



*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: Marine Science Technician Second  
Class Monica Louise Allison, USCG**  
Atlantic Strike Team

Interviewer: PAC Peter Capelotti, USCGR  
Date of Interview: 21 February 2002

**Place: Atlantic Strike Team**

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**Q:** I'd like to start off by asking you how long you've been in the Coast Guard?

**MST2 Allison:** Almost eight years.

**Q:** And how did you find your way to the Strike Team?

**MST2 Allison:** I short-toured out of Activities New York when they had a billet open.

**Q:** You were, according to what I have here, in New York by the 14th.

**MST2 Allison:** Correct. I think that was the day.

**Q:** Oh, I'm sorry.

**MST2 Allison:** It might have been a little bit later.

**Q:** Yeah, the 18th. Well in any case you were working in Operations Bulk Sampling Group.

**MST2 Allison:** Correct.

**Q:** Could you tell me what exactly that is?

**MST2 Allison:** We were walking around taking samples of matter that was on the streets and around Ground Zero looking for asbestos specifically.

**Q:** Uh huh, and how were you doing that?

**MST2 Allison:** Through standardized EPA methods. You take a shovel of dirt and put it in a bag and label it and off it goes. Then we would log each place that we did it so we could go back and check day by day the same area to see if there was any difference; if there was any kind of transient affects that were happening or there was a path where it was being tracked across the area.

**Q:** So when you got there after those first few days there was still a lot of junk and debris lying around?

**MST2 Allison:** Yes.

**Q:** What scene greeted you the first time you were there at Ground Zero?

**MST2 Allison:** You know I wasn't surprised to see the Towers. I'd seen that on the news eventually. I was moving the day of September 11th so I had no media coverage.

**Q:** Lucky you.

**MST2 Allison:** No, I had phone calls from my mother in San Diego saying, you'll never believe what happened. That's a whole other story. But what I remember seeing more than anything was Trinity Church right there because I use to run with the New York Roadrunners Club and I always got off the subway right before that.

**Q:** Right, uh huh.

**MST2 Allison:** The church is . . . I mean it's a very, very old historical church and it was just covered in ash. It was covered in clothing. Window blinds were in the trees. There was some damage done to some of the overhead stones, and I think that probably stuck in my mind more than anything else.

**Q:** That's not the same graveyard where Alexandria Hamilton is buried is it?

**MST2 Allison:** I don't know. That's the real old little one that's right there behind the Trade Center.

**Q:** He's buried around there somewhere. Maybe it's at Trinity. So how did you get there? Were you folks transported there by one of the unit's boats, or how did you get back and forth from Ground Zero?

**MST2 Allison:** Each day we drove.

**Q:** Did you?

**MST2 Allison:** Yes. I rode with two EPA OSCs that I've worked with in the past.

**Q:** You say you've worked with folks doing this same kind of sampling in the past?

**MST2 Allison:** No. I actually worked with both of these OSCs doing flood work; drum recovery, working in floods in the past.

**Q:** Okay. Was there anything that you have done in the past that prepared you for what you did during this?

**MST2 Allison:** For my mission, yes. I mean as far as sampling, yes. That was a routine item. There was nothing spectacular. I mean there's basic protocols that we go by regardless of where we're going.

**Q:** Does that allow you to - I don't want to say tune out - but focus on what you have to do?

**MST2 Allison:** Focus on the mission instead of the extraneous items?

**Q:** Yeah.

**MST2 Allison:** Yes.

**Q:** Is there a time in this situation, because it was such an unusual event, where you sort of took a step back from focusing on the details of your mission?

**MST2 Allison:** There was a time when we were in a park one day. It was a housing; like a condominium type park, and we were actually waiting to figure out where we were going to start out our next sampling grid. An individual walked up to me with a visiting fire department and had pointed out that there was a pair of turnout gear that was up in a tree there.

**Q:** What is that?

**MST2 Allison:** A fireman's turnout gear.

**Q:** Oh, okay.

**MST2 Allison:** So that kind of brought the reality of the whole situation back home - because we had stopped for a break. I think we stopped to eat lunch right after that too - and it kind of drifts right back to the devastation of what had happened. Other than that, I mean when you're working it's easier to focus on your work, and when you're putting in long hours you go back to the hotel and sleep and just focus on all of that.

**Q:** I know having lived through a flood, in those first few days you see cars in your back yard and things where they're not supposed to be and all sorts of destruction and so forth.

**MST2 Allison:** Correct.

**Q:** Was this different in any way other than the scale of the destruction? By that I mean, I know one of the things I noticed those first few days is that it was so quiet because there were no planes overhead. I mean did you have sensations like that?

**MST2 Allison:** Right. It was very frightening and it was very eerie, and when the airport started flying some of their planes over for protective measures, that was probably even eerier than that that was happening. I guess you just saw a lot more humanity than you would in a normal flood.

**Q:** Humanity in what sense?

**MST2 Allison:** You'd see people that were working until they'd drop over, and there were so many people that came from so far away and it wasn't even just the fire department and resources such as that. But I mean everybody. You know I've lived in the New York area before and I had never seen

people that friendly in my entire life. I really hadn't. It was like there were no barriers of any sort at that point.

**Q:** Were you treated differently because you were in the Service?

**MST2 Allison:** Oh yes.

**Q:** How so?

**MST2 Allison:** We were treated very well. I think that, myself included, and I think a lot of other people here kind of felt guilty sometimes because we were treated like heroes. They would yell and scream when we came in, you know, that "you're heroes", and "thank you for being here." We were just doing our jobs. We weren't doing anything that was that extraordinary or spectacular is how I felt and I think some other people did also. If we went anyplace in the city in uniform, people always made sure to stop and talk to us and say, "you're doing a good job" or they would volunteer to pay for our meals or buy us a drink or whatever, and it was very odd.

**Q:** Have you run into that at other disaster scenes?

**MST2 Allison:** No.

**Q:** Never?

**MST2 Allison:** Well I take it back. Maybe from local communities like in a flood; right there at the Command Post. But when you go out in the community itself its, "Coast Guard, where's your boat? What are you doing here?" (Laughter)

**Q:** Yeah, as soon as the waters recede.

**MST2 Allison:** Right.

**Q:** But you say this was more citywide?

**MST2 Allison:** Oh definitely.

**Q:** Yeah.

**MST2 Allison:** This was throughout the city. This was across over to Staten Island. There were stories. We had an individual who didn't have enough money in the grocery store and he was going to run to the ATM and the lady behind him said, I'll pay for it. Don't worry about it.

**Q:** Yeah. I'm hearing a lot of that from people over there. As you look back on this now with a little bit of perspective hindsight - both in terms of your job and in terms of the event itself - what do you take from it?

**MST2 Allison:** The World Trade Center actually came at a very bad time for me. I had a lot of other personal items going on at that time, including literally being in the middle of a divorce. I had to leave the World Trade Center to go to court and then come back the next day, and then we had a suicide in the family. We got through that. So what I learned from it all wasn't just the World Trade Center. It was everything else.

**Q:** You learned how to deal with the end of the world I guess.

**MST2 Allison:** Yeah, it was pretty hectic for a month there. But I'm right now getting ready to go on terminal leave in six more days to get out of the Coast Guard. I'm a single parent and I have a young child, and what I took away from that morning, if anything, is that I love my job. I've always loved my job, especially in the Coast Guard. I have the greatest job in the world, but my child means far more to me though.

**Q:** How long have you been in the Service? I know I asked that.

**MST2 Allison:** Almost eight years.

**Q:** Eight years.

**MST2 Allison:** I want to watch him grow up and I want to be there for him, and all I could think of the whole time I was in New York was how much I wanted to hug my kid. My girlfriend works at the Command and Control Center at Headquarters and she's a single parent, and she went through the same thing that day. She was getting all these phone calls.

**Q:** Who's that?

**MST2 Allison:** Stephanie Rathbun.

**Q:** Yes.

**MST2 Allison:** She's an MST2 there, and all she wanted to do was go home and hug her kid too, and it just drove that home that family is really far more important.

**Q:** Did the World Trade Center or 9/11 bring that home to you? Was it a combination of these things going on in your life or did this sort of push you over the edge in terms of wanting to get out and spend time with your family?

**MST2 Allison:** I knew that I was going to be getting out but it was probably for different reasons. But this really cemented the act of this. It wasn't just the World Trade Center. It was 9/11. I mean I think the Pentagon affected me a lot more than the Trade Center.

**Q:** Really, how so?

**MST2 Allison:** I grew up in generations of military families. How could they hit the Pentagon? I mean to me that was just inconceivable.

**Q:** I think the Pentagon's still wondering that.

**MST2 Allison:** I mean the World Trade has been a target so many other times . . .

**Q:** Right.

**MST2 Allison:** . . . and we all knew it would be, and we always used it as an example when we're teaching to prepare for WMD classes and stuff. We'd say, the World Trade Center. It's on the cover of FEMA's *Emergency Response to Terrorism* course book; a picture of the World Trade Center.

**Q:** Really?

**MST2 Allison:** Now I wonder if they'll change that.

**Q:** I think they'll have a before and after shot, I'm sure.

**MST2 Allison:** But the Pentagon, who would have guessed?

**Q:** Was your family background in Coast Guard?

**MST2 Allison:** No. My generation's Coast Guard is just myself. My mom and dad were Navy. My grandmother and grandfather were Army.

**Q:** Were they all enlisted?

**MST2 Allison:** Yeah, all enlisted.

**Q:** You have a son?

**MST2 Allison:** Yes.

**Q:** How old is he?

**MST2 Allison:** He'll be five in April.

**Q:** Oh yeah, that's a wonderful age.

**MST2 Allison:** Yeah. He still doesn't quite understand. He knows something bad happened but that's all.

**END OF INTERVIEW**

