

Covering History

By PATTY REINERT

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WASHINGTON - Standing in my living room, I got the word simultaneously over the telephone and radio: A commercial airliner had just slammed into the World Trade Center. The *Chronicle's* Cragg Hines told me to get to New York. I ran upstairs, exchanged my shoes for boots and threw some underwear and socks into a backpack with my press credentials, laptop, a pair of sunglasses and a bandanna, to use as a face mask. I took a minute to find a decent map of Manhattan.

I ran to the end of my street, hailed a cab and got in. Things had already gotten much worse.

"The Pentagon has been hit," the radio said. "Smoke is seen near the White House."

I'm not just reporting this story, I told myself. I am *in* the story. My husband Scott's office is two blocks from the White House. So is mine, in the other direction. As I headed downtown, we were frantically trying to call each other.

When I finally got through, his voice was shaking. "Where are you?" he sighed, and then, when he realized I was OK, "Which are you covering?"

Good question. Had my assignment changed? I hung up and called Cragg in our capital bureau. "New York, by train. All airports are closing," he said.

People were pouring out of every office building in D.C. Some were wide-eyed, seemingly paralyzed; others out of control, sobbing. Everyone seemed to be talking on a cell phone.

The sidewalks were packed, the streets gridlocked, the subways closed, sirens screamed from all directions. And four people had joined me in the cab.

"Where?" my driver asked them. "Anywhere," they said.

Traffic was frozen. "I'm going to run for it," I told the driver. Pointing out the windshield, he said, "Eight blocks straight up, then turn right."

I am not a runner. A block from Union Station, I knew I was too late. People were streaming out of the subway and the Amtrak station as police evacuated the trains.

Everybody on the street was talking at once: Two planes hit the Trade Center, not one. Another crashed into the Pentagon. We're under attack by terrorists.

I showed my White House press pass and crossed the police line to stand next to an officer with a radio. As we waited for information, I repeatedly punched numbers on my cell phone: my editor, my husband, my brother, my mom, not necessarily in that order. None of the calls went through.

Then, all of a sudden, people started moving again toward the subway entrance. "No trains into New York," the officer told me. "But the red line is running again."

I got a call through to Cragg, who told me to come to the bureau. When I arrived at 11:30, reporter Julie Mason yelled, "We're putting out a special edition. Deadline at noon."

When I got to my desk, my friend Ruth was calling from New York, crying. She and her husband had been visiting us from Houston and they had taken the train to New York the day before. I typed as she described the scene — blue skies and a beautiful day uptown; black smoke and unbelievable terror downtown.

I took her phone numbers and told her I loved her. I sent my three paragraphs to the desk and picked up another line to talk to David Ivanovich, our national business writer. From a commuter train in Virginia, he dictated quotes from workers fleeing the Pentagon.

As soon as the special edition was out, I was going to New York again, this time by car. But there were no rentals to be had in Washington.

Julie and I grabbed our gear and two bottles of water and took the subway to my house in northwest D.C. Scott had beaten us home. He drove us out of the city to BaltimoreWashington International Airport to rent a car. When radio reports told us bridges and tunnels into New York had been closed, he reminded me of other routes into the city.

At the Hertz booth, Scott handed us our laptops and gave each of us a quick hug. Unlike me, he had seen the destruction on TV and was trembling. He whispered in my ear. He squeezed my hand and kissed my cheek and forehead.

I laughed, inappropriately. "Go home and feed my cats," I teased him. "I'll call you when we get there."

I volunteered to drive for one reason: Reading a map in the car makes me throw up. Neither of us needed that. On the road, Julie and I were calm, surrendering to the four-hour drive and glad to be speeding toward the Big Story. Julie was navigator, cell phone operator, toll payer.

The radio announcer was rattling off the closings: The New Jersey Turnpike would be diverted northwest onto the Garden State Parkway. All tunnels were blocked. Ferries were carrying the wounded and dead out of New York; thousands of people were walking out on the Manhattan and Brooklyn Bridges.

No one was going in.

I recalled living in Brooklyn, years before. I had loved walking across the bridge's narrow pedestrian path into Chinatown, soaking in the heat and the stunning view of Manhattan's skyline. I thought about my friends in Brooklyn's Park Slope and Carroll Gardens and in Manhattan's Greenwich Village and TriBeCa, just above the Trade Center.

That's when it hit me: Brad, Amy, Jim, Pete, Fukiko. It would take days of calling, even searching the fliers seeking the missing, before I found them. Like me, they were safe, some of them working on this story.

Julie and I headed north, over the Tappan Zee Bridge. One of our editors in Houston, Jan Jordan, had called ahead to get us a hotel in Rye, N.Y., above the city, and Cragg had reserved us rooms on 45th and Broadway, in case we could get in.

We dropped the car at the Rye Marriott, called Houston, and minutes later, we were hiking to the Metro North train station, hoping to catch a ride into the city. The train came. The ticket was free to Grand Central Terminal.

We stepped out onto the street at 10 p.m. and started walking the 40-plus blocks south to the Trade Center. Police stopped us several streets away. All we could see was black smoke and the space where the 110-story towers had stood.

The streets, usually a cacophony of horns and shouting, were surreal — empty and quiet except for occasional sirens and emergency vehicles. Taxis, which had been commandeered earlier in the day to use as ambulances and hearses, were scarce. The two we saw were taken.

We called editors in Houston to tell them we were in the city. We described what we saw: Fruit and flower stands open. People, stunned or defiant, apparently unafraid, walking their dogs, sitting on stoops, talking to their neighbors, riding bikes and skateboards in the middle of the streets.

If you didn't know what lay to the south, you would think this were a lovely fall evening in New York. We walked up Broadway to our hotel on Times Square and went to bed.

Wednesday morning, I walked downtown to Saint Vincent's Catholic Medical Center, hoping to write a story about survivors pulled from the ruins. Dozens of doctors and nurses stood outside the Emergency Room entrance, ready with rows of gurneys and wheelchairs. Hours later, none had been used.

I interviewed a surgeon returning from the Trade Center site. "There was no one I could help," he said. "A lot of body bags."

A paramedic, one of the first on the scene the day before, told me about the hairless, burning woman who had run up to him. He had been driving her to the hospital when the second tower fell, trapping hundreds of his fellow rescuers.

"I was trying to save her and she saved me," he said.

Thousands of traumatized people were wandering the streets, walking from hospital to hospital in search of loved ones. Many approached me when they saw my press credentials, overwhelming me with their horror, reaching out to grab my arm, shoving photographs into my face and pleading:

"Have you seen my brother? He was on the 79th floor."

"Can you help me find my mom?"

"Can you get my sister's picture on TV? I need to find her."

"I know every life is important," one woman told me as she handed me a photograph of her friend, a smiling blonde. "But this woman has six children at home waiting for her."

I asked about her friend. She told me about the conversation they had had via cell phone the morning of the attacks, before the towers fell.

"I joked with her. I told her to meet a fireman," she said, her voice breaking. "She was scared. I could hear her fear."

A man told me about his brother. "He has a good heart, and he loves to help people," he said, tears streaming down his face. "I know he didn't get out."

It's part of my job to talk with people on their worst days, to ask them questions and write about their pain. I'm supposed to be a sponge, to soak in every detail of a tragedy and to try to feel it myself so I can explain it.

I talked to Abe Quintanilla after his daughter, Tejano star Selena, was murdered in Corpus Christi. I talked to Mary Wiese the day she found out her daughter had been killed in an Oklahoma tornado.

I talked to James Byrd Jr.'s family after racists chained the Jasper man to a pickup and dragged him to his death in the East Texas woods. I grieved for that family and for the families of Byrd's killers. I promised myself I would never forget what hate can do. Every day, I put that aside and wrote my stories.

Journalists must keep their emotions in check enough to do their jobs. But the emotions are still there. What kind of human being could walk away unaffected after covering the Oklahoma City bombing or Columbine — or this?

In New York, I did my job during the day. Late at night, I joined my colleagues — Julie, Lisa Teachey, Jim Kimberly, Janette Rodrigues, Rachel Graves and T.J. Milling — for a drink or dinner. Sometimes we talked it out; sometimes we just sat with each other and drank.

Back in my hotel room, I'd cry myself to sleep, and every morning I was shocked to wake up into the same story.

On Sunday, Lisa, photographer Smiley Pool and I got up early, donned respirators and hiked down to what rescuers had begun calling "the pit."

Once there, I called an editor in Houston on my cell, assuring him we were calm and breathing OK despite the smoke and sickening stench.

"What are you seeing?" he asked.

At first, nothing really. Rubble. Smoke.

Then, the details jumped out at me. A Burger King was now temporary police headquarters. The Men's Warehouse was a first aid station. In red spray paint on the side of one building were three-foot-high letters: MORGUE.

The skeleton of a few stories of one of the towers stood off to one side, like a grotesque trellis. Exhausted and teary-eyed rescuers worked in masks and filthy protective gear. Many had vented their grief, and their rage, scribbling messages in the thick dust coating every window still intact.

"Kill bin Laden now," read one.

"Cowards!" said another on the side of One Liberty Plaza, still in danger of falling.

A National Guardsman kept trying to get the attention of reporters and photographers as they arrived. "This is a hard hat area," he shouted repeatedly. "These buildings are unstable. You are here at your own risk.

"If you hear one blast, standby," he warned. "Three blasts, get the hell out."

After a while, Lisa and I wanted to get out. Smiley was frustrated, trying to make a better picture. He signaled for us to go on.

Walking out, we interviewed shopkeepers dusting off their merchandise on the fringes of the destruction. We grabbed a cab to the hotel and went our separate ways to shower and write.

The next day, Monday, I took the train north to Rye to pick up the car. Not one passenger spoke on the way out of the city. Lisa left Tuesday, most of the others shortly afterward. T.J., Smiley and photographers Buster Dean and Andrew Innerarity stayed on to report on the vain attempt to find survivors.

On Sept. 11, terrorists murdered nearly 3,000 people in New York. Close to 200 more were killed in the attack on the Pentagon. Forty-four aboard another plane died in a Pennsylvania field after they thwarted hijackers' plans to hit yet another target.

On my drive back to Washington, I thought of all those families, and I thought of my own. I promised myself I would never forget what hate can do. I cried until I couldn't see the road.

I turned the radio from news to music, and I went home to my husband.

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