

# Driving into Disaster

## A Train Operator Helps 800 Passengers to Safety

*Kevin Harrington*

I was a train operator on the Lexington Avenue line the day the Twin Towers fell. I had set out that day from Brooklyn with about 800 passengers in my 10-car train and headed north until a terrorist act stopped my uptown trip.

### Emergency Under Ground

As the first cars of my train entered the Fulton Street train station, I heard a powerful blow of air rushing towards my train. That wind was caused

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by one of the falling World Trade Center Towers. A few seconds later, all the signals turned red causing the train to come to an emergency stop, and the tunnel quickly began to fill with an ocean of dust.

At that time all I knew was that a plane had crashed into the Twin Towers. I was totally unaware of the devastation taking place in the street above the subway.

When I saw smoke filtering into the under-



*People crossing a bridge out of Manhattan with the Twin Towers burning in the background.*



ground station I went to the policeman on the station platform asking him if I could evacuate my passengers out of the Fulton Street station to the ground above. The policeman told me that the station was closed as it was too close to the World Trade Center.

### Backing Away from Danger

With smoke and debris quickly filling the station, I began to activate emergency procedures. I turned off the air comfort system and the fans, closed all the doors and urged all the passengers to move to the rear of the train where

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there was less smoke. I got on the public address system and explained to them what was going on and what we were going to do.

A supervisor and I agreed to move the train back to the previous Wall Street Station. I began to walk back through the train to the other end reassuring the passengers as I went. The tunnel was filling with white smoke and dust, but I finally got

to the other end of the train where another set of controls would allow me to move the train into the previous station a few blocks farther away from the World Trade Center.

Some of the passengers began to panic but the other passengers reassured them that all would be well. I moved the train backwards 50 feet at a

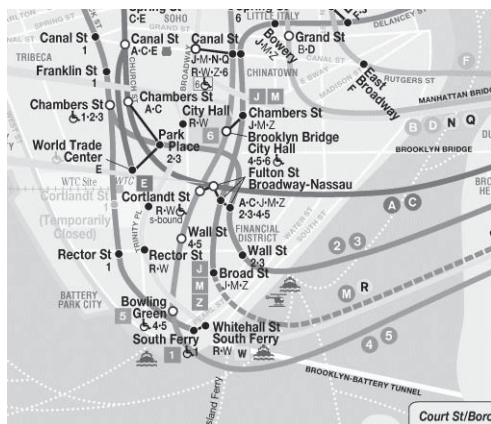
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**The streets were strewn with dust and personal items from people's desks. We saw framed photos, papers with corporate letterheads, and brief cases.**

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time. We could not move more than 50 feet at a time because the electrical failure caused the emergency brake to come on. Each time the brakes came on, they made a loud shrieking noise. Meanwhile,

visibility was zero due to all the smoke and dust. I recharged the train's brake system about ten times before the train's first car was in the Wall Street Station. The repeated shrieking of the brakes and the poor visibility caused great trepidation amongst the passengers. With a single car adjacent to the Wall Street platform, I manually opened the doors in that car and began to evacuate the passengers onto the platform and up the stairs to the surface.



*This map of the New York City subway system shows the stops in lower Manhattan.*

## Fortunate to Survive

After clearing the train of all its passengers, I went upstairs where an ambulance driver told me the first tower had fallen, as he spoke the second tower began to fall and his radio squawked with voices and screams. A Kantor-Fitzgerald\* employee's bag fell in front of us. Some of my passengers were directed to take shelter in a nearby building or to leave Manhattan via the Brooklyn Bridge. I stayed in the area after the building fell and directed passengers and passersby to leave Manhattan.

Hours later, my conductor and I finally left the area. We walked uptown toward our homes. The streets of New York's financial district were strewn with several inches of dust and personal items from people's desks and work places. We saw framed

photos, papers with corporate letterheads, and brief cases. The dark streets were filled with po-

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**Passengers from that fateful day sometimes thank me and give me a hug.**

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lice, firefighters, and other emergency personnel. Even then, we did not comprehend the extent of the devastation. We knew that many people were dead and that two airliners crashing into the towers could not be an accident.

We were relieved that we got all our passengers off safely and the subway system lost no one that day. Later, when things began to return to normal, passengers from that fateful day would see me and thank me and sometimes give me a hug. They, like me, were fortunate to survive.

*\*Kantor-Fitzgerald was a firm that had offices in the World Trade Center.*

Kevin Harrington is 59 years old and has worked for the New York City Transit Authority since 1981. He is a third generation Transit worker. His ancestors came from Ireland. He is Sikh by faith. Currently, he is the Vice President of the Transport Workers Union Rapid Transit Operations Department.

