

History Report

September 11, 2001: Caught at Ground Zero

Mike Bergman, a Public Affairs Specialist with the U.S. Census Bureau, was in the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001. He was asked to recount his experience a week later for the bureau's employee magazine, and this is an edited version:

Admiral Jeremiah Denton described his brutal seven and one-half years in a North Vietnamese prison camp in his book, *When Hell Was in Session*. On the morning of Sept. 11, hell reconvened at the New York World Trade Center.

Several Department of Commerce and Census Bureau employees were there to attend the National Association for Economics (NABE) annual conference at the Marriott World Trade Center Hotel, situated directly underneath – and between – the two 110-story towers.

My work had concluded Monday evening. We had interviewed sixteen senior economists for their views on the role of the 2002 Economic Census in improving the quality of our national economic statistics.

Tuesday morning at 8:46 a.m., I was about to step into the shower in my ninth-floor room when I heard the piercing sound of an accelerating jet aircraft. It instantly struck me that it was odd that a jet was flying that low over Manhattan. A split second later, I heard a thunderous explosion and the building shook.

My hotel room faced the grand plaza of the World Trade Center complex. I rushed to the window and saw beams of steel raining on the plaza as if they were pieces of Styrofoam falling from the air. People were running for cover. I could not see above the 10th floor of either tower.

I quickly threw on a shirt and pair of shorts. I opened the door and smelled jet fuel. I ran to the nearest emergency exit, but it was blocked by debris. I found another stairwell and made my way down to the lobby. A hotel employee directed us to the only pathway out through the restaurant and lounge. I exited to a scene of vehicles with blown-out windshields and a street littered with glass and debris.

"Don't look back," shouted a police officer. I couldn't since I was barefoot and trying to avoid shards of glass. It was only when I reached what, at that moment, was relative safety across the street that I turned around and saw the true horror unfolding behind us.

The events that followed have been well documented in the media, but words can never describe the horrific scenes. We kept moving toward the Hudson

River when we heard the rumbling from the middle of the South Tower. Sensing all 110 stories would collapse on us, we began to run. As it turned out, the building was imploding, not toppling. However, a giant wall of grayish smoke was moving down the canyons of Manhattan toward us, and we feared a firestorm of flying debris.

The cloud enveloped us with choking smoke for what seemed like an eternity. I pulled my shirt over my head to breathe as we made our way to Battery Park. Shortly after we reached the park, the other tower imploded.

Amid the chaos, I found someone with a Marriott badge. He was able to call his wife on his cell phone, and I relayed my wife's phone number to her to let my wife know I got out okay.

A flotilla – from ferries to police and Coast Guard vessels and a ship from the Army Corps of Engineers – docked to evacuate us. After stopping at two piers in Manhattan to pick up other evacuees, we headed across the Hudson River. As we gazed back, the enormity of the tragedy began to sink in. We were all lucky to be alive.

In the middle of the river, I cringed at the sound of another jet aircraft. But when I looked up, it was a military F-15 patrolling the skies, which offered some assurance to this veteran of twenty-seven years in the U.S. Air Force.

We docked at Jersey City where paramedics were conducting triage. One of them taped towels around my bare feet. Two Marriott employees were sent to hospitals. Other Marriott employees took me to their hotel at the Newark Airport, which was in a security lockdown.

Not a moment went by over the next eighteen hours that I didn't think about my fellow Census Bureau employees and their status. Only late Wednesday morning did I learn that they had made it out safely.



With all ground transportation out of service, my good friend Mark Tolbert from the Public Information Office in Maryland drove to Newark to pick me up Wednesday evening and returned me to a grateful family. On the way back, Mark told me about the deaths of our New York regional office colleagues, who died in the crash of the hijacked plane in Pennsylvania.

When I was asked to write this account, one compelling thought emerged: I will forever feel a special bond with those who found themselves in the middle of what seemed like Armageddon.

Mike Bergman grabbed his room bill and room key as he rushed to escape the Marriott World Trade Center Hotel on September 11. When the South WTC Tower imploded, it destroyed the Marriott. Twenty years later, Mike (and many other survivors) suffers with lung damage and PTSD.

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