

ness accounts of the event. Most callers correctly identified the target of the attack. Some identified the plane as a commercial airliner.³²

The first response came from private firms and individuals—the people and companies in the building. Everything that would happen to them during the next few minutes would turn on their circumstances and their preparedness, assisted by building personnel on-site.

Hundreds of civilians trapped on or above the 92nd floor gathered in large and small groups, primarily between the 103rd and 106th floors. A large group was reported on the 92nd floor, technically below the impact but unable to descend. Civilians were also trapped in elevators. Other civilians below the impact zone—mostly on floors in the 70s and 80s, but also on at least the 47th and 22nd floors—were either trapped or waiting for assistance.³³

It is unclear when the first full building evacuation order was attempted over the public-address system. The deputy fire safety director in the lobby, while immediately aware that a major incident had occurred, did not know for approximately ten minutes that a commercial jet had directly hit the building. Following protocol, he initially gave announcements to those floors that had generated computerized alarms, advising those tenants to descend to points of safety—at least two floors below the smoke or fire—and to wait there for further instructions. The deputy fire safety director has told us that he began instructing a full evacuation within about ten minutes of the explosion. But the first FDNY chiefs to arrive in the lobby were advised by the Port Authority fire safety director—who had reported to the lobby although he was no longer the designated fire safety director—that the full building evacuation announcement had been made within one minute of the building being hit.³⁴

Because of damage to building systems caused by the impact of the plane, public-address announcements were not heard in many locations. For the same reason, many civilians may have been unable to use the emergency intercom phones, as they had been advised to do in fire drills. Many called 911.³⁵

The 911 system was not equipped to handle the enormous volume of calls it received. Some callers were unable to connect with 911 operators, receiving an “all circuits busy” message. Standard operating procedure was for calls relating to fire emergencies to be transferred from 911 operators to FDNY dispatch operators in the appropriate borough (in this case, Manhattan). Transfers were often plagued by delays and were in some cases unsuccessful. Many calls were also prematurely disconnected.³⁶

The 911 operators and FDNY dispatchers had no information about either the location or the magnitude of the impact zone and were therefore unable to provide information as fundamental as whether callers were above or below the fire. Because the operators were not informed of NYPD Aviation’s determination of the impossibility of rooftop rescues from the Twin Towers on that day, they could not knowledgeably answer when callers asked whether to go up or down. In most instances, therefore, the operators and the FDNY dispatchers relied on standard operating procedures for high-rise fires—that civil-