

“We Can’t Abandon Her”

CAPTAIN JOHN “JAY” JONAS

Fire Department of New York

World Trade Center . . . ten-sixty. Send every available ambulance, everything you’ve got to the World Trade Center . . . Now!”

In his 20-plus years at the Fire Department of New York, Captain Jay Jonas had never heard such a radio transmission before. “Ten-sixty” meant a catastrophic event. He and his five men from Chinatown’s Ladder Company 6—nicknamed the Dragon Fighters—leaped onto their 50-foot-long hook-and-ladder truck, which then roared out of the firehouse. Mike “Mickey” Meldrum was behind the wheel while Matt Komorowski sat high on the truck’s tail to steer the back end. Sal D’Agostino, Tommy Falco, and Billy Butler were in the back of the cab preparing themselves for a long day. In less than three minutes the bright red truck, which sported shiny brass

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dragons on its doors, covered the mile-and-a-half run.

From the shotgun seat, Jonas got his first look at the stricken North Tower. Smoke and flames were spewing out of gaping holes bored by American Airlines’ Boeing 767 that had crashed between the ninety-third and ninety-ninth floors on the north face of the 110-story building.

Jonas, 43, who wrote the FDNY training manual for rescuing firefighters from high-rise fires, knew that each floor was roughly an acre. With the top 20 floors engulfed in flames, he was staring at a 20-acre fire raging 90 stories above. He thought, *This is the most unbelievable sight I’ve ever seen.*

It would soon become even more unbelievable.

After Meldrum weaved the rig through a current of fleeing people, he parked the truck on West Street in front of the North Tower (1 WTC). As the men began taking equipment off the vehicle, they were bombarded by falling fragments of office furniture, glass shards, chunks of the building, and parts of the jetliner.

“Run!” Jonas shouted.

The men took cover under the pedestrian bridge that spanned the four lanes of West Street and connected the North Tower to the World Financial Center. To retrieve their gear, Jonas kept watch until he could see a letup in the rain of debris. When it seemed clear, they dashed to the fire truck, grabbed their tools, and sprinted under the bridge. They darted back and forth three times to get what they needed. Then, lugging their gear, they hustled

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into the entrance of the burning building. It had been only ten minutes since the plane had slammed into 1 WTC.

Jonas and his men rushed into the shattered lobby where victims who had been burned in elevators were being treated. The firefighters reached the command post, a big console-like counter full of phones and monitors that were connected to smoke detectors and emergency communications throughout the building. Battalion Chief Joe Pfeifer and Deputy Fire Chief Peter Hayden were juggling several phones at once while barking orders to the growing number of firefighters who had arrived. Office workers by the hundreds streamed from the stairwells in surprisingly orderly columns and were ushered safely out.

Suddenly, the firefighters heard a loud explosion that shook the building. They rushed to the blown-out lobby windows and saw large pieces of falling metal and flaming debris slam into the ground. *Maybe a fuel tank on the plane blew up*, Jonas thought. Seconds later, a man in a business suit rushed in from outside and yelled, "A second plane just hit the other tower!"

"They're trying to kill us," Jonas declared. For several seconds, an eerie silence crept over the lobby.

A firefighter muttered to Jonas, "We're going to be lucky if we survive this."

Jonas nodded and said, "Good luck." When it was Jonas's turn to get orders, Hayden told him, "Just go upstairs and do the best you can."

"All right, Chief. You got it."