

The Greatest Job in the World

1 On September 11, 2001, hundreds of New York City firefighters rushed into the burning World Trade Center. That day, 343 firefighters lost their lives trying to save others. This is the story of six who survived.

2 On the morning of September 11, these six firefighters reported for duty at their firehouse in downtown New York. At 9:46 A.M., they got the call. A plane had just hit the North Tower of the World Trade Center, just a few blocks away. The men arrived at the tower within minutes. As they waited in the lobby for orders from their captain, John Jonas, they heard a rumble and then an explosion. A second plane had hit the South Tower. In the windows of a building across the street, they saw the reflection of the explosion. Firefighter Sal D'Agostino turned to the man next to him. "This is not going to be good," he said.

3 Captain Jonas figured the fire had probably spread down to the 80th floor. He and his men would have to climb 80 flights of stairs with 110 pounds of equipment on their backs. They entered a stairwell and started to walk up.

4 The stairwell was narrow, allowing only two people to pass at a time. On one side of the stairwell, there was a long line of people walking down. On the other side of the stairwell, there was a long line of firefighters walking up. The people descending the stairs encouraged the firefighters. "God bless you, firemen," they said. "Take care . . . Go get 'em . . . Good luck."

5 By the time the firefighters got to the 27th floor, there were no longer any people going down the stairs. Captain Jonas told his men to stop and catch their breath. They still had more than 50 floors to go. Then, while pausing in the stairwell, they heard another rumble—the sound of the South Tower going

down. Captain Jonas looked at his men and said, "If that one can go, this one can go. Time to go."

The firefighters began their descent. At 6 the 14th floor, they met Josephine, a 60-year-old woman who had walked down from the 73rd floor. She was so tired, she could barely take another step. At the rate she was going, it would take her hours to get out of the building.

Captain Jonas told Bill Butler, the 7 strongest man in the group, to help the woman. "Josephine," Bill said, "we're going to get you out of here today."

The firefighters were in a race against 8 time. The South Tower had collapsed, and they feared the North Tower might soon follow. Sal D'Agostino remembers looking at the numbers that marked each floor and thinking, "All right, I'm on eight, I'm on seven, I want out of this building now. Let's go." The men encouraged Josephine to move faster. They asked her questions about her family, and they kept telling her, "Josephine, your kids and your grandkids want you home today. We gotta keep moving." Urged on by the firefighters, leaning on Bill Butler, Josephine was moving as fast as she could, but she was exhausted. Her legs were giving out. Tony Falco, one of the firefighters, remembers thinking they had to move faster but adds, "We weren't going to leave her."

9 So Josephine and the firefighters did the best they could, slowly moving down the stairwell. Then they reached the fourth floor. "That's it," Josephine said. "I can't go any more."

Captain Jonas remembers feeling "very 10 frustrated. I got all my guys in front of me. We gotta get outta here." He searched the fourth floor for a chair to carry Josephine in.

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All he could find were swiveling office chairs and some couches, and neither would work.

- 11 Then there was another rumble. The North Tower was collapsing. Firefighter Matt Komorowski remembers, “The first thing I felt was the incredible rush of air at my back.” Then the building started shaking. Sal D’Agostino says, “I got on my side and I crawled to a doorway, and then I just laid there. Waiting for it to come. This is it. This is horrible, and this is it. I said a prayer.”
- 12 When the rumbling finally stopped, it was pitch black, and the firefighters were covered with six inches of dust. But they were alive, scattered now in the stairwell between floors two and four. Bill Butler moved a piece of wall that had fallen near his feet. Under the wall was Josephine. She was alive.
- 13 Josephine and the firefighters sat in the stairwell, dark as a cave, for several hours. The firefighters remained calm and, for the most part, so did Josephine. Only once she said, “I’m . . . I’m scared.” In the calmest voice he could manage, Captain Jonas told her, “Look, we’re all a little scared, darlin’. Just hang in there.”
- 14 Then the dust and smoke began to clear, and a shaft of sunlight shone on Josephine and the firefighters. “All of a sudden,” Bill Butler says, “everything cleared just for a moment. And I could see that we were at the top of this debris pile. And I thought, ‘This is going to be OK. We’re going to be OK here.’”
- 15 One of the firefighters followed the light to a hole, climbed out, and found a rope so that he could lead the others out of the stairwell. But what about Josephine? The firefighters knew that once they left the build-

ing, they would have to cross piles of debris. Josephine wouldn’t be able to walk across all the rubble, and it would be too dangerous to carry her. So, they waited with Josephine until rescuers came.

The rescuers arrived, and an hour later the 16 firefighters and Josephine were out of the ruins of the World Trade Center. The firefighters’ determination to stick together—and to stick with Josephine—had saved their lives. When Josephine refused to go any farther than the fourth floor, she kept all seven of them in the only part of the North Tower that remained intact.

A week after the collapse of the World 17 Trade Center, reporters interviewed Josephine. She described the six firefighters as “strong, brave, and caring . . . the kindest people I have ever met. When I was scared, they held my hand. They took off their jackets and gave them to me when I was cold. They told me not to be afraid, they would get me out. And they did.” She added that when they were trapped in the stairwell, she thought the building was going to start moving again. One of the firefighters told her that if the building started to move again, they would put her in a doorway. And he would cover her body with his.

Reporters asked the firefighters if they 18 had any thoughts about leaving the job. All six men said they would not. Sal D’Agostino said, “I think everybody thinks about it. But I’m not going. I’ve got to be true to me.” Matt Komorowski explained, “I think being a fireman runs through your core. And even if bad things are happening all around that core, you always have that core.” Tony Falco added, “I don’t think I’m going to leave. It’s the greatest job in the world.” ♦