United States Coast Guard
U.S. Department of Homeland Security

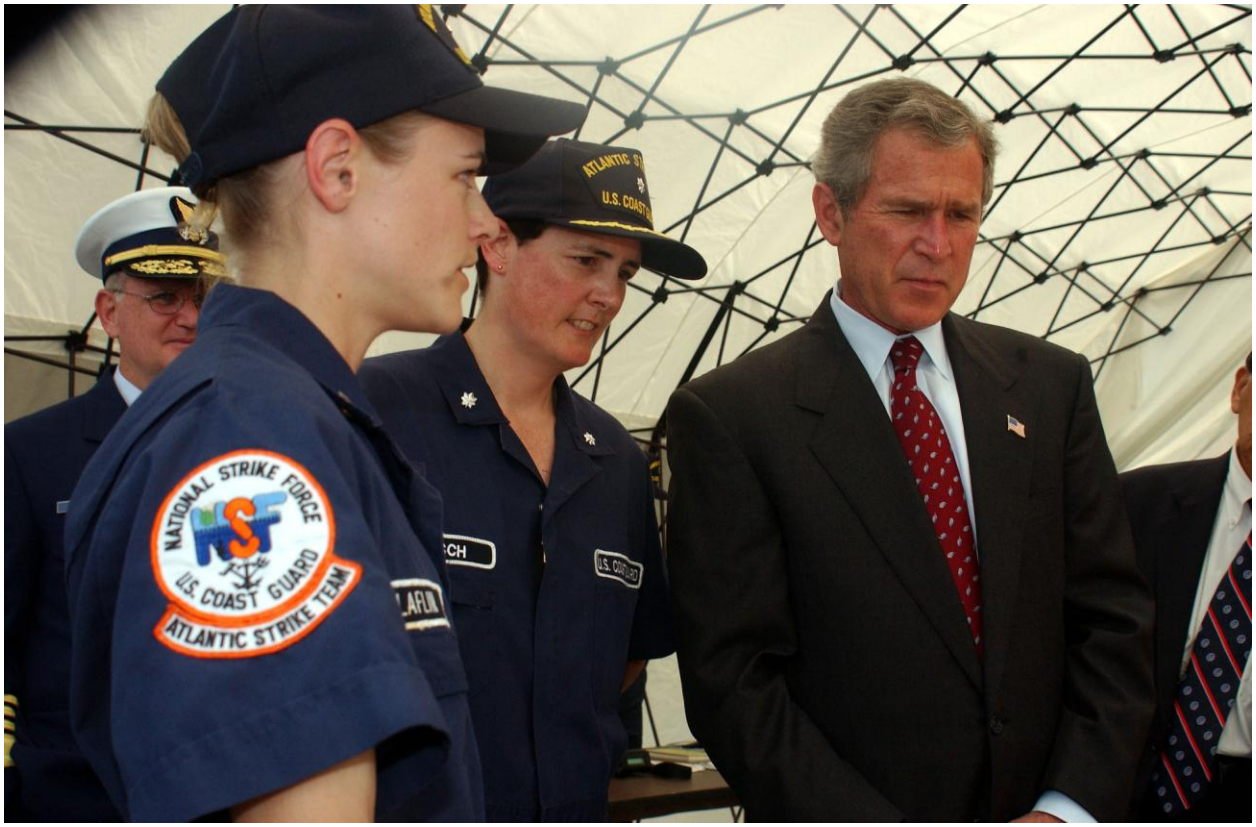
U.S. Coast Guard Oral History Program

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: **Commander Gail Kulisch, USCG**

Commanding Officer, Atlantic Strike Team



PO 2/c Tina Claflin (left) and CDR Gail Kulisch (center) brief President George W. Bush on the types of equipment used by the CG's Atlantic Strike Team.

Interviewer: PAC Peter Capelotti, USCGR
Date of Interview: 20 February 2002
Place: Atlantic Strike Team, Fort Dix, New Jersey

Q: How long have you been in the Coast Guard Ma'am?

CDR Kulisch: Eighteen years.

Q: And did you go to the Academy or OCS?

CDR Kulisch: OCS, 1984. I went to two ships in a row then grad school.

Q: What kind of ships?

CDR Kulisch: A 378, and I have been the C.O. of a 95-foot patrol boat; the [USCGC] *Cape Cross* [WPB-95321]. I went to Grad School and have a Master's in Chemical Engineering.

Q: Where?

CDR Kulisch: UCLA. I went to Marine Safety Office Los Angeles/Long Beach where I was the Marine Environmental Response Officer for three years.

Q: Are you from the West Coast originally?

CDR Kulisch: From the East Coast; Rhode Island.

Q: Oh yeah, where in Rhode Island?

CDR Kulisch: Smithfield; northern Rhode Island.

Q: How long have you been here?

CDR Kulisch: I've been here about 18 months. I came here from MSO Philadelphia where I was the Assistant Chief for Port Ops. Prior to that I was the Program Reviewer for Operations for the Coast Guard Headquarters for three years, and prior to that I was Executive Officer of a buoy tender in San Francisco; the [USCGC] *Buttonwood* [WLB-306].

Q: Were you at MSO Philadelphia when CDR Kearney was there? Did you know him?

CDR Kulisch: Yes. He was the XO then.

Q: So you've been here about 18 months, so you had no lack of responses before this event. The XO said that you were . . . were you on your way to Activities New York, or you were . . . where were you on your way to that morning?

CDR Kulisch: I was in a meeting. I'm the Certified Hazardous Materials Manager and we were having our quarterly meeting in Lynnwood, New Jersey, which is about 20 minutes from Staten Island. So I was in that area.

Q: And he called you. Was that the first time that you had heard that something was going on?

CDR Kulisch: A lot a people were trying to call me actually and the phones were down. The cell phone service was disrupted and I actually called in, and the only way I could get through to here was by calling collect. I had phone cards. The phone cards wouldn't go through. Direct dial wouldn't go through. Cell phones wouldn't go through. So I don't know why. I must have run through a different circuit or something, but I called collect.

Q: Nice to know that the phone company would run the phone charge through us. Somebody else is paying for it.

CDR Kulisch: It probably went through a switcher in Minneapolis or something.

Q: At what point that morning did . . . well even before we get to that, could you encapsulate your command duties here; what you're responsible for and how that experience led up to the response at 9/11?

CDR Kulisch: Well as the Commanding Officer I have three focus areas that are the command philosophy. One is that we will maintain our high state of readiness. That drives a lot of what we do. To stay ready for supporting the needs of the Federal On-Scene Coordinators: that's our primary mission. That we're going to preserve our core competencies which. . . there's essentially a list of them, but it's associated with oil spill response capabilities and hazardous materials response capabilities, and in that we're going to meet the needs of the Federal On-Scene Coordinators. It's our primary mission to support them. So that's our three focal points, and everything we do revolves around achieving those three things.

Q: Did you feel . . . well back to that morning you called in. Who did you talk to? Do you remember who accepted the charges?

CDR Kulisch: It was the watch stander at the IRC - and I don't recall which Petty Officer or Auxiliarist. We have Auxiliarists who man the watch - was at the phone, but I did get put through to the Operations Officer, LT [Scott] Linsky, and it was with him that I had my first conversation.

Q: Uh huh, and do you remember the nature of that conversation; what kind of things that went back and forth? Did you know at that point, or sense that you were going to be on the road very quickly, or that the unit would be? I got the sense from talking with some people yesterday and today that when you hear about things like this on the news that there's a sense that a few hours later you're going to be asked to be there. Was that the sense you got in this situation as well?

CDR Kulisch: It was even more immediate than that. When I heard . . . after being at my meeting I had stopped across the street at the Dunkin Donuts, and I didn't have the radio on and I didn't have television. So the first thing that I heard was from the people in the Dunkin Donuts and that's when I began to attempt to call in. As soon as I heard, the thoughts that went through my mind were the status of our boats, the status of our people, where are we, which I knew and I was just sorting through it in my mind. When I got a hold of Lt Linsky I asked him what he knew and he gave me a quick brief. I also asked if he had been contacted by anybody for use of our assets.

Q: Had he?

CDR Kulisch: He had not. I also anticipated that by using the phone system we wouldn't be able to be reached necessarily by our primary customer; the FOSC, who at the time was RADM [Richard] Bennis; that they would have difficulty getting a hold of us. I knew they'd be standing up the Incident Command System. I knew what kind of structure they would have. We've trained with them. We had just completed a Preparedness for Response Exercise drill with them. I knew their capabilities in that regard. I knew there were limitations in respect to boats that they had in that area. So I directed at that time, and discussing with LT Linsky, directed him to send our boats up there; pre-staged to Sandy Hook, just to offer them; to get them close there with boat crews, and then working with the chief there at Station Sandy Hook to meet their needs. I knew they'd be needing boat assets. I knew they'd be evacuating that island; that there'd be an enormous search and rescue and human response initially, and that's where my first thoughts were going.

Q: Did you have a sense, at that early stage, of the magnitude of port security operations that were going to be put into place, or was it more evacuation and environmental response?

CDR Kulisch: No. The first thing I was thinking was search and rescue, human; saving people. I went right to the response mode. I didn't think much beyond that in the first few hours.

Q: What did you think this was that morning? I know most people thought that an accident had taken place and then by the time they had got to the TV and saw the second tower hit they knew that something serious was going on. What was your sense that morning?

CDR Kulisch: That it was an intentional act. The first time I heard of it, it had already been synthesized a bit through the media, and as it got conveyed to me it was already being characterized as an intentional act. I did have enough information to immediately begin to think it was Osama bin Laden that had done it.

Q: Now you're a senior officer at one of the Coast Guard's primary response units to disasters, so you're in a unique position when something like this happens, because a lot of responsibility falls on your shoulders. Did you sense that responsibility at that moment, or did you sort of go right into your responsibilities and not feel them as such?

CDR Kulisch: I go right into it. You don't think of that stuff. You think: what do I need to do? Who's where? Y ou know you go to the "what", and I completely defaulted into that mode. After getting the tasking going about the boat, then I discussed with Mr. Linsky . . . I also knew the condition of the roads because I was on them, and the turnpike was shut down and it was backed up all the way. I knew we were going to have difficulty getting people to Staten Island directly by road or getting our trailer in there or getting our equipment in there. I knew it was accessible through the back way; going over the back bridge to get into Staten Island. So the second thing I thought of was, I'll go there and assess and offer our services.

Q: So you headed right from the meeting area to Fort Wadsworth?

CDR Kulisch: Right, over the outer bridge and into Staten Island.

Q: And you arrived there before noon, or early afternoon?

CDR Kulisch: Around noon or shortly thereafter.

Q: What was the sight that greeted you, both at the Fort . . . and I suppose you could just see smoke billowing up over the city from there?

CDR Kulisch: Actually I couldn't until I went up to the vantage point at the historic fort there. I didn't see anything driving in and going right to Activities New York. I went right in, and of course they had the televisions on. But they had stood up the Incident Command System. They had people in place. T hey had status boards going. They had tasking. They were operational.

Q: Who did you report to there?

CDR Kulisch: Actually Captain Harris was standing in the Ops Center along with CDR McAllister and LCDR Coubler. No, LCDR Coubler wasn't there. She came in later. I forget who else was there actually standing in the room.

Q: Do you remember what their response was when you arrived, or how they were responding? What was the scene like in the . . . ?

CDR Kulisch: It was a professional calm and there was slightly an element of - I don't want to say shock. That's too dramatic - but there was an element of modified shock or something. But everybody was clearly in their professional mode and had defaulted to the Incident Command System; what do we do, deploy boats? What's the status? Where are the people? It's a lot about assessing. It's a lot about, what is it? What's the problem? What do we have?

Q: I would imagine that you're one of the people that these folks are most happy to see, knowing the capabilities of this unit. Would that be a correct assumption that you're welcomed wherever you go when something bad happens?

CDR Kulisch: Yes, and we have to certainly bear in mind that we don't want to land on them and "plop", here we are. Hi, we're here to help, and overload their ability to figure out what they need. But that's what I worked on with CDR McAllister. It was, you know, I'm here, yes. They said, oh, the Strike Team's here, and we said, what do you need? Do you need people to augment the Command Post? I've got the boat up to Sandy Hook.

Q: What did they say - other than getting the boats up there - what did they think their needs were going to be from the Strike Team immediately?

CDR Kulisch: We were in an assessment mode to augment their Command and Control infrastructure, which we're trained to do.

Q: So they get the command van up there and . . .

CDR Kulisch: They had a Command Post there. They didn't need the van right then; the Mobile Incident Command Post, or anything like that at the first hour or so. What we were talking about was getting some trained people into these technical positions to be able to then manage the whole response. A lot of it was, of course, from Activities New York's prospective, was the evacuation of Lower Manhattan. So we were supporting that and moving into an assessment of what is the scope of the problem, getting information, getting people out into liaison positions with the city of New York and with the police department. They had a separate command post; the New York Police Department, the Emergency Operations Center, and then in subsequent days with FEMA in the Regional Operations Center.

Q: In a crisis situation do you look to the leaders around you - being a Commander yourself - do you look to the Captains and the Admirals to see how they're reacting to a situation? Because as a C.O. of a unit, your unit looks to you for, I would assume, for how you respond in a crisis situation. Do you look to people to view how they react in a certain way, and what kind of reactions did you note?

CDR Kulisch: I don't know that I looked to them for that, but I'd certainly note it, and I also know that I need to bring a calm and measured approach to it as well, because people will react off of me, whether they're senior or junior, particularly by the nature of my position.

Q: Right.

CDR Kulisch: So I know I need to bring that.

Q: So that is something that you're clearly aware of and note it on the part of others in a situation like that?

CDR Kulisch: Oh yeah. Not that I'd note it. I'm not looking for it. I mean it's there.

Q: Not in the sense of judging whether . . .

CDR Kulisch: Generally I was looking for the overall tone of the Command Post - Is it chaos? Is it structured? Is it ordered - to be able to suggest or influence what happens.

Q: So what you saw that morning at Activities New York were people that had been punched but were getting up off the floor and finding out what they would have to do to respond?

CDR Kulisch: You know there was the element of "this is unbelievable that this is happening", but everyone was in the "this is my role". They were assigning roles to each other. They had predetermined

roles, and then trying to staff up, trying to bring in the people to fill those roles at the secondary and tertiary levels and to start to think beyond the initial response to a little bit of sustainability. People were constantly defaulting to their professional modes.

Q: In that sense, what were your duties and responsibilities, say over the next week or so? How did they evolve as the situation evolved?

CDR Kulisch: Our responsibilities evolved as the . . . within the first couple days between the Environmental Protection Agency and the Captain of the Port, they agreed and determined that the EPA would take responsibility for all the hazardous material related issues associated with the World Trade Center. That would free up RADM Bennis and the Captain of the Port and his staff to focus on the port security issue subsequent to the medical evacuation and personnel movement. So once that happened the EPA Region Two asked the National Strike Force to stand up a large response organization, which EPA did not have experience with doing. So they asked us to essentially bring in full force to create the Incident Command System, to staff the main positions and to help them then integrate into that, so that the idea of them having a structure to work within in such a complex operation, and they do not have experience doing that. And to the credit of their leadership they recognized that. They said, we know we don't have experience doing this. We know the National Strike Force does.

Q: So this would be the ESF-10 money that came down from FEMA to EPA, to the Coast Guard, to this fund?

CDR Kulisch: The mission assignments and the tasking subsequently happened. So yes, once ESF-10 became a . . . after the first 24 or 48 hours became a more significant piece and more of an issue, and the mission assignments started flowing from there. Then, of course, they needed an organization with which to deal with all of this and then execute the mission assignments. So it was a very big task. And so we brought in . . . at one point we had over a hundred National Strike Force people supporting it.

Q: When other Strike Force members; Gulf Strike Force, Pacific Strike Force, come to an event to support what you're doing in this area, would they work for you or do they bring their command structure with them, and how does that work?

CDR Kulisch: The National Strike Force operates off of a home team concept, and that's another SOP. So in this case we modified that a bit, but we started out with the home team, so I was the operational commander on the ground. Since we were really supporting both the Captain of the Port and the ESF-10 FOSC mission, in the first couple weeks there was a huge effort which was principally my role to manage the mobilization/demobilization/redistribution of assets so that Activities New York was not hampered by that, yet we could support ESF-10. And also I had the prospective; from the FEMA ROC perspective, having been asked by CAPT Harris to be his representative there for a couple of days, of what that picture looked like in the bigger picture in how the city and the Federal agencies at the coordination level were operating, to understand those issues. But in terms of the National Strike Force my effort was on ensuring support to the Captain of the Port while also trying to draw assets over to and from other sources to the Region Two Administrator.

Q: Of these procedures - and this is obviously a large and complex event - was there a moment when you had a chance to sit back and A: think about the magnitude of the event, and B: think about what worked in the response and what you might do differently in the future?

CDR Kulisch: During the event we were so full out and constantly changing, and I was also in the field at Ground Zero doing some of the assessments with the teams - particularly on Day Two, Three and some of the earlier days -my concern was I wanted to make sure that what we were being tasked to do was appropriate for us to be doing and that our people were okay. I wanted to be with them and share some of the experience with them as well as assess that they were safe and doing the right things in contribution. So I was between a command and control mode and actually a tactical mode to be able to assess those things and bring some of that back as we were building the two respective organizations and developing NSF support for those things. My own ability to reflect really didn't . . . I really wasn't able to reflect, probably until a couple months went by.

Q: Really?

CDR Kulisch: Because we went right from that into anthrax, and at the same time as we were managing anthrax and I was on Capital Hill anthrax response as the deputy to the Commander, managing that, I knew I had personnel assigned to New York and that was in my mind, although the responsibility for the operational oversight transferred to the commanding officer of the Pacific Team who relieved me when my three weeks were up. We run on a three week, 21-day deployment, and she came in and relieved me and physically we were just all wiped. We needed to be relieved. We were just totally . . . the physical push plus the emotional drain on top of it, we were all exhausted.

Q: As a C.O. of a unit that was under such pressure for really three or four months straight, and still is to a large extent, what do you look to sort of relieve that stress or to let the unit know that there was a light at the end of the tunnel; that you were going to get through all of this?

CDR Kulisch: I don't know that any of us could have really projected what, say, gee, in three weeks there's light at the end of the tunnel or in six months here's the light at the end of the tunnel. We really all took it day by day, week by week . I never attempted to project that far ahead for them, and we dealt with where we were at that time, emotionally and professionally and operationally; where are we now? We had different resources we had brought in; tapped. But a lot of this was timing. People aren't ready. They're ready when they're ready, and you can bring a chaplain in and you can bring counselors in and you can have people sit around in circles as we did and then try to talk. But what affects people is my being available to them individually and other people being available to them individually. We looked at pictures. As we got picture developed we'd go over the pictures. We'd talk through it. I had a lot of one-on-one conversations with people about what they felt, what they sensed. And people wrote letters. Two crewmembers: one wrote a letter to a school. One wrote a letter to his own school where he's a teacher. He's a deployed reservist and he wrote it to his school and they posted it. To me that was their way of processing. And then to be constantly, constantly aware of what are their issues, particularly when I went to Capital Hill and did that whole Anthrax thing. So what are their issues? Where are they at? What are their concerns now, and in addressing the concerns now; if they were medical, if they were emotional, if they were tactical? Try to anticipate the concerns and then bring in the resources to deal with them.

Q: The Anthrax situation seemed to happen in kind of a similar way in that when it was announced - like the first plane going in. It might be a Cessna off course or something - when the first anthrax case was announced it was one person who may have been at a farm or something. Did you have a sense then, or when did you have a sense that we're going to be on this one as well? Was it right then, or when the second case was announced?

CDR Kulisch: Oh as soon as it was announced we said we're going to be in this business, either responding to hoaxes or responding to a real thing, and it actually started here. It started here as well where there were some . . . on Fort Dix, some claims of white powder, and somebody found this and somebody found that. And right away I gathered my Response Officers and my Response Supervisors and we all sat in a room and we said, here it is. If we get the call tomorrow what do we do? What's our policy? There wasn't anything in the SOP. What will our policy be? First, what are our capabilities? What will we do? What won't we do? What's our box?

Q: Had you trained for Anthrax, or something like Anthrax, before this so that you felt that you were more or less in the ballpark?

CDR Kulisch: We were close. We had been talking about it. We had had a WMD week where we had presentations on bio and the capabilities, and some equipment things, and what the issues were. Over the last 18 months since I got here we've been talking about it, saying this may be an issue, and starting to use the bio terms. Starting to actually draft policy. We were getting to the point where we were starting to draft SOP; starting to think it through. The timing of it, you know, you weren't sitting there, yes, we have it all wrapped up in a nice little bow and we're ready to go. It was still evolving. But we had been talking about it enough that when it began to hit we could accelerate the rest of the process and get a little further along with what will we do and what won't we do. We were very clear about what we will do and what we won't do.

Q: Were you aware at that early stage of the virulence of this weaponized anthrax? I mean was that something that you had discussed or was that something that your knowledge also evolved as the situation evolved?

CDR Kulisch: We knew fairly soon on through FBI reports and in the media that this particular compound on Capital Hill had been treated with something that made it more aerosolizable; that made it more of a hazard than normal anthrax, which clumps together and doesn't aerosolize as well. We knew that was different than the Boca Raton anthrax. We knew there were differences in the very first week of our response, and even before that we knew that was a difference.

Q: As an Environmental Response Team or Hazardous Materials Response or Oil Pollution Response Team, was there any sense - and I know this may not, in any specific sense - was there any sense that someone out there is trying to get past us?

CDR Kulisch: Get past us, what do you mean?

Q: In a sense that you're one of the first lines of defense for the United States in terms of biological response and hazardous materials response. If I can defeat the Strike Team's ability to respond to us . . .

CDR Kulisch: Oh no. Outside of the Response community we're not . . . nobody knows we exist.

Q: Well not necessarily the Atlantic Strike Team or even the Coast Guard Strike Team, but the whole cultural ability to respond to these kind of threats.

CDR Kulisch: Oh I'm sure someone was thinking . . .

Q: Sizing up what we can do and how we can . . .

CDR Kulisch: Or even if it wasn't that methodical, at least to say, let me disrupt, let me create chaos, which is the cause of terrorism. I mean the purpose of terrorism. Let me bring about discredit to the government. Let me create fear in the public's eye and that the government is not able to keep them safe. That's terrorism. That's the goal for them.

END OF INTERVIEW

CDR Gail Kulisch (left) and MST1 John Kapsimalis brief President George W. Bush on the equipment used by the CG Atlantic Strike Team during his visit to the Port of Newark on 24 June 2002.