



U.S. Coast Guard Oral History Program

Attack on America: September 11, 2001 and the U.S. Coast Guard

U.S. COAST GUARD ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
Operation Noble Eagle Documentation Project

Interviewee: Captain Richard Sullivan, USCGR
Chief of Homeland Security, Eighth Coast Guard District

Interviewer: PAC Peter Capelotti, USCGR
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PAC Capelotti: It's April the 11th, 2002, and I'm in the office of Captain [Richard] Sullivan in New Orleans in the District 8 Commander's Headquarters, and we're in the Office of Law Enforcement?

CAPT Sullivan: That's the office we're in. I'm actually the Chief of Homeland Security.

Q: And was this a position that existed before 9/11?

CAPT Sullivan: No, it did not.

Q: So this is something that we can directly attribute to 9/11?

CAPT Sullivan: That's right. I have a staff of five and we coordinate "M" missions and "O" missions and Reserve mobilization and demobilization. I think we're probably the only district that has it as a Chief of Staff element as opposed to being in the "M" Division.

Q: Yes. Was that by design that that was put under the Chief of Staff?

CAPT Sullivan: Yes it was.

Q: What's your background, sir?

CAPT Sullivan: In civilian life I'm a Federal Probation Officer and I've worked in several communities in the Coast Guard. I was assigned here as Deputy Operations Officer in August and a month later, of course, everything changed.

Q: So you were on EAD [Extended Active Duty]?

CAPT Sullivan: No, I was recalled under Title 10 and, well about a week after the 11th.

Q: Okay, but your Reserve position was?

CAPT Sullivan: Was Deputy Operations Officer.

Q: Deputy of Operations, right.

CAPT Sullivan: And I've done no operations since then. It's all been Homeland Security.

Q: Well that's one of the interesting conundrums that's been spun out of 9/11 is Homeland Security Operations "M". And for somebody; an outsider, somebody like me, who has never been on active duty before to find out that there's this big dichotomy in the Service between the "M" [Marine Safety specialists] folks and the "O" [Operational] folks and the [Coast Guard] Groups and the MSOs [Coast Guard Marine Safety Offices], has been a real shock.

CAPT Sullivan: Yeah, that's kind of why it's a Chief of Staff element.

Q: To unify . . .

CAPT Sullivan: In order to unify the community.

Q: Well I interviewed [the Commander of the Coast Guard Atlantic Area and Fifth Coast Guard District, Vice] Admiral [Thad W.] Allen in Portsmouth a couple weeks ago and he said, if we don't take this chance to get those two sides together we're never going to get it again.

CAPT Sullivan: Yeah.

Q: But it seems like those problems are acute in this District just because of the way it's structured.

CAPT Sullivan: Well it's the largest district in the Coast Guard. It covers the heartland; basically the Mississippi River and all of its tributaries. As you can see, these blue fingers reach all the way up into North Dakota and Wyoming, and West Virginia and New Mexico; basically from the Mexican border to the Canadian border, and Colorado to West Virginia. That's our area. It's 26 states; all or part of 26 states, 10,000 miles of inland waterways and over 1,000 miles of coastline. So just about any function you mention that the Coast Guard does, we have a huge amount of it. We have 12 of the top 14 ports in the United States located in the 8th District.

Q: Yes.

CAPT Sullivan: For example, the first 250 miles of the Mississippi River is broken up into four different port areas and they are among the top ports in the Nation. As a matter of fact, if you add those together it's more than the Port of New York. We have a lot of linear AORs [Area of Responsibility]. In other words, the Captain of the Port up on the river system may have a thousand miles of river, and you know, it's a hundred yards wide.

Q: Yes.

CAPT Sullivan: So it's not your standard ports as you have on the East Coast. So it gives some unique opportunities in the 8th District when you have long . . .

Q: So you deal with shipping all the way up into the Ohio River valley?

CAPT Sullivan: Absolutely.

Q: Yeah.

CAPT Sullivan: As a matter of fact one of the largest ports in the country by tonnage is Huntington, West Virginia.

Q: Yes. Now that's a coal loadout facility, or . . . ?

CAPT Sullivan: Coal, grain, chemicals. In West Virginia in the Kanawah Valley there's a great deal of chemical industry, including some real methyl ethyl, nasty things they manufacture there.

Q: Yes.

CAPT Sullivan: They call this lower stretch of the Mississippi River "Chemical Alley" because there are so many chemical and petrochemical plants in this area. And of course the Houston Galveston coastline is just inundated with the petro-chemical industry. So much of the gasoline that we use in the country flows through this area, either from foreign tankers or from this huge Gulf of Mexico oil patch.

Q: Yes. Where were you on the morning of the 11th?

CAPT Sullivan: The morning of the 11th I was in my office in the Federal Court in Birmingham hearing the news that a small plane had run into one of the buildings. And by the time I walked from my car and got into my office the TV was on and it was obviously a huge disaster, and then of course the second plane hit. And for everybody, everything changed from that moment.

Q: When were you called up?

CAPT Sullivan: The following Friday.

Q: Yes.

CAPT Sullivan: It was the 16th I guess.

Q: How did things evolve that you would stand up such a thing as a Director for Homeland Security for the whole District?

CAPT Sullivan: Well I was first called down here to do a risk assessment on the District, and we assembled a team that . . . about 22 people out in the field units to gather information on the critical assets within their AORs, send it here and we compiled it for the District, and with some pretty high standards. It had to be a critical national asset that it would affect the Nation, the economy, the psychology of, you know, those like the Saint Louis Arch and nuclear plants.

Q: So you did take into account landmarks and things like that?

CAPT Sullivan: That's right. Stadiums next to the waterway, interstate bridges over the waterway, railroad bridges, nuclear power plants.

Q: I guess the Superdome counts as something that's within reach of the waterway?

CAPT Sullivan: Exactly. So we came up with over 1,300 critical assets.

Q: That met that criterion?

CAPT Sullivan: Yes, that needed protection.

Q: Just in this District?

CAPT Sullivan: In the 8th Coast Guard District, right.

Q: Now did you try to prioritize those?

CAPT Sullivan: We did. First we divided them into tiers with the top being the most important.

Q: Who did that division? Was that done here?

CAPT Sullivan: Yes, we did it here.

Q: [First Coast Guard District Commander, Rear] Admiral [George] Nacarra at Boston said he asked his field commanders to tier their critical structures 1, 2, and 3; 1 being the highest. And of course he got back all . . . everything was Tier 1.

CAPT Sullivan: Tier 1.

Q: And they all wanted them protected all the time.

CAPT Sullivan: Exactly.

Q: Did you run into sort of those things as well?

CAPT Sullivan: Sure. Each AOR looked in their backyard and prioritized the things that were most important to them. And at this level there had to be some serious judgment calls on what do we protect.

Q: Yes.

CAPT Sullivan: We have all these inland waterways with all sorts of national resources and then you had, basically, the geo center of activity in Houston Galveston, which is a 50-mile stretch of water, just wall-to-wall chemical plants, refineries and that sort of thing. Of course the Port of New Orleans is a massive port; Mobile, Lake Charles. We have two out-loading ports in the 8th District.

Q: And where is the offshore oil port?

CAPT Sullivan: The LOOP; the Louisiana Offshore Oil Port is right about here. It's just south of New Orleans down here in the Gulf.

Q: And that's where a lot of tankers tie up to bring their oil into the country?

CAPT Sullivan: Yes, that right. It's basically a floating bollard; a huge bollard, and they tie up to it and offload to a pumping station that's like an offshore rig, what you'd normally think of, and then it pumps it ashore.

Q: Are these tankers that are operating from the Gulf, or are these tankers that are operating from all around the world?

CAPT Sullivan: All around the world. These are the ones that are too big to get into port.

Q: Right okay.

CAPT Sullivan: So we prioritized based on each MSO and Groups' view of the threats, and we actually . . . the Tier 1, 2, and 3 system that came out of the 1st, we used it down here.

Q: You also had something; Crisis Task Units that you set up?

CAPT Sullivan: We had an Incident Management Team; IMT, set up here in New Orleans.

Q: But in terms of the sectors that you were guarding, I think it was Adm Allen who mentioned something about every District set their areas up differently.

CAPT Sullivan: Yeah, we organized common areas. Like right in Houston you have MSU [Marine Safety Unit] Galveston. You have Group Galveston and you have MSO Houston up river 50-miles, and other units, and we formed them into sectors, and the same sort of thing in Mobile. We made it a sector. In New Orleans we made it a sector, and sectors of the river which had common interests.

Q: And that had not been done prior to . . . ?

CAPT Sullivan: No.

Q: That was all spun out of 9/11?

CAPT Sullivan: Exactly. It was a more efficient way to run things. You have instances where one Group covers four MSOs, so you have overlapping jurisdictions and they're not always the same lines. So it just made sense to organize things into clumps.

Q: That's been one of the big surprises for me as a Reservist, finding out that the Captain of the Port doesn't have his own boat; to get the "O" people to take him across the harbor.

CAPT Sullivan: Exactly. And that works very well. The "O" guys love to get in their boat and go out on a mission, and they're ready to go.

Q: When you did this assessment, what was the sense of what your enemy was and what our Coast Guard's role was in defeating that enemy? Was our role to defeat them, to identify them?

CAPT Sullivan: I think our role was to harden maritime targets in the same way that on a block you would lock your house up. You'd have flood lights . You'd have burglar alarms. You would have a visible presence so that they won't want to take that on. And so our idea was to have a visible, recognizable presence in the places that we thought it would be most likely a terrorist would want to attack.

Q: Yes.

CAPT Sullivan: We have a catch phrase here we use constantly, which is, think like a terrorist. If you're in Saint Louis and you're a terrorist - particularly the Al Qaeda kind of terrorist, and we know the sorts of terrorist acts they like to pull off compared to your garden variety of terrorist - look at your AOR, think like a terrorist and put up your visible presence and your protection at those points, and you may have 300

targets and you can protect two. And those are the sorts of really very difficult decisions we had to make back in September. What do you protect? What do you not protect? And of course you try to rule out things that somebody else can protect and get down to the things that only the Coast Guard has the jurisdiction to protect.

Q: Right. What sorts of things were those that you had to bring, say significant Coast Guard assets in to raise this level of oversight?

CAPT Sullivan: Well we looked at waterways that carried hazardous cargos that passed by major population centers where a ship could either be blown up or used as a weapon of mass destruction, driven into other objects.

Q: Yes.

CAPT Sullivan: Where it could be attacked from the outside or taken over from the inside. For instance in Houston-Galveston Ship Channel; 50 something miles long, we couldn't board and escort every single ship that came in, so we set up zone defenses around the most heavily populated areas or the largest concentration of chemical plants. So the idea was, wherever it would be most to a terrorist's advantage to strike, that's where we were.

Q: Yes. How did the Reserves figure into this? Were they a big part of what the industry . . . it seems that with this amount of cover you couldn't do it without them?

CAPT Sullivan: Yes, the Reservists picked up the major load of Homeland Security work and are still carrying a good bit of it, even though we've downsized tremendously since then.

Q: Yes.

CAPT Sullivan: We are at about half the strength that we were in October. So that role is being integrated as part of the day-to-day missions of the active duty unit.

Q: What was done in those first four to six months or so with the Reserves, those AORs and those patrols? Do you think those are going to become a regular part of the new numbers that are coming onboard?

CAPT Sullivan: It will if we have the resources to do it. For example here in New Orleans there are about 45 Reservists and they drive the levees, because, you know, you blow up a levy and you take out the town.

Q: Yes.

CAPT Sullivan: They do Sea Marshals. They board ships, particularly the ones that are passing by this New Orleans area.

Q: Yes.

CAPT Sullivan: And Maritime Domain Awareness. We took the VTS [Vessel Traffic Safety] and added that layer, besides just being traffic cops for the ships, now they can acquire the targets. They can identify HIVs, track them coming into port and help coordinate the Sea Marshals boarding and so forth. So those kinds of missions are manpower intensive, and as we back down the mobilization they will have to integrate into other missions that the units perform.

Q: What kind of strain had this put on the District in those first few weeks?

CAPT Sullivan: It was the most stressful and intense era I've ever experienced and I'm 54 years old. I have been a Federal Agent for 28 years, and I couldn't sleep . I couldn't eat. I'd wake up at three in the morning and jot down a note; something I've got to do when I get to the office, and finally at six o'clock, just go to the office.

Q: Yes.

CAPT Sullivan: It was an incredibly tense period because you have all this to protect. You can't do it. The places you decide you cannot protect, God forbid that's where it would happen.

Q: Yes.

CAPT Sullivan: That's what we worried about. And of course everybody needed more resources, more bodies, more boats, more bullets, and they were limited.

Q: Do you think it's made it easier for you working at the Chief of Staff level down as opposed to either the "O" or the "M" side of things?

CAPT Sullivan: I think it has. It's a coordination that's working very well so that the interests of everyone are taken into account, and we're not within either community. And I worked in both communities, and so I think it was a good move.

Q: Do you see this rearranging the structure of the District in a long term sense . . . you've mentioned the sort of groupings of areas under threat. Is that going to be a permanent part of District operations do you think?

CAPT Sullivan: I'm not sure if Homeland Security will drive reorganization, but I think with the change of Commandant and re-looking at force structures, I wouldn't be at all surprised if we'd come up with new ways to organize the Coast Guard.

Q: Is this District too big? It's sort of a loaded question.

CAPT Sullivan: It's a loaded question. (Laughter) It is the biggest district in the Coast Guard.

Q: Well I guess my question is, you've only had six years or so to get used to this enormous monster, when all of a sudden you get this thrown at you. I would think that probably you're still integrating all of these different elements here in central command and now you've got to think about that whole area in a totally different way.

CAPT Sullivan: That's exactly right. The District line used to be right along about here. This was the 2nd District. This was the 8th. The 8th was basically, as a matter of fact, our nickname was "Guardians of the Gulf."

Q: Yes.

CAPT Sullivan: We covered this coastal area here and now we call ourselves the "Guardians of the Heartland" because we have all this river system. Rivers and coastal are two different worlds and the interest of the rivers is different than the interest of the coast, and keeping both of those top in your mind is a job.

Q: Yes.

CAPT Sullivan: So that's a possible reorganization. That's way above my pay grade.

Q: Right.

CAPT Sullivan: But it's a challenge to, you know, if you're centered here, to keep mindful of all the issues that exist in the river system.

Q: Have you been able to visit many of these areas around the District since 9/11, or are you fairly rooted here?

CAPT Sullivan: I'm fairly rooted here. I've been to a couple of the coastal units. Of course my history was in Mobile.

Q: Yes.

CAPT Sullivan: I spent years there. So I've been basically working the coast. It's difficult to get up in the river system if you're allocating your time, because the real substantial action is here on the coast.

Q: Yeah. Well, sir, thank you very much.

CAPT Sullivan: You're very welcome.

Q: It's been very valuable

END OF INTERVIEW

