

Episode 88: Tim lost friends on September 11

Most adults remember where they were on the morning of Tuesday, September 11, 2001.

In New York City, there were some thunderstorms the night before, but that day, 9/11, had started out beautiful and sunny, with clear skies.

Then people started noticing that some large passenger planes were flying too low.

911 Dispatch

911 emergency.

Caller #1

Yeah, I live on Staten Island. I'm sitting out front and this plane...I'm telling you it's so low. The second time it came around I was expecting it to land in the water, I mean it's that low. I can see the bridges out my front door. There's a fighter jet escorting it but the second time, I have to tell you, it looked pretty low. It's banking really steeply. I don't know what's going on with it. I'm not one to make phone calls like this but I was wondering if there's something wrong with it.

911 Dispatch

911 what is your emergency?

Caller #2

I'm in Jersey City, New Jersey. We want to know what's going on. There's planes that look like they're going to go inside the buildings. Everybody's outside going crazy.

911 Dispatch

There's what?

Caller #2

It looks like planes are trying to hit the buildings. Everybody is outside going crazy.

911 Dispatch

What's trying to go in the building?

Caller #2

Planes. It looks like they are trying to go into the buildings.

911 Dispatch

A plane?

Caller #2

Yeah. But they don't know if it's like a federal passage they do in the air, but we're all outside by the Hudson and we don't know what's going on here. There's no cops, nobody's telling us anything.

When the first building was hit, there was confusion. Even the office workers who were in the building didn't know exactly what had happened, just that there was an explosion and lots of smoke.

911 Dispatch

What is your emergency?

Caller #3

Yeah hi. I'm on the 106th floor of the World Trade Center. We just had an explosion on the 105th floor.

911 Dispatch

The 106 floor?

Caller #3

Yes.

911 Dispatch

106. Ok.

Caller #3

We had a conference up here, there's about a hundred people up here.

911 Dispatch

What is your last name?

Caller #3

Hanley. We have smoke and it's pretty bad.

911 Dispatch

This is on the 106 floor right? Ok we have a big job. Let me connect you with fire ok?

Caller #3

Yes there's fire and smoke. We can't get down the stairs.

911 Dispatch

Hold on, let me connect you with fire.
(Ringing)

Fire Department

Fire Department 408 where's the fire?

Caller #3

Yeah hi. I'm on the 106th floor of the World Trade Center. We just had an explosion up here.

Fire Department

Ok. 106 floor. What building are you in sir, 1 or 2?

Caller #3

We're in 1 World Trade.

Fire Department

Alright.

Caller #3

Yeah there's smoke and we have about a hundred people up here.

Fire Department

Sit tight. Do not leave. There's a fire or an explosion or something in the building. I want you to stay where you are. What's your phone number there?

Caller #3

Yeah we're on the 106 floor.

Fire Department

Ok, what's your phone number?

Caller #3

(censored)

Fire Department

Alright, we'll be there. We're coming up to get you.

Caller #3

I can see the smoke coming up from outside the windows now.

Fire Department

Alright we're on the way. Just keep some windows open if you can and sit tight. It's gonna be a while because there's a fire going on downstairs.

Caller #3

We can't open the windows unless we break them.

Fire Department

Ok just sit tight we're on the way.

Caller #3

Alright, please hurry.

The New York metropolitan area is home to the busiest airport system in the United States, with 3 major airports: JFK, Newark, and LaGuardia. On that morning, the air traffic controllers were also communicating about what they were seeing, and trying to figure out what was happening.

Air Traffic Control #1

Anybody know what that smoke is in lower Manhattan?

Air Traffic Control #2

I'm sorry, say again?

Air Traffic Control #1

A lot of smoke in lower Manhattan.

Air Traffic Control #2

A lot of smoke in lower Manhattan?

Air Traffic Control #3

It's up at the World Trade Center Building, there's a major fire.

Air Traffic Control #4

Can you look out your window right now?

Air Traffic Control #5

Yeah.

Air Traffic Control #4

Can you see a guy at about 4000 feet about 5 East Europa right now? Looks like he's--

Air Traffic Control #5

Yeah I see him.

Air Traffic Control #4

Is he descending really quickly also?

Air Traffic Control #5

He's descending really quick too, yeah. He just dropped like 800 feet in one sweep.

Air Traffic Control #4

That's another situation.

Air Traffic Control #5

Another one just hit the building!

Air Traffic Control #4

Wow! (frantic commotion heard in background, people exclaiming)

Air Traffic Control #5

He hit it hard.

Air Traffic Control #4

Wow. Another one just hit World Trade. The whole building just came apart.

Air Traffic Control #5

Holy smokes.

On the ground, there were many 911 calls coming in. Firefighters were deployed from stations all over the city, as well as police officers from the NYPD and the Port Authority.

One of the people involved on that day is my guest for this episode, Tim Brown. He was a New York City firefighter for 20 years, and that knowledge and experience led to a job working in the

Mayor's office. He was specifically equipped to know what to do when any big emergency happened. He was one of the people who were in charge.

But like everyone else on that morning 20 years ago, he had no idea what he was about to experience.

Scott

How many friends did you lose on 9/11?

Tim

Somewhere around 100 men I knew, who I had worked with in my career. Some I was very close with, some were more like acquaintances; but somewhere around 100. I worked in the Special Operations Command of the New York City Fire Department. About 1/3 of the firefighters murdered on September 11th were from our Special Operations Command; so about 100 firefighters were from Special Operations. The Special Operations Command took a very big hit. Then I knew a bunch of the NYPD police officers, because out of the 23 departments there, 14 were from their elite Special Operations Emergency Service Unit. I was on the FEMA urban search and rescue team with those heroes. We actually went to Oklahoma City together after the bombing there in 1995. So I spent 5 or 6 nights on the pile of that collapsed building, searching with these men. They were murdered also on September 11th in the subsequent terrorist attack.

Scott

What was your actual job in New York City at that time?

Tim

I was a firefighter for about 18 years. I had become friends with Mayor Guilianni. He had been asking me for a few years to go into his newly created Mayor's Office of Emergency Management. I refused for a while because I was enjoying my job in Rescue 3 in the Bronx, but eventually in 1998 I did move out of the fire house and kind of put on a tie to work for the mayor. I represented him at the scene of larger disasters and emergencies. So it was the Mayor's Office of Emergency Management, where I was on September 11th.

Scott

I know your office was in 7 World Trade. Where was that in relation to the Twin Towers?

Tim

So, 7 World Trade Center was directly across Vesey Street from the North Tower, which was 1 World Trade Center. The way we used to try to remember that, because it's very confusing, is it's the building that has the towering antennae on it. Kind of like a number 1. So we were directly across the street from 1 World Trade Center, which was the first of the Towers to be struck by a passenger jet.

Scott

What were you doing when the first plane hit? That was just before 9am, correct?

Tim

Right, 8:46am eastern time. I had gone into the office a little before 8am, and I always went to the cafeteria on the 3rd floor and ate my breakfast there. I had my Cheerios and juice and some

tea. I would buy all the local newspapers and read them too. This was before we had smartphones so you had to actually go buy the physical paper. I would just blow through the papers just to be sure I was up to date on what was happening in the city.

The power went out in our building. For a modern high rise building that's fairly unusual. Then 5 seconds later the power kicked back in and I knew we had lost our power source, our main feed. That we were now on backup generator power. That's how the building was designed. I didn't hear or see anything immediately, but when the power went out, the people who were sitting at the glass facing the North Tower all at once jumped up and started running and screaming toward the exit. I didn't know why. I grabbed this young lady by the shoulders and I kind of had to shake her back to reality, and I said, "What happened?" She said, "A plane just hit the tower." That was the first that I knew of it.

Now Scott, this was not a very unusual thing. I mean it was unusual, but not unprecedented. This has happened before where, a pilot has a heart attack and his plane runs into one of the high rises. Or we had the bomber jet in WW2 crash into the Empire State Building. So it was not completely unusual. It was still a major emergency, and that's what we did right? Time for action.

Scott

You knew immediately what your job priority was going to be that day, right? Even though you didn't know what happened yet.

Tim

You're right. Ya know, game face on, this is what we train for. This is what our experience is. I went up to the 23rd floor where our emergency operations center was located, including my office. I wanted to be face-to-face with the supervisor of "Watch Command" which was what we called/ our listening post. We had to do a full activation of our emergency operations center which means they needed to make about 150 phone calls to bring in all our partners from the federal, state, local and private sector. We needed them to support this developing disaster that's happening across the street.

Supervisor Mike Lee was there. From across the room we caught each other's eyes and I gave him the thumbs up, and he gave me the thumbs up back, signaling full activation. I ran over to the emergency operations center where supervisor Mike Burkowitz was, and the same thing happened. I said, "Mike, full activation?" He gave me the thumbs up, he was already powering up the 150 work stations. All the screens look kind of like a Star Wars command center. Very soon that was going to be filled with 150 people from different parts of the region who were going to be supporting the incident commander in the North Tower.

I went to my desk and grabbed all 3 portable radios. The OEM radio, the NYPD radio, and the FDNY fire radio. I put the PD and the FD in my back pockets, so I had them with me, and I carried the OEM radio down to my car, which was parked on Vesey street. Right outside 7 World Trade Center. Right at the base of the North Tower. I took off my tie and my dress shirt and put on a rain jacket which says "Mayor's Office" on the front and back, my heavy leather boots, and the made us wear this stupid green helmet so we were identifiable as Mayor's office guys. We're trained as firefighters to always look at 3 sides of a building that is being destroyed by fire or collapse or whatever it may be. I wanted to do that before I went into the North Tower.

Scott

What's the purpose of looking at 3 sides, from a firefighting stand point?

Tim

To get a size up in your head the best you can. To have situational awareness. I was not the firefighter or the police officer here. I could take a step back a little bit and I just wanted to get a better idea of what was happening from the outside. Once you go in, your vision and hearing are blocked off. You're just in a kind of cocoon when you're inside. I just wanted to take, not even a minute, to take a look. In order to do that I had to run up from the street level to the plaza level. There was an exterior one story concrete staircase that I ran up. Later on this became a famous staircase called "The Survivors Staircase," because hundreds or thousands of office workers used this staircase to run away from the developing disaster and live. That staircase is in the 9/11 museum titled, "The Survivor Staircase."

I ran up this staircase as the firefighters and police officers did all day long. I looked out over the plaza in between the World Trade Center complex, and it was littered with debris that was on fire. Black smoke, fire, parts of the building, plane parts, and if you remember from the video, all the papers from the offices that are floating and fluttering down. It looked like Armageddon. At this point, I started to realize that this was maybe a little bit bigger than a small Cessna.

I went into the North Tower at plaza level, and I had to go down one level inside the building to get to the command station. There was an escalator with hundreds of office workers, like a funnel, trying to get on this escalator to go down and to go down again to go underground and escape. That's the way that the security guys and gals and the police officers were directing them to evacuate. I noticed in this moment, what we always hear about is people pushing and screaming and climbing over each other and trampling each other in these types of situations. Causing more injuries and death. On this day, what I saw with my own eyes was the opposite. It was people helping each other. Regular office workers, not cops, not firemen. If someone was pregnant, obese, injured or disabled, there were 4 or 5 regular office people helping that person. I remember in my head thinking, "No matter what happens today we're gonna be ok because that's the true human spirit that I'm witnessing right now." When someone trips and falls next to us, we all reach down to help them up, and give them a helping hand. That is 99.9% of humanity. I was witnessing it in front of my eyes in this situation; not understanding what was to come, I still carried that confidence with me through the rest of the day.

I got into that crowd and went down the escalator. As the lobby revealed itself to me, I could see hundreds of firefighters in their turnout gear with the yellow reflectives stripes on their gear. There were hundreds of them awaiting their orders to go up. I completely understood at this moment why the cops teasingly called us bumblebees. When we all get together in the hundreds like that, it looks like a hive. That's exactly what I was looking at, a hive of firefighters awaiting their orders to go up. I got to the bottom of the escalator and right in front of me was a bumblebee.

Firefighter Chris Blackwell from Rescue 3 in the Bronx, where I had worked with him for 7 years. Not only was Chris a Bronx Harlem fireman who-- you know we really weren't the revenant guys. We didn't shave like we were supposed to, we didn't follow the rules like we were supposed to, our gear was all tattered and torn and burned up, the helmet sits a little off on your head, because it's been in so many fires and it's all burned up. That was Chris, the bumblebee in front of me. Not only did we work in the same firehouse together, but we also worked on the same shift. We were very very close. We had been through tremendous difficult situations before, and we'd always come through them relatively uninjured. I love this man like my brother.

We always greeted each other the same way. We came face to face, just a couple feet away from each other, and Chris always had the unlit stub of a cigar in the right corner of his mouth. We'd come up to each other, come to attention, he'd reach up with his right hand and take the stub of a cigar out of his mouth, and we'd lean in and we'd kissed each other on the lips, and then we stood back at attention and he put the cigar back in his mouth. Of course I love this man and this is why I kissed him, but we just thought it was the funniest thing that it grossed all the other firemen out. So that's why we did it.

Scott

I think it's hilarious too. You're talking about the cigar in his mouth and a firefighter tough guy, it's all stereotypical New Yorker, up until the kiss. (laughter)

Tim

Oh, it was wonderful. We did this in the most horrific of situations just to kind of bring people back to reality, ya know? We did this on the morning of September 11th. He was the first bumblebee I ran into. Relating this story to his family later on, gave them such relief and warmth that Chris knew how much he was loved.

After Chris and I greeted each other. He said to me, "Timmy this is really bad." I said, "I know Chris. Be careful. I love you." He said, "I love you too." Then he turned around and he went into the stairwell, and he went up. That's a really important part of the story because he said those words to me, "Timmy this is really bad." For us to say that to each other after all these years in the Special Operations Command of the Bronx Harlem fire department, those words mean something. He knew it Scott, he knew it. But you know what he did? He turned around, and he went into the stairwell and he fulfilled his oath. His oath was to help people he didn't know, at the risk of his own life. He knew that there was a pretty good chance that when he went into that stairwell he would not come back down; but he still did it.

Someone yelled my name across the bumblebees, across the lobby, and I looked over and I could see my best friend. Captain Terry Hattan, captain of Rescue 1, the Manhattan Special Operations Elite. He was my best friend, and he was put in that position because he was that good. He was the boss of Rescue 1. He was the future of the New York City fire department. The big chiefs were grooming him so that one day he could be one of the big chiefs, and run the New York City fire department. That's how much Terry Hattan was respected. He had the experience and the knowledge that's hard to find in one person. He was always thinking 6 or 7 steps ahead of everyone else. I ran over to my best friend. He was easy to spot because he was 6'4. With his helmet and boots on he was 6'7 or 6'8. I ran to him and he opened his arms up wide, and I ran into his chest and I wrapped my arms around him and he leaned down and he wrapped his arms around me. He squeezed me tight and kissed me on my right cheek and said in my ear, "I love you brother. I may never see you again." I blew him off because we had done so many very very dangerous things together. Things that no one should ever come back from, because I trusted him and I followed him wherever he went. We always did it, we always came back. Terry was a smart one, and he knew it, and he said it to me, "I love you brother. I may never see you again" and he kissed me on the cheek.

After saying that to me, he turned around and he went into the stairwell with his men. The men of Rescue 1, and he went up. The men of Rescue 1 made it to the 83rd floor of the North Tower, where they were fighting the fire and saving the lives of people who were burned and broken. When there was an interior collapse, not the big collapse, but an early interior collapse, they got trapped. I did not witness this myself. This was told to me later on by firefighters who did

witness, that my best friend Terry Hattan was screaming into the radio the worst thing a fireman could ever say or hear. "Mayday! Mayday! Mayday! Rescue 1 is trapped! Mayday! Mayday! Mayday! Rescue 1 is trapped on the 83rd floor." The elite Manhattan firefighters, whose primary job was to save other trapped firefighters, were now trapped themselves. That's how bad this was. One of his men made it down to the lobby, minus his helmet. His head was full of blood and he was begging for other firefighters to go back up and help him to get his brothers out of being trapped. I did not witness any of this, because I would have been in that stairwell going up.

A firefighter came into the lobby where we were screaming, "Another plane just hit the South Tower!" That's the first I knew of it. The leadership huddled up and it was decided that myself and assistant chief Donald Burns would go to the South Tower to open that command post. We were to take command of the second greatest disaster in the history of the city of New York, occurring at the same time and right next door to the first greatest disaster to hit the city of New York. Chief Burns, 41 years in the New York City fire department. Possibly the most respected chief in the New York City fire department at that time. Another big guy, 6'4. If you looked up in the dictionary 'Irish fire chief' it would be his mug. He had the red rosy cheeks, the permanent lines of experience in his face, from his long nights standing outside in -10 degree (Fahrenheit) snow and ice fighting fires. Every line in his face he earned. Chief Burns grew up in the outer boroughs so he had a little bit of a thicker New York accent. He only talked out of the right side of his mouth, and he talked fast. I said, "Chief, what do you need me to do?" As we ran from the North Tower to the South Tower. He said, "Timmy, there's not much you and I can do. I've ordered the 5th alarm," another 350 firefighters, "but the first 5th alarm is going to the other building, we gotta wait. Do your best and be careful." I saluted Chief Burns, my friend, and I said, "Yes sir."

A woman came over to us screaming that there were people trapped in an elevator. Chief Burns gave me the nod to go with her. Chief Burns went to the command post. I followed this lady, and she took me right to the elevator banks of the South Tower. She took me to one elevator specifically. The hoistway doors to the elevator were open and you could see into the shaft, but the elevator car was stuck at the top. You could see just one foot into the elevator car and see people's feet who were trapped and they were screaming. I could see the mens suit jacket and dress shirt as their hands and wrists were trying to pull the elevator down another foot or two, so they could get out. They were screaming. I did not know at the time that they had just taken a 70 story freefall. When Flight 175 slammed into the South Tower, it snapped the cable and their elevator free fell 70 floors. The emergency brakes on the elevator worked as they were supposed to and stopped before it hit the concrete pit. It saved their lives, but now those elevator brakes were locked on and they were not letting go. There was no way that human strength was going to move that elevator car. In addition to all of this, the elevator pit below them was full of jet fuel that was on fire, and they were getting burned. What they needed was a firefighter, not a Mayor's Office guy.

In my panic I guess- I mean this all took 5 seconds, right? I turned to my right to see if I could see something or someone to help, and my shoulder hit a person. I looked over and it was a bumblebee and I looked up at his face, it was firefighter Mike Lynch from Ladder 4. A young firefighter who I had helped train in the early 90s. He was my friend and he was a really good firefighter. In fact, he was so well respected that Captain Terry Hattan was recruiting him to go to the elite Special Operations Rescue 1. We had great confidence and faith in firefighter Mike Lynch from Ladder 4. He put his hand on my right shoulder and he squeezed it a little bit and he said, "Timmy, I got it." 3 words, "I got it." Between firefighters who knew each other and trained

together and had experience together, those 3 words meant he had the training, the experience, the tools, and the equipment. He was wearing his turnout gear so he had his hand tools, and he had a whole fire truck, Ladder 4, full of tools with him. It's a rolling toolbox. He's what those people needed.

Over my OEM radio, an urgent message came in, "Urgent! Urgent! Urgent! 3rd plane incoming. Confirmed by the FBI. It's ours. Impact imminent. Get in the stairwell. Take cover. Urgent! Urgent! Urgent!" If planes kept crashing into us we couldn't do our job and save people. I said to my friend, firefighter Mike Lynch, "I gotta go. You got this." I ran to the command post, picked up a landline I found that worked and I dialed 0 for the operator. She picked up right away. I said, "I'm with Mayor Guillian in the World Trade Center. I need to talk to the White House immediately." She tried to get through to the White House, she couldn't get through. I said, "I need to talk to the Pentagon." She said, "The Pentagon is under attack." That's the first we knew of it. Our situational awareness was zero. I talked to the New York State Emergency Management Office, and they promised me that the fighter jets had already been scrambled and were coming to us as fast as they could to protect us from overhead. That's what I wanted. It was the first time in the history of the New York City Police Department, the New York City Fire Department, and Port Authority Police Department; an army of 50,000 or more, that we needed help from the United States military.

The lobby was filling up with people that were injured. They were laying all over the lobby. It was impeding our evacuation progress. Imagine you're an injured person, and you were on the 78th floor. You're burned or you're broken or bloody, and your only way out is to go down 70-80 floors. Around and around and around and around and around. In a dark, smoky, wet stairwell. Then you get to a door that says 'Lobby' on it. You push the door open and it's light and dry and you see cops and firemen and think, "I made it. I'm safe. They're going to take care of me." These people when they made it to the lobby, they had nothing left and they collapsed all over the lobby. So Chief Burns ordered me to go find the paramedics and bring the paramedics in. All the firefighters and police officers were going up. That's why I left the South Tower.

I went out on Liberty Street, and the first thing I saw is burned into my visual memory forever. Out of my left eye was a dead firefighter in the street, who had been crushed by a woman who fell or jumped from the upper floors and instantly killed him. It had just happened seconds before I went out. His buddies were yanking what was now 2 bodies that became 1. Trying to pull them out of danger, thinking they could save him, but it was too late. I heard someone yell my name. I looked over and it was firefighter Mike Lynch, who was at his truck Ladder 4, he was getting what we call the Jaws of Life off. It's the spreaders we use at a car accident, they are really powerful and run by a hydraulic motor. That motor is really heavy, so Mike was yelling at me to go help him take that motor off the truck. So I started running toward him, but another firefighter got there first. Mike waved to me and I waved back to Mike, and it would be the last time I saw my friend.

I broke off and ran to find the paramedics. I found Captain Charlie Wells, my friend. I said, "We have to move triage into the North lobby." He said ok and we got our stuff together, they put on their helmets, and we loaded the stretcher up with all their doctor equipment. Then myself and 3 paramedics with the stretcher went running from West street back up to Liberty street, heading back into the South Tower lobby. We were running on the sidewalk, right along and very close to the Marriot hotel, which was 3 World Trade Center, which adjoined the South Tower to World Trade Center. As we rounded the corner, because the South Tower was set back on the sidewalk, we were about 20 feet from the door of the South Tower when it collapsed.

We were still outside so we could hear it. The first indication was a very loud crack, like lightning struck right next to you. It was so loud that it reverberated through the canyons of lower Manhattan. It was so loud we knew what it was without saying anything. Anybody who heard that knew what it was.

Scott

Did you ever expect one of the Towers to actually collapse?

Tim

No! Our fire department expert on collapse, Chief of Special Operations, Ray Downey, had the conversation with the mayor in the North lobby early on. His expert opinion, based on fact and experience, was that the fire would burn up and would burn out. There was no way we could get enough water up there to physically put the fire out. It would just burn up the rest of the building and then eventually would go out when it had no more fuel. That's truly what Chief Downey believed at that time. That's what any collapse expert in America would say. So it was completely unexpected. For whatever reason, I guess it was so loud that we knew.

We're trained as firefighters, you can never outrun a collapse. You have to seek immediate cover. I yelled to the paramedics, "Follow me!" into the 3 World Trade Center, which was the Marriott Hotel, which was adjoining. We had just run by the doors into the Marriott, and I knew we had just run by them, and I knew that we had to get into that building to protect us from the collapsing tower. So we ran in those doors and it was as clear as the room all of us are sitting in right now. With the snap of your fingers it went pitch black and I hit the ground. We were in the restaurant called the Tall Ships, which was the restaurant in the lobby of the Marriott hotel. Everything that wasn't nailed down was blowing in our faces. 2 World Trade Center was collapsing on 3 World Trade Center and 3 World Trade Center was now collapsing around us. You couldn't see, because of the dust, you couldn't breathe. The dust was so thick it was filling up your nose and ears and mouth and eyes. I was trying to stick my mouth in my shirt to try and filter some of the dust.

I was on all fours and I was crawling away from where the collapse was coming at us as fast as I could. I knew from my experience that if I could find a vertical column, it was the only chance I had at living. I know from experience in collapses that we find people alive next to vertical columns, which are the strongest part of any building. I was crawling as fast as I could, desperate to survive, and I found a vertical column. I wrapped my arms around this huge column and squeezed with all my might and this wind is lifting my legs off the ground. It blew the helmet off my head. I was trying with all my strength to hold on to this column, cause I knew it was the only shot I had at living. I just waited to be crushed. My thought at that moment was that I wasn't ready to die. I'm not afraid of dying, I just wasn't ready to die. I wanted to hold my brother one more time and my family one more time and tell them I love them. I just waited to be crushed.

As fast as it started Scott, it stopped. It was less than 30 seconds, the whole thing. I was alive. I crawled desperately to try to get back to Liberty street where I had come in, but of course the landscape was completely different now because a building collapsed. You still couldn't see, you still couldn't breathe. I came to a truck and the engine was running, I could tell it was a diesel, and the headlights were on. You'd think I would be able to tell if it was a firetruck, but I did not recognize it as a firetruck. For whatever reason, in my panic and desperation to get out, all I could think of was that it was a truck bomb. So I turned around and I went deeper into the

restaurant, deeper into the hotel, trying to get away from what I perceived was a truck bomb. It turned out not to be. I came to a metal roll down gate that was meant to separate the restaurant from the hotel lobby when the restaurant was closed. In the collapse the metal roll down gate had come down, but I was pretty determined to go through it. I reached my fingers under it and lifted it up. When I did, all these fingers came from the other side from people who were trapped on the other side of it. Together we lifted this roll down the gate and I said, "We have to go that way." There were about 15 people, firefighters and the civilians they were trying to rescue. They said, "There is no 'that way' it's gone." The collapse had come in right behind them in the lobby of the Marriott hotel. It had killed half the people they were with and taken them and their bodies down 7 stories. Right behind them was a 7 story drop. They were on a ledge between this 7 story drop and the metal roll down gate. When we opened the gate up, it was their salvation, and now my salvation. We turned around again and went back into what was left of the restaurant. We crawled across the steel and the rubble. One of the ladies in the line we had formed saw a really bright flashlight on the outside and she could hear a firefighter yelling, "Come to me!" We formed a chain and all followed and made our way out to this firefighter.

That's the story of my survival. There were about 35 people in that area of the Marriott hotel that survived, which was very unusual. There were really only 2 pockets of people in the 18 acre complex who survived. They did a scientific study of that space where we were. It was determined scientifically that the wind that lifted my legs up off the ground was 180 miles per hour. I have no idea how I was able to hold onto the steel column other than to say that God did not want me at this point in my life. There were too many steps there that kept me alive for me to think anything other than, He with a capital H was not ready to welcome me into his kingdom just yet.

Over the last 20 years I think this is exactly why. He wanted me to tell the story of the heroes. The 333 firefighter heroes, the 37 Port Authority police heroes, the 23 NYPD police heroes. Who all fulfilled the oath they had taken when they became firefighters or police officers. That they would give their life if it meant saving the life of someone they didn't know. That's what these firefighters and police officers did, right? They all did what Captain Terry Hattan, firefighter Chris Blackwell, and Captain Patty Brown did. They went into that stairwell and went up knowing that they probably would not come back. As long as I have a voice, Scott, I will always speak of them. I will speak their names and speak of their heroism. I will speak of the families they left behind and the children that missed them as they grew up.

Scott

After this all happened, you went to visit the widow of firefighter Mike Lynch, who went to save these people in the elevator. How long after 9/11 did you visit with her and what happened there?

Tim

It was a matter of days. We were reeling, there's no other way to say it. It was us trying to manage chaos but the chaos was so big that all we could do was manage our little piece of it. It's like how you'd eat an elephant, one bite at a time. That's where we were at. We were so overwhelmed. One thing caught my attention. There had been a rumor swirling around that Ladder 4 was not saving people's lives, instead they were looting the stores. If you can believe someone actually published this. Ladder 4 was where firefighter Michael Lynch was assigned. So when I heard that rumor and that it was getting into the media, I panicked a little bit and thought, "Michael's widow Denise has to hear from me what her husband and Ladder 4 was

doing on September 11th, because I was with them. I witnessed it. She has to know that this rumor is a lie." So I got in my new- all our cars were destroyed, so I had a new undercover police type car -I ran and jumped in it. I went lights and sirens out to Long Island to Michael's widow, Denise's home. I went into her living room and sat on the couch with her and described the heroics of her husband in his last moments.

In the way I described him, in the lobby of the South Tower, in that elevator where those poor people were trapped, when he said to me, "Timmy I got it." He may as well have had angel wings coming out of his back. He was the angel sent by God to save the lives of those people. He just appeared out of nowhere at my side. When I said in my head, "What these people need is a real firefighter, not a Mayor's Office guy." He just appeared like an angel out of nowhere. I told Denise this story and that he was working on saving those lives. Later on we found out that he saved 3 women from that elevator before the South Tower collapsed. So we know his last act of heroism as the angel, firefighter Michael Lynch, was fulfilling his oath; saving the lives of people he didn't know. Unfortunately, he couldn't get them all out, but we know he got 3 out.

When I was saying goodbye to Denise and her 2 little boys, who were under 2 years old, they were running around the living room. You know they're 2 they didn't know what was going on. I gave her my contact info and said, "One day when your sons are older, and they want to know about their hero dad, please ask them to find me. I'd be happy to talk to them." Well about a year ago, I got an email from Michael Francis Lynch Jr. he was 22 years old. He asked me if I would tell him about his dad. I said, "Yeah let's meet at my favorite place down at the World Trade Center now called O'Hara's pub. We'll walk over to your dad's name on the memorial and talk about your dad." Just like his dad, 6'4, handsome as could be with a steel soul, confident as ever 22 year old. His demeanor and appearance was like he was a 40 year old man. I told him about his dad and his dad's heroism in his last minutes. Young Michael had not had a good experience with good father figures growing up, he was kind of the man of his house. Men came and went in his life. So I promised him, in this moment, that I was his forever. I would mentor him and help him and be his friend until my last breath. That's how it's been. He's an incredible young man. His dad would be extremely proud. Again, maybe this is why God spared me that day too.

I asked Michael- he's already earned his bachelor's degree, that's how good he is, but now he wanted to go into the military and be an army ranger. I said, "That's awesome man. That's a great goal and I understand your passion. That you don't want other kids like you to have to grow up the way you did, because we were attacked on American soil. But don't sign anything please, not right away. Come meet some of my friends." I have made a lot of friends over the last 20 years in the military and in the intelligence community. I said, "I have some very cool friends." So for about 8 months we took a tour of the east coast military facilities together. Every person I introduced to Michael, took him under their wing and gave him their cell phone number and their email and said, "I want to help you." Michael now has this whole community from people in the FBI, the CIA, Special Forces, Rangers, SEAL's, he has some very cool friends. He has their phone numbers that he can reach out to if he has questions. After all of this and after his Master's in education, I said, "So what do you want to do now?" He said, "I want to be a SEAL." I said, "That's kind of where I thought you would wind up." So he is working very hard with some former SEAL's right now, because especially now, it's going to be very very difficult for him to get through it and earn his trident; for many reasons. I will be there with him through thick and thin; we all will be. I feel like he has been one of the greatest gifts I've had in my life. I'm so proud of him. His dad would be so proud of him. I love that our community has adopted him, as we have with many of the young people. The young people- without me knowing, I

found out later on -they gave me the nickname 'The Shepherd.' If they need help, these young people know they can call me and I can give them the best advice that maybe their dad would've given them.

Scott

As proud as you are of Mike Jr. I'm sure his dad would be just as grateful to you for stepping in and taking that role, giving him some direction. Your empathy and compassion is just breathtaking.

Tim

Thank you. That's my mom. That's my mom. She left us last year, but she did instill that in all 5 of her children. You learn that stuff when you're a kid, and I thank her forever for that. I'm happy I can give it back. Going back to the escalator scene, when people were helping each other, that is human empathy and compassion. I think we all have it in us. It takes some extreme conditions, sometimes, for it to come out. We all have that in us. I think it's beautiful.

Scott

We're at the 20th anniversary now, of 9/11. Are there any events going on to commemorate or honor the people that lost their lives on that day?

Tim

Yes. There are many events going on throughout the country. Specifically in New York, the 9/11 memorial and museum will be, as they do every year except last year, they'll be reading the names of the 2,977 plus the other's killed in the 1993 bombing. They'll be reading those names on the Plaza. That is a family only event. The museum will be open, again, to the families only on September 11th. Around the day of September 11th the museum will be open to the public. The Memorial and Museum will also be doing the 'Two Towers of Light' on the night of the 10th and the night of the 11th. If you have not seen it, it's pretty spectacular.

Then the Stephen Siller Tunnels to Tower Foundation, is doing numerous events. The biggest of which right now is that the CEO Frank Siller, whose brother Stephen Siller was a hero New York City fireman murdered on September 11th, is walking from the Pentagon to Shanksville Pennsylvania to the World Trade Center in New York. It's about 537 miles he's walking. He's 68 years old, he had a heart attack last year, he's in the best shape of anyone that age I've ever met. He's going to make the whole 537 miles. There are events along the way, every Saturday they do a remembrance parade in different parts of the east coast. When he gets to Staten Island, which is where his family is from, we will be having a welcome remembrance parade for Frank on the 9th. On the morning of the 11th a few of us will walk with him from Staten Island over the Verazzano bridge into Brooklyn to FDNY Squad 1, which is where Stephen Siller worked. We will have a remembrance celebration there at Stephen's fire house. Then we'll walk, retracing Stephen's footsteps, to the mouth of the Brooklyn Battery tunnel. The tunnel that Stephen ran through with 60 pounds of gear, on the morning of September 11th. Stephen's family will retrace his steps through the tunnel to the other side where we will meet them at the World Trade Center, where we will have a remembrance there. That's the big event, it's to raise awareness of the Tunnels to Towers Foundation, which is my number 1 charity.

Then the other big event that has not been done before, that the Siller Foundation is spearheading, is on the 12th. On September 12th we will be at Ground Zero, reading the thousands of names of first responders who died from 9/11 illness, subsequent to 9/11. That's never been done before. Later on in November we're going to read the names at the Lincoln

Memorial in Washington D.C. We're going to read the names of the 7,000 plus, volunteer, military or heroes, who lost their lives in the global war on terror. That's also never been done before, but we're going to start that tradition now. Every year we will read the names of those heroes, who volunteered for the U.S military for us, for our community. A lot of them were wearing patches sewn onto their uniforms of the NYPD or the Port Authority police or the New York City Fire Department, when they took their last breath. They did that for America, but specifically, they served justice for our community. Starting this year we will never forget and we will say every one of their names and the Lincoln Memorial, and say thank you to their families.

Scott

I love that. Those are names that should never be forgotten.

Tim

Yes.

Scott

One last question. You've told this story many times. I know you've done TED talks. Why do you feel it's important for people to know this?

Tim

Shortly after 9/11, probably days after 9/11, what started appearing in every fire house and on every firefighter's bumper sticker was the mantra, 'Never Forget.' If we don't speak. If I don't have a voice and speak their names loudly, we will forget. I made that promise to them back then, the police officers, the firefighter's and now the military. For us, Scott, September 11th is every day. For example, young Michael Lynch, he grew up without his dad. His younger brother Jack grew up without his dad. Their mom grew up without the father of her children, she had to do it all on her own. This is true for all the families. The nearly 3,000 murdered on September 11th, it's true for all of them. For the 7,300 plus, military heroes, the thousands who died from 9/11 illness, all those families live 9/11 everyday. We have to remind America and the world of their heroism and their sacrifice so that we can live in freedom. If we don't remind America and the world then we have failed and they have lost their lives for nothing.

Scott

Tim Brown. Thank you for your service. Thanks for sharing your story.

Tim

Thank you for having me and sharing the story.

If you want to check out the charity that Tim mentioned, it's called the Tunnel to Towers Foundation, and the website is t2t.org – that's the letter T, the number 2, and the letter T again, dot org. And if you'd like to contact Tim directly, his email address is in the show notes for this episode at WhatWasThatLike.com/88.

And, by way of announcement, if you're in the Facebook group you've probably heard discussion about an upcoming special bonus episode about childbirth. This is where we hear from a bunch of different women about their childbirth experience – what went right, and what went wrong. Well, the announcement is that this bonus episode now has a date - it will be published on Friday, October 15, 2021. That's in between the regular episodes. So if you're already subscribed to What Was That Like, that bonus episode will show up automatically

wherever you listen to your podcasts. Another good reason to subscribe, because that way you never miss a show!

Now, there's something I want to mention here before we get to this week's Listener Story, and it's this: I never want what you hear on this podcast to be boring, or predictable. And I see those as two different things.

For the "never be boring" part, I try to take care of that in advance by being very picky about the stories I talk about on the podcast. Believe me, for every story you actually hear, there are like 50 that I had to reject, and there are lots of reasons for that, but that's how it is. The way I look at it is, one of my jobs as the host here is to protect you, my listener, from being bored. And just between you and me – out of all my listeners, you're my favorite.

But the other thing is, I don't want it to be predictable. You know how when you're watching an action movie, and the hero character gets captured by the bad guy, and it looks like there is no way out for him? Well, even though it looks like it's the end of the road for the hero, you know in the back of your mind, and having watched a hundred movies like this before, that there's no way that main character is actually going to be killed. You know something's gonna happen. Someone you thought was already dead turns out to be alive and saves his or her life, or the bad guy slips and falls into the alligator pond, or something... but the end result is that the good guy wins and everyone's happy. Including the production company, because that means they make more money when the crappy sequel is made.

Well, that's not always how it goes here on this podcast. Really, the only thing you can predict accurately is that the guest for the episode made it out alive, obviously since I'm talking to that person. But other than that, things might turn out good, or they might turn out not so good. What we're talking about here is real life, true stories. And real life doesn't always have a happy ending. But I would rather talk about reality than have a Hollywood scripted ending. I hope that's the way you like it too.

If you have any comments about that, agree or disagree, please come over to the podcast Facebook group and let's talk about it. [WhatWasThatLike.com/facebook](https://www.facebook.com/WhatWasThatLike.com/facebook)

And now, this week's listener story. Stay safe, and I'll see you back here in two weeks.

Natalia

Hello everyone, my name is Natalia, I'm Brazilian and I work as an English teacher here in Brazil. The story I'm going to tell you happened a couple of years ago when I was starting out in a new job in an English course. During one of my classes I had a very bad belly ache. So in the short break between the two classes I ran to the bathroom to relieve myself. The bathroom was connected to the teachers room where all of my colleagues were gathering, waiting for the next class to start. I was really embarrassed of opening the door and letting everybody smell the remaining odor of my diarrhea, so I had the idea of opening the bathroom window to let the wind circulate a little before opening the door. But the window was stuck, it was like glass made and stuck. As I tried to force it, it fell and broke into a million pieces on the ground and everybody heard the noise. They knocked on the door to ask if I was alright. I opened it and they not only could smell it but they could also see that I was trying to get rid of the smell by breaking the window. It was really really humiliating, but I didn't get fired.