

Frank Woodruff began Sept. 11, 2001, like any other day.

He left home before dawn, caught the 6 o'clock train, and commuted two-and-a-half hours from Manasquan, N.J., to New York City.

He arrived with the morning crowd at One World Trade Center, also called the north tower, and took the elevator to the 65th floor where he worked for the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. He settled into his cubicle, turned on his computer and checked his email. Large windows offered a sweeping, east-facing view towards the Brooklyn Bridge. The sky was blue, visibility was limitless.

Then, the building shuddered.

It was 8:46 a.m.

"When we were hit, it was from the north. The building swayed to the south and then came back and settled. It wasn't a huge sway, but enough that you noticed it," said Woodruff. He heard the explosion and then the sound of debris raining down from the floors above. "There were little bits of glass that were tinkling against the windows."

The first hijacked plane had struck the 93rd floor. Woodruff, who worked in the Port Authority's aviation department, immediately recognized the smell of jet fuel. American Airlines Flight 11 was a cross-country flight loaded with 20,000 gallons, which ignited and coursed through the building.

"That's how I recognized we were hit by a jet was the smell of jet fuel. If you hang around an airport you've smelled that Jet A fuel," he said.

"The fuel exploded and went down all of the air shafts and the elevator shafts. A lot of the people who were killed were burned in the elevators. Because, as you can imagine, they'd still be coming into work at that time."

More than 2,600 people were killed in the World Trade Center attacks, which were carried out by Al Qaeda affiliated terrorists.

Approximately 33,000 others escaped and were forever changed.

Now retired and living in Easton, Woodruff, 77, continues to process the experience. In a matter of minutes, he witnessed a lifetime's worth of Injury, violence, death, and, destruction. The events of Sept. 11 revealed to him the darkest corners of the human soul.

"I saw evil that day," he said.

## THE ESCAPE

Woodruff, who had experienced the World Trade Center bombing in 1993, knew to act quickly.

He and a co-worker cleared the floor of employees, then headed for a stairwell. It was already crowded. It took him 50 minutes to exit the building. Occasionally he stepped aside as badly burned people were hurried down and firefighters made their way up.

At 9:03 a.m., the second hijacked plane rammed into the south tower. Those in the stairwell heard the explosion but had no idea what it was. There were no windows and no smartphones.

"As we got down to the lower levels, I'd say roughly the 15th floor or so, all the plumbing had been broken in the building. So the stairwells became like a stream. So now you're walking through the water and it's streaming down the stairs," he said. "And then you get to the mezzanine level [where] you're hit by the sprinkler systems, which were running. I could see out the windows, all the debris in the plaza. And the debris was a little bit of everything. Airplane parts. Parts of the building."

“The thing that really resonates with me was the people who were jumping and hitting the deck of the plaza. It was a very heavy thud and it took me a while to understand they were human beings. ... People were unable to hang on with the heat and the smoke, so they chose to jump.”

Finally, he made it outside.

He looked up and saw that both buildings were on fire. He realized the second explosion had been the south tower being hit. United Airlines Flight 175 had struck it between the 77th and 85th floors.

“The place was chaotic. The trucks were still coming in, everything from emergency vehicles to fire equipment. And they were trying to figure out what they should be doing. I was with another fella, our concern was getting out of there, to get some sort of transportation to New Jersey. So we jumped on a subway and went uptown.”

## STRANDED

The subway ride took about 20 minutes.

“By the time I got to Penn Station the south tower had fallen. People were looking at it on TVs,” he said. That was when the enormity of the event began to sink in. “I knew there would have been thousands of people affected directly by that occurrence.”

He and a co-worker tried to find a way home.

They boarded a train to the Jersey shore, but it was cleared of passengers due to lingering terrorism concerns. Next, they went to the Empire State Building to meet an acquaintance with a car, but they never found the person.

Stranded, they took shelter in an Irish bar, which was located “around 37th Street” on the West Side. They stayed there for a few hours,

surrounded by other refugees from the financial district. Footage of the tragedy played continuously on televisions. Those in the bar watched silently.

“A lot of the people that were in that bar were from the World Trade Center complex, and a lot of them were financial types. People were just saddened, they were stunned, they had lost close friends,” said Woodruff, who estimates he knew between 15 and 20 people that were killed.

At around 2 p.m., Woodruff was able to call his wife, Toni, on a payphone. She had been a school principal in Tom’s River, N.J.

“She saw [the attacks] and started counting the floors because she knew what floor I was on,” he recalled. “We were glad to get in touch with each other.”

## GOING BACK

Rail service resumed in the late afternoon.

The train didn’t pass the World Trade Center site, but Woodruff was reminded of the tragedy the entire way back. He arrived home at 8 p.m.

“The wind was coming from the north, and there was a column of smoke that went along the Jersey shore. The train just followed that column of smoke all the way down to Manasquan,” he said.

The Port Authority re-opened nearly a week later, relocated to temporary quarters at JFK Airport.

“We started to form carpools to get out there but, quite frankly, that was a lot of bravado because there wasn’t too much you could do,” he said.

At some point during the immediate aftermath, he returned to Ground Zero. Security checkpoints had been set up and public access was prohibited. The ruins were visible from a distance and they still smoldered, enveloping the southern tip of Manhattan in a smoky haze. Emergency workers continued to search the debris.

“Obviously, they were still retrieving bodies and whatever they could. I was taken back by the enormous size of the piles of rubble,” he said.

All around the perimeter, friends and relatives had put up “missing person” flyers. The flyers covered walls, windows, and any surface where a piece of paper could be hung. Eventually, those flyers became memorials to the fallen.

“It was sad. It was probably the first time that I had ever tasted evil,” he said. “People talk about evil, but you could feel it.”

Years later, Woodruff visited the National September 11 Memorial & Museum, located on the former site of the World Trade Center. There, names of the victims are inscribed on bronze panels, two 1-acre pools occupy the footprints of the Twin Towers, and the underground museum houses more than 40,000 images, 14,000 artifacts, 3,500 oral recordings and 500 hours of video.

It was an overwhelming experience.

It was also a reminder to appreciate life, and the people around you. Because the future is never certain, and everything can change in the blink of an eye.

“The most dramatic aspect of it was, they had a room where they had the telephone calls that people were making to their families. And to me that was just ... it was just a difficult thing to deal with,” he said.

“When people say ‘I love you,’ sometimes it’s a reflex action. But here, people knew, they weren’t making it out.”