

the fireball. Floor-to-ceiling windows in the northwest corner of the West Street level of the lobby had been blown out; some large marble tiles had been dislodged from the walls; one entire elevator bank was destroyed by the fireball. Lights were functioning, however, and the air was clear of smoke.⁵²

As the highest-ranking officer on the scene, the battalion chief initially was the FDNY incident commander. Minutes later, the on-duty division chief for Lower Manhattan arrived and took over. Both chiefs immediately began speaking with the former fire safety director and other building personnel to learn whether building systems were working. They were advised that all 99 elevators in the North Tower appeared to be out, and there were no assurances that sprinklers or standpipes were working on upper floors. Chiefs also spoke with Port Authority police personnel and an OEM representative.⁵³

After conferring with the chiefs in the lobby, one engine and one ladder company began climbing stairwell C at about 8:57, with the goal of approaching the impact zone as scouting units and reporting back to the chiefs in the lobby. The radio channel they used was tactical 1. Following FDNY high-rise fire protocols, other units did not begin climbing immediately, as the chiefs worked to formulate a plan before sending them up. Units began mobilizing in the lobby, lining up and awaiting their marching orders.⁵⁴

Also by approximately 8:57, FDNY chiefs had asked both building personnel and a Port Authority police officer to evacuate the South Tower, because in their judgment the impact of the plane into the North Tower made the entire complex unsafe—not because of concerns about a possible second plane.⁵⁵

The FDNY chiefs in the increasingly crowded North Tower lobby were confronting critical choices with little to no information. They had ordered units up the stairs to report back on conditions, but did not know what the impact floors were; they did not know if any stairwells into the impact zone were clear; and they did not know whether water for firefighting would be available on the upper floors. They also did not know what the fire and impact zone looked like from the outside.⁵⁶

They did know that the explosion had been large enough to send down a fireball that blew out elevators and windows in the lobby and that conditions were so dire that some civilians on upper floors were jumping or falling from the building. They also knew from building personnel that some civilians were trapped in elevators and on specific floors. According to Division Chief for Lower Manhattan Peter Hayden, “We had a very strong sense we would lose firefighters and that we were in deep trouble, but we had estimates of 25,000 to 50,000 civilians, and we had to try to rescue them.”⁵⁷

The chiefs concluded that this would be a rescue operation, not a firefighting operation. One of the chiefs present explained:

We realized that, because of the impact of the plane, that there was some structural damage to the building, and most likely that the fire suppres-