

killed or severely injured; others were relatively unharmed. We know of at least one civilian who seized the initiative and shouted that anyone who could walk should walk to the stairs, and anyone who could help should help others in need of assistance. As a result, at least two small groups of civilians descended from that floor. Others remained on the floor to help the injured and move victims who were unable to walk to the stairwell to aid their rescue.⁸⁰

Still others remained alive in the impact zone above the 78th floor. Damage was extensive, and conditions were highly precarious. The only survivor known to have escaped from the heart of the impact zone described the 81st floor—where the wing of the plane had sliced through his office—as a “demolition” site in which everything was “broken up” and the smell of jet fuel was so strong that it was almost impossible to breathe. This person escaped by means of an unlikely rescue, aided by a civilian fire warden descending from a higher floor, who, critically, had been provided with a flashlight.⁸¹

At least four people were able to descend stairwell A from the 81st floor or above. One left the 84th floor immediately after the building was hit. Even at that point, the stairway was dark, smoky, and difficult to navigate; glow strips on the stairs and handrails were a significant help. Several flights down, however, the evacuee became confused when he reached a smoke door that caused him to believe the stairway had ended. He was able to exit that stairwell and switch to another.⁸²

Many civilians in and above the impact zone ascended the stairs. One small group reversed its descent down stairwell A after being advised by another civilian that they were approaching a floor “in flames.” The only known survivor has told us that their intention was to exit the stairwell in search of clearer air. At the 91st floor, joined by others from intervening floors, they perceived themselves to be trapped in the stairwell and began descending again. By this time, the stairwell was “pretty black,” intensifying smoke caused many to pass out, and fire had ignited in the 82nd-floor transfer hallway.⁸³

Others ascended to attempt to reach the roof but were thwarted by locked doors. At approximately 9:30 a “lock release” order—which would unlock all areas in the complex controlled by the buildings’ computerized security system, including doors leading to the roofs—was transmitted to the Security Command Center located on the 22nd floor of the North Tower. Damage to the software controlling the system, resulting from the impact of the plane, prevented this order from being executed.⁸⁴

Others, attempting to descend, were frustrated by jammed or locked doors in stairwells or confused by the structure of the stairwell deviations. By the lower 70s, however, stairwells A and B were well-lit, and conditions were generally normal.⁸⁵

Some civilians remained on affected floors, and at least one ascended from a lower point into the impact zone, to help evacuate colleagues or assist the injured.⁸⁶

Within 15 minutes after the impact, debilitating smoke had reached at least