

Special report

220 floors in all, but many empty

Continued from 3A

Twelve floors in each tower were dedicated to mechanical equipment and a giant lobby.

In addition, dozens of Asian investment firms in the World Trade Center had closed their offices or cut employment sharply because of the recession in Asia. Other offices were leased but empty or under renovation. The Atlantic Bank of New York had moved out of the 106th floor of the south tower in July but was still paying rent.

Tourists were sparse at 8:46 a.m., too. The observation deck, on the 107th floor of the south tower, wasn't scheduled to open for another 45 minutes. Outside the buildings, the TKTS booth, which sold half-price tickets to Broadway shows, hadn't opened either. Most stores in the World Trade Center's busy underground shopping center were still shuttered. USA TODAY identified only one tourist who died.

Elevators: The quickest way out

Sixteen minutes, 28 seconds. That was the length of time between the first and second crashes. The fate of more than 2,000 people on the south tower's upper floors was determined by what they did during that time. Most made the right decision: They left soon after the first jet hit the north tower.

The elevator system was the hero there. Built by Otis Elevator and modernized in the 1990s, the World Trade Center's elevator system was one of the biggest and fastest in the world. The 99 passenger elevators in the south tower moved several thousand people out of harm's way before the second crash.

The elevators on the highest floors took people down to the 78th floor. In the 78th floor elevator lobby, people transferred to giant express elevators that sped to the ground in 45 seconds.

These room-sized express elevators held up to 55 people each. Every two minutes, a dozen express elevators could move 500 people from the 78th floor to the ground.

(Two giant express elevators ran non-stop from the ground to the 107th floor in each building, but they were not in service. The elevators went to the not-yet-open observation deck in the south tower and the Windows on the World restaurant in the north.)

The bottom wing of United Flight 175 ripped through the south tower's 78th floor elevator lobby. The floor exploded in flames. Walls crumbled. More than 100 people lay dead or wounded from the initial impact.

AON Corp. senior vice president Judy Wein was thrown across the lobby and broke her arm. Her boss, who had been standing next to her, died. Another colleague's legs were broken. "Goodbye, Judy, I love you," he told Wein before he died, according to her first-person account in *Ladies Home Journal*.

"A man with a red handkerchief over his face seemed to appear out of nowhere and pointed to the stairs. 'Anyone who can get up and walk, get up now,' he urged the other people on the floor," Wein wrote.

A small number, perhaps 10, escaped down Stairway A at the northwest corner of the building. If the jet had hit just 10 feet higher or had not tilted sharply at the last moment, the crowded elevator lobby would have escaped most of the carnage.

USA TODAY identified 76 people who worked below where the jets struck. Some victims were obese or frail, unable to finish the long walk down. Others were trapped in elevators. Some were just unlucky.

General Telecom, in an 83rd floor corner office in the north tower, suffered most. Everyone survived from the four other companies on the floor, 10 floors below the impact zone, but all 13 General Telecom workers in the office at the time perished.

After the crash, half the employees went through a kitchen and a telephone equipment room to reach an exit, General Telecom chief operating officer Bill Callahan said. The door was blocked by debris or jammed shut from the crash's impact.

When the workers turned around, the kitchen ceiling collapsed, trapping them in a 15-by-15-foot equipment room. Others were trapped in another part of the office.

The employees were in communication with the outside world throughout, sending a pager message shortly before the collapse.

On the 64th floor, five to 10 Port Authority workers gathered in a security command post equipped with video cameras and communication equipment.

"They talked about what to do and felt safer staying put than leaving the building," Port Authority spokesman Allen Morrison said. After the south tower collapsed at 9:59 a.m., they tried to get out. They did not make it.

First Union, a bank, lost four employees who worked on the north tower's 47th floor. One woman tired during the descent and stopped. Three men got outside but died when the south tower collapsed.

At Empire Blue Cross Blue Shield, nine employees and two consultants died. Some deaths are understood: One man, for example, stayed on the 27th floor with a disabled friend; both died. Other deaths remain a mystery. "We suspect some were in elevators" when the plane hit, vice president Deborah Bohren said. "But we don't really know."

One survivor's story

On the north tower's 92nd floor, one floor below the crash, 69 employees from Carr Futures found themselves trapped. Most, perhaps all, survived the crash. But, in phone calls to loved ones, the employees reported that the stairwells were impassable.

They crowded together in corner rooms as the floor filled with smoke. People appear to have lived until the building fell. By phone, a mother told her son that the south tower had collapsed.

On the 91st floor in the north tower, the story was different.

At the American Bureau of Shipping, George Sleigh and his co-workers counted heads after the crash: 11 of the 22 employees were in the office. All were unharmed. Other than Sleigh's area, the office was remarkably intact. Sleigh went back for his briefcase.

The closest stairway was blocked. The second was open. The status of the third was unknown. "It was quiet and peaceful at first" in the stairwell as the employees made their way out, Sleigh recalls. "Nobody was behind us."

A few minutes later, Sleigh's office was engulfed in flames. Fifty minutes after the crash, Sleigh was out of the building.

Bruised, bloodied, covered in dust, separated from his colleagues, he was loaded into an ambulance. A police officer shouted: "Get out! Get out! The building is coming down!"

The south tower was collapsing. It was 9:59 a.m. The north tower's highest survivor was on his way to Beth Israel Hospital.

"Sometimes, I think it was God's providence that spared me," Sleigh said. "Other times, I wonder why me and not others. I realize I am a very fortunate man."

Contributing: Barbara Hansen, Anthony DeBarros and Paul Overberg

For many, a sealed fate ...

The fate of nearly everyone inside the World Trade Center was sealed the moment the hijacked jets struck on Sept. 11. All but four people at or above the crash zones died. Nearly everyone below lived. Most people died in the north tower, which was hit first. But more than 1,000 people used the

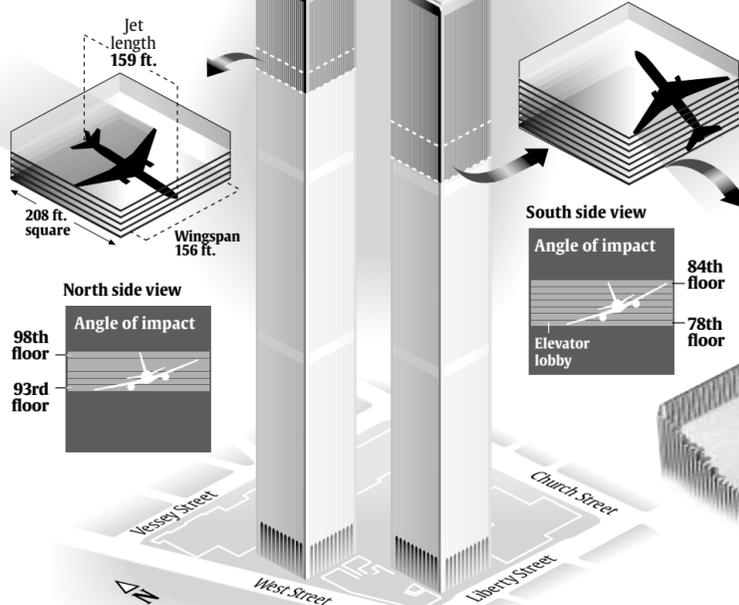
16 1/2-minute gap between the first and second crashes to evacuate the south tower's upper floors. Nearly 500 rescue workers lost their lives when the towers collapsed. Here's how the evacuation unfolded:

The north tower

Everyone on floors 92 and up died; 99% of those below lived. American Airlines Flight 11, carrying 92 people, struck at 8:46:26 a.m. The jet attacked from the north, slightly angled, and crashed into the 93rd through 98th floors. Of those working or visiting the tower at the time, 1,434 died.

The south tower

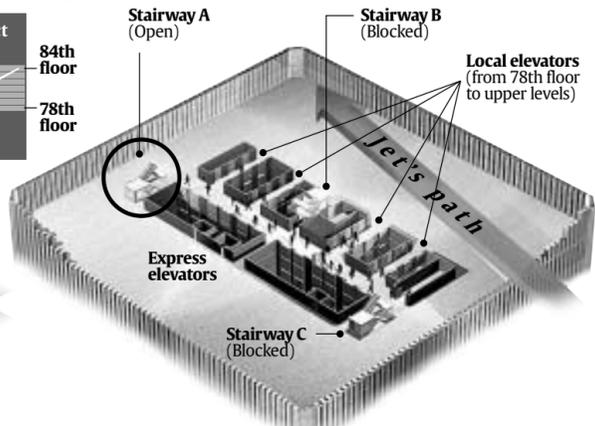
Only four people on the 81st floor or above survived; they used an unblocked stairway to escape. All but four of the 599 who died in the south tower worked above the impact zone. United Airlines Flight 175, carrying 65 people, struck from the south at 9:02:54 a.m. The jet, sharply angled, crashed into the southeast corner from the 78th through 84th floors. Dozens died in a 78th floor elevator lobby, where they had gone to evacuate after the crash in the other tower.



A narrow escape

Flight 175 destroyed two of the three stairways in the impact zone. But Stairway A, farthest from the crash, remained unobstructed from the top to the bottom of the south tower. A small number of people escaped down the stairway; several from the 78th floor elevator lobby, where dozens died, plus four from above. An unknown number of people climbed the stairs toward the roof in search of a helicopter rescue that never came.

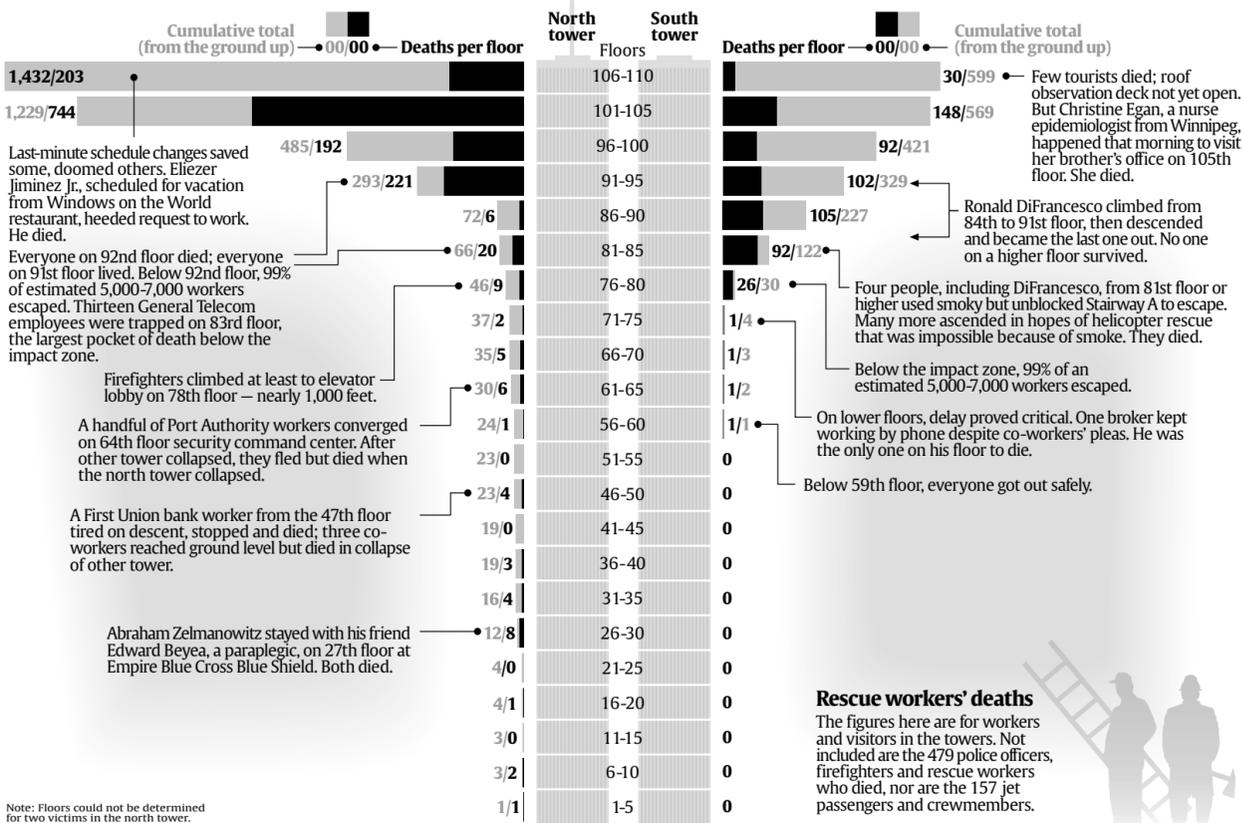
The layout of the 78th floor:



... for thousands of others, a miracle escape

More than 6,000 were feared to have died in the World Trade Center attacks, but that figure was based on missing-persons reports compiled by New York City police. A USA TODAY count shows the toll was fewer than 3,000, including 2,180 building occupants.

Where victims worked or were located:



Source: Analysis by Anthony DeBarros and Paul Overberg, USA TODAY

By Frank Pompa and Robert Ahrens, USA TODAY

Four survived by ignoring words of advice

Stairway was path to safety for some as others went upward

By Dennis Cauchon
USA TODAY

Call it The Great Escape. Only four people survived above the 78th floor in the south tower. They did it by acting against the advice of others and going down the stairs through smoke and debris.

Dozens more, possibly hundreds, could have taken the same path to safety. Instead, they went up in search of a helicopter rescue that would never come.

The story of Stairway A is a haunting exception to an otherwise successful evacuation. These four survivors, plus about 10 people in the south tower's 78th floor elevator lobby, are the only survivors known to have escaped from the floors above the jet crashes.

United Airlines Flight 175 struck the 78th through 84th floors of the south tower at almost 9:03 a.m., 16 1/2 minutes after a jet hit the north tower.

Brian Clark, executive vice president of Euro Brokers on the 84th floor, was standing against the west wall when the higher wing of the Boeing 767 hit his floor. "It felt like the building was going to fall," he recalls. The tower twisted. Air conditioning ducts fell. Floors buckled.

Clark dropped into a football stance. He locked eyes with senior vice president Robert Coll. "Come on, everyone. Let's go," said Clark, 54. As one of his company's fire wardens, he had a flashlight in one hand, a whistle in the other.

Five Euro Brokers colleagues walked with Clark into the hall, turned left and entered Stairway A.

At the 81st floor, they met an obese woman and a frail man walking up. "You can't go down," the woman said. "The floors are in flames. We have to get above the smoke and fire."

In the dark stairwell, the Euro Brokers colleagues debated: up or down? Clark shined his flashlight on the face of the person speaking. "The woman carried the argument," Clark recalls. Four decided to climb up. "Bobby Coll and Kevin York put their arms under the woman's elbows and helped her up the stairs," Clark says.

As his friends climbed, Clark and co-worker Ronald DiFrancesco continued down. Clark heard banging from inside Fuji Bank's wrecked office. "Help! I'm buried! Can anybody help?" yelled Stanley



By Todd Pliht, USA TODAY

Survivor: Brian Clark is executive vice president of Euro Brokers, which was on the south tower's 84th floor. The firm's offices took the brunt of the second jet's impact Sept. 11.

Praimnath, a loan officer. Clark pulled him from the rubble and they walked down together.

In the meantime, DiFrancesco, struggling to breathe, turned around and headed up. DiFrancesco climbed to the 91st floor. He lay down on the landing for 10 minutes. Then, moved by an intense desire to see his wife and children, he got up and pushed himself back down the stairs through the smoke that had stopped him before.

As he left the building, he saw a fireball rolling toward him. He put his arms in front of his face.

He woke up three days later at St. Vincent's hospital. His arms were burned. Some bones were broken. His lungs were singed. But he was alive — the last person out of the south tower.

Richard Fern, another Euro Brokers executive, was the fourth survivor. He was in an 84th-floor

elevator, doors open, when the jet hit. He found Stairway A before the others and took it to safety.

Why didn't more people use Stairway A to leave the building?

Two Aon Corp. employees came down from the 105th floor, but turned back in the face of smoke at the 79th floor, not knowing the heavy smoke lasted only a floor or two more.

USA TODAY identified nine people in the stairway who went up in the hope of a helicopter rescue. A helicopter rescue was not possible: The rooftop doors were locked, and the roof was smothered in smoke.

Euro Brokers lost 61 employees. "I can still see my friends helping that woman up the stairs. They were heroes who made an unfortunate decision," Clark says.