

## The Height of Ambition: Part One

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By JAMES GLANZ and ERIC LIPTON

uy Tozzoli guided his black Mercedes sedan past a jumble of swaybacked old warehouses and manicured condominium developments on the back streets of Hoboken, N.J., winding his way toward the Holland Tunnel. Over the years he had figured out how to cut to the front of the 10-block line of traffic in front of the tunnel, shaving a few minutes off his journey to Lower Manhattan from his home in Bergen County. Tozzoli firmly believed that there was a work-around for every problem; his daily commute was no exception. His shortcut took him down Jersey Avenue, under a rusty train bridge and straight into the Holland Tunnel plaza near the tollbooths. On this particular September morning, as he passed under the train bridge, Tozzoli was a bit behind schedule. He had just wrapped up several calls from his car phone to business colleagues in Hong Kong and Paris; 15 more minutes, and he would be sitting in his 77th-floor office in the north tower of the World Trade Center, looking out toward Midtown. Every morning more than 40,000 men and women went to work in the trade center, but only one of them -- Guy Tozzoli -- could say that he had created it. From the conception of the trade center in the early 1960's to the completion of the twin towers in 1973, Tozzoli led the team of dreamers, planners, architects and builders who overcame countless obstacles to construct the tallest buildings on earth. Sometimes it seemed as if Tozzoli, the director of the project for the Port of New York Authority, had personally willed the towers into existence -- outfoxing enemies, bullying colleagues, maneuvering around one intractable problem after another. As construction delays mounted and his impatience grew, he imposed on his staff what he called Tozzoli's Rules, a set of inflexible and often idiosyncratic dicta designed to help him beat the clock and the odds, including one that decreed that no meeting should last longer than 17 minutes.

When the towers were finally completed, Tozzoli moved into an office there himself, and once he got there, he never left. In the four decades that had passed since the Port Authority's executive director, Austin J. Tobin, first mentioned to him the preliminary plans for a World Trade Center, Tozzoli had never been away from the plot of land on Manhattan's West Side for more than a few weeks. And in all that time, one of the most beautiful moments for him each morning was his first view of the towers across the Hudson.

But on this particular morning, as he made the turn off Jersey Avenue, his eyes were confronted with an incomprehensible sight. Waves of thick, oily smoke were billowing from a gash in the north tower, not far above his office. Tozzoli lurched to a stop and found himself stuck in a motionless mass of cars. He stepped out of his Mercedes and stood among dozens of other stupefied commuters, all staring helplessly at the smoke and flames in the distance. "It's going to take us a long time to fix that," Tozzoli said, his voice as scratchy as a washboard, to the clot of people around him. No one answered.

Then he heard the scream of the second plane gunning its engine past the Statue of Liberty, and he watched it bank toward the south tower. An orange billow of flame exploded from the point of impact. Chunks of steel,

shards of fuselage and landing gear and a blizzard of paper burst from the side of the tower. As chaos and panic erupted around him, Tozzoli got back in his car and worked his way into the stream of ambulances and squad cars entering the tunnel. In 1993, he guided people down a dark exit stairway after a terrorist bomb exploded in the basement of the trade center. He knew he had to do something this time too.

On the Manhattan side, a uniformed policeman stopped him and ordered him to turn around. Tozzoli pulled out his credentials. "Listen, I built that place," he said, pointing at the burning towers. "I've got to get down there to help."

The policeman's reply was curt. "I don't care if you're the pope," he said. "You turn this car around."

For the first time in the trade center's history, there was nothing Guy Tozzoli could do to fix things. From the instant the south tower spit out its burning plume, like a great flamethrower over Manhattan, everything he had pieced together and nurtured was doomed to come horrifyingly undone. Tozzoli and the towers' other creators -- most of them as innovative and as hardheaded as he was -- had over the decades made dozens of decisions, small and large, many now half-forgotten, that had suddenly become matters of life and death. When they determined the enormous size for the trade center, when they shaped it into an icon of international financial prowess and -- most important -- when they drew the blueprints for its construction, they had unwittingly written the script for its eventual destruction. Why did the towers initially withstand the impacts of jetliners without tipping over like felled oaks but then collapse, about an hour later, in two deadly implosions? Why did most of the people below the impact zones escape and live, while nearly all those above were trapped and died? The answers are deeply buried, like clues beneath the rubble, in the trade center's history.

The destruction of the twin towers erased, first and most tragically, some 2,800 lives. But a year after the nation began mourning those lives, something else is being mourned: the towers themselves. They were the biggest and brashest icons that New York has ever produced -- physically magnificent, intimately familiar structures. Their builders were possessed of a determination that sometimes crossed the line into hubris: they refused to admit defeat before any problem that natural forces, economics or politics could throw in their way.

The talisman that the builders brandished, again and again, to counter their opponents was the technological optimism of the early space age. The project's architects and engineers used brand-new, untested technologies to raise an unprecedented amount of real estate into the sky. They created a pair of lightweight, almost willowy structures that, they said, would nonetheless be able to withstand hurricane-force winds and other natural cataclysms -- as well as fire, explosion or even, they assured prospective tenants, the impact of a jetliner.

Even before they were built, though, critics derided the Buck Rogers quality of the towers, noting that new technologies and new architectural paradigms often bring new vulnerabilities. Ada Louise Huxtable, then the architecture critic at The New York Times, publicly aired her doubts in 1966. "Who's afraid of the big, bad buildings?" she wrote. "Everyone, because there are so many things about gigantism that we just don't know. The gamble of triumph or tragedy at this scale -- and ultimately it is a gamble -- demands an extraordinary payoff. The trade-center towers could be the start of a new skyscraper age or the biggest tombstones in the world."

In the end, they were both.

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