

# DAILY NEWS

## GIULIANI & GROUP OF TOP COPS BARELY DODGED DEATH AS TOWERS FELL

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Before Sept. 11, no one in the Police Department could recall hearing the distress call "Code Black" screamed over the police radio before. Just as a "10-13" is the radio code for officer in distress, Code Black is the call that means the mayor or the police commissioner is in danger.

When the south tower of the World Trade Center imploded, Mayor Giuliani, Police Commissioner Bernard Kerik and their top aides were trapped inside a building at 75 Barclay St. With telephones knocked out, Kerik's bodyguard, Detective Hector Santiago, called a "Code Black" over the police radio frequency. Those who knew what it meant understood how serious the situation was. "That's the first time I ever heard a 'Code Black' called," said Kerik, who protected the Saudi royal family before he became a cop. "I knew it was bad, but I didn't know how bad."

Just how close the NYPD's top command came to being wiped out in the terrorist attack has never before been fully revealed. Kerik, along with his first deputy commissioner, the chief of department, the deputy commissioner of operations, the chief of detectives and other top brass were all in close proximity to the burning towers, and dodged rubble and debris as the structures fell.

"We were all probably too close to the scene," said Assistant Chief Thomas Fahey, a police spokesman. "We were very lucky." When American Airlines Flight 11 crashed into the south tower at 8:48 a.m., Kerik was taking a shower in his private bathroom on the 14th floor of Police Headquarters. Moments later, Chief of Staff John Picciano was banging on the door, telling Kerik that a plane had struck the World Trade Center. The top cop assumed it was a small twin-engine aircraft or some kind of stunt plane that hit the building by accident. "I went to the conference room and looked out the window," Kerik said yesterday. "I thought there was no way a small plane could have done that much damage. I'm thinking it was a bomb."

Kerik dashed to his antique desk, the one once used by another police commissioner, Theodore Roosevelt, and called Giuliani, who was already heading downtown. The top cop was out of the building and in his sleek black Chrysler Concorde within five minutes. With him were Picciano, NYPD spokesman Thomas Antenen and bodyguards Santiago and Craig Taylor.

They decamped at West Broadway between Liberty and Barclay Sts. People were running past them, screaming hysterically. There were poor souls jumping from the burning towers. Seemed like a safe spot. At that moment, the NYPD brass was still not thinking terrorist attack or building collapse. "We were thinking it was a towering inferno, that it was just going to burn," said Deputy Inspector Chris Rising, a close aide to Kerik.

Then the unimaginable happened before their eyes. "I was turning around to talk to [Picciano] when I heard the revving of an engine," Kerik recalled. "Somebody said the plane slowed down as it got to the tower. And then the explosion. "Over the radio the ESU [Emergency Service Unit] guys were yelling it was a United airliner. At that point, I realized it was definitely a terrorist attack.

"My mind switched gears," he said. "Now I had to think: how many more planes are there? Where are they coming from? What are the other targets?"

Two minutes later, the mayor's vehicle pulled up. Kerik told Giuliani the city was under attack.

"The first thing out of [Giuliani's] mouth - he didn't miss a beat - he said, 'We got to cut off the air space,' " Kerik said. "I told Picciano to get us some air support."

The mayor's group, which included First Deputy Mayor Joe Lhota and top aides Tony Carbonetti and Sunny Mindel, huddled with Kerik, and they decided it was too dangerous to move to the city's command center at 7 World Trade Center.

The group walked to the south side of West St. in front of the American Express building, where they saw Fire Department brass, including Bill Feehan, the first deputy commissioner; Chief of Department Pete Ganci; Deputy Chief Ray Downey, and a chaplain, Rev. Mychal Judge.

Kerik also saw a familiar NYPD face, ESU Sgt. John Coughlin who in August 2000 had responded to the top cop's own family distress call when Kerik's 15-month-old daughter was choking at his Manhattan apartment.

"When I sped home that night, he was the first person standing in my vestibule. He was playing with my baby while my wife was hysterical. I've seen him a hundred times since then," Kerik said. Coughlin hasn't been seen since the attack. "He was a great guy," Kerik said. Command center on move The mayor and the police group decided to find another command center north of the Trade Center. A retired NYPD lieutenant came by and advised them to use a Merrill Lynch office at 75 Barclay St.

As they headed toward Barclay St., it was the last time they would see the four Fire Department officials and Sgt. Coughlin alive. Rescue workers recovered the bodies of the Fire officials, but Coughlin is among the 23 NYPD cops still listed as missing. Setting up shop in a first-floor office at Merrill, Giuliani was on the phone with the White House when a rumble was heard and the building began to shake. A detective ran into the room and yelled, "Hit the deck!" Kerik said the windows of the Merrill Lynch building started popping. "Then all of a sudden this gush of smoke and dust burst in through the door," he said. "I can remember thinking: 'If the building doesn't fall on us, we're going to suffocate.' "

Their bodyguards yelled "Code Black," and broadcast their location of the building. Then they grabbed Kerik and Giuliani and tried to lead them out. Building maintenance workers led them through the basement, but the group found no exit, only locked doors. Finally, they made it out to Church St., where, miraculously, their city cars were waiting for them.

"My driver and the mayor's driver were side by side on West Broadway when the tower fell," Kerik marveled. "They backed up 80 miles per hour up West Broadway and never hit a thing. Every car around 75 Barclay St. was demolished, but they beat it out of there."

Kerik would hear a radio transmission that the first deputy commissioner and chief of department were dead. He did not know it referred to the Fire Department's Feehan and Ganci. A team of cops was dispatched to the home of NYPD Chief of Department Joe Esposito to await further orders. Esposito turned up okay. First Deputy Joseph Dunne also turned up safe, although his sport-utility vehicle was crushed under debris. Kerik said there is no second-guessing about having so many top cops at the scene.

"If anything happens to any one of us, there's a line of succession," he said. "Leaders should lead by example." Did he think he was going to die?

"I was angry," Kerik said, "because it's not often in this job that you don't have control over what's going on."