

Reporting from ground zero

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Rescuers work late into the night in downtown Manhattan on Tuesday

By Rose Marie Arce
CNN

I was in my apartment in downtown Manhattan when I heard a tremendous explosion. I ran to the street with my cell phone, and started moving south.

I spent several hours looking out from the terrace of a building two blocks away from the World Trade Center, watching people inside waving madly for help. The building

above them was engulfed in flames. Two planes had hit the Twin Towers. The buildings were in danger of collapsing. There were flames behind the people, and one-by-one, I could see people jumping to their deaths from the upper floors.

Later, after the buildings fell, a cameraman and I cut through the dust and walked toward ground zero, where the sky was filled with fine pieces of glass and acrid smoke. The concrete had a thick coat of grey debris.

The dust thickened as we neared the Trade Center buildings, and down on the ground lay people's resumes next to office supplies and photographs. By then, the two buildings had collapsed, and this stuff was strewn like confetti across a city street.

Doctors raced down the block and emergency workers, acting on practiced instinct, moved cautiously toward the buildings.

We kept walking, filed a story from two blocks north of the burning building.

We heard another explosion and heard a firefighter yell, "That building's going to come down, too." A third building had been crushed under the debris of the collapsing Twin Towers and was ravaged by flames.

Shortly after we began to move away, the building we'd just been near would also collapse. Boom. It just came down.

We saw a firefighter who had just come from trying to rescue people at ground zero, but he had been turned back by the impending collapse.

"What did it look like? What did it feel like at the base of the building?" I asked.

"Very hot, pitch dark, couldn't see anything," he said. "A lot of rebar and broken glass and a lot of brick. Not really much smoke. Just debris."

I had one thought: "What about the people?"

He looked at me blankly and said, "There are people in there."

Another firefighter approached. He had just watched as debris came down on top of his truck, on its way to a rescue. The debris hit the truck, crushing all his colleagues except him.

"It was a nightmare," the firefighter said. "A choking feeling. Total blindness. Covered in dust and rubble and everything. I dove under the truck.

AUDIO

CNN Producer Rose Arce comments on the panic she witnessed during the attack

870 k / 22 seconds

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I was the only one who made it."

Near ground zero, it was almost like night time. Except for the burning. What was left of the buildings was just fire, hulks of twisted metal and concrete and glass..

Heat. Fire. Dust. The sounds of the sirens. Pieces of the building that kept falling. A thick, grey rain.

Rescue workers now were pushing people away from the scene.

We walked back. Away from ground zero, heading into a haunting silence.

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