

My Experience at WTC Ground Zero on 9/11, by Emil William Chynn, MD, FACS, MBA as told to ACSH.org

In 1993, I was doing my internship at St. Vincent's Hospital in Greenwich Village. I remember one night in February, every doctor was told not to leave the hospital. We were told that a terrorist had set off a bomb at the World Trade Center in a parking garage, and to stand by, because we were the only Level I Trauma Center in lower Manhattan. I was rotating in the ER that month, and was supposed to go "off duty" at 5PM (having started the day the prior 5PM—this was before maximum work hours for doctors in training were actually enforced). So instead, I stayed "in house" with everyone else, and waited for the victims to come in.

We waited around until that night before the 1st ambulance pulled up to the loading bay. This was weird, because we could see on TV that the attack happened hours ago, and the drive from WTC to SVH by ambulance should only take about 15 minutes. Why the several hour delay? We later discovered that the triage process is unfortunately very slow in an unexpected terrorist attack (because there are no "resources" on site; as opposed to an event like the Super Bowl, where they put medical and security forces in place in advance, etc. So, when all the MDs and nurses were waiting in the ER for patients, the ambulances had to be staged, the roads cleared, the area secured, which took hours.

Therefore, when the Twin Towers were attacked the 2nd time on 9/11, and I saw them burning from my apartment building (I used to live in the West Village), rather than head to New York Eye & Ear Infirmary, which was calling for medical volunteers, I thought, "Why don't I just head down to the scene, where I can be of more immediate help?"

There was no public transportation downtown, because by that time the subways and buses were shut down. You also couldn't hail a cab, because not only were the streets blocked off, there were streams of people running uptown, and no sane cabbie would take a fare going downtown, anyway. So, after feeding and walking my dog, which took about 15 min., I put on my rollerblades, and headed towards the burning towers.

After I got past Canal Street, with every passing block the air was getting smokier, and I started seeing paper and other debris swirling in the air, and also on the ground. By the time I got to Duane Street, there was so much debris on the ground that I couldn't make any more progress on my rollerblades because paper kept getting stuck in the wheels, so I had to remove them and continue on foot. By Reade Street, the paper and dust on the ground was so thick that it looked like it had just snowed, with the papers piling up in drifts, sometimes knee deep. Just past Chambers Street, I saw my first burning vehicle, which was scary enough to walk by (I was afraid it might explode, so gave it a wide berth), but even more so because nobody was trying to put it out, it was just left to burn. Around Barclay Street, things got much worse, because that was when I started to see burning cop cars and fire trucks. The entire scene was surreal, and post-apocalyptic, because there was no "law and order" anymore—not when "the law" was literally on fire.

You can't really predict how you will react in such situations. It's like when you watch a war film, and you hope you'd be brave, and not be a coward—but really, nobody can know how they will behave, until they are actually under fire. Somewhat to my surprise, I acted "normally" in this "abnormal" environment. I decided to stash my rollerblades (which were starting to get heavy) in a burned-out fire truck, figuring that it wasn't going anywhere, I could easily find them afterwards, and it had the strange advantage of already being burnt to a crisp, so it couldn't catch on fire again.

Because of all the fire and smoke and soot and papers and dust in the air, it was basically dark as twilight by now—I couldn't see the sun or the sky. At this point, I thought I was lost, because I couldn't find the Twin Towers. Visibility was only about a hundred feet, so I thought that was the reason I couldn't see them. I bumped into a female nurse, then a male EMT, and a few minutes later a construction worker, and we spent about 15 minutes stumbling around from block to block, looking for the twin towers, pulling up our shirts and trying to breathe through them in an unsuccessful attempt to not choke on the fumes, which smelled like burning oil, rubber, and a new smell for me that I later identified as burning metal. Although I was born in Manhattan and lived downtown for a number of years, I really didn't know the exact address of the Twin Towers—you would normally just find them by looking up in the sky, which was now impossible. Finally, after walking in a big circle, we found ourselves back where we started, and the EMT said, "Hey, guys, I think that pile of debris might be the Twin Towers."

We told him he was an idiot: “First of all, those towers would never collapse, and second of all, if they had, the rubble would be hundreds of feet high and one city block long!” So, we walked around the entire block again—no Twin Towers. The second time, we had to admit he might be right, although that idea was so bizarre, it remained beyond our comprehension. Remember, all electricity had been cut off to lower Manhattan—so no radio or TV, plus our cell phones didn’t work. There was nobody to guide us, because all of the first responders and much of the “command and control” were killed in the collapse—but we didn’t know that at the time. A person watching TV in California would know vastly more than us, despite our standing right at Ground Zero a few minutes after the 2nd tower fell.

By this time, other volunteers (other civilians too brave, stupid, or stubborn to evacuate) were showing up, and we decided to start a triage center, since that seemed to be the first order of business. We decided to put it in the nearest surviving structure, which was an abandoned Burger King across the street from where WTC had stood (I don’t remember if it was Tower I or II, because by that time there were no towers, so that point was kind of moot). There were no workers inside, which added to the post-apocalyptic atmosphere. Someone found a broom and mop, and we started to clean up the floor and counters and tables. Another person found some candles, so we had some light, because again it was like night outside. As the only MD on the scene, the others automatically looked to me for guidance in terms of organization and set-up, so I tried to remember my training working in the ER for a month, which again was the last time WTC was attacked, which was even more surreal.

A firefighter wandered in, and I remember he looked really distraught—not just frazzled, but stunned, like his dog had just been killed by a car. I didn’t understand that at the time, but I know now that he had probably just lost his “band of brothers” and it was amazing that he could even function. He asked me how our progress was going, and put me on the walkie-talkie with his boss, who was called a “Battalion Commander.” He asked me what my progress was, and when he could send in the ambulances, which he said were “standing by.” I told him that the ambulances would not be able to get within a block of WTC, because the streets were knee-deep in paper. The construction worker said, “I’ll take care of that!” and then ran outside. I thought he had PTSD or something, because I didn’t know how he could “take care of it.” A few minutes later, I looked outside, and he was driving a small orange Bobcat with a plow extension through the papers, like he was shoveling snow. I directed him to shovel 2 lanes clear, one leading into the Burger King, and one leading out, so the ambulances wouldn’t get stuck turning around in the paper drifts. Once he did this, I called the Battalion Chief on the walkie talkie, who called “The Mayor’s Office” and then they sent in about 20 ambulances.

We were all really happy for a few minutes, and a little cheer went up from the crowd of volunteers, because we felt that we had really accomplished something important. It was only about an hour later, when we realized that almost all of our efforts had been in vain—besides a few emergency response workers, who came in with relatively minor injuries like smoke inhalation, minor trauma, and corneal abrasions, we never saw a single victim from the twin towers that entire afternoon. That’s when somebody said what we had all been thinking, but not saying, because we had to hope and pray it wasn’t true, to keep working, keep our sanity: “They’re not coming. . . they’re dead. They’re all dead.”

I have other stories about my time as the first doctor to arrive at Ground Zero the morning of 9/11, some of them uplifting, others actually somewhat comical. For instance, we all stayed down there overnight trying to dig for survivors “on the Pile” (as it became to be known), and by that evening there was no running water, so we were all really dirty. I saw the construction guy the next morning, and thanked him for clearing a path for the ambulances, and asked him how he managed to procure a Bobcat, when even FDNY and the Mayor’s Office were helpless. He laughed and told me that on the way down he had passed a construction site, and saw it, so he just went back there and “hot-wired” it. I then asked him how he looked so clean, when everybody else looked like they worked in a coal mine, and he laughed again. “There’s a swimming pool in the Millennium Hilton across the street.” I asked him how he got in. He laughed again. Apparently, while the rest of us were trying to get a few minutes of sleep on the sidewalk or in the back of a burnt out car, he had been luxuriating in a “superior” room with a King bed and sheets with Egyptian cotton! After agreeing that he wasn’t really “breaking in” or “stealing” when the entire staff had abandoned the hotel, he did need a place to sleep and bathe, and Hilton would probably gladly offer their services to rescue workers at Ground Zero, he said “tonight, why don’t you stop by, and you can also take a bath in the biggest tub in the US, and sleep like a King?” It’s one of the great regrets of my life that I never took him up on that offer. It seems like a silly thing, but I would have liked to have that nice memory to balance out all the horrors I witnessed that week, and gotten his name, because in my mind we might have become friends, or at least stayed in touch, and lifted a glass together every year on 9/11.

The pictures that have been used to illustrate this story were taken by me between 9/11 and 9/19, and some of them were previously displayed in the exhibit Here is New York, which later toured around Europe briefly the following year.