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Help is 'Just what we do,' a hero says

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FDNY Battalion Chief Thomas Murphy has had a difficult time sleeping in the two months since he was buried in the rubble of Tower 2 while responding to the World Trade Center attacks.

Every time a jetliner thundered over the 28-year veteran's home in Belle Harbor, Queens, Murphy, 54, was jolted awake or gripped with an indescribable sadness.

"It's been hard," he said. "Real hard."

Then the unimaginable happened.

American Airlines Flight 587 exploded Monday above his neighborhood, two blocks from his Beach 129th St. home, raining debris and death down on his neighbors. Despite the injuries from which he is still recovering, Murphy became one of the dozens of off-duty firefighters and police officers from the tight-knit community who ran into the streets to help put out fires and pull people to safety.

"I heard this hit, then my whole house shook. I didn't think about it. I ran out in my shorts and T-shirt and started to help," Murphy said yesterday, minutes after he was embraced and thanked for his bravery by Gov. Pataki at Engine 268's firehouse. "That's just what we do. You really don't think about yourself."



Thomas Murphy

Flashback

As Murphy helped firefighters stretch hose line into the burning homes belonging to his friends and neighbors, his mind raced back to that terrible morning when he was knocked unconscious as Tower 2 collapsed. Murphy said he remembers looking up as it crumbled and having just enough time to mutter: "God forgive my sins," before everything went black.

"After I asked God to forgive my sins, I felt this everlasting peace," Murphy said.

He woke up a short time later. His left leg was pinned by debris, and there was an unrelenting pain coming from his cracked ribs. The face piece on his air mask had been knocked off, and he was having trouble breathing.

"I was buried, it was black, and I was trapped and pinned," said Murphy, who has survived two other life-claiming collapses during his long career. "I checked to see if my back was broken by wiggling a bit, and when I wiggled, some of the debris came loose, so I kept doing it until I dug myself out."

When he had brushed himself off, he began helping people.

Later that day, after he began spitting up blood, Murphy was taken to a New Jersey hospital where a Catholic priest gave him last rites. Murphy said he feels a miracle kept him alive, and well enough to help his neighbors Monday morning.

"The way the Fire Department is, the way this neighborhood is, of course we are all going to pull together," he said. "But I don't know how much more we can take of this."

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