

'It was awful -- the building just went' New Yorkers describe seeing worst happen

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What dawned as a beautiful, sunny workday quickly turned into a surreal scene this morning for New Yorkers who saw the terrorist attacks that leveled the World Trade Center towers.

Clyde Ebanks, an insurance company vice president, was attending a meeting on the 103rd floor of the South Tower of the World Trade Center shortly before 9 a.m. when his boss said, "Look at that!"

Ebanks turned and saw a plane fly by the window and crash into the neighboring building.

About 18 minutes later, Luigi Ribaud -- who works nearby, in Tribeca -- heard a twin-engine plane making what he said was a strange noise. He looked up; he saw a plane that was "too low."

"It was going to hit something and it hit and exploded inside," he said.

Jennifer Brickhouse, 34, of Union, N.J., was riding an escalator up into the World Trade Center when she "heard this big boom" and turned around.

"The minute I got out of the building, the second building blew up," she said. "All this stuff started falling and all this smoke was coming through. People were screaming, falling and jumping out of the windows."

Juli Tolleson, an account supervisor at Rowland Communications in the Saatchi & Saatchi building several blocks away from the towers, described the street scene in the area of the attacks as chaotic and confusing.

"The streets are totally packed," Tolleson said this morning. "The city is completely packed, and people are wandering around not knowing what to do."

Before her building was evacuated, she said, many employees watched the two towers collapse -- including a colleague whose best friend works in the World Trade Center.

"He watched it go down," Tolleson said. "It was awful. It was the most unreal thing. The building just went down, almost in slow motion, and an entire cloud just spread over lower Manhattan."

Another co-worker, Peter Collins, a vice-president at Rowland Communications, saw the second plane strike the second tower.

"As we're watching the building on fire, I saw this plane sweep over the bay and I knew it was from Newark," Collins said. "It kept climbing, and all of a sudden it just went into the building. There was a spectacular fire and then a few seconds later you heard a pop. It went

directly towards it, never deviated."

He said the scene was surreal.

"You're so used to terrorism happening all around you and you become numb to it," Collins said. "You see the spectacular happening right in front of you and you're just like 'whoa.' "

Iris Ashkinos, who lives on the upper East Side, was in a state of disbelief.

"I'm sitting here with tears rolling down my face," she said, having just checked on her son, who was on his way to work in the New York subway before public transit in the city was shut down.

"You feel so vulnerable, so violated. Who knows what is going to happen next?" she said. "These buildings were full of people. It's a busy fall day in New York."

Larry Repanes, who moved to Long Island just four days ago, works for J.P. Morgan on Wall Street a half-dozen blocks away from the World Trade Center. His building shook when the first plane crashed into the center, he said.

"Someone stopped me and said a plane just crashed into the World Trade Center," he said. "I thought it was a joke. Then another one crashed, and I felt this entire building shake. I feel just numb.

"Essentially, we're being held hostage here," he said.

On West Broadway, in the city's fashionable SoHo shopping strip, the silence was sickening.

"There was no sound as these tremendous buildings went down," said Andrew Nelson of San Francisco, who was in New York visiting family and friends. "The World Trade Center was there this morning. I'm looking where the towers should be and they are not there."

Nelson was having coffee in a friend's West Broadway loft when the first of the hijacked commercial jets slammed into the World Trade Center.

"I'm watching the World Trade Center go up in flames," he said at 8:55 a.m.,

not knowing that he was watching the signature moment of the most staggering terrorist attack on the United States unfold.

"All of a sudden we heard this whoosh of low-flying jet, there was this murmur in the streets, knots of people were looking south and started screaming.

"The entire World Trade Center is on fire. Look at the shrapnel falling. It is falling into the streets."

Several minutes later, with crowds of store clerks, office workers and tourists gaping at the destruction, a second plane appeared in the sky.

"This plane banked around the side of the World Trade Center looking like it was going

right at it. There was a huge fireball and it just exploded. People on the street screamed, cried no, no, no, and sobbed," he said. "It is horrifying. There is debris falling from windows. . . People on the street are gesturing, crying, in shock."

Some time later, the two buildings collapsed, first one, then the other. "The funny thing is, from a mile away on West Broadway, there was no sound. There was no sound when these buildings went down," Nelson said.

"New York is shut down," said Alison Brod, a New York City publicist. "This has been terrifying."

Chronicle Staff Writers Tanya Schevitz, Ray Delgado, Larry D. Hatfield, Chuck Finnie, Cynthia Robins and wire reports contributed to this story.



[©2002 San Francisco Chronicle](#) Page A - 2

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