Miracle Amidst the Rubble

by Kristin Witt

It would have been a day like any day for 27-year veteran NBC cameraman, Jeff Scarborough. He was on his way to cover a breaking story with reporter Rob Morrison. Scarborough driving as usual protocol for a camera and reporter team. It was one of the prettiest days he’d seen in a long time, and again, it would have been much like other days on the job except for two things. Jeff Scarborough was driving to a scene in the heart of New York City and the date was September 11th, 2001.

“This wasn’t the first time Jeff had been called to the World Trade Center in the midst of calamity. In 1993, Scarborough was the one cameraman allowed into the parking garage of the North Tower after the Al-Qaeda bombing attack where eight people were killed. He was charged with getting video of the destruction for all of the news stations during a VIP tour of the site.”

Scarborough made his way across 49th Street onto the Westside Highway, where he pulled into a convoy of emergency vehicles, all responding to what NBC Control thought was a small plane collision into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Pulling into the convoy of police and first responder vehicles guaranteed Jeff and his reporter premier access to the story, as they blew through lights and traffic — and in their business it was all about who got there first.

The convoy was about 60 seconds from the front door of the North Tower when Jeff looked up to see a football field-sized hole near the top of the tower. News came over the radio that the South Tower had been hit by a second plane, and at that moment Jeff Scarborough knew. “They finally figured out how to bring the towers down,” he said, as he yanked his car out of the convoy and pulled back several hundred feet.

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Jeff Scarborough readily admits that, if, on that fateful September 11th, he had not been privy to that particular piece of information, it would not have occurred to him that this was a terrorist attack and that Al-Qaeda was about to succeed in bringing the World Trade Center to the ground. In a matter of seconds, the scenario flashed through his mind, and he made the decision to pull away from the convoy. With his reporter cursing him for ruining their chance at getting in before the police tape barred them from the scene, Jeff radioed his command center at NBC telling them to set up the live feed truck 500 feet behind his location and to keep reporters behind that line of demarcation. When a reporting team is the first one on-site in a crisis, they become the “boss” as it were, trusted with decision making for every reporter that will enter the scene. In this case, though the reporter should have been in charge, Jeff trusted his instinct and overrode Morrison’s desire to pursue. Though he insists that he was just doing his job, Jeff Scarborough is credited with saving the lives of many reporters on that day, including Morrison’s.

Jeff stepped out of his vehicle and began filming the devastated towers as a crew prepared the live feed. The tight shots he was able to capture were the most gut-wrenching he had ever taken, a couple holding hands and crossing themselves just before they jumped, film that he chose not to release out of respect.

When Scarborough and a new reporter began a live feed to the station, the reporter’s back was to the scene as he tried to explain the chaos of two planes embedded in the upper stories of the Twin Towers. In the midst of the broadcast, Jeff motioned to the reporter to turn around. The South Tower was beginning its descent, the first of the two towers to come down. The reporter dropped his microphone and took off, while Jeff instinctively carrying his camera, literally ran for his life towards the van that housed the live feed equipment and his co-worker, Eddie Alonzo. Scarborough actually pulled Eddie from the van and told him to run as far from the towers as he could, as fast as he could, but Eddie hesitated. Scarborough was already exhausted from his sprint and didn’t look like he had much more in him, but Jeff assured his friend that he would take shelter behind a nearby building and urged him to run for his life. Reluctantly, Eddie took off like a track star, while Jeff moved behind a building just as the impenetrable cloud of dust raced down the
“At the heart of things, Jeff wants readers to know that he is a musician, and he has moved on with his life. He loves his music and the privilege he has of playing with some very talented people here in the mountains of Colorado. The Scarbroughs found themselves embraced by the community almost upon their arrival, and Jeff says that returning to his roots as a musician has gone a long way towards helping him heal.”

Sunday, you will enjoy Jeff’s band, the Bucktones, as well as Joe Byr and Friends who will be featured on our second stage at the entry gates.

Jeff Scarbrough graciously recounted for us the difficulty of that impossible day, and when he was done, he showed us an award he received from NBC. On it these words are inscribed:

“In recognition of your bravery, judgment, and leadership on September 11th, 2001. Your actions helped save lives on a day that changed the lives of all Americans.”

“I’ve received much recognition for my work as a cameraman, including several Emmy Awards,” Jeff says solemnly. “But none of them hold a candle to this one.”

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