

THE READER

A publication of the McCandlish Phillips Journalism Institute

Never Forget

A journalist looks back at the 9/11 attacks to educate future generations

Freshmen entering college this fall are the first to be born in 2001, the same year as the Sept. 11 attacks. As a result, they were too young – or in some cases weren't even born yet – to remember the tragic events of that day. For them, it's a date that can be found in a textbook or something you saw in a documentary. For people my age, it was a generation-defining event. It is also a day that will forever be a part of me and my experience as a journalist.

The events of that day would plunge this country into two wars – first in Afghanistan and later Iraq – and has led to the death of thousands of American soldiers and countless civilians. We are still fighting those wars. We are still dealing with the aftermath of those attacks – and the fears they illicit – every time any of us go through an airport security checkpoint or walk into a stadium.

Before any of that, Sept. 11 had started off as a beautiful, sunny day. I worked at the New York Post at the time. I had been there since the summer of 1998 and had worked on hundreds of stories. From fires to murders, I had covered nearly every corner of the city. This was my dream job. I was reporting in the place where I was born and raised. I worked for a newspaper that was known around the country for its sensational page-one stories and memorable headlines. It was hard work, but I loved it.

None of that would prepare me for what took place on Sept. 11. Reporters, like myself, were taken by surprise just like everyone else. While everyone fled for safety, my task – and the task of many New York journalists and editors that day – was to tell the story. From the first plane hitting the World Trade Center to its eventual destruction to the death of nearly 3,000 people, we had to tell the story. Our job was to chronicle the horrific events of that morning, talk to people about what they saw, what they did and how they felt. The need for action left little room for reaction.

8:00 AM

Journalists should never get too personally involved with any story they cover. Despite the tragedy that had befallen

my city, there was no room for emotion. I had a sense of duty that morning. I called into my editor that morning, like I did every day, looking for an assignment. It was exactly 8 a.m.¹ Nothing was happening that morning. That's not what a reporter wants to hear. Reporters want to be busy. They want to tell stories. I was told to come into the office. The world changed in the hour-long train ride from my home on Manhattan's Upper East Side to the office located near Times Square.

At 8:46 a.m., Mohammed Atta and a group of fellow hijackers aboard American Airlines Flight 11 crashed a plane into floors 93 to 99 of the North Tower of the World Trade Center. By the time I walked into the newsroom, a few editors were standing near their desks, staring at TV screens above them. This was a time before smartphones and social media. I had been underground for nearly an hour. I had no idea what was taking place above me. It turns out neither did anyone else. The consensus in the newsroom was that this had to be some type of small plane that had by accident crashed into the building.

9:00 AM

We were wrong. I jumped back on the subway,² located in the lobby of our building, and decided to take the 30-minute ride south to the tip of Manhattan. A taxi wouldn't have been any faster during morning rush-hour. My instincts as a reporter kicked in. I had covered many accidents in the past. My goal was to get to the scene, interview witnesses and officials gathered there. It was, in my mind, just another story, just another day. It would be far from that.

Once again, being underground cut me off from the world above me. My train moved very slowly. The events taking place downtown had caused a chain-reaction of train delays. Finally, unable to get to the World Trade Center, I exited the train at West 4th Street, near Washington Square Park.³ Although 17 years have gone by since that day, I still remember the chaos that had taken over the streets. A giant cloud of smoke could be seen on the horizon. I was

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still nearly two miles away. People were standing around confused. Some gathered near car radios to get the latest news.

9:30 AM

It was about 9:30 a.m. and I was still unaware that at 9:03 hijackers had crashed United Airlines Flight 175 into floors 75 to 85 of the World Trade Center's South Tower. I would later tell family and friends that people watching the news coverage on TV around the world knew more about what was going on than I did. My new cellphone, which I had bought the day before for \$200, didn't work. The lines were jammed. All I got was a busy signal. I tried to call my office, but nothing. I was on my own, laser-focused on getting downtown to cover, unbeknownst to me at the time, the biggest story of my life.

I continued to make my way downtown, navigating the narrow streets south of Canal Street. My sole focus was to get to the site, talk to people and figure out what happened. I must have been too far away still to figure out that the South Tower had collapsed at 9:59 a.m. All I could see was giant clouds of smoke covering the sky. From my viewpoint, both towers were still standings and only one plane had hit one of the buildings.

10:28 AM

I was on Worth Street near West Broadway — about 10 blocks from the World Trade Center — gazing up at the North Tower when at 10:28 a.m. it came crumbling down.⁴ The sight of the building falling on itself amid a backdrop of people on the street screaming and wailing is the one thing I remember most from that awful day. I will never forget the loud, crunching sound those steel beams made as the building came crashing down. My heart sank. In that moment it was as if I had gone from local reporter to war correspondent in a matter of seconds.

To see all that death and destruction was overwhelming. I was also overcome with sadness. It was as if I was no longer even a news reporter. I was a New Yorker who had seen his beloved city destroyed, his city's skyline forever altered. I was also an American who had witnessed the worst act of terrorism in this nation's history.

Credit: © USGS/EROS

Screams immediately turned to fear. I got closer, only to be faced with police officers and office workers covered in thick gray ash running in the opposite direction. I got as close as the New York Stock Exchange, but no one was around. The streets were covered in ash, something that looked like images of a nuclear winter re-creation from a science-fiction movie. This didn't seem real. It couldn't be real. My brain couldn't process the information. One of my first reactions was: "God, how could you let this happen?"

Of course, God didn't let this happen. What happened just a few blocks from here was pure evil. It was the good that would later come out of the tragedy, the stories of heroism and sacrifice, that reflected God's love.

I knew there was a hospital nearby. I decided to head there. I also had some witness accounts scribbled in my notebook and had resumed taking notes on everything I had seen and heard once I had gotten to safety. I decided to call my editors. My phone finally got through to the office around 11 a.m. The person on the other side of my phone greeted me with these harrowing words: "Oh, thank God. You're alive!" My office didn't know what had happened to me – and the many other reporters and photographers sent downtown that morning. I said, "Of course I'm alive! I acted like nothing had happened. I told my editors I was going to NYU Downtown Hospital near the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge.

Once there, I waited in the lobby. I finally got through to my family, relieved to hear that I was safe. At the hospital, my aim was to speak with the many survivors who would be streaming into the hospital. Doctors anxiously waited outside. The lobby became very active, very quickly. But hope turned to dread as the hours passed. No one came into the hospital that day, other than a woman who was in labor.

That's when it hit me. No one was coming. There were no injured people, just dead ones. Nearly 3,000 people died on 9/11, including the attacks at the Pentagon and in a remote field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

Americans are resilient, particularly New Yorkers. I, like many reporters, spent the next three months in lower Manhattan covering the aftermath of the attacks. I



covered many funerals of firefighters and other first-responders who died that day. While I acted like it was any other story, it wasn't.

The attacks took an emotional toll on me a few days later when a colleague asked me what I had seen. It remains the first—and only time—I have ever cried in a newsroom. I am saddened every 9/11. Memories of that day haunted me for years. However, it's important to talk about that day and educate people about it, especially younger generations.

Some have asked what it was like to survive the attacks? I don't consider myself a 9/11 survivor. I am not. I was just a journalist doing his job.

Newsday
THE LONG ISLAND NEWSPAPER
WEDNESDAY, SEPT. 12, 2001 • SUFFOLK

'Acts Of Mass Murder'

Hijacked Jets Topple World Trade Center, Killing Thousands; Pentagon Also Attacked

The Washington Post FINAL

Terrorists Hijack 4 Airliners, Destroy World Trade Center, Hit Pentagon; Hundreds Dead

Bodies Pulled From Pentagon; Troops Patrol District Streets

Bush Promises Retribution; Military Put on Highest Alert

U.S. Intelligence Points To Bin Laden Network

On Flight 77, 'Our Plane Is Being Hijacked'

'I Saw Bodies Falling Out—Oh, God, Jumping, Falling!'

U.S. military goes into action

Terrorist attack sophisticated

Direct hit, then screaming

More bodies

U.S. military goes into action

Terrorist attack sophisticated

Direct hit, then screaming

More bodies

USA TODAY Carnage in New York
Pentagon in flames

'Act of war'

Terrorists strike; death toll 'horrendous'

Bush to nation: U.S. saw evil

Law enforcement eyes bin Laden

Crisis deepens economic woes

80% say attacks are acts of war

Crowds rush blood centers

Drama of day in pictures

Minute by minute, fear envelops the country
As jetliners strike U.S. landmarks, America's sense of security is shattered

Cover story

NATIONAL EDITION
Los Angeles Times
WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 2001

TERRORISTS ATTACK NEW YORK, PENTAGON

Thousands Dead, Injured as Hijacked U.S. Airliners Ram Targets; World Trade Center Is Destroyed

A Struggle to Escape Fiery Chaos

President Shoulders Historic Weight

The Choreography of Carnage Was Precisely Timed, FBI Says

Seattle Post-Intelligencer
WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 2001

'None of us will ever forget'

ATTACK ON AMERICA: 09/11/2001

Knife-wielding hijackers carried out deadly plan

Death toll could easily be in thousands

At least 300 firefighters may be among dead

Terrorists 'blew the flames themselves'

NEW YORK POST METRO EDITION
WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 2001

ACT OF WAR

World Trade Center destroyed; many dead

The New York Times Late Edition
WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 2001

U.S. ATTACKED

HIJACKED JETS DESTROY TWIN TOWERS AND HIT PENTAGON IN DAY OF TERROR

A CREEPING HORROR

Buildings Burn and Fall as Detonators Search for Explosive Safety

President Vows to Exact Punishment for 'Evil'

A Sombre Bush Says Terrorism Cannot Prevail

Awaiting the Aftermaths

Washington and Nation Prepare to Fight With Enemy Head to Head and Point to Point

More on the attacks

DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK'S HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER

IT'S WAR

Just an instant before the second jetliner hit the south tower of the World Trade Center

The Reader is a publication of The McCandlish Phillips Journalism Institute

The McCandlish Phillips Journalism Institute (MPJI) is based at The King's College in New York City. MPJI provides education, training and professional development projects for journalists at the high school, undergraduate and professional levels. It is named after the late John McCandlish Phillips, a legendary reporter at The New York Times.

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