



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: **Lieutenant Commander Nathan E. Knapp,
USCG**

Executive Officer, Atlantic Strike Team

Interviewer: PAC Peter Capelotti, USCGR
Date of Interview: 19 February 2002

Place: Atlantic Strike Team Headquarters

Q: Sir, how long have you been in the Coast Guard?

LCDR Knapp: Going on 15 years including the [Coast Guard] Academy time; 11 years commissioned.

Q: What aspect of your Coast Guard service prepared you to be the Executive Officer here? Where have you been in your 11 years as an officer?

LCDR Knapp: I graduated the Academy in '91. I was stationed on the Coast Guard Cutter *Mellon* [WHEC-717], a 378 out of Seattle until '93, and then went to the Marine Safety Office, Cleveland for a four year tour there where I left as Chief of Port Ops. Then to Marine Safety Office, Hampton Roads where I was the Assistant Chief of Port Ops and also did a six month tour with industry as part of the Port Safety Industry Training Program, and received orders here last June.

Q: So you worked with industry?

LCDR Knapp: Yes. It's a Coast Guard program; Port Safety Industry Training.

Q: And what were you working in particular in Port Safety?

LCDR Knapp: I worked with various entities from the port community. I worked with Stevedores Shippers Terminals in the Hampton Roads and Greater Hampton Roads area, state agencies, towing companies. Basically a conglomerate of the folks that make up the Maritime industry in the region.

Q: So you had quite a bit of experience in ports when our biggest port, I guess, was attacked?

LCDR Knapp: Yes.

Q: So you've been here how long?

LCDR Knapp: Since June. I relieved the prior XO on June 15th.

Q: Last year?

LCDR Knapp: Last year.

Q: So you'd been here a couple of months?

LCDR Knapp: Yes.

Q: So you're just getting settled in, and you folks, from what I can tell, are more or less a 24/7 outfit here. You've probably had your share of incidents before 9/11.

LCDR Knapp: Yes. I've been fortunate in my previous career in other units to experience some bigger jobs, but certainly nothing that would even compare to this. They all pale in comparison.

Q: Well you had a course going here. Were you here physically that morning?

LCDR Knapp: I was. We had an indoctrination course going; what we called the National Strike Force Boot Camp, which I was a part of. I was bouncing back and forth between participating in the course and covering my duties as the Executive Officer, and was physically located here at the unit that morning.

Q: And you learned about this from someone calling in; a spouse or a relative calling in, someone here at the unit?

LCDR Knapp: We did. We got a call into the Incident Response Center; what we call our IRC, and the Operations Officer let me know that it came in, and all of us had the puzzled look when he said a plane just crashed into the World Trade Center. At first of course, probably like most of the nation, we thought, well, some Cessna, some private pilot has probably made an error and hit the building.

Q: The IRC, that is where?

LCDR Knapp: The IRC is located in the front building; 5614.

Q: That's right in the front office there where you first come in and where the big map is on the wall?

LCDR Knapp: Yes, where the watch stander sits, yes.

Q: And so a call came in there, and I guess since you're hooked up for TVs the TVs went on. Is that right, or are they usually on to monitor things? Since 9/11 everybody's been watching CNN more or less 24-hours a day or MSNBC or whatever it is. Did you do that before then?

LCDR Knapp: I have a TV in my office and I honestly think that that was the first time I turned it on. But certainly once we heard this all the TVs in the building went on to monitor it. It was the breaking news. Then once you saw the picture you realized, okay, this is not a Cessna. We were talking maybe a private commercial jet, but it's certainly something larger than a small plane.

Q: So you were all gathered in the conference room, or a lot of you were?

LCDR Knapp: I was in my office, but we continued with the course at this point. It didn't seem like . . . we still weren't to the alarm phase yet.

Q: Right. It was an incident, not an attack.

LCDR Knapp: Right. This is an incident. We'll watch it and we'll see what happens. Everybody had the puzzled look on their face as to what could cause this; a navigational error. We still weren't certain it was a terrorist attack.

Q: Was it more or less . . . well the course was sort of going on and people had one eye on the TV. What was the sense of the unit when the second plane went in?

LCDR Knapp: Certainly at that point we realized that this is something catastrophic.

Q: This is not a coincidence.

LCDR Knapp: Right. This is not a coincidence whatsoever. And you know with the live coverage, by that time . . . I don't recall exactly, but I think it was 18 minutes later that the second plane hit. You know certainly by that time the news coverage was solid, to see people running in the streets and to see the second plane was clearly a passenger jet, and so we knew something was up.

Q: Well you're the Executive Officer in what's clearly one of the Coast Guard's front line response units. What was running through your head at that moment? When did you sense, or realize, or when did it hit you that you guys were going to be packing everything up and going?

LCDR Knapp: Well certainly we started making preparations. The Commanding Officer [[CDR Gail Kulisch](#)] was not at the unit at the time, though she was in the area. She was up in northern New Jersey. I immediately placed a call to her to let her know what was going on, thinking that she probably wasn't privy to a TV at the time. So I called to brief her and I started thinking, okay, there's some way we may get involved in this and I started thinking about where's everybody at. I started talking with the Ops Officer. Where are our people? Who do we have around? And still at that point it was a little bit of, I won't say chaotic, but a lot of uncertainty as to what role we might play in this. The buildings hadn't collapsed yet.

Q: Right.

LCDR Knapp: So really at that point I didn't see us playing any role.

Q: Do you remember off-hand what the reaction of the CO was when you called her?

LCDR Knapp: I don't remember exactly what the reaction was other than she listened to my brief and said that . . . I do remember her saying that, I'm going to start making my way over to Activities New York.

Q: Okay.

LCDR Knapp: She was over on the New Jersey Turnpike-side I think and she couldn't make it back in on the New Jersey Turnpike because the mass exodus had started from Manhattan.

Q: Uh hum. I don't have my timeline with me. I don't know what happened first, whether the plane going into the Pentagon or one of the Towers collapsing and the second Tower. But at some point in

those next two hours it became obvious to everybody that the world was not going to be the same. Was that the sense here as well?

LCDR Knapp: Absolutely, and it was a feeling of everybody wanted to go to the fight, wherever that was, and it's just that type of crew. Everybody was ready to do something but we didn't know what something was yet. So we just huddled tight here and hunkered down and got ready to go wherever we were needed.

Q: Where would - in a situation like this; a general attack, or what was interpreted, I guess, that morning eventually, as something of a general attack on the United States - where would your orders come from? Would they come from the Atlantic Area? Who would eventually tell you people to go someplace and do something?

LCDR Knapp: Sure. We are technically a Headquarters unit. There's various ways that we could get our tasking, but most common is that we get tasking from the Coast Guard Captain of the Ports, the Marine Safety Offices or the Federal On-Scene Coordinators.

Q: Who do they ask to get your services?

LCDR Knapp: They can call us directly. They can call NRC; the National Response Center. They can call the National Strike Force Coordination Center. They can ask a District Office to contact us. It doesn't matter. There are various routes. Just the word has to get to us. We need to know who we're working for and where they want us, and we roll.

Q: I was looking over last night, some of the lists of materials that you've had to deal with over the past four months and are still dealing with. Were you thinking about those kinds of things, that when structures like this come down they're producing all sorts of stuff? Clearly at that early stage people were still hoping that there would be survivors. But when you see lists of potential carcinogens and blood products and asbestos, and everything else, I mean it was sort of a witch's brew of every kind of hazardous material you could think of.

LCDR Knapp: Nastiness, true, right.

Q: I mean you're trained, I guess, to respond to specific threats. Are you trained to sort of bring everything, because we may get hit with everything this time?

LCDR Knapp: Sure. Well you know the bottom line is we're Coast Guardsmen first and so we think about the safety of human life and that was obviously, I think, everybody's primary concern, including ours. We wanted to get in and save people. But I would say the majority of the Coast Guard, a close second to that is the things that you mentioned; the nasties. What are we going up against here? What could we be called in to do? We were notified by Activities New York, and one of the things they asked for first after the Towers had collapsed and the mass exoduses from lower Manhattan had started were our boats, because we do have boats. We have coxswains. We have engineers. We're able to field a team and do the more traditional Coast Guard SAR mission if we need to. It's not our touch-stone mission but it's something we can do and did do that day. At some point, in short order, we got our tractor out. We got our 32-footer. We got our boats and we headed to Sandy Hook to the Coast Guard station up there to preposition ourselves.

Q: So the 32-footer . . . did you bring the 23-footer as well?

LCDR Knapp: We did.

Q: And then those were both brought to Sandy Hook?

LCDR Knapp: Yes, and pre-staged.

Q: And launched from there?

LCDR Knapp: Yes, pre-staged.

Q: Were they launched that day do you recall on 9/11, both the boats?

LCDR Knapp: I don't know that they were launched that day. They were launched and they were used heavily, but I don't know exactly the time that they went in the water. I don't know exactly when they splashed; if they went from Sandy Hook or whether we ended up bringing them on up to New York first before we put them in the water at Bayonne.

Q: So you were asked by Activities New York for the boats, and I assume that they come pre-packaged with the crew as well, so you had to get those folks in here if they weren't here already and . . .

LCDR Knapp: They were here and they were ready to go.

Q: . . . get them on the road.

LCDR Knapp: Sure, and we had a boat on the road. Once we were given the order the boat was on the road within 30 minutes I'd say. It's a guess, but certainly less than an hour. The other thing we were asked to do was to set up a staging area in the Military Ocean Terminal Bayonne with our MICP, our Mobile Incident Command Post. So we rolled that out.

Q: So that went to MOT-B [Marine Ocean Terminal - Bayonne], okay.

LCDR Knapp: Right. So we rolled that out as well and went and set up a staging area to provide support for the Coast Guard small boats that were deployed.

Q: Who's the officer or the petty officer in charge of the 32?

LCDR Knapp: It became Chief Field; Boatswain's Mate Chief Robert Field. I don't remember the exact sequence, again to whether he was on the initial deployment or whether he later went up and then took charge of that.

Q: And how about the 23?

LCDR Knapp: He was in charge of . . . I don't know the particulars. I don't remember the particulars anymore.

Q: Okay. I want to go back just for a moment to the question of orders you had. As it looks like from the paperwork over the ensuing days everybody rushed in the first day and then somewhere around the second or third day the bean counters started to ask who was going to pay for all of this, and you had money coming in from ESF-10?

LCDR Knapp: ESF-1 initially.

Q: Oh, so the initial money, say to launch the boats and so forth was coming in as ESF-1, and that was coming through . . . ?

LCDR Knapp: Activities New York.

Q: Was getting ESF-1 money?

LCDR Knapp: Right. We were brought on by Activities New York; [ADM \[Richard\] Bennis](#) [Commanding Officer, Activities New York, and COTP] and his crew up there. There was some dissension there that was apparent over time with respect to funding streams and I think everybody clearly up front was under the understanding that this would be ESF-1 funded. Once we'd realized it was a disaster it fell under the Stafford Act. Whether that funding ever came in I don't know, if it was ever actually federally declared as ESF-1.

Q: But ESF-10 was clearly declared?

LCDR Knapp: ESF-10 was clearly declared; the environmental protection.

Q: With what, something like sixteen million dollars eventually?

LCDR Knapp: Yes.

Q: So the folks on the other side of your shop would fall under the ESF-10; the response people, the washing, the getting into the buildings and so forth and so on. Would the Mobile Incident Command Post also fall under Ten?

LCDR Knapp: Under One.

Q: Under One?

LCDR Knapp: Right. At the time, because it was brought in for Port Security by Activities New York.

Q: Okay, and that's so you could keep contact with your vessels, or is that . . . ?

LCDR Knapp: Right. They ran a staging area of food, water, fuel, crew rest and communications with Activities New York for both our boats, local boats from that area up there, and also later the PSUs.

Q: Okay, so would that have included, say boats from Station New York or other areas, or was that primarily the Port Security Units that were coming in and your boats?

LCDR Knapp: Primarily the Port Security Units and our boats because Station New York obviously had there station right there.

Q: Did you have much contact with PSU-305?

LCDR Knapp: I did not personally. I was called by the CO after she got to Activities New York, probably about noon on that day, maybe a little after, and she told me, I need you to come up here and start the planning process; Planning Section Chief in their Incident Command Structure. They weren't sure that they were going to be . . .

Q: This was your CO that called you?

LCDR Knapp: My CO. They weren't sure that they were going to be able to get the person in their organization who was billeted to be the Planning Section Chief back. She was on leave or TDY at the time and they weren't sure that she was going to be able to get back in time.

Q: So you relocated from here to Activities New York?

LCDR Knapp: Yes.

Q: And they're at Fort Wadsworth?

LCDR Knapp: Yes.

Q: I want to sort out a little bit more of this ESF-1/ESF-10.

LCDR Knapp: Sure.

Q: Are there any other sources of funding that would have paid for this besides those two?

LCDR Knapp: I can't think of any. This is clearly a Stafford Act type of incident. In Washington DC - not to skip ahead - but in Washington, D.C. we used CERCLA funding, because obviously the Anthrax was considered a contaminant, which the EPA felt brought it under the CERCLA funding stream.

Q: And CERCLA is?

LCDR Knapp: The Comprehensive Environmental Reclamation and Liabilities Act. So it's a pot of money. It's Super Fund money that funds like cleanup of hazardous waste sites and all.

Q: And all the Anthrax response was paid for out of that?

LCDR Knapp: Yes. Partially for the hazardous materials dimension of this incident we could have probably used CERCLA because they're clearly contaminants.

Q: What's the difference between CERCLA and ESF-10?

LCDR Knapp: CERCLA is an act. CERCLA is a regulation in itself. As I just mentioned, and just like that's a separate pot from OPA-90 (Oil Pollution Act of 1990) money or OSLTF (Oil Spill Liability Trust Fund). That's strictly for oil. CERCLA is strictly for chemical. Both acts and federal regulations are under themselves, and then the ESF's are part of the Federal Response Plan and the Stafford Act.

Q: For things like hurricanes and so forth.

LCDR Knapp: Sure, and its FEMA. When people think of Stafford, or that type, they think of FEMA money; money that FEMA issues out.

Q: Is that where the ultimate source of it is?

LCDR Knapp: Yes.

Q: So that's sixteen million that went down through the EPA to the AST. Eventually to pay for your activities, at least under the ESF-10, would have come ultimately from FEMA?

LCDR Knapp: Right. FEMA says, here's this chunk of money. This is what we want you to do. This is how much we're going to give you to do it under ESF-10. EPA is the lead agency. They give the money to EPA and EPA requests us to work for them.

Q: If you want to proceed from the specific to general or general to specific, either way. What are your impressions on the . . . well let's start with the incident itself. You've got a million responsibilities being in the position you are in. Was there a time when you allowed yourself to just sort of stand back and look at the magnitude of what had been done?

LCDR Knapp: The first time I remember actually having the time to . . . I mean it was certainly in the forefront of everybody's mind on what we were doing. But the first time that I remember having the time to kind of decompress and think about the magnitude of it was in about 36 hours. I was up for 36 hours, and at the end of that time period I went and I brought a beer and went up to the top of Fort Wadsworth there to the old fort and just looked across the river, and it was still smoking heavily. I just sat there and looked at it and thought, wow, you know. This is crazy. If somebody would have ever told me that I'd be working on this sitting here and what had just happened, I would have told them that it's impossible.

Q: What were your impressions when . . . you were at . . . were you at Fort Wadsworth on the 11th and were you up there by the end of the day, or did you go there the next day?

LCDR Knapp: No, I was there by the afternoon.

Q: On the 11th?

LCDR Knapp: Yes.

Q: What was the scene that greeted you that afternoon? I mean I would imagine there was chaos.

LCDR Knapp: Very chaotic. Again, everybody had the desire to do something, do the right thing, make it better, but there was still just so much chaos with such a large population.

Q: Uh hum. Were a lot them coming towards Staten Island or were they mostly heading toward Brooklyn on the one side and Bayonne and New Jersey on the other?

LCDR Knapp: They were headed everywhere. Like I say, the roads were blocked. Obviously you see the pictures and know the story of all the boats that, you know, the tuggers and everybody that came to . . .

Q: Could you see much of that harbor activity from Fort Wadsworth or was that pretty much over the horizon?

LCDR Knapp: I was inside the command post.

Q: Oh you were, uh hum.

LCDR Knapp: So we were just trying to figure out what our resources were and how best to organize them.

Q: Was there anyone that stood out there in your mind, and I'm thinking here at Headquarters? They called all the senior officers together and one of the senior officers just told me that the only person in that room who seemed - not that anybody was out of control - but the person who seemed most in control was the Commandant himself, and whether that was an attempt to communicate that to his senior leadership in a crisis or whether that's how he genuinely felt, I don't know. I'll ask him. But was there someone there in New York who you felt that you looked to as sort of a steadying influence?

LCDR Knapp: Sure.

Q: Because in times of crisis like this, officers and enlisted, for that matter, or perhaps even more so, look to their leadership to see how they're reacting. They, in a sense, sort of take their cue from them.

LCDR Knapp: ADM Bennis, you know the man had a lot of strain put on him but he remained stoic and very much under control and communicated that to his staff, and I throw myself in there at which point, you know, when I integrated into their organization as part of his staff . . .

Q: Had you met him prior to this incident?

LCDR Knapp: I used to work for him.

Q: Did you really?

LCDR Knapp: Yeah, in Hampton Roads.

Q: So he knew you when you walked through the door then?

LCDR Knapp: Yes, he knew me.

Q: It's a small service.

LCDR Knapp: Yeah it is. As a matter of fact when I walked through the door - well not when I walked through the door - but when I was there RADM [George N.] Nacarra [III; First District Commander] came down and he was walking through the hallway and he says, RADM Nacarra, have I introduced you to my illegitimate son Nathan Knapp. (Laughter). I don't know if that should be on the tape or not.

Q: That's wonderful.

LCDR Knapp: He maintained levity in a grave situation and I think he's probably known for that. I mean the people would expect that of him. But it certainly put a sense of calming across his crew, and really we were all just, you know, like I say, buckled down trying to do the right thing and figure out how best to utilize the Coast Guard resources.

Q: How much of that do you look for throughout your career? Do you look to see how leadership responds in certain situations?

LCDR Knapp: How much do you . . .?

Q: How much do you as an officer look to other people in terms of how would you say, perhaps emulate or look for things, both to avoid and to do, when you find yourself in command?

LCDR Knapp: I think everybody realized it was a grave situation. You have to be able to maintain operational effectiveness. That's what it's all about. I mean that's what we're here to do. You know when everybody else from the general public was going to chaos, it was time for us to go to work.

Q: And what do you see as the most effective route to operational effectiveness? Is it training? Is it leadership? What do you invest your efforts in?

LCDR Knapp: Yes.

Q: All of the above. (Laughter)

LCDR Knapp: It's certainly both of those things you mentioned; its training and its leadership. It's competence amongst your people. In a situation like that you don't have time to be everywhere that you would like to be and you can't be wondering if your people are doing the right thing. You have to know that it's embedded and that gets put in by training and by good leadership.

Q: It's hard though to train for such an overwhelming scenario. Are there things that you've thought about since then that you might look to train people in for a similar type situation? I know it's hard to imagine a similar type situation, but clearly you could have an overwhelming earthquake or a flood or a hurricane, or another terrorist attack, or a nuclear attack or something like that, that could be of the same scale. Are there things that happened in this event that you would look to have people aware of before, or be ready for before such an event might take place?

LCDR Knapp: That's a huge question.

Q: I know that and I hate to spring that on you with three minutes left.

LCDR Knapp: I don't have any question whether the people here can go out and do whatever you ask them to do. I can't think of one scenario that, you know a realistic scenario, that we'd be given to do that we can't handle. A lot of that is because of the people who we have. Just the nature of the people they are; the nature of the person that is attracted to the Strike Team.

Q: Sure.

LCDR Knapp: They're people that are highly motivated, self-assured, and you know, come hell or high water we'll get the job done. As far as what training would we do back here, obviously we've been thrust into the chemical, biological, radiological world much more, as well as the weapons of mass destruction, dirty bombs type of world, much more as a result of both the World Trade Center and Capital Hill with the Anthrax. It's really kind of hard in my mind to separate the two because being that they happened in succession like they did, it's really forced us . . . we've talked about WMD and we've talked about CBR for a long time as a Nation and as a Coast Guard. To me this was the *Exxon Valdez* of that arena. We were thrust to where we were going at a - I'll call it a leisurely pace - on our own time schedule. We no longer have that benefit.

Q: Is there anything technologically that you would have wanted to have in responding to this that you didn't have, either in terms of communications or anything else?

LCDR Knapp: Well certainly you find out that our dependence on technology is almost a hampering . . .

Q: It's almost a weakness.

LCDR Knapp: It's a weakness, it is. All the communication towers and antennas that were on the World Trade Center, once they came down the city was dead. So that would probably be - you know to go back to your previous question - that's one thing that we should look at. How do we operate when we don't have our technology?

Q: When everything is vaporized.

LCDR Knapp: Sure. I think that's something that we've done a lot of great things with technology in the Coast Guard, but one of the things maybe we've sacrificed is how to do it in the absence of technology when you go to the field. I think that's something that we don't want to lose, and this is, you know, here you are in one of the greatest metropolises that the world has ever known . . .

Q: And nobody could make a phone call.

LCDR Knapp: And nobody could make a phone call.

Q: Yeah, because who would have ever thought.

LCDR Knapp: Sure. So what's the answer? I don't know. But our dependence on technology at that point was a weakness.

Q: Yeah. Well I think that's a good place to let you take a breath. Gosh, this is terrific, and there are certainly some areas here I'd like to follow up with you on at some point. We haven't even really gotten at all to the Anthrax situation. Maybe that's something we could come back to either later today or tomorrow depending on how much progress I make today.

LCDR Knapp: Okay.

Q: Because I'd like to go over with you how that started and the response to that, because you must have been just taking a breath from New York and then they said, we're not even . .

END OF INTERVIEW

