

# 9/11 Revisited

By John Littlefield

At 8:46 on the morning of September 11, 2001, the United States became a nation transformed, the emotional intensity of the attacks seared the moment deep into the nation's soul. Now reborn, the 9/11 site in New York City is an architectural wonder. The hole in the sky left by the Twin Towers is now filled by *One World Trade Center* which rises even higher than the Twin Towers it was built to honour. Symbolically, it is 1,776 feet tall, the tallest building in the Western Hemisphere, and, in a nod to a motto of Washington's continental army of 1776, defiantly signals, 'Don't tread on me!'

The immeasurable pain of 9/11 remains acute, and while saluting the victims and others affected by it, this article, while paying tribute to the way in which New York has risen from the ashes and the way in which the victims are remembered, touches on some of the strengths and weaknesses of actions triggered by the attacks.

I was in New York shortly after the 2001 attacks when the centre of down-town Manhattan was literally a bomb site. This year, at times conscious of intruding on others' grief, I revisited the former 'Ground Zero' to admire how the city had, at least physically, dealt with the aftermath of the horror. Notwithstanding, health problems persist, with survivors' guilt, PTSD, and other illnesses such as cancer resulting from exposure to toxins.



Reborn: One World Trade Center<sup>®</sup>  
Image courtesy Creative Commons license



The Twin Towers with the  
Communications Tower atop  
the North Tower  
Image: Public domain

At the heart of the re-birth is the *National 9/11 Museum and Memorial*, its central purpose honouring those who died in the 2001 and 1993 attacks. It is the nation's principal body concerned with exploring events of the day, documenting its impact, and examining its continuing significance. The memorial comprises twin waterfall pools, *Reflecting Absence*, in the footprints of the former Twin Towers, each surrounded by bronze panels inscribed with the names of the victims of the 1993 and 2001 attacks. To visit the memorial is an inspiring and affecting experience.

At twenty-one metres below ground is the museum, its design fragmented to resemble a partially collapsed building mirroring the aftermath of the attack. Media, narratives, and a collection of monumental and authentic artefacts are presented to visitors together with personal stories of loss, recovery, and hope. Exhibits include wrecked emergency vehicles; structural sections from all the World Trade Center buildings; aircraft parts; recordings of survivors and emergency services; pictures of all the victims; photographs from the wreckage and other media detailing the destruction. In a graphic representation of the turmoil, destruction, and anguish of the day, the memorial and museum are effortlessly evocative, both expressing the disbelief and heartache of New York and the nation.

There is of course no distinction between victims, but one museum exhibit drew me to the tragedy of the Telecoms engineers trapped at the summit of the North Tower. Prominently displayed and at first sight appearing like a burnt-out space re-entry vehicle, was a 20-foot section of the Transmission Tower that stood atop the North Tower. The 360-foot tower began broadcasting TV and radio signals in 1980 replacing the Empire State Building as the transmitting centre for stations in New York. Six broadcast engineers working from offices located on the 104<sup>th</sup> and 110<sup>th</sup> floors of the North Tower were trapped above the impact zone when hijacked American

Airlines Flight 11 tore into the building. Able to communicate with colleagues elsewhere in the city, they reported that primary power had failed but back-up emergency generators seemed to be functioning. Later, they reported that the spaces were hot and filling with smoke. Broadcast engineer Steven Jacobson called a colleague at NBC headquarters in midtown Manhattan who, on behalf of the imperilled engineers, relayed Jacobson's information to the North Tower's fire command station urging firefighters not to forget those working at the building's summit. All transmissions ceased by 10:28 when the tower collapsed. None of the engineers survived.



20-foot fragment of the 360-foot-tall transmission tower from atop the North Tower.

Displaying steady determination and resolve, New York's emergency services inspired the nation. Under horrifying and overwhelming conditions, their actions saved many lives but cost many of their own. Technically, according to the 9/11 Commission's report, interoperability across multiple commands was hampered by non-standard operating procedures and radio equipment. With the magnitude of the incident unforeseen, Fire Department commanders had difficulty communicating with their units; more were dispatched than were ordered, and some that were self-dispatched were neither accounted for nor coordinated. Exceptionally, New York's Police Department was more prepared. Accustomed to mobilising in large numbers, they were equipped with radios and protocols that were fit for purpose. Again, according to the Commission's report, the most important failure leading to the attacks was one of imagination. 'The attacks were a shock, but they should not have come as a surprise.' Whoever would have thought . . . ?