") yellow glow strips around the biceps, thighs, and hat. Heavy gloves.

They were carrying an unbelievable array of equipment. Axes, picks, shovels, fire hoses, and oxygen tanks. It must have been in excess of 75lbs per man including clothing. Unbelievable!

They were perspiring profusely, exhausted. And they had to go all the way to the 90's--- straight into hell! This was not lost on the crowd. We all broke out in applause at one point. It was a wonderful moment. Mike and I patted many on the back with a "God bless you".

Forever, extremely polite. Constantly inquiring about our welfare.

Fireman: "Are you alright" (to Mike)

Mike: "I'm fine. Thank you."

Fireman: "Are you with this guy" (pointing to Mike).

Me: "Yes, I'm with Mike and we are OK, thank you".

We had this conversation with virtually everyone of the 35 or 40 fireman that passed us.

They are all gone now.

We cannot praise this spirit enough.

We finally got to the 2nd floor. I estimate the time to be about 9:35 or 9:40. Water was on the landing. I cautioned Mike. Roselle loved it---drank right from the floor and it perked her up. She was going to need the energy.

As we got down to the very last landing, water had accumulated in the stairwell. We exited the stairwell into the World Trade Center #1 lobby.

It was a war zone. I know this is an overused phrase. However, it really fit. There were pieces of debris: wall material, ceiling tiles, paper, and garbage all in a lake of water an ankle deep. Forward of us, I saw a torrential rainfall occurring over the exit turnstiles. I alerted Mike that he was about to get very wet but that there was no other danger.

We went through the turnstiles. Police, WTC personnel in white shirts, black pants and security badges kept yelling, gesturing, "keep moving!" We are in the "rain" moving now through the eastern exit doors of the #1 into the in-door mall that attaches the two towers. More water and lots of noise!

Left now and heading north. "Keep moving". Lights were on. Up some stairs. Down a dark narrow corridor. Light at the end. The sky!

We were out!

We had exited the northeast corner of the entire complex. There were many medical personnel coming at us. "We're fine. No injuries here. Thank you!"

Television people moved forward to ask questions, but we were moving and did not want to stop. They didn't press it (no pun intended).

Mike said, "David. You did well today" It was nice to hear. We thought we were clear.

Just about 30 yards outside the exit, I turned and looked up over my right shoulder and witnessed what I thought, was the most monstrous sight of my life. Both towers, ringed by fire around their perimeters! "My God!" Flames sharp and lapping at steel. A huge plume from #1 joining up with #2 creating a river of gray/black smoke against a perfectly blue sky. This was no accident.

But, we had to keep moving. Up to Broadway and the corner of the Presbyterian Church.

We crossed the street and began to amble south on Broadway. I was thinking, transportation and that maybe there was a way to get back south near WTC#2 to get the rental car and my stuff and provide transportation for Mike and myself. This immediately showed itself to be a very bad idea so we just stopped on Broadway.

There were a dozens of people on Broadway going both ways. The police didn't have the street blocked to foot traffic. I decided to pull out my DV camera and take a quick shot of our WTC#1. I pointed the camera and ran it for about 5 seconds. I couldn't get both towers due to a building blocking my view of WTC#2. I got ours. Then said to Mike that we had to get out of there. The police officer standing near by was much less polite.

I put the camera in my bag and stood up. Then we heard a very distinctive, recognizable and unforgettable sound. World Trade Center #2 was coming down.

The sound was like a freight/subway train, combined with metal poles snapping in two. Adding in a chorus of screams and you get the picture. Not to mention the 300' tall debris cloud coming at us at high speed. Not to mention that the building was tall enough to easily fall on us if it fell our way. (We learned later that this was partially true).

We ran for our lives.

Just as quickly as I had galloped around the corner heading east, I realized that I had left Mike behind. Four leaps back and grabbed him and into a subway type entrance just as the cloud engulfed us. The street went completely black. I do mean black. There was absolutely no light at all.

But there was light in this little entrance. It turned out to be a mini-mall underneath the street, connected Mike later heard, to the subway system. However, even though my reaction to go towards the light was natural, I thought that I had made a fatal error.

The cloud had filled the stairwell going down, instantly. What if the cloud kept filling the mall but we had no ventilation? If we stayed above on the street, would the air clear faster and give us a chance to breathe in time?

I couldn't see Mike in front of me. I know he was a foot away, but couldn't see him. Couldn't see Roselle. Couldn't see my feet. Nostrils filling up fast with concrete ash. "Breath shallow"

A completely unique feeling entered my mind. I was going to die today with Mike Hingson. Everyone dies and this was our time. I told Mike, "I don't think we're going to make it, Mike". It was now, I know, an apology. I felt that I had made the wrong choice.

We kept going down. People asking for help. Couldn't see them even with the lights on. We shuffled on.

Suddenly, I saw another staircase ahead about 10' away. I went for it. It was blocked by a security gate. No way to go further. But a little fresh air was coming up! I kneeled to get closer and told Mike to do the same. He kept standing. Roselle was caked and panting heavily.

Then an angel appeared. His name was Lou. No dust on Lou! Just a mask. "Go down this hallway and into the room at the end. You'll be alright in there." Sure enough. Turns out that Lou was some kind of janitor (angel) and had been in this little 6' x 20' locker room with a water fountain and a fan!

One of the victims was vomiting badly over the fountain. Another woman came in, caked in ash, terrified. I shook her a little and got her name. "Cheryl" She calmed down. The man at the fountain seem to recover a bit. Mike and I both got to the fountain.

The police showed up about 7 minutes later, demanding that we leave and go back upstairs. The density of the cloud, even below ground had diminished enough so we could see about 15' ahead, so we were able to get back to the top. We had gone down 3 levels! We never saw Lou again.

Up on the street, we were still in the cloud but could see light to the east. What an eerie view. Darkness behind us, light at the end of the tunnel cloud. We were caked and filled with gunk but kept walking. Finally the cloud eased up and we could see city hall to the north.

We found a pay phone. It worked! Somewhat. I think this is where I called my sister Claire in Stony brook, wife Jennifer, friend on the upper west side Hugh, and Nina my friend near 5th Ave. and 10th St. Mike was having some luck with his phone too.

We kept walking to the northeast down an empty street. I decided to steer us away from city hall and go further east. More sights: ambulance emerging from the cloud down by

the WTC and spilling ash along the way; an abandoned food cart---the fruit, soda can, bottled water all dusted with ash; an inch of ash covered the street.

Mike wanted to get to a restaurant to sit down and rest. We were headed for Chinatown. We approached the Brooklyn Bridge. Throngs of people on foot walking to Brooklyn. Some walking into the chaos (Manhattan). Looking for loved ones, colleagues? Orderly, quiet. Overwhelming sight.

On the way to the Manhattan bridge area, we heard our Tower #1 begin to fall. The sound, unmistakable. To my horror, another large debris cloud was racing our way! But this time, I grabbed Mike by the arm and ran, as best we could to safety. The edge of the cloud missed us by 50 yards. No way were we going to go through that again!

Then, the Manhattan Bridge. Same as the Brooklyn. The approaches (Canal Street) were really the border of the emergency zone. Anything south of Canal was off limits. Throngs of people again, on foot. Massive traffic jam but no horns.

We crossed Canal, found a wonderful little square with a bench to rest. There was a statue of a Chinese community hero who died in the late 19th century. He was a hero in the war on drugs. Even then! I shared with Mike. Then on to a Vietnamese restaurant where we hung out for 2 hours.

We got more phone calls done including one to my friend Nina Resnick in the NYU area. Not far. I wanted to insure that Mike had a bed for the night given that we didn't think that the bridges and tunnels would be open. Mike wanted to get home to NJ but was fine with staying at Nina's if need be. Nina offered help. We had to wait until she got back to her apartment, so we kept using the restaurant's house phone. Wonderful and patient people, the Vietnamese. We tipped them heavily even though they wanted nothing. All those eating looked at us in awe and disbelief.

All throughout our walk after escaping the first debris cloud, we were approached by all kinds of people. "You are blessed". "God gave you a gift". "You've been re-born." "You've been extraordinarily lucky." Mike and I agreed, of course. Mike kept emphasizing the blessings of the day.

Off to my dear friend, Nina's. I walked up to some Chinese men in a brand new mini-van and asked them for a ride pointing to Roselle and Mike. They couldn't speak a word of English but got the message! Into the back of the van and 10 minutes later we were at Nina's.

It's a beautiful Tudor style building with a totally carved wood lobby, 2 old chairs and a big carved table. We waited there for Nina to arrive. Mike jumped on the phone and I went upstairs with a fellow named Pete who offers a phone upstairs.

The phone didn't work at all. But Pete said the most profound thing of the day. "David, you've been given another life. Don't waste it."

Nina arrives and we spent the next 2 hours talking excitedly, eating, drinking lots of water, feeding Roselle, speculating about world wide and domestic politics and reaction to the event, getting philosophical and generally behaving like people in shock. Not without humor. Like Mike said, he didn't even get to have one of those croissants! I joined Mike in mock anger by stating that I was really steamed not to get my morning bagel. Some people!

I went downstairs to get info from the police about whether or not we could get Mike out to New Jersey that night. It looked good so back upstairs to Mike and Nina and we decided to get to Penn Station at 32nd street on the west side. But not before Nina getting some pictures of me, Mike and Roselle on my camera. Happy people! Happy Dog!

We walked a while and then caught a bus. All transportation was free. Got to 32nd and Fashion Ave. (6th) and walked the one block into Penn Station. The streets were full and so quiet. Looking downtown, I saw the plume. No towers. Just a huge cloud.

We moved onward to NJ Transit. Throngs of orderly, quiet people. The trains were running free and without schedule. They pulled a train into the station, loaded it up and sent it on its way. Got Mike and Roselle to the head of the line and away he went, apparently with minimal discomfort—off to his family.

I walked to the subway and caught the 1 to 116th street and my dear friend's on the upper west side. For the first time, I saw the pictures...all through the night...

Mike, (and yes, Roselle) and I are blessed with the opportunity to live another day and gain strength from extraordinary adversity. We will recover but never be the same.

Mike and I helped each other and we were helped by many complete strangers and dear friends. We survived with a sense of dignity, even humor but we are not untouched.

You know. It's short. Don't waste it.

David Frank
9-13-01
9:30PM

P.S. I found out that our friends from Ingram are alive and well—early Wednesday morning. What a relief!

Joe Santoro ended up where I believed (and prayed that I was right) he would. About 10 blocks north of the towers on at 14th street. Joe has already lost one fireman friend to the tragedy. Let's hope that's the end of it.