



*U.S. Coast Guard Oral History Program*

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## 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 Scott Linsky, USCG** Operations Officer, Atlantic Strike Team

Interviewer: PAC Peter Capelotti, USCGR  
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**Q:** Sir, how long have you been in the Coast Guard?

**LT Linsky:** Nine and a half years.

**Q:** And how did you come to be in the Coast Guard? Are you from the Academy or OCS?

**LT Linsky:** I'm OCS. I grew up in the Boston area. I operated high-speed passenger ferries before I joined the Coast Guard while I was in college.

**Q:** Where did you go to college?

**LT Linsky:** Boston University. I've got a degree in International Relations. It's a long story how I got here, but there was a Coast Guard officer that rode the passenger ferry to work every day and kept encouraging me to do something a little more productive with my life.

**Q:** Oh, there was a Coast Guard officer on the ferry every day?

**LT Linsky:** Yes. He pushed me towards OCS and here I am ten years later.

**Q:** Well that's terrific. Do you remember who that is, or was?

**LT Linsky:** It was a gentleman by the name of Mark McCabe. He was a lieutenant at the time. I've run across him once since then.

**Q:** Is that right, while you were in uniform?

**LT Linsky:** Yes. I ended up in a school in Yorktown with him and he said, I always wondered what happened to you.

**Q:** That's terrific. Okay, great. And how long have you been here with the Strike Team?

**LT Linsky:** Almost four years.

**Q:** Four years, okay, and how long have you been the Operations Officer?

**LT Linsky:** The whole time I've been here.

**Q:** What billets did you have before this?

**LT Linsky:** I spent four years at MSO Hampton Roads, mostly in port operations. The last two year I ran the Marine Environmental Response Branch and that's how I got into this job was handling all the oil and hazardous materials cases for Hampton Roads.

**Q:** Did you know . . . was the XO there when you were there?

**LT Linsky:** Yes. We spent probably four or five months together down there before I transferred out.

**Q:** And you've been here for about four years so I guess you had had no shortage of incident responses before 9/11. Were you here that morning?

**LT Linsky:** Yes.

**Q:** There was a course going on I guess, so were you part of that?

**LT Linsky:** No I was not. We teach sort of a basic training for all three Strike Teams at the end of every summer, early fall, to get the new people qualified in oil and hazardous material response. It's really for familiarization with our basic equipment, and we were teaching about 30/32 people in that course and I was in my office that morning. There's two pieces to the course. There's the hazardous material portion, which was taught by an outside contractor and then there's the oil portion, which would have been the following week. So I was in my office talking to the Engineering Officer about the following week's oil course.

**Q:** What does an Operations Officer do for the Atlantic Strike Team besides everything?

**LT Linsky:** It's an interesting job. The unit isn't split up like most of the Coast Guard. In most units you'll have three or four or five about equally sized departments. The Operations Department effectively is the unit, with the exception of the four people in the Admin, everybody works for Operations, and my job is really to support the needs of the Federal On-Scene Coordinators, whether it's the EPA or the Coast Guard. When we get a request for assistance, whether it's operational or training, I'm the one who puts together a response team or a team to provide the service that they're looking for. It helps them select the equipment and the proper personnel and gets them out the door to where they are headed.

**Q:** You were in your office that morning and I guess mumbling went through the building about this plane going into the World Trade Center. Did you stay in your office or did people gather around the TV? Do you remember what you were doing?

**LT Linsky:** Actually how the unit found out this had happened was my wife called my office. We were sitting, as I said, discussing the oil portion of the course, which was going to be the following week, and my wife happened to call and said, you better turn the TV on. Some sort of aircraft has run into the World Trade Center towers and said, it's a pretty clear day out. It must be some sort of accident with a traffic helicopter or a small plane. And I said, all right, and as I went to hang up the phone she said, you better hurry, an airliner just flew into the second tower, and her question was what could cause an accident like that? The only thing I could think of was it isn't an accident. I got up from my office. I believe I left the poor EO sitting there in my office wondering what was going on, stuck my head into the Incident Response Center; our small operations center . . .

**Q:** Is this Mr. Rich?

**LT Linsky:** Yes. This is Mr. Rich. I told the watch stander there was something going on and to start mustering the crew. I went into the conference room, turned the TV on and people began to gather and things started happening pretty quickly. I remember telling the Mr. Deon, who's the Warrant Boatswain - the Assistant Operations Officer, Mr. Reinhart, was at a course that morning - I remember telling Mr. Deon to double the size of the watch section. e found our senior truck driver who's Chief Johnson, and said, Chief get three drivers, your equipment bags, get the command post hooked up and get ready to go to New York, and that was really the first action we took.

**Q:** So you were, even at that point, you knew that you guys were going to be on the road very quickly?

**LT Linsky:** Just based on the other things like . . . obviously nothing like this had ever happened before. But the major responses . . . it's pretty common that we'll see something on CNN and say, you know, in 12-hours we're going to go.

**Q:** You mean somebody's going to ask us to be there.

**LT Linsky:** We're going to have to be there, and that's pretty much what happened. I had a pretty good idea of what Activities New York was going to ask for and then I assumed . . . this was early. This was before either tower collapsed. Once the towers collapsed I was pretty certain that EPA was going to bring us in on the hazardous materials side.

**Q:** Just to go back slightly. Was there a moment when your sort of surprise, or interest in the event . . . or what was the point when you realized, okay, I watched TV enough. I t's time to start making plans?

**LT Linsky:** It was when the building came down. I had told the watch; the OD, just before the first building collapsed to get all of the officers and chiefs that were onboard from all three Strike Teams, gather them in the conference room and that I wanted to talk to them. I remember asking Mr. Deon, do you think they'll ever be able to repair the damage to the buildings? Look at the fire, and right then the first building collapsed, and that was pretty much, okay, mute the TV. It's time to get to work here. And from there we started building a response.

**Q:** Activities New York; did they call you or did you pretty well know that they were going to be asking for your boats very quickly?

**LT Linsky:** No, actually the boats were sort of a separate event.

**Q:** So the environmental response was separate from the port security?

**LT Linsky:** Yes. Based on previous events I knew that Activities New York was going to want our command post. They were going to want our Incident Management Team. They were going to want to stand up ICS and that we were going to have to help them do that. The first call we got was from the CO of the station at Sandy Hook who said that they had no landline communications with New York.

They had received a request from RADM [Richard] Bennis by radio for us to deploy our command post as soon as possible to Staten Island. So that was the first thing out the door. Knowing what we were going to start getting into I wanted to get a boat in the water to support our own operations, not realizing, it never crossed my mind what the port security side of this was going to look like; how big this was going to be. I called back to the Station Sandy Hook, got the CDO on the phone and I said, listen; I need some place to stage a boat. They were so happy that I could send them a boat and two crews that they agreed, and I ended up sending both boats . . .

**Q:** That was the 23 and the 32?

**LT Linsky:** The 23 and the 32. I put both boats out with enough crew to sustain us for 24-hour operations, and almost before I knew what happened, they were sucked up into the whole port security operation.

**Q:** And you had assumed, at least initially, that they would be supporting the Incident Command Center?

**LT Linsky:** I assumed that they would be moving Strike Team people around New York to wherever we needed to be.

**Q:** Around New York Harbor, right. When did it hit you that as far as the mass evacuation, as you say, you realized that very quickly this was going to be a much larger operation?

**LT Linsky:** I guess really when I talked to Sandy Hook they told me what was going on; the Coast Guard boats were evacuating injured. One of the things I did before we sent the boats out the door was that I structured the boat crews a little bit different. I sent a coxswain, an engineer and a boat crewman, but I also sent an EMT with each boat crew assuming that we were going to be responsible for some evacuation.

**Q:** And you have those on staff here?

**LT Linsky:** Yes we do. Each team keeps a core of EMTs trained for our own use in response to provide our medical assistance.

**Q:** But that's not usual that you would send an EMT?

**LT Linsky:** Not on a boat crew. On any operation . . . if we do any response operation for hazardous materials or oil, we'll send an EMT along. But for a typical boat operation it would have been a three-person crew.

**Q:** And each boat has a four-person crew?

**LT Linsky:** In that case.

**Q:** So in this case there were five people?

**LT Linsky:** No, I'm sorry. In this case there were four people where it normally would have been three.

**Q:** And that's on each one of these?

**LT Linsky:** Yes.

**Q:** The Mobile Incident Command Post; that eventually went to MOT-B [Marine Ocean Terminal - Bayonne]?

**LT Linsky:** That was the first thing out the door. That was gone by about 11:05 that morning and it was directed to Staten Island, to Fort Wadsworth, to Activities New York, and in transit was redirected to MOT-B. The way I envisioned it was they basically pulled their OpSail 2000 plan off the shelf, because we supported OpSail 2000 with the Mobile Incident Command Post at MOT-B, and from what I could tell they just basically pulled that plan off the shelf to reestablish the staging area in some sort of small boat operations center.

**Q:** Who's responsible for - as the Chief showed me yesterday - who would go up there and make sure that the thing gets parked where it should be and set up the way it should be and gets up and running?

**LT Linsky:** In that case it would be . . . basically I would pick out a team leader and our senior truck driver. We also had, in addition to EMTs, one of the other special skills that we build around here is commercial truck drivers. The senior truck driver was onboard. He also happens to be a chief, which was helpful. I told him he was the team leader and it was his decision where it should go, how it should be set up and what was the most effective . . .

**Q:** Who's that?

**LT Linsky:** Chief Johnson.

**Q:** Chief Johnson, okay. Let me ask you, when did you get to New York? Did you go to Activities New York or did you go right to Manhattan, or did you go to the command post when you finally got up here?

**LT Linsky:** I was here for about the first seven days of the operation.

**Q:** You were, okay.

**LT Linsky:** It just kept growing.

**Q:** Right.

**LT Linsky:** I basically wiped out all of our personnel. I started dipping into the class for personnel. When the class concluded within an hour I sent them all off to New York. I coordinated resources from the other two Strike Teams coming in and pretty soon we had 93 or 94 people in the field, which is pretty impressive considering the teams only have an active duty strength of 37 apiece. So we had most of the National Strike Force out there.

**Q:** So most of the Pacific and the Gulf Teams were here?

**LT Linsky:** Were here. I would guess that at some point in the response to New York, everybody in the NSF; everybody at the Teams participated in some way.

**Q:** And you know those folks pretty well. You've trained together and you have the same procedures and same technology, so that they can more or less step in and fill the same roles?

**LT Linsky:** Yes. We're trained to the same qualifications stated and we all operate the same basic equipment, even the people - and this had been experience with other cases too - even the people that I had never met and never worked with. I knew what their qualification level was and I could bring them in, plug them into a certain place, and I knew they'd perform. That had been my experience in other cases too. The relationship between the three Operations Officers at the teams is excellent. I pick up

the phone. I call another Operations Officer. That's a routine event for us to trade personnel back and forth as we have needs.

**Q:** So in a crisis situation you can sort of cut through the . . .and go right to the Operations Officer and get what you need?

**LT Linsky:** Yes, and that is our normal method of operation. For example, we're supporting the Gulf Strike Team on a case in Tennessee right now. It's just a routine Super Fund cleanup site. They called and had need for a specific skill . . .

**Q:** And that's SOP with the Strike Teams is that I need this and I can call them? I know they have it.

**LT Linsky:** Yes. It doesn't have to go up the chain. Even through the CO's it's as simple as the Operations Officer of the Gulf Team picking up the phone and saying I need a Response Supervisor for these dates and we'll make it happen.

**Q:** Well that leads me into my next question, which is, during those first seven days - I mean it obviously was something of a magnitude that nobody had seen before in terms of an event or the response to it - is there anything that you felt that you would have liked to have had? I mean obviously no one assumes that we've got this highly technological society and you've got this massive city with all this world-class communication and then they don't work. You can't make a phone call. Is there anything that you would have liked to have had that you didn't have; satellite telephones, you name it?

**LT Linsky:** I don't know that there's a unit that's better prepared out there in the Coast Guard because we go to natural disasters all the time. We do hurricane response. We've done flood response. We've done earthquake response, and it's all basically the same. You get some place and the infrastructure is wiped out. This was more hectic than anything we've ever responded to because of the emergent nature. Hazardous Material Incidents tend to be much more life threatening than an oil spill. They start out small. We might send a team . . . the biggest team I think we've ever sent in an emergency response to a hazardous material incident was about 24 people right off. So we've always kind of got time to think about it. We threw resources at this very quickly and I think that if we had thought through it better . . . we took a whole bunch of VHF radios, which anybody that knows anything about communications would have told you, aren't going to work in a city filled with concrete and steel buildings. We had UHF radios. I think as far as technology went we had most of the things we needed. Cell phones didn't work well for probably the first ten days of the incident until we got some temporary things set up. We could have used more cell phones. We remedied that problem less than two weeks into the incident, but they wouldn't have helped in those first few days anyway.

**Q:** Right. Is there anything that would have?

**LT Linsky:** We have satellite phones. It would have been nice - one of the things we're looking at now from the Mobile Incident Command Post that the Pacific Team is prototyping is a satellite link so that we can actually get onto the Coast Guard data network. It would have been nice to be able to tap into some of the databases we use just to get pictures and SITREPS and e-mail, and things back here so that we could feed them out. Activities New York lost all of their communications. We ended up fielding phone calls and having personnel calling here to check in from units we had never even heard of. So I think some sort of comprehensive satellite communications would have been nice. But I think otherwise on the ground, technologically, we did okay.

**Q:** How about in terms of people?

**LT Linsky:** That's a tough question because nothing like this obviously has ever happened. For any of the events that we've had to this point, the three Strike Teams have always been able to have enough personnel available to make the response function very well.

**Q:** So short of having 9,000 Strike Team people . . . ?

**LT Linsky:** It's a tough question. If I thought this was going to happen every six months I think we'd need to drastically increase in the size of the Strike Teams. But I think what we need to add, in light of this, is a few more specialized things. We're in the process of writing up a job description and hiring an Industrial Hygienist. We need to beef up our safety capabilities.

**Q:** Industrial Hygienist in terms of somebody who can identify bad things that might affect you when a building comes down, those kinds of things?

**LT Linsky:** Yes. We can do all the air monitoring in the world, but none of us have a Master's degree in Industrial Hygiene and can prepare a fully comprehensive Site Safety Plan, or talk to the people who do. We were not the only people there trying to fill that function, and we always bring in Industrial Hygienists from Area or District or MLCLANT and they work very well. But it would be nice to have somebody that's here all the time and trains with us and knows our procedures and our limitations. We need somebody that can step back and take a comprehensive view of safety without getting tunnel vision. The Response Officer or the Response Supervisor just can't do that in the field. They're too busy trying to solve the problem.

**Q:** This is something I would assume that you would want to have more or less roughed out well in advance of an incident as to what you might be running into.

**LT Linsky:** Yes.

**Q:** Was there anything similar - you were talking about floods, hurricanes and so forth - was there anything - and I don't mean in terms of scale but in terms of the environmental problems that you were dealing with that you had run into before - anything that compares with this?

**LT Linsky:** Obviously not in scale, but this was not all that different. It's a fire, and every fire has its hazards, and a lot of times they're unknown. We worked at an industrial park fire outside of Philadelphia probably eight or nine months ago and obviously the scale doesn't come anywhere close, but the hazard is the same. We didn't know what was in the World Trade Center buildings. We talked for days at the beginning; how much asbestos was actually in the air? There were thousands of gallons of dry cleaning fluid that was burning. There was gasoline and motor oil, and antifreeze and office furniture. It reminded me a lot of going to a metal plating plant fire; an industrial park fire, where you probably spend the first two days just trying to figure out what hazards you're up against.

**Q:** Right.

**LT Linsky:** And it was much more complicated because in a smaller more contained structure, pretty quickly you can get the Fire Chief to tell you exactly what was in that building or bring over the owner of a particular business and talk to him or her about what they stored. This was so different.

**Q:** What kind of concerns did you have in terms of . . . obviously this is the financial district of New York. There's a lot of pressure from the national leadership to get those businesses back up and running, or at least make the buildings available so people could get their data out.

**LT Linsky:** Yes.

**Q:** What kind of concerns did you have about sending teams into buildings in the area; things that you had them make sure they watched out for? And are those . . . that you say it's like a fire. Firemen have to go into dangerous situations. What was at the top of your list?

**LT Linsky:** Initially I know that the people here are well trained enough that they're not going to knowingly put themselves in a bad situation. If anything, we're overly cautious because we're not the fire department. We always have the opportunity to step back and say, I'm not comfortable here. Let's step back, reassess and figure out how we're going to do this. My initial concerns were actually for the emotional well-being of the . . . from the second day there was team in Manhattan doing air monitoring helping to clear these buildings so that rescue workers could go in and do a thorough search and that critical data and documents could be recovered, and our people were seeing bodies and finding bodies, and I was really concerned. I talked to . . . I was back here but I was getting phone calls from the team leaders out in the field pretty much around the clock about the things they were seeing and the things they were experiencing, and I'm glad that they called and I felt the need to go and see what they were seeing. So for seven days I went up and I looked at what they were facing and that's when I realized that there were still a lot of physical hazards. One of the buildings we went in, the structural engineers told us they didn't think it was going to collapse, and this was a 50-story building. I've never been scared in this job until I had to climb up that stairwell wondering how secure this building was, and as it turned out the building was fine. The building was reopened for business relatively quickly, but all the structural engineers could give us was a guess.

**Q:** What do you do in that situation when you have concerns about what your team is seeing in the field? I would think that this comes close to approaching combat shock, seeing dead bodies and death and destruction and so forth.

**LT Linsky:** Once I saw what they were involved with we got them involved with the Critical Incident Stress Debrief Teams. And I'll be honest. I'm not sure that those teams were prepared for what . . . one of the comments that one of our people made to me was they thought that the Critical Incident Stress Debrief Team was more upset than they were by the time they were finished discussing, and I'm sure that's the case. I don't know how anybody would have prepared for this. There are plenty of resources out there at any incident for a team to be able to sit down and talk to somebody, but it's hard to assess initially. It's certainly hard to assess from 80 miles away back here. I went and I saw it. I found all of my people and went and sat down, individually or in small groups, and talked to them. I got a feel for how bad it really was for them, and it was like a war. But I've got more people. I can rotate them around. And there have been cases over the last few months where . . . we have one person who's from northern New Jersey and grew up watching the Trade Centers built. It really hit him hard at one point in one of his deployments and I brought him home. You know, give him someone to talk to and get him out of there and let him reflect on it a little bit. Fortunately we have the luxury of shuffling the people around if we run into something like that.

**Q:** Operational effectiveness: as an Operations Officer, this is your livelihood. To what do you base the obvious effectiveness of this unit? Is it training? Is it leadership? What are the factors, or what combination of factors would you point to?

**LT Linsky:** I think the training here is excellent. I think the people here are phenomenally trained because we have the time to do that. We're a fire department. No, we're not running into burning buildings, but we're a fire department. We're sitting here waiting for the next fire, and when we're not waiting for the next fire . . . when we're not responding, we're training. And the training is excellent, but it's the people that make up the Strike Teams that make it a special place. Nobody is selected and directed to come here. They volunteer. They have to go through an interview process, and you'll never find a more motivated group of people. They like to have a lot of fun but they take their jobs seriously. They take each other's safety seriously. It's really about the capabilities of the people that are here that makes this place effective. It's not just the Marine Safety community. In fact very few of us actually have a Marine Safety background. The petty officers are from stations and cutters and Aids to Navigation teams and . . .

**Q:** Let me ask you, what's the first thing . . . if you're sitting in an interview room for somebody interviewing to join the team, what's the first thing, or flag that would go up to say no?

**LT Linsky:** After I have explained to them what we do here, if somebody says, I'm not sure I want to do that or I don't think I want to do that, then that's the first flag. It doesn't matter what they know coming in. Very few people come in here having any sort of background. Even the Marine Safety community; we're oil spill responders. We're not hazardous material responders. That's something you can only learn here. They have to want to do it. Anything else we can overcome.

**Q:** So besides oil and hazardous materials, what else would this unit focus on and what other situations might you be called into?

**LT Linsky:** We do a lot of Incident Management. The Strike Teams really brought ICS training to the field and that continues to grow. Every time a major incident happens we get called out to help provide the Incident Command System. We helped set it up in New York. We basically taught it to the EPA as we went along in New York. So we do a lot of that.

**Q:** Those kinds of procedures you work on, I guess you're continually refining those and working with . . . ?

**LT Linsky:** I don't think you'll ever go to a case that you don't learn something, in Command and Control especially. There are always miscommunications. There's always something that didn't get ordered that was really critical because this piece of paper didn't flow to this desk, and you're always looking at why not and how to improve.

**Q:** Are you confident that when you respond to a situation that you have what you need to do what you have to do on scene?

**LT Linsky:** We try as hard as we can to be self-sufficient for . . . the main reason is the last thing an Incident Commander that's got this major problem on their doorstep wants is for me to show up and say, well Sir, we're here. If you get us this list of things we'll get right to work. So every time we go out on a job like this we come back and we have a debrief, and it's one of the things I ask the crew in the debrief - and we only did this a few weeks ago - is what didn't we have? Well then if it's practical we go out and we buy those things, but we always take somebody with us that's capable of procurement. And everybody that's back here, it's they're job to support the response. So you get on the phone. You call back here and we find ways to get the things we need. I don't think we've ever really run up against a problem where we couldn't get a hold of something we needed.

**Q:** In the debrief, were the things that were identified that you would look to have next time that you didn't have for this response, anything that you felt that you really needed?

**LT Linsky:** No. There was some discussion about additional training; things like sampling and air monitoring and of that nature. Most of the things were small-scale technological things. Personal communications came up quite a bit, but that situation got resolved early on. We all had a pager when this started and some of the officers had cell phones. Now we got rid of the pagers and everybody has a cell phone. So our communications are better. We are already working on improved radio communications.

**Q:** There were things like hand held data, you know, palm data type things. Have you thought about those things?

**LT Linsky:** Something we're already using.

**Q:** Is that right?

**LT Linsky:** All of the officers and all of the - I don't know if this has been explained yet - but our qualification system, it doesn't matter what rank you are, but on the enlisted side you can achieve three

qualifications. Everybody gets Response Member, which is basic familiarization with our equipment, up to Responses Technician, which is a mastery of the technical side of the equipment, and then there's Response Supervisor, and not everybody achieves that. That is adding leadership on top of your technical skills. The officers and the Response Supervisors have Palm Pilots now, and they're actually prototyping - I think the Pacific Team is doing this - pocket PCs, which will give us even more storage capability. All of us carry around a lot of basic reference information. It sure beats carrying 25 pounds of books in your response bag.

**Q:** Sure. Well that's why I say it's a way to carry a lot of data.

**LT Linsky:** We will certainly procure that technology for everybody as soon as we settle on exactly what that's going to be.

**Q:** So you see that as, where let's say ten years down the road everybody's going to be carrying around all the CFRs in their back pocket on a CD or right on their Palm Pilot?

**LT Linsky:** We now have . . . this got started probably just over a year ago. I went home one weekend and put all of the references I could think of on a CD because we're always carrying laptop computers. The Assistant Ops Officer has a lot of skill with software. He took it home and turned it into something ten times better than I had ever envisioned and we have sent that out to be mass produced, and everybody in all three Strike Teams carries that around. It's almost everything you ever wanted to know; salvage manuals, technical data, suit compatibility, so that you don't have to be digging through 50 pounds of books. You can put it right into your laptop computer and pull up all your references.

**END OF INTERVIEW**

