Books

From 8:46 to 10:28

102 Minutes: The Untold Story of the Fight to Survive Inside the Twin Towers, by Jim Dwyer ’80JRN and Kevin Flynn ’79JRN (Times Books, 2005. 352 pages, $26).

By
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Even if you visit the World Trade Center site and see for yourself the 16 acres of bedrock laid bare to the sky, it can still be difficult to grasp the enormity of the events of September 11, 2001. From the global to the local, so much can be traced back to that day — the altered geopolitical landscape that led the United States into two wars, the ambitious but often contentious plans to rebuild, and, of course, the loss of loved ones by countless families.

In 102 Minutes Jim Dwyer ’80JRN and Kevin Flynn ’79JRN of *The New York Times* tell the harrowing story of that terrible morning — from the inside. The authors conducted hundreds of interviews with survivors, rescuers, and family members of victims and collected thousands of pages of oral histories, transcripts of emergency radio transmissions, and, most heart-wrenchingly of all, e-mails and phone messages left by those who didn’t make it out. From their research, Dwyer and Flynn meticulously reconstruct the paths of several dozen people, including a Port Authority staffer, who were in the two towers that day. The result is a discomfiting, gripping narrative:

“Now, a few seconds after the plane’s impact, Elaine Duch, a member of the Port Authority staff, wandered the 88th floor, dazed, charred, her clothes nearly burnt off her. She had been getting off the elevator when the fireball of fuel blew through the shaft, the flames shooting out of any opening to gulp oxygen. The ceilings had collapsed in the hallways. Out of their offices and cubicles, men and women were swarming. Where the elevators had been were now two gaping holes. At least two or three stairways were either in flames or filled with smoke.”

While not strictly chronological, 102 Minutes recounts the one hour and 42 minutes between the crash of the first plane into the North Tower at 8:46 a.m. and the tower's fall at 10:28. (The South Tower, of course, was struck and then collapsed in the interim.) Along the way, the authors indict the towers' design, discussing the how and why of their construction and the extent of their compliance with the city's fire code. And even as they praise the efforts of rescue workers on the ground, they criticize the police and fire departments for failing to remedy long-rooted communications problems that certainly resulted in at least some preventable deaths. But what stands out are Dwyer and Flynn's graphic descriptions of fire, destruction, injury, and death, conveying the experience of thousands of evacuees who descended the tower staircases and reached ground level successfully:

"The view [from the lobby windows] froze many of them. The stairs had been windowless, the roaring fires unseen, the anxiety powerful but lacking shape. Now the evacuees found that however terrible the pictures playing in their heads on the way down may have been, the reality on the plaza turned out to be worse. Charred body parts. Shoes. Pieces of plane. Flaming debris. Luggage. A windowpane covered in blood. Red garments that looked like they had been quickly discarded. In fact, they were what was left of people from the upper floors of the north tower who had decided they could not face the flames."

Among the disturbingly vivid tragic accounts of carnage and mayhem such as this, Dwyer and Flynn intersperse individual distinctive perspectives and moving tales. For example, Chris Young, a temp at the financial services company Marsh & McLennan, was stuck in a North Tower elevator that was lodged within a foot of the lobby level. He finally extricated himself only to experience the eerie sensation of being the only person in the lobby of WTC 1:

"[T]he exhilaration of escape quickly lost steam. There was no one there. No one. The bright, modern lobby of tan marble and polished chrome had been replaced by a scene from nuclear winter. Debris was everywhere."

It is only when Young got outside that he learned the North Tower was on fire. This theme — that a great number of people in and around the buildings had little sense of what was happening — recurs throughout the book. Few officials, for example, anticipated the towers' fall: Those people stuck on the buildings' upper floors who were able to reach building security or 911 operators were simply told to wait, that help was on the way. Alerted by a buildings department engineer, FDNY Chief of

Department Peter Ganci was stunned to hear of the possibility of the South Tower's imminent collapse only moments before it actually happened, leaving no opportunity to warn anyone inside.

This human drama stays with the reader, in particular the heroism and compassion displayed by civilians and uniformed rescuers alike. The authors return several times to two Blue Cross computer analysts, Ed Beyea, a 280-pound quadriplegic, and Abe Zelmanowitz, a slight orthodox Jew, waiting for help on the 27th floor. Zelmanowitz encourages Beyea's nurse to leave the building, saying he will stay with his wheelchair-bound friend. It would take three or four men to move Beyea and his wheelchair, and the elevators are out of service, so the two men wait on the stairwell landing as evacuees stream past them. As they wait, Zelmanowitz helps Beyea talk to his mother by dialing and holding Beyea's cell phone to his ear. Firemen tell them periodically that someone eventually will be able to carry Beyea out. Exhorted to leave numerous times, Zelmanowitz refuses: "No," he says, according to a building staff member, "I'm staying with my friend."

The reader knows from the start how this grim story will end; yet there is suspenseful uncertainty in the stories of other individuals as to whether or not they survive. People in tight spots are rescued by their own gumption or the assistance of others, which in several cases clearly goes above and beyond the call of what anyone could have expected under the circumstances. Port Authority workers Frank De Martini and Pablo Ortiz went up the North Tower stairs when everyone else was streaming down, prying open doors, clearing rubble, and helping others to escape. The two did not make it out.

The accounts, often new, are jarringly detailed, and it is to the authors' credit how effectively they put the reader inside the buildings. Indeed, the book serves as a kind of memorial to the victims, not in granite but in words. Vivid sometimes to the point of lurid, it's difficult to read but harder to put down — and more than enough to make you feel the pain of September 11 all over again.

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