

Evan Fairbanks Page
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Photographer Evan Fairbanks An American Hero



Catching the World in the Act of Changing

By SARAH BOXER

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At first it looked like snow. There was a stillness in the city. White dust floated in the air. People looked up to see where it was coming from. The traffic was moving slowly. Then people started running, running north and running east. It was around 9 in the morning on Sept. 11.

The man who was recording the events with his video camera, Evan Fairbanks, had just emerged from Trinity Church, where he was videotaping the archbishop of Wales. He came out in time to photograph the paper snow. On the street, people were dialing their cellphones again and again to tell their someones the news. They were looking up at a white plume of smoke. Against a crack of blue sky just above the American Stock Exchange you could see the source of the strange weather. One of the towers of the World Trade Center was on fire. And things were remarkably calm.

Mr. Fairbanks has made a Zapruder film for our time. His camera is there but always seems just a second or two behind the events. He doesn't know what he is photographing. How could he? And he certainly doesn't know what it will look like in retrospect. He has no idea of the things that people will know when they finally do watch it.

The video shows people pointing up at the sky after the first building has been hit. A New York City Fire Department ambulance rumbles down the street. One man in a T-shirt is outside Steve's Pizza yelling and gesticulating madly, showing with his hands what the fireball looked like when the plane hit. He looks oddly out of place, like a street preacher talking about the end of the world.

Then a long, long moment changes everything. **Over the head of the F.B.I. agent, who clearly does not see what is happening, a plane silently penetrates the other World Trade Center tower.** The man's head reels out of the frame as he reacts to the crash. His head snaps back in time to watch the aftermath. A black cloud envelops the tower. Debris sprays out like a fountain from the top. The sky goes dark. The traffic stops.

And the weather shifts completely. It is no longer a gentle snow, but a tornado outside. Papers the size of newspapers are blowing everywhere. A man's shadow runs and throws down a briefcase near a wall. The camera gazes at the wall, then focuses on a cellphone. The neighborhood is dark and deserted.

Firefighters start marching toward the tower with oxygen tanks. The street sign blinks „Don't walk.“ They are marching very, very slowly. You wish they would go faster — or stop. Some look worried. But what do they have to worry about? The buildings they are marching to still look sturdy. The camera follows them into the World Trade Center.

People are emerging from the bottom of the building without panic. They wave to their friends. The sun streams in. Everything will be O.K.

Then the camera goes down to the Emergency Control Center in the basement of the World Trade Center. The room is ordinary, ugly and bureaucratic looking. Men stand around arguing about strategy, as if it were just another power struggle. There is an American flag on the wall. The camera and the cameraman leave the building for the last time. The camera catches sight of the Port Authority police station. The black cloud at the top of the tower begins to descend, faster faster faster. The world shakes. And everything goes black.

Evan had been in Trinity Church preparing to shoot a speech by the Archbishop of Wales when the production manager ran into the church and reported the first plane's collision. Evan ran to a window and saw what looked to him like a Yankee parade -- a rain of shredded paper. Grabbing a video camera Evan ran out into the street, where people stood, staring out. The mood in the streets was one of „surreal numbing calm“. When the second plane struck Evan was rolling on the Tower. **It looked to him as though the plane had flown into a „three floor hanger cut out of the building“.** **The impact was whisper quiet, followed by a low, distant rumble and then a rain of debris.** Evan ran and lay under a car until he felt it was safe, and then proceeded shooting again.

When the first plane had struck Evan had been bewildered by the magnitude of the disaster. His shock was compounded exponentially by the second plane. At each event people assumed the worst had struck. When the south Tower began collapsing, proving them all wrong, Evan was still shooting from the immediate area. **He captured the building peeling down on itself like a steel banana,** then he ran again, somehow managing to shoot at the same time, unknowingly capturing his own shadow. (Friends who hadn't spoken to him recognised his shadow when the footage was first aired). As the burgeoning cloud of smoke and ash caught him he rolled under a heavy vehicle.

The noises were high pitched: the tinkling of glass and shredded steel. Dust filled the air and blocked out light. Evan felt himself unable to breathe. His first thought was to record a message for his children, but on second consideration he decided to attempt moving out. He got himself out from under the vehicle found he could breathe a little easier. Visibility was dismal. He walked a short distance before deciding it was the wrong direction, then set off the other way.

Evan eventually found himself in the offices of the FBI at 99 Church St, only four blocks from the flaming north Tower. Almost 30 minutes after nearly being buried in the rubble of the south Tower, Evan watched the north Tower collapse.

„It looked like a cheap miniature model from some cheap film“, he said, „It was a non-event because it didn't fall down on my head.“

„You just couldn't connect“, he said, „That what was happening had any relation to you.“

The New York Historical Society

New York September 11 by Magnum Photographers

I've seen so many films of the incident on television but they were all edited. This was raw footage, with mistakes and all. And it was interesting to hear Mr. Fairbanks talk about all the things that were wrong with the film technically, because he was just too scared to get the audio or the focus right. And there are some parts when he didn't know the camera was on and all you can see are feet or smoke or just darkness. No doubt this was real. And here was a real person standing in front of us who had taken the film and lived to tell about it.