

# ***from* 102 Minutes: The Untold Story of the Fight to Survive Inside the Twin Towers**

by **Jim Dwyer** and **Kevin Flynn**

## **11:00 A.M. GROUND ZERO**

Will Jimeno found himself buried but alive, pinned below the burning ground at the center of the trade center plaza. A load of concrete had fallen onto his lap, and a cinder-block wall rested on one of his feet. The oxygen tank strapped to his back also was wedged into rubble, fixing him in a semblance of a seated position, bent at a forty-five-degree angle. Of the four other Port Authority police officers who had been running with him through the concourse, pushing a cart full of rescue gear, only one, Sgt. John McLoughlin, was still alive. Two members of their group had been killed immediately by the collapse of the south tower. A third officer, Dominick Pezzulo, had managed to free himself and was picking at the rubble around Jimeno when the collapse of the north tower killed him.

Now Jimeno was slumped in the hole, talking occasionally with McLoughlin, who was even deeper in the heap than Jimeno. The two men had no view of each other.

“Can you see sky?” McLoughlin asked.

“No sky, but light,” Jimeno replied.

The sergeant worked his radio. No one answered. McLoughlin, who over the years had led elevator rescues at the trade center and rappelled<sup>1</sup> into the blind shafts, told Jimeno that the rescue operations would have to pull back for a day, until the scene was stable. They were on their own.

All across the northeastern United States, people were essentially on their own, stepping into the first minutes of a new epoch<sup>2</sup> without the protections of an old world

order whose institutions and functions seemed to have turned instantly decrepit.<sup>3</sup> So a consideration of the events of September 11, 2001, could begin at any one of numerous spots across the globe, at almost any moment over the preceding four decades: the end of the Cold War;<sup>4</sup> the collapse of the Soviet Union;<sup>5</sup> any hour of any year in the unfinished history of the Middle East; in the often empty and petty exercise of authority in the capital of the world's only superpower; at the boiling, nihilistic<sup>6</sup> springs of religious fundamentalism<sup>7</sup> that not only have endured but have thrived as forces in opposition to globalism, capitalism, modernism.

Those historic currents, and others, merged and crashed on the morning of September 11 at the two towers of the World Trade Center, and at the Pentagon, and in a field in Pennsylvania. The particulars of the era that had just passed—the expectations of protection, the habits of defense, the sense of safety—seemed to have fossilized<sup>8</sup> from one breath to the next. What happened in New York City that morning was replicated through all the arms of government, differing only in details, duration, and cost.

An hour or so after the collapse, Will Jimeno, buried beneath the plaza, heard a voice coming through the same hole where the light was entering. The voice wanted to know if a particular person was down in the hole. Jimeno could not quite make out the name, but he was delighted by the sound of another human voice.

“No, but Jimeno and McLoughlin, PAPD, are down here,” he yelled.

The voice did not answer, but moved off, and they heard no more from him.

Balls of fire tumbled into their tiny space, a gust of wind or a draft steering them

away, the fire spending itself before it could find another morsel of fuel. Jimeno, thirty-three years old, felt that death was near. His wife, Allison, and their four-year-old daughter, Bianca, would be sad, but proud, he thought. The Jimenos' second child was due at the end of November. So he prayed.

Please, God, let me see my little unborn child.

Jimeno tried to make a bargain. He might die, but surely there was a way he could do something for this child.

Somehow in the future, he prayed, let me touch this baby.

Then shots rang out.

The fireballs had apparently heated up the gun of the late Dominick Pezzulo. The rounds pinged off pipes and concrete, erratic and unpredictable, until the last of the ammunition was gone.

With his one free arm, Jimeno reached his gun belt for something to dig with. He had graduated from the Port Authority Police Academy in January and was issued the standard police tools, but he already owned his own handcuffs—a pair made by Smith & Wesson, bought when he was a security guard in a store, arresting shoplifters. He scraped at the rubble with them, but the cuffs slipped out of his hands, and he could not find them again.

No one had heard from Chuck Sereika, and by midmorning, the messages had piled up on his telephone answering machine and in his e-mail. Can't believe it. Hope you're okay. Our hearts are with you.

Sereika woke up. He had slept through everything, not a whisper of trouble in his

apartment in midtown Manhattan. The e-mails told him something awful had happened, then news on his computer spelled it out, and as he blinked into the new world, he heard the messages on his answering machine. His sister had called.

“I love you,” she said. “I know you’re down there helping.”

Actually, he had been moping. In his closet, he found a paramedic<sup>9</sup> sweatshirt and a badge he had not used for years. He had lost his paramedic license, let it lapse after he squandered too many days and nights carousing. He had gone into rehab programs, slipped, then climbed back on the wagon. He had fought his way back to sobriety, but the paramedic work was behind him. He still had the sweatshirt, though, and no one had taken the badge away. Maybe he could do some splints and bandages. He walked outside. Midtown Manhattan was teeming with people, a stream of humanity trooping in the middle of avenues, the subways shut down and scarcely a bus to be seen. The only way to move was on foot, and by the tens of thousands, people were walking north, or over to the river for ferries, or into Penn Station for a commuter train that would take them east to Long Island or west to New Jersey.

Sereika walked a few blocks from his apartment to St. Luke’s-Roosevelt Hospital Center. Then he hitched rides on ambulances going downtown.

Seven World Trade Center—a forty-seven-story building—collapsed at 5:20 that afternoon. The firefighters had decided to let the fire there burn itself out. There was no one inside. Against all that had happened, the loss of even such an enormous building seemed like a footnote.

David Karnes had arrived downtown not long after its collapse, and as far as he could see, the searches were confined entirely to the periphery of the complex, picking

through the rubble at the edges for signs of life. Other structures were now burning—the low-rise building at 4 World Trade Center was shooting flames—and all hands were staying clear of the ruins of the two towers and the plaza between them.

Karnes had started the morning in a business suit, working as an accountant for Deloitte and Touche in Wilton, Connecticut. After the attacks, he drove from Connecticut to Long Island and went to a storage facility where he kept his Marine kit. His utility trousers and jacket were freshly pressed, though his commitment had ended months earlier. Trim as a whip, he slipped into them, drove to a barber, and ordered a high and tight haircut. He stopped at his church and asked for prayers with the pastor, then with the top down on his new convertible, drove straight for lower Manhattan.

He found the rescue workers in shock, depressed, doing little by way of organized searches. Karnes spotted another Marine, a man named Sergeant Thomas, no first name.

“Come on, Sergeant,” Karnes said. “Let’s take a walk.”

Not another soul was around them. They swept across the broken ground, yelling, “United States Marines. If you can hear us, yell or tap.”

No one answered. They moved forward, deeper into the rubble. The fires roared at 4 World Trade Center. They plowed across the jagged, fierce ground.

Lost in thought, waiting for release, Will Jimeno listened to the trade center complex ripping itself apart. He had gotten tired of shouting at phantoms. He asked McLoughlin to put out a radio message that Officer Jimeno wanted his newborn baby to be named Olivia. The sergeant was in excruciating pain, his legs crushed. There was nothing to

do, Jimeno thought, except wait until they sent out rescue parties in the morning. If they lived that long.

Then came the voice.

“United States Marines. If you can hear us, yell or tap.”

What? That was a person.

Jimeno shouted with every bit of strength he had.

“Right here! Jimeno and McLoughlin, PAPD! Here!”

“Keep yelling,” Karnes said.

It took a few minutes, but Karnes found the hole.

“Don’t leave,” Jimeno pleaded.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Karnes said.

Karnes pulled out his cell phone and dialed 911, but the call did not go through. He tried again, without success. How could he get help, without leaving Jimeno and McLoughlin? Maybe the problem was with phone lines downtown, and he could find an electronic bridge via someone outside the city. He dialed his sister in a suburb of Pittsburgh and got through. She called the local police. They were able to reach the New York police. The message had traveled 300 miles from the pile to Pennsylvania, then 300 miles back to police headquarters, but the NYPD finally learned that a few blocks away, two cops were buried in the middle of the pile, and a United States Marine was standing by to direct the rescuers.

Chuck Sereika had been wandering the edge of that pile as evening approached, when he heard people yelling that someone had been found in the center of the place. Sereika set out, walking part of the way with a firefighter. They could see the flames

roaring from the remains of 4 World Trade Center, an eight-story building. The firefighter peeled away. By himself, Sereika stumbled and climbed, until he found Dave Karnes standing alone. From the surface, he could see nothing of Will Jimeno, but he could hear him. Sereika squeezed his way into a crevice, inching his way down the rubble, finally spotting Jimeno's hand.

"Hey," Sereika said.

"Don't leave me," Jimeno said.

Sereika felt for a pulse. A good, strong distal pulse,<sup>10</sup> a basic in emergency care.

"Don't leave me," Jimeno said.

"We're not going to leave you," Sereika said. He pawed at the rubble and found Jimeno's gun, which he passed up to Karnes. Then he sent word for oxygen and an intravenous setup.<sup>11</sup> Two emergency service police officers, Scott Strauss and Paddy McGee, soon arrived, and Sereika handed rocks and rubble back to them. A fireman, Tom Ascher, arrived with a hose to fight off the flames. They could hear McLoughlin calling out for help.

We will get there, they promised.

The basics of trauma care are simple: provide fluids and oxygen. Simple—except that in the hole at the trade center, they could not take the next step in the classic formula: "load and go." First they had to extricate Jimeno, a highly delicate proposition.

Sereika could hear 4 World Trade Center groaning to its bones. To shift large pieces off Jimeno risked starting a new slide. There was room in the hole only for one person at a time, and Sereika was basically on top of him. It was not unlike working under the dashboard of a car, except the engine was on fire and the car was speeding and about

to crash. The space was filled with smoke. Strauss and McGee were carefully moving the rubble, engineering on the fly, so that they could shift loads without bringing more debris down on themselves or on Jimeno and McLoughlin. Tools were passed from the street along a line of helpers. A handheld air chisel. Shears. When the Hurst jaws of life<sup>12</sup> tool arrived, the officers wanted to use it to lift one particularly heavy section, but they could not quite get solid footing on the rubble. Sereika, the lapsed paramedic, immediately sized up the problem and shimmed rubble into place for the machine to rest on.

The work inched forward, treacherous and hot and slow.

After four hours, at 11 P.M., Will Jimeno was freed. They loaded him into a basket, slid him up the path to the surface. That left only John McLoughlin, deeper still, but none of the group in and around the hole could go on. They called down a fresh team that would work until the morning before they finally pulled him out, not long before the last survivor from stairway B, Genelle Guzman, would also be reached.

Above ground, the men who had gone into the hole with Will Jimeno found they could barely walk. Smoke reeked from the hair on their heads, soot packed every pore on their skin. Sereika stumbled up from the crevice in time to see Jimeno in his basket being passed along police officers and firefighters who had set up a line, scores of people deep, across the jagged, broken ground.

He could not keep up with his patient. He could just about get himself to the sidewalk. He had worked for hours alongside the other men, first names only, and Sereika was employed by no official agency, no government body. Once they left the hole, the men lost track of each other. Just as people had come to work by themselves

hours earlier, at the start of the day—an entire age ago—now Chuck Sereika was starting for home on his own. His old paramedic shirt torn, he plodded north in the late-summer night, alone, scuffling down streets blanketed by the dust that had been the World Trade Center.