

EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT



Michael Poehlman's photo of the World Trade Center shortly after it was hit by two jets.

A stunning, surreal September day

By Michael Poehlman

On Tuesday, Sept. 11, my morning in Brooklyn began as normally as any other. I awoke to NPR and eventually dragged myself into the kitchen to prepare coffee and cereal. I later started the shower and continued for the next hour or so having breakfast and going through various stages of getting ready for work.

My last and final habit before leaving has always been to click on the TV and check the weather. What I saw there this morning was anything but normal. It was one of those early live shots of one of the WTC towers with a big, smoking hole in its side. I turned up the volume to hear the reporters saying that this may have been an accident.

Still stuck in my routine head and in the beginning phases of shock, I still prepared to go to work.

Seconds later my mother called to make sure I was OK and that I wasn't going in to work (knowing that I worked downtown, not far from the WTC). I certainly wasn't connecting to this being as tragic as it actually was, so I told her that I had to go to work and grabbed my camera on my way out the door.

As I headed down to the L-Train subway stop in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn there was a sizable crowd of people just standing around staring across the East River at this tremendous column of gray smoke blooming over the low brownstones and tenement-style apartment buildings of northern Brooklyn. This icon that greeted

us every morning was actually burning, and all people could do was watch in stunned amazement.

I stood there locked onto this building and sky full of smoke for a couple of minutes, and then I hustled down to the subway platform to take the train into Manhattan.

There was nothing unusual about the crowd on the train; everyone seemed as focused on their newspapers and books as they always are in the morning.

I usually take the train all the way to Canal Street, but at this point all subways in the city were apparently halted and I was forced to exit the train here. The train stoppage seemed to annoy commuters, but it seemed that they were angry at the inconvenience more than anything else.

When I came out of the station I looked south and saw that both towers were in flames. This was absolutely unbelievable, but I still wasn't connecting to this as being something dangerous or even horrific. I was telling myself that surely everyone escaped from the buildings.

My instinct at this point was to contact family and let them know I was OK (knowing that my mother was probably hysterical since I told her I was actually going to work). My cell phone was dead, so I figured I'd head to my office at Getty Images located on Canal Street & Varick Street and check in and make some phone calls from there.

I began to walk down Thompson Street giving me a clear view of the WTC. There were gaping jagged holes in both towers with orange flames licking up at the higher floors and black smoke

pouring out of the shattered windows and drifting over the harbor and across the East River.

I overheard people telling each other how they actually saw the jet(s) smack into the side of the towers — jets? This was my first real indication that it was something more than an accident (as if the flaming towers weren't enough).

I remembered my camera and I started snapping random photos. People were in a frenzy. Some were running uptown. Some were hysterically crying, trying to make phone calls. Some were standing stunned and pointing. And some, like me, continued walking downtown toward this unbelievable sight.

I got to around Broome Street and I heard this horrible guttural rumbling followed by screaming. I looked up and one of the towers was crumbling into a strange cloud.

At this point my nervous walk became a frantic sprint over to my office, which was just a couple blocks west. I did manage to snap a couple more photos before going inside.

I got to my cubicle and noticed that the floor was abuzz with abnormal activity (usually people are walking robotlike to their desks with their gourmet coffee and muffins to settle into their morning e-mails). The Getty News division, a few bicycles over, had photographers running in and out dropping off film and uploading digital pictures of the towers.

I had trouble making calls out because the phone lines were so jammed, but my phone rang and it was my dad asking if I was OK and if I was in any danger. I didn't think I was, so I told him not

to worry.

He informed me about the Pentagon and about some of the other rumors and I think we somehow calmed each other by simply making contact. Since I couldn't call out, I asked him to let everyone know that I was safe.

My office building was soon evacuated and I had to figure out a way to get to my wife and friends and eventually back home. I did manage to make e-mail contact with loved ones and we decided on a safe place to meet.

New York was surreal. I joined the mass of people walking north. Some were crying. Some were covered in dust. Some were talking to strangers. Others were just stunned.

F-15s were cracking the sky overhead and emergency vehicles and military trucks were roaring up and down the avenues.

I walked past St. Vincent's Hospital in Greenwich Village and there were enormous lines of people preparing to donate blood and there were ambulances coming and going and reporters and camera crews across the street recording the scene.

I continued on to my friend's gallery in Chelsea and we sat on the roof and stared and the huge plume of gray smoke against the bluest sky above lower Manhattan. We didn't say much. We just watched and listened to this changed city.

Michael Poehlman, a native of Traverse City, has been living in New York City since 1994. He is a senior picture editor at Photonica, a provider of photographic images for various media.

THEY WERE THERE

The day in N.Y.: Noises, then eerily quiet

By LORI HALL STEELE

Special to the Record-Eagle

TRAVERSE CITY — On the morning of Sept. 11, H.T. and Lauren Snowday had just awoken, groggy from a sleepless night with their 4-day-old daughter Hallie.

Lauren's parents, who were visiting for the baby's birth from Michigan — and staying at the Snowday's New York City apartment, located two blocks from the World Trade Center's Building 7 — said they'd heard an explosion.

"My reaction was: There are explosions in New York all the time," said H.T. Snowday, 31, a longtime Traverse City resident.

Then a friend phoned and asked the couple to come over. Snowday turned on the television to see what was going on, but the screen was dead. He knew then that something was terribly wrong. All the city's major stations were broadcast through the Trade Center's North Tower antennas.

"I immediately went out to the

balcony and it was awful, and very, very scary to be that close," he said.

The first of two planes had flown into the building. The Snowdays were in the epicenter of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. Countless other area residents visited Ground Zero in coming days and months to help victims and aid in rescue attempts at the World Trade Center.

"It was a horrible thing to look at a building damaged like that," Snowday said, of that sunny September morning on his balcony. "My wife made the decision for us to leave, she was just adamant. She was convinced the building was going to come down."

"At the time I wasn't sure we could do it — there was a mess

on the street below, my wife had just given birth and we had a 4-day-old baby."

The fivesome quickly gathered belongings — diapers, a baby seat, a jacket, the parent's carry-on luggage and a still-unpacked hospital bag containing clothing, snacks and water — and headed into the chaotic street below, where emergency workers and the curious were streaming toward the Trade Center. They made it to a sub-way about five to 10 minutes before the North Tower collapsed.

"We didn't know if we'd have an apartment. But we got away," H.T. Snowday said.

The next morning, before dawn, H.T. Snowday walked 40-some blocks through New York

City to his apartment. He walked for blocks and blocks down Broadway and saw no one, no cars. It was, he said, "like being on a movie set."

Closer to Ground Zero, the National Guard had erected roadblocks, and one guardsman let him through so he could get diapers from the apartment.

Snowday used his camera's viewfinder to make his way up the darkened stairs, into the apartment. It was filled with ashes, but everything was intact.

"The amazing thing about Ground Zero the next morning is there was no noise," Snowday said. "The 12th was another beautiful day and all I could hear was birds. The southern third of the island of Manhattan was closed. There was no emergency noise, the power and everything was out. There were no vehicles."

"It was just stunningly quiet. I could hear my heartbeat in my ears."

The Snowdays eventually made their way to Long Island,

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At the time of the attack my family and I lived in Washington, D.C. From the top floor of an office building I saw smoke coming from the Pentagon.

Through the confusion of trying to determine exactly what was happening I remember walking down the stairs rather than risking being caught in an elevator.

Once home, my wife and I had to go to school to gather our children. No child was allowed to go home unless a parent or guardian personally appeared at the school. Sadly, the fear was that some children may have lost a parent.

John L. Wagner
Traverse City

Unlike most Americans, I was not glued to my TV on Sept. 11. Instead, I along with several other teachers received the news of the attacks in the shade of the pine trees at Camp Leelanau, where we were camping with our seventh- and eighth-grade students.

Upon notification, our decision was to let the children continue with their camp experience unaware of world events. However, my greatest concern was when and how to inform the students.

Although questions from a few were briefly answered when asked, it was on our return trip that I had the awesome responsibility to inform this tired group of what had happened. With quiet respect, the children listened to this news and my request that they talk to their parents before turning on the TV when they got home. Thirty-six hours after the attacks, I finally understood the devastation Americans had experienced.

Barbara McCann
Northport

We pulled alongside the USS *Lasalle* on the mainland of Italy and began to do the normal routine. After lunch I went to inspect systems my shop was tasked to repair, most eastern Americans were just waking up.

Looking at a TV it had an image of one of the towers on fire. Then I saw the gates of terror opening when the second plane struck. I was in a silent awe, yet heard thousands of cries.

Moments later, bells, whistles and orders passed over the loud speaker from the captain, many sailors ran to man mooring lines and the gun mounts. So early that evening we were back out to sea for three weeks straight.

Michael Robert Nyland
Traverse City
US Navy
USS EMORY S. LAND

I am disabled, so I spend most mornings watching "Good Morning America." I saw the smoke and heard the comments from Charlie or Diane that there was some kind of fire in the twin towers.

I was glued to the screen and saw the plane that flew into the second tower. I haven't been the same since. I cry at every sentimental

thing. Is this normal? Is everyone affected the same? I feel as though this act was a personal thing done to me.

I have no personal physical link to anyone that had a loss in New York. I hope that by writing this I might feel better.

Verna Woodcox
Traverse City

I was at my daughter's in Silverthorne, Colo., after a three week visit and I was scheduled to fly out of Denver International Airport on Sept. 11.

I had called my son that morning and left a message for him to pick me up at the Traverse City airport in the evening, then sat down to watch the morning news. I knew right then that my flight would never happen, but what disturbed me most was the exposure that my grandchildren had all day to this via TV in their classrooms. I can remember how disturbed I was hearing about Pearl Harbor at their age on radio, and yes, they were disturbed and had many questions.

I tried to answer them as best I could. I'm sure Sept. 11 will always stay in their minds. I know it will in mine.

Mary Mead Rose
Traverse City

On Sept. 10 my wife and I backpacked South Manitou Island. Except for the rangers, we had the whole island to ourselves. It was quiet and peaceful, seemingly the rest of the world no longer existed.

As we were hiking the next day, we met a ranger. He told us the news was sketchy, but reportedly a plane had hit one of the World Trade Towers.

The next afternoon we returned to the mainland not at all prepared to absorb the previous day's events. The peace and security of the island had faded into the terrors of the real world.

Dennis Collier
Lima, Ohio

My three friends and I were disgusted with our 10-day Alaskan wilderness hunt for grizzly bear and moose — not seeing game, no radio communications, no guides, no horses, less than mediocre food (all promised us).

Our plane did not arrive on Sept. 11 to take us back to civilization, not until Sept. 14 when a pilot arrived and informed us of the attack on America. Arriving in Anchorage, we found no room in the inns and no way to get home.

A vehicle was bought and we began our 900 miles-per-day, five-day trip back to Michigan. We will never forget where we were on 9-11.

Paul Felix
Williamsburg

I was at work at Merrill Lynch. We have access to CNBC on our computers and they interrupted the show to show the first tower burning.

My daughter lives in Manhattan, so I called her and she was watching, too. We sat on the phone together and when the second plane hit she screamed. She only lives about 20 blocks from the World Trade Center and her boyfriend works in the area. She wanted to hang up so she could reach Steve. She works at ABC News and they told her to stay at home.

Our firm has over 8,000 employees in the World Financial Center, which is next to the Trade Towers. Everybody started to get worried about our friends and business associates that work down there.

The rest of the day and night was filled with people calling to make sure our daughter was OK. She had worked in the Towers last year.

Also, that day I received a very sad call from my sister Toni who works at TJ Maxx headquarters near Boston. Eight of her co-workers were on the plane that hit the tower. Eight women from ages 28 to 41 were on a buying trip from Boston to L.A.

A few days later I realized how close we were to losing two of our family members that day. Laura could have been still working there and Toni could have easily been on that plane with her co-workers.

Kathie Wing
Lake Leelanau