

The Unthinkable Happened

A New York TV station news director reveals how 9/11 changed our lives forever. | **By Karen Scott**

The unthinkable happened. It happened on a bright sunny fall day—September 11th—a typical day for us. We were getting ready for our primary-election coverage that evening. The WB11 *Morning Show* started out like any other day, on this day our world was changed forever.

For almost a week straight we were on air live for 20 hrs. at a clip, providing coverage, information, help to our city viewers and the entire Tribune network nationwide.

We lost one engineer in the attack, Steve Jacobson. Steve worked at the World Trade Center transmission site. He had been a loyal and dedicated employee for WPIX for 27 years. He was a husband and a father of two children. As an indication of Steve's dedication to the job, during the 1993 bombing of the WTC, he stayed on the job until midnight, enduring heavy smoke conditions until the fire was put out, to

assure that the transmitter was operating properly when power was restored.

Our news-room team endured incredible moments when many thought they would not make it out of ground zero alive. News and Engineering, along with every department at WPIX, showed exceptional professionalism in these days of crisis.

As the news director my number one goal is usually to inform the viewers—to get breaking news out as soon as possible.

Because we had the first all-digital helicopter in New York City we were the only civilian chopper allowed to remain in the air on 9/11. But there were other massive communications problems.

But I realized very quickly this was a catastrophic event. My main concern was: who was dead; the safety of our crews; how many were dead and how many survived? The

magnitude of the event quickly unfolded before our eyes.

We ran back into the control room and we raced onto the airwaves after the first plane hit at approximately 8:48 a.m. The second plane hit at 9:03. The south tower collapsed at 10:05 and the north tower at



10:28. We knew Steve was at his controls in the transmission room. It was very hard to watch. In disbelief we showed the towers going down. We stayed on the air for 20 hours a day, non-stop, with no commercials for a week.

Digital Chopper: At the time of 9/11 we had the first all-digital helicopter in New York City. It enabled us to transmit aerials and pictures from a greater distance. As a result we were the only civilian chopper allowed to stay in the air on 9/11 and we transmitted the story for the entire world.

Broadcast tower: When the WTC collapsed, we were not broadcasting. Obviously, we would like a backup. We were being carried by other transmission sources (cable, etc.).

Radios: Nextels and mobile phones were out of service. 2-ways seemed to work but were very busy.

Landline phones were frequently busy. We couldn't call for information, communicate to others, do phoners, etc. Some service was available.

Access to the island was denied. Reporters/producers outside Manhattan could not enter, even with press cards. Those here could not leave for fear of not being able to return. When a disaster hits, our entire news staff knows to call in or just come to the station. Many who lived in Manhattan did so immediately. But some of our personnel, including my executive producer, John Houseman live on Long Island. Here, in his own words, is how he got to work.

"The issue of security came to the forefront in the minutes, hours, and days after the attack on New York. No one can question the decision to 'seal' the city by closing all bridges and tunnels into Manhattan. Thousands of terrified New Yorkers were fleeing the city on foot... too scared to get on the subways, most of

which were also shut down out of security concerns.

“For those of us trying to get into the city, patience and perseverance were the order of the day. As an example, it took me four hours to negotiate my way into Manhattan from Long Island. A large group of employees who live on Long Island

gathered at the offices of *Newsday* in Melville to plot a strategy for getting into Manhattan. The Long Island Railroad had been shut down. The only way was by car. The first big obstacle was the fact that the Long Island Expressway, the main highway off Long Island and into the city, was closed westbound into the city for more than 40 miles all the way to the Midtown Tunnel. The only vehicles allowed were emergency vehicles, fire trucks, and ambulances. Riding in a press vehicle, we had to work our way through five or six hastily formed checkpoints. Some were local police, some state police. We finally ended up joining a caravan of emergency vehicles and riding along.

“When we finally made it to the Midtown Tunnel, we learned that no press credential on earth was going to allow us to cross the East River into Manhattan with a car. We were directed to the 59th Street Bridge. The cops said we might have better luck there. Traveling the few miles from the tunnel to the bridge turned into a one-hour nightmare all its own. The streets were packed with traffic and thousands of people traveling on foot.

When the bridge was within eyesight, which is to

say about a mile away, we abandoned the car and set out on foot. The police said that was our only chance of getting into

Manhattan. Again we had to work our way through several barricades. I was traveling with the producer of our *News at Ten*, Robert Cucchiaro, and one of our reporters, Jill Conway. I don't think any of us will

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ever forget that bizarre scene. Thousands of people walking towards us, fighter planes soaring across the sky directly over the bridge as they circled Manhattan, and a view to the south of a smoke-filled sky that made it seem as if the whole city was on fire. Needless to say we walked as quickly as possible. Our N.Y.P.D. press credentials were checked several times and we had to talk our way out of problems because Robert was relatively new to WPIX and did not have a valid press i.d. card. Luckily, the police officers we encountered were quickly convinced that only the truly insane would be trying to get into the city at that hour if they did not have essential work.”

Employees trying to come into Manhattan from New Jersey experienced similar problems. One reporter, Marvin Scott, only made it in by persuading a boat owner to take him across. That option was not generally available to the rest of our staff stuck on the other side of the Hudson River.

We have to be prepared if the worst happens.

The issue of “sealing” the city was also manifested during the November 12th



WPIX-TV's all-digital chopper.

for example, currently have phone update lines.

Second, we need to be able to move crews, trucks and the chopper. When American Airlines flight 587 went down in Queens we were lucky that we moved immediately or we would not have gotten our trucks to the

crash of American 587 on Long Island. Within moments of hearing about the crash, we at WPIX dispatched all of our crews and live trucks out of Manhattan. Some of our competitors who did not react as quickly could not get their live trucks out of the city and could not put those reporters on the air because they had no remote trucks on site.

The two biggest problems faced on 9/11 were moving crews around once Manhattan went under lockdown and communicating with crews once the towers collapsed.

First, we need a system so that we can get accurate and up-to-date information as soon as its available from local, state, and federal officials. Perhaps a system can be developed that combines e-mail alerts, Internet access and phone updates. That way if one method fails there's still another source for information. In an emergency we should not have to wait until a press conference can be organized. The FAA in New York and the Florida State Police,

scene. A system should be developed so that credentialed media do not get caught in a lockdown or frozen zone.

Finally, we have to be prepared if the worst happens. If a case of smallpox is detected or if a dirty bomb is detonated, how many members of the media will stay in Manhattan? The answer is that nobody knows. But if we are at least ready with

We had to stop to think that in the midst of terrorism, death and destruction, living under the highest state of alert, news and engineering personnel, with great risk to themselves worked around the clock for almost a month straight to get coverage to our viewers.

proper protective gear and potassium iodide, we may be able to maintain a staff to keep a broadcast on the air. Some sort of Panic Newsroom and Panic Live Truck needs to be developed. There are already cameras throughout the metro area. Also, the media and the government should collaborate and expand the installation of cameras throughout the entire metro area. If an evacuation of the area were required we could still get the story on

the air with video.

When the planes hit the World Trade Center we watched our broadcast signal go out. We lost W.T.C. transmitting capability at 9:12 a.m. Our cell phones did not work; pay phones had long lines; there was no-long distance service; and our Nextels went down because it was pure overload on the system. All of Verizon's equipment near the towers was blown up. Our assignment desk used the 450 radio but it was difficult getting in contact with our crews and reporters.

Our pagers worked...we have two-way pagers. Nextels came back before Verizon did and that's how we communicated. We were carried on certain cable companies because WPIX had fiber feeds that went directly to the cable outlet like Time Warner Cable.

In late afternoon our engineering department put a small transmitter and antenna on the *Daily News* building on 42nd Street, where our studios are located. This transmitter covered approximately one square mile of Manhattan. The following day we removed that same transmitter to a small balcony on the 81st floor of the Empire State Building at 34th Street, broadcasting to the north. Three days later we placed Channel 64 on the south side of the Empire State Building for coverage towards Brooklyn. But in the next week we were up on a 920-foot-high tower in Alpine, New Jersey, 18 miles from Manhattan. WPIX shared

this site with ABC. NBC, ABC, and Channel 13 (PBS). In all the madness we stayed on live for 20 hours at a clip—no commercials—only going over to CNN for four hours a day, from 1:00 to 5:00 a.m. For Tribnet stations throughout the country and CNN we fed our live digital chopper shots out via fiber.

I could go on about the courage of our engineer Steve Jacobson who died in the transmission room on top of the World Trade Center or our cameraman who was blown into a building when the WTC towers fell. The big white cloud with tornado strength killed many people. He held onto his camera. He survived to tell his story.

Or the reporter and crew who huddled in their live truck believing they would be dead as the towers came down with such force around them.

Or the cameraman who was caught in the force of the towers falling and ran with his camera light on so other people could try to run to safety. This cameraman found an abandoned city bus and turned on its lights and started honking its horn so other people could find their way to him and safety.

I could tell you of hundreds of people lined up around our building holding pictures of loved ones hoping to get on our news program in order to find their mother or father or husband or wife or brother or sister or friend alive.

That day forever changed our lives.

A former news producer for WNBC-TV New York, Karen Scott has been news director of WPIX-TV (WB/11 New York) since 1996. She is the winner of 12 New York Emmy® Awards, three Edward R. Murrow Awards, as well as honors from the Associated Press and the New York State Broadcasters Association.