

Justice Under the Rubble: The Salvation Army Building Collapse

Andrew Stern with George Anastasia

Excerpt from Chapter One

The last body was pulled out shortly after 11 p.m. That's what John O'Neill, the Philadelphia Fire Department captain who was overseeing the rescue operation, thought when he ordered his men to take a break.

"It was quite warm," O'Neill would recall while describing the rescue work that had begun late on the morning of June 5, 2013, and had continued long into the night. Dozens of highly trained workers had spent hours working through a massive pile of rubble that was once a salvation army Thrift store located on the corner of 22nd and market streets in Philadelphia.

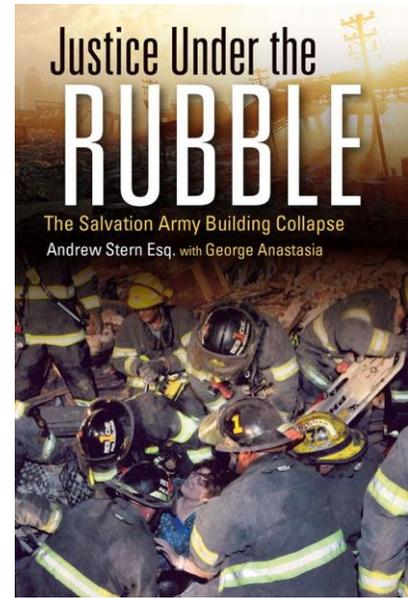
"Everybody was pretty much drained," O'Neill said. "It was hot. Everybody's dusty and dirty."

Rescue teams—firefighters and EMTs trained for that kind of work—had been at it for more than twelve hours. At that point, no one knew all the details of what had happened. But it didn't really matter. For those on site, the only issue was rescue. Wade through all the rubble and look for bodies. Hope that maybe somebody was still alive under the debris. But twelve hours into the operation, O'Neill knew that finding anyone alive was unlikely.

While technically this was still a rescue operation, "extrication"—getting the bodies out—was the reality. The rescue teams had found six corpses. The first was a woman named Kimberly Finnegan. She was thirty-five and was recently engaged to be married. It was her first day working the register at the Salvation Army Thrift store.

Her body was pulled out at 1:30 p.m., three hours after a four-story, unsupported and unstable wall that was part of a poorly planned and executed demolition job collapsed onto the roof of the Thrift Store.

It happened in a flash.



There was a strange sound, a whoosh that seemed to suck the air out of the city block, witnesses would recall, and then the wall of the partially demolished structure was gone. A cloud of dust swept over the site and out onto Market Street, like a brief, blinding desert windstorm whipping across the heart of a city. Tons of brick, concrete, wood and debris rained down on the roof of the Salvation Army building, a one-story structure with a basement. The store, which anchored the corner of 22nd and market streets, was hard up against the unsupported wall. In fact, its chimney ran up that wall. The roof of the shop collapsed under the weight of the falling debris. It was 10:41 a.m. on a bright, sunny Wednesday morning. The store had been open about an hour.