



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 (Junior Grade) Christopher
Williammee, USCG**
HAZMAT Officer, Atlantic Strike Team

Interviewer: PAC Peter Capelotti, USCGR
Date of Interview: 20 February 2002

Place: Atlantic Strike Team

Q: I'd like to start off by asking you how long you've been in the Service, Sir.

LTJG Williammee: Eleven years.

Q: And were you Academy, OCS, or how did you come into the Coast Guard?

LTJG Williammee: I'm an OCS graduate as far as I originally came in as an E-1 eleven years ago.

Q: Oh really, okay.

LTJG Williammee: I went through boot camp and went up through the MST rating and then to [commissioned] officer.

Q: Did you? Then you went to OCS?

LTJG Williammee: I went to OCS from Activities New York.

Q: Uh huh. Oh, so you have lots of experience in the Port of New York?

LTJG Williammee: I'm the area specialist for that port, yeah.

Q: Are you?

LTJG Williammee: Yes.

Q: So you've been in the Coast Guard for a total of eleven years and you've been an officer for?

LTJG Williammee: What, about two and half, three years?

Q: Uh huh.

LTJG Williammee: Since the summer of '99.

Q: Okay. And while you gave me a little bit of background, what other posts did you have in the Coast Guard leading up to this one?

LTJG Williammee: I started off on a 270; the cutter [USCGC] *Harriett Lane* [WMEC-903], out of Portsmouth, Virginia, and from there to MST School, then up to Marine Safety Office Providence, Rhode Island.

Q: Oh, my very first Reserve unit. When were you there?

LTJG Williammee: I was there, what, '92 to '93.

Q: Yeah, I left in '91.

LTJG Williammee: Okay.

Q: Was Eric Williams still there?

LTJG Williammee: Yes. From there I went to . . . actually I went to the Academy and resigned from the Academy. I went back to enlisted status and was stationed in Cape May, New Jersey for four years; Training Center Cape May. From there I rotated up to Activities New York to get back in rate, and went to OCS. From OCS I went to Headquarters -- G-MRI -- my background's split between Marine Safety and Computer Systems - and then I came here.

Q: And how long have you been with the Strike Team?

LTJG Williammee: About a year and a half now.

Q: So you've had plenty of responses before this big response?

LTJG Williammee: Yes.

Q: And what are your duties here with the Strike Team?

LTJG Williammee: I'm the Chem Officer; what they call now the HAZMAT Officer. So I'm a Division Officer in charge of all of the Hazmat related response gear and equipment we have at the unit.

Q: Were you involved in this course that was being taught the morning of September 11th? There was a HAZMAT course going on.

LTJG Williammee: No, because they were doing the oil side of it that week.

Q: Ah, okay. Do you remember where you were, or were you in the office?

LTJG Williammee: I remember exactly where I was. I was actually in the IRC talking with a couple of gentlemen. I'd stopped over to check on the classroom, and that was when Lieutenant [Scott] Linsky; the Ops Boss, came running on down and hollered at all of us that we needed to see this. He went into the conference room and immediately turned the television on, and that was where they were replaying the first plane hitting and we were all standing around.

Q: So you were in the conference room when the second went in and it ceased to be an incident and became an attack.

LTJG Williammee: Yes, and I was on my cell phone trying to contact my wife who's at Activities New York.

Q: Oh yes, uh huh.

LTJG Williammee: She's active duty. So I was trying to get a hold of her, realizing that the phone system was already hosed.

Q: Uh huh. Did you ever get a hold of her that day, or I should say when was the first time you . . . ?

LTJG Williammee: I got a hold of her for maybe 30 seconds that day and then I was one of the first ones out the door. I deployed with the first MICP and all of the response folks heading on up within about . . . we got out there a little under an hour I believe.

Q: So the MICP is on the road at about 11 o'clock that morning?

LTJG Williammee: I think somewhere around there, yeah.

Q: And you were diverted from Staten Island to MOT-B [Marine Ocean Terminal - Bayonne] enroute and set up shop there?

LTJG Williammee: Yes.

Q: What are some of the kinds of things that went on with the MICP that first day? What were you trying to do?

LTJG Williammee: We were trying to find the location where they were going to need us for the long term so that we could just get that thing set up and start working as a Forward Command Post, and there was just too much chaos going on for them to really know themselves where they wanted us.

Q: So what did you do?

LTJG Williammee: Well first we went to Tosco Bayway Refinery, which is on the New Jersey side. I tried to get in touch with Activities New York. Their entire phone systems were down on the Coast Guard side because their switch was out of that building. I couldn't get through to them. I finally got through to one of the petty officers I knew. He told me, we don't know what we want you to do. See if you can get up here to the Activities building and we'll go from there.

Q: Uh huh, and how did you get from MOT-B to Activities New York? Did you take a boat?

LTJG Williammee: No, we took our government vehicles; flashing red and blues when we went across the bridge to get over into Staten Island. As far as the cops, they had everything blocked off and we

basically pulled up, rolled down the window, told them to get the hell out of our way, we were going through whether they wanted us to or not. The majority of them totally understood and we went on our way.

Q: Yeah. So you've left the Mobile Incident Command Post at MOT-B and gone over to Activities New York. Did they eventually decide where they wanted that? Did it stay there at . . . ?

LTJG Williammee: We stayed at MOT-B because we actually . . . I don't think we got over to Activities New York that first day. I don't think I got over to Activities New York until the second day. We set up at MOT-B and we started building a staging area down there.

Q: Uh huh. When you're at MOT-B are you in the area where the [USCGC] *Katherine Walker* [WLM-552] ties up, in that general area?

LTJG Williammee: Exactly. That's exactly where we set up. We set up right alongside that pier as far as back a good 50/60 feet.

Q: This TCC van that I see in the first situation reports from New York, they're not referring to you folks, are they? That's a different telecommunications . . .

LTJG Williammee: That must be. I don't know anything about that van, but that's not us.

Q: Is that right?

LTJG Williammee: Yeah, that's not us.

Q: I don't know where it's coming from. That's one of the things I have to find out. But it's not your MICP van?

LTJG Williammee: No.

Q: What are the kinds of things that . . . did you stay in charge of that command post for the first few days?

LTJG Williammee: For the first week, yes. I took charge of Bayonne. We still had the ANT Team there though, so you had the senior chief in charge of the ANT Team and then what I was doing was - I wasn't in charge of him - I was working alongside of him to build that staging area down there, and start building all the things that . . .

Q: What was he doing?

LTJG Williammee: He was doing whatever the commander needed him too for Activities New York. He had small boats, non-standard boats there, so he was doing ferrying service. He was running firefighters over and medics over.

Q: Right, and what were you guys doing?

LTJG Williammee: We were beginning the process of - well let's see. We got the command post all set up. We started giving them information about what resources were down there and what was happening down there. We started gathering pallets of Gatorade, water and food. We started reaching out to find out what we had to do about fuel, what services was there and what we had to build. We had to build a whole lot more pier space to accommodate PSU boats.

Q: How did you go about doing that?

LTJG Williammee: I ended up getting in touch with the gentleman up at Activities New York; the engineering officer up there, and he came down and they had built those piers for OpSail two years back, and actually had them still out in the back bay of where the ANT team kept all of their buoys.

Q: All their stuff, uh huh.

LTJG Williammee: They were rotten. I shouldn't say rotten. The majority of them worked. A couple of them did not work. It was a bad design, but it got us going at least for a couple of weeks until we redesigned them and rebuilt them.

Q: On about the third night, according to the *Walker's* log, they came back to MOT-B and got their electronics blown out by a lightning strike. Do you remember that night? Were you there that night?

LTJG Williammee: I was on watch that night when the lightning strike hit. Yes, I remember that very well. I was standing . . . I had just gone outside to do a round. I had come back in. Chief Johnson and Chief Fields had laid down and were sleeping, and the other member in the MICP was DC2 John Santamaria, and then I had two folks sleeping in the tractor trailers, so they were in the beds of the tractor trailers; BM2 Matt Schalich and I believe MK2 Tom Hadley. I had just come back into the MICP and was looking outside when it struck. It scared the Be-Jesus out of us. In fact there's a funny tale. I'm not sure I need to say it on here.

Q: Go ahead. I've already heard about having to go in to feed the Senator's fish.

LTJG Williammee: Oh you've heard about that one, all right. But Chief Johnson sat up, as far as he jumped out of his skivvies. We were under a status of alert. They were looking for a tugboat in the area, and so consequently as far as I had security doing roving rounds the whole time. It was dark that night. We were worried about terrorist attacks. So when this happened our first thoughts were we were being shelled or something. We didn't know what was going on.

Q: A rocket or anything, yeah.

LTJG Williammee: Chief Johnson jumped on up. He jumped out of his skin. He turned around and he yelled back at Chief Field who was still sound asleep, did not wake him, nothing. He screamed loud enough to wake the dead and Chief Field sat straight on up. I looked over on the other side of the MICP and DC2 Santamaria (phonetic) was just standing there shaking like this. This is a man who's about 6'2", 6'3", maybe 220/230, and he's just shaking like a leaf. We went outside and that's where we could see as far as it must have been maybe what, we were only 60/ 70 feet from the *Walker*. We were right there.

Q: Yeah. Is that big berthing area for like the old berthing for ocean liners and repairs and such, is that still there at MOT-B or has all that stuff been . . . ?

LTJG Williammee: A lot of that stuff's been torn down. There are sections of MOT-B I didn't get a chance to get around. It was funny. That entire first week I don't think I went more than outside of the fence line.

Q: Yeah. What site greeted you that first day as you got up there? I mean you basically had a front row seat of what's going on.

LTJG Williammee: The first thing we noticed as we were driving over on the bridge heading into MOT-B was the smoke coming up, and looking out over the city. Again, I was stationed in New York. I'm used to seeing those Towers and they weren't there.

Q: Right.

LTJG Williammee: And I think it was as we were going over the bridge - I'm not sure of the timeline - but I'm almost positive that's when the first building went down and we could see a lot of that.

Q: Were you listening . . . do you have a radio in the car? Were you listening to the news report on the radio as you're driving in there?

LTJG Williammee: We had, did we? I don't think we did. I do not think we had the news report on. They kept continuing to show the same thing over and over again, and very quickly on we turned all that stuff off. We ordered, as far as I had the TVs turned off, although the guys kept turning them back on. It was traumatizing them too much to keep seeing it over and over again. So we had to turn it off so that we could get stuff done.

Q: Yeah. It really got to be excessive by about noontime to see this for the 50th time.

LTJG Williammee: Exactly.

Q: That's interesting. So you tried to get your folks refocused for the task at hand?

LTJG Williammee: Well everyone. I mean everyone's completely stressed out. They're not sure what exactly is going on. At that time we're not getting direction much from our command, which is Activities New York because they're in a state chaos themselves and they don't have good phone comms.

Q: Right. What do you look for, or what did you look for in your leadership in those first few hours and days? Was it an attitude? Was it words or was it direction? In other words, when you command later in your career, you know, if you have command of a vessel or unit and you're confronted with a situation like this - heaven forbid - what would you take out of this that you would seek to emulate or seek to do differently?

LTJG Williammee: I remember trying to consciously think - especially those first couple of days - that I needed to appear as if I knew exactly what was going on and I knew exactly what I was doing, whether I was right or wrong. At the same time when something was proved to me wrong, chalk it up, accept it right at that moment, say, darn, I thought it was something different, and well here's where we're going to go, and move on completely. I think as far as if you portray that to all of your folks it didn't necessarily reduce their stress levels but it made them truly believe as far as that, well, at least someone knows where we need to go, and they listened to me more intently. They did exactly what I needed them to do immediately because they were all looking for direction. They're looking to be told what they could do to help because everyone wanted to help in their own way. They wanted to do something to feel that they were providing help, and if you didn't give it to them they were going to go find it for themselves. Those guys on the ships, we talked to them when they came back, especially the *Walker*. I have a couple of friends who are petty officers on that ship and they dropped their folks off. They went into the city I think a couple of times doing different things and it's all because they really wanted to help, even when they probably shouldn't have been doing that.

Q: Yeah. I've gotten some terrific stuff from them. They are one of the few units that kept pretty good records of what they were doing and actually wrote it up and sent it in. And your heart goes out to them. They're working 24 hours a day and then coming back to have all their electronics fried on them.

Well this has been terrific.

END OF INTERVIEW

