

# September 11, 2001

## What It Was Like

The woman featured in this story worked for Marsh & McLennan Companies, a global professional services and risk-insurance brokerage firm headquartered in New York City. She was visiting the City from the United Kingdom at the time of the terrorist attacks, which occurred on the morning of September 11, 2001. She was getting ready for a meeting in the South tower at the time the first plane hit.

This is the story she told about her experiences on that day.

This story was written as part of an effort undertaken by Marsh & McLennan Companies to document what had happened to their employees, and how their employees rebuilt the company in the weeks and months following the attacks.

Marsh & McLennan Companies had offices in both of the Twin Towers in downtown Manhattan. They lost 295 employees and 60 consultants in the attacks.

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I was in our offices on the 48<sup>th</sup> floor of Tower 2. I was early for a meeting and waiting for a colleague to join me for breakfast, when I heard an explosion in the North tower. I looked out the window and could see quite clearly what was going on, but I didn't realize at the time that it was a plane that had gone in.

Having been exposed to so much of this sort of thing in the UK, I immediately thought it was a terrorist attack.

To my horror, I saw a body falling through the air.

My colleague joined me very shortly after that. She initially thought we should leave the building, but we heard announcements over the building's PA system that were telling people to stay where they were. We weren't sure what to do, because we certainly didn't feel safe in that building. But we finally decided it would be safer to stay than to go, thinking that there would be all sorts of debris flying around down at ground level.

Then we heard the crash above us, and the whole building moved dramatically. I think it must have swayed about 6 feet or so.

We realized that something was terribly wrong. So we started to head down the stairs; only two abreast could go down. There was no smoke, but the heat was phenomenal. It was very hard for me to do, because I'm really not in very good physical shape. But I did it, so I think my adrenaline must have just cut in.

After a while, I started losing control of my muscles. I wasn't in any pain, but I couldn't feel my legs. It was like when you go to a dentist and they freeze your face. You know you can still eat and drink, but you can't feel your face. Well, I knew I could still walk, but I couldn't feel my legs. So, very frequently on the way down, I needed to stop on the landings and let other people go by. My colleague was right there with me, helping me every step of the way.

The whole thing was completely terrifying.

We were so relieved when we finally got down to the bottom. We guessed later that it took us about 25 minutes.

We stopped briefly to get some water, and for the first time, saw people bleeding and in great pain from all types of injuries. We felt somewhat lucky I guess, and then headed out of the building.

We found a place to sit, about 100 feet away. I think we had been out there for about four to five minutes, trying to catch our breath, when all of a sudden everyone started screaming and running. I threw myself in a doorway. A firefighter grabbed my colleague and put her into an emergency vehicle. I was alone, and very frightened.

I got down on the ground — just laid there and prayed. My legs were getting crushed with people and stuff falling all around me. It seemed like pandemonium. I thought I was going to die. And then it went totally and utterly black, and I thought I was dead.

I didn't realize that the building had come down.

After a while, I saw some light, so I figured that no, I wasn't dead. So, I got up and started moving away from the area. My legs were badly hurt and I was utterly exhausted, but I knew I couldn't just stay there lying on the ground. And then, I heard someone calling my name. It was my colleague, who somehow or another, was able to find me in all that chaos.

We were both choking and coughing. Officials of some sort or another directed us into a bank – actually, it was more like an ATM lobby. We got some water there, but were afraid to stay. We saw one person being treated for what looked like a broken leg; another who was bleeding profusely. We also saw people covered from head to toe in ash. Little did we realize how much we looked like them. Then we zeroed-in on the fact that the lobby we were in had all glass windows.

Without saying anything, we started moving on.

We ended up at a bar that was about three blocks away. Later my colleague wondered why we didn't get a couple of stiff drinks while we were there, but all we could think about at the time was getting some water and a place to sit. It was there that we began to realize, for the first time, what was really going on. The TV was on, and all kinds of speculations were being made about the Pentagon and the White House, and what was going on in Pennsylvania. It was truly beyond belief.

And while we were trying to process all of this new input, the people in that bar were being incredibly helpful and caring. I don't think I ever thanked them.

Then the second tower came down.

We couldn't comprehend what had happened. It was like the end of the world. I couldn't even think. Everything collapsed down to a very simple level. Things were moving in slow motion. We saw the big black plume of smoke and debris moving toward us. We were paralyzed with fear.

Somehow, we survived.

We wanted to call our next of kin to tell them we were OK. But we lost our cell phones in all the turmoil. Yet somehow, I held onto my purse. Imagine. Coming down all those stairs, laying on the ground, being trampled, narrowly escaping death, witnessing all this horror around us, and still, I had my purse—my Gucci purse! I guess it shows what my real priorities are. I can't even believe I'm saying this, but I had wanted a Gucci purse for years and years, and then, just six weeks before all of this happened, I finally bought one. I was ecstatic that I was finally a proud owner of a Gucci purse. And then ... all this! Yet somehow, after everything I had been through, I still had that purse.

Fortunately, I had some quarters in that purse, which we used to call our office in midtown. We figured people would want to know that we were safe. So, we told them we were OK, and asked them to call our next of kin.

We waited in that bar for a long while. On one level, it felt as if we were frozen. On another, it felt as if we were in a safe haven.

Finally, people started leaving the area, so, we headed off with the crowd. I'm not sure how far we walked—I'm not even sure where we were. But nowhere could we find a taxi. We walked and walked and walked. Finally, my colleague spotted a town car and flagged it down. Being from the UK, I didn't even know what a town car was, let alone how to flag one down. She did thank God, because I don't think I could have walked another block.

Of course, traffic was going nowhere fast. So now, instead of walking, we sat. The good news is that it was in the comfort of a nice car that had air conditioning.

By now, we felt we would be OK.

But because things were moving so slow, my colleague, being a New Yorker, figured she could get home faster by walking, than by sitting in traffic. So she got out of the car and walked. She may have gotten home before I did, but I simply couldn't walk another block.

I stayed in the car, and finally got to the apartment where I was staying. It may have been around 4:30 when I got there. Lucky for me, I was staying with a friend. I don't know how I could have coped with everything that had happened, had I not had the support of my friend.

I never did go to our office in midtown; I didn't even try. I was completely shell-shocked. I coped with it by withdrawing. Again, thank God for my friend.

The company did everything they could to help. They got me to a doctor, they arranged for car service, they tried to get me booked on a flight out of New York – whatever they could do they did.

The doctor said I couldn't fly due to the trauma I had suffered in my legs. So, I put myself on a ship. It was the QE2. I left that Sunday, and it took a week to get home.