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U.S.



The south tower of the World Trade Center begins to collapse following a terrorist attack on the New York landmark Tuesday, Sept. 11, 2001. (AP Photo/Amy Sancetta)

The Moment of Collapse

A Smothering, Black Cloud Covered Us All

By [Michael McAuliff](#)



NEW YORK, Sept. 11 — The balding man with a salt-and-pepper mustache and a World Trade Center ID card hanging around his neck stood across the street, almost joyous, a block from where the twin towers burned.

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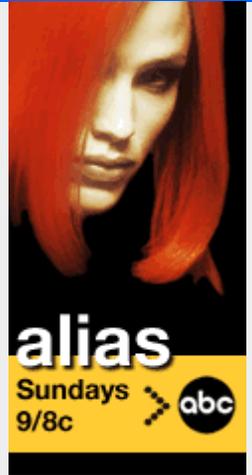
He was speckled with dust and stained with sweat and sprinkler-system water from his flight down 81 floors of Tower 1, where he worked.

"I thought it was a bomb," he said. "The ceiling started to collapse, and we just started to get out."

He began to say more, his relief visible as the realization that he was outside and alive sank in.

A deep rumble from the other side of the block stopped him. The joy left his face.

Everyone looked around at the heavy sound that could only be coming from Tower 2. Some started running, some milled, wondering where to flee or hide.



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A Black, Smothering Cloud

A cloud, black and starting at the ground along Broadway, flooded out from the other side of the block around the base of buildings, growing huge around the sides of the skyscrapers in seconds, shooting towards the corner.

A reporter grabbed two women and a third person, perhaps the man from the 81st floor, and nudged them around the back of a column.

"Stay against the wall, keep your head down," he said.

The cloud struck and it felt almost solid. All light vanished.

"Breathe through your shirt. Breathe through your shirt," someone yelled.

"Stay down."

The light didn't return as seconds dragged on. Breathing grew hard, even through cloth. Sound seemed almost to cease. The sirens were gone. Shouts of evacuation crews just across the street vanished. Nothing could be heard from the wrecked buildings.

It felt for those moments like it was just beginning, like the smothering cloud was forcing the oxygen from the air, like silent death.

Return of Light

More seconds dragged by. Sound leaked back first, then the hint of light, but it was impossible to blink dust from eyes for another minute.

When it cleared enough, the reporter urged the people he huddled with to walk away as best they could, towards the light to the east.

He found a man down the street, a gray figure curled against a building. Blood seeped from a gash on his head.

The man's handkerchief, which had kept the dust from his lungs, was used to dab the wound, and clear the coating of ash and debris.

He stumbled off after the other people. He, like them, had survived again.

But there was no more joy, or even relief, on anyone's face. ■

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