

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: Rear Admiral Richard E. Bennis, USCG
Commander, Coast Guard Activities New York
Captain of the Port, OCMI

Interviewer: PAC Peter Capelotti, USCGR
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Rear Admiral Richard Bennis (left) and Coast Guard Commandant Admiral James Loy (right) discuss Coast Guard operations, 23 September 2001.

Q: I'll just give you a bit of background about this [9/11 oral history project]. Fairly soon after 9/11, it started to dawn on the senior leadership that they were making decisions that were going to affect the organization for the next 10 or 20 years and that somebody ought to be capturing it. So the Navy has sent 12 Reserve O-6s to document what they've been doing since 9/11 and the Coast Guard's mobilized a Reserve E-7.

RADM Bennis: That's about at par.

Then-CAPT Bennis

Q: You and I can say that Sir. I don't say that when I'm over at the Navy. I just wanted to start a little bit by getting some background about your career, because it was, as far as I can tell, fairly unusual to have an Admiral in that position and unusual that we had an Activities. That concept seems to be fully accepted now, but I've been told that if this disaster was going to happen, it was good - if that's the right word - that it happened in New York, because you had a Unified Command. Could you just explain a little bit about what led you . . . what side of the house you were on? From your *vitae* it looks like you were on the "M" side of the house. What led you to New York and what led you to be a one-star there when all this happened?



RADM Bennis: I'm in a unique situation. I think I was the only Coast Guard officer that had been Captain of the Port of three of the largest container ports in the country. I had been Captain of the Port of Charleston, South Carolina, Captain of the Port of Norfolk, and then Commander of Activities New York. I'd also been the Chief of Responsive in Headquarters, which was sort of all encompassing in the world of response; be it fires, explosions, natural disasters, oil spills, whenever there's a response evolution, that kind of went to the Office of Response. At the same time I was also involved with the National Response Team. I was a co-chair of the National Response Team working with all the other government agencies, so I'd been involved previously in the security world with security for the 1996 Summer Olympics. I've been involved in the *Exxon Valdez* response of Tampa Bay Oil, collision grounding and explosion response. I'd been in Norfolk less than a year; Captain of the Port in Hampton Roads, which was a dream assignment, and I heard that New York was going to come open and I decided to put in for it. Throw me in that briar patch. I knew OpSail 2000 was coming and I thought that was the greatest peacetime gathering of ships in history, and it sounded like a pretty good bone to chew on.

Q: Had you had any experience before at Governor's Island or in New York at all before you got there?

RADM Bennis: New York City was my least desired area, absolutely.

Q: Were you a New Englander originally?

RADM Bennis: Rhode Island. I met my wife in the sixth grade in Rhode Island.

Q: Where in Rhode Island?

RADM Bennis: East Village.

Q: Yes.

RADM Bennis: We put the full court press on to leave Hampton Roads after a year and go to Activities New York.

We went to Activities New York and we did a lot of planning and had a lot of major events happen while we were there, but we were all gearing up towards that culmination being the response with regards to OpSail 2000; a huge security interest. It was a huge evolution and a lot of partnership with the local industry in this city on how to pull this off and keep the . . . it was the International Naval Review and OpSail 2000. So we needed to keep security on the naval ships. We needed to keep this gathering of vessels safe, secure, and make it happen.

Q: Yes.

RADM Bennis: We pulled it off. A huge success, and I got a one-year extension. I was selected for flag. I got a one-year extension in New York - and at the time I thought it was going to be sort of an unwinding from the OpSail 2000; doing our lessons learned, getting everything together - and then 9/11 happened. I've made the comment that OpSail 2000 was probably the best exercise a city, a community or an organization could ever have for an event, besides 9/11, as far as the maritime response. We mentally dusted off everything we'd done and all the lessons learned for how to support a huge influx of Coast Guard personnel; how to support the PSUs, how to berth people, how to transport people, and how to fuel them. And if you've got that many small boats; the PSUs and the Auxiliarists, there are major issues as far as messing, berthing, fueling, logistics, showers, shower facilities, laundry facilities, telephone and head facilities. Things that, seamlessly on 9/11 . . . we heard the PSUs were coming and we knew where to go for portable showers. We knew where to go for portable heads. We knew where to go for telephone trailers and we knew where the shortcomings were. We knew that the last time they'd been there we didn't have enough sinks and mirrors and electrical outlets for shaving. We knew that, sure, you can shower and do all those other things, but we knew that we had to bring in all our lessons learned from OpSail 2000. We hauled them out.

Q: You sound like the enlisted sailors' dream Admiral.

RADM Bennis: But we learned it all in OpSail 2000. So what took two years to prepare for in OpSail 2000 . . . we had no time for preparation. We just made it happen.

Q: Right. How advanced was the Activities' concept when you were at Charleston, Hampton Roads, and then New York?

RADM Bennis: When I was at Headquarters I was on the Activities Evaluation Team. We had different models. We had a model in Corpus Christi. We had a model in San Diego, a model in Baltimore and a model in New York. So that was one of the other things that sort of spurred me to ask for New York, because I'd seen the other models. I'd seen how they worked and I was really taken by the New York model.

Q: What was it about that model that you liked?

RADM Bennis: You know it was one stop shopping for the community and it was one stop shopping for the Coast Guard. Everybody knew the buck stopped here. They knew exactly where to go. All the other ports I've been in; Houston, Tampa, Jacksonville, Charleston, Norfolk, Boston, I'd already seen the stakeholders; the folks that we provide services to. I'd hear them come into the front desk and they'd ask to speak to the Captain of the Port or somebody, and I'd hear the person at the front desk say, you need to talk to the Group Commander. Just go back out to the parking lot and get your parking fee that you just paid. Drive down the road. Go through the tunnel. Go two miles and enter the Base of Portsmouth. Go down there and the Group Commander is over there and that's whom you need to see. And there's this poor person who'd seen the Coast Guard stripe out front. They thought they were in the right place. It had taken an hour out of their day and dollars out of their pocket and they were frustrated by the government.

Q: That's kind of hard to explain that sometimes the Coast Guard has to liaison with the Coast Guard, or the Captain of the Port doesn't have his own boat to get across the harbor and has to call the Group Commander to . . .

RADM Bennis: That's right. People would talk about Activities New York - the largest operational field command in the Coast Guard - and they'd say - within the Coast Guard they used to say - what about the span of control? How can you handle that span of control? It is infinitely easier. You know I've lived the dream. I've been a Captain of the Port and Commanding Officer in other units, and lived that dream. But once you've lived the Activities Commander dream, it's easy. The best example is - if you take nothing else away from our discussion - the best example is: I can get a call in the middle of the night, as a Captain of the Port, from our investigators; our Response Team, and they'd say, this vessel has just hit a bridge. There's a fire. There might be an oil spill. We think there are people in the water. We've got to send somebody out there to do the investigation. We've got to send somebody out there to respond to the possible oil spill. We've got to send somebody out there to start gathering evidence. We need to do all those things. The Group has already sent the boat out. They don't want to send their Standby Ready Boat out so we've got to try and get a ride with somebody. We're going to contact the pilots to see if they can take us out there and we'll keep you posted. They call back in half an hour and say, we're having trouble getting out there. Can you call the Group Commander and get him to free up his Ready Boat? They really are uncomfortable doing it.

Q: So the idea of getting across the harbor is a real scenario?

RADM Bennis: That was easily the norm. Now in Activities New York I get one phone call. This event has just happened. We've got a boat underway with SAR folks and two members of the Response Team. We've got a second boat standing by for the investigators and they'll be going out shortly.

It was an absolute joy for me. A little frustrating, but a joy to have a petty officer that would come to Activities New York; a petty officer or a junior officer; an O-2/O-3, would come to Activities New York. It's their first tour in whatever program they ended up working in, and after they had a couple of months understanding what their role was and what they were doing, then we'd send them off to the Yorktown or one of the other Service Schools. They'd come back three weeks later and they'd say, I can't believe how screwed up this unit is, or that unit is, or the Coast Guard is. All they're talking about is a conflict between "M" and "O", and I don't know what they're talking about. You know, here we have all these Coast Guard missions. When the call comes in we respond. We don't have an "M". We don't have an "O". We have the Coast Guard. We have missions, and we just go out and respond.

Q: What "O" assets did you have under you in New York? Put it that way.

RADM Bennis: For my afloat assets I had two 110s. I had two 140s. I had three 65s. I had one 47. I had many 41s. I had many Rigid Hulls, and the only non-Activity New York asset in New York was the buoy tender which is under the District control, but they were family. I mean they were essentially part of the Coast Guard family and part of the Activities New York family.

Q: Sure. So the two cutters at Sandy Hook were under your operational control?

RADM Bennis: Oh yes. A lot of the old groups that had once existed in the GI [former Coast Guard installation at Governors Island] days; Group Sandy Hook, Group Rockaway and Group New York, they all came under Activities New York and became stations.

Q: I know they wouldn't say anything to you, but was there any tension between, say the "O" side of the house; the 110s and so forth; 87s, serving, or thinking that they're serving the "M" side if they were responding to somebody in an office as opposed to say a Group Commander?

RADM Bennis: I don't think so. The only downside to an Activities is there's a loss of command opportunities. You've got an Activities Commander and then you've got these phenomenally talented Division Chiefs.

Q: Sure.

RADM Bennis: Your Chief of the Maritime Response Division, who under him has surface forces in Response, and your Chief of Prevention and Compliance. I mean they are phenomenally talented individuals. The Chief of Prevention and Compliance has more people under him than probably most of the 0-5 COs in the Coast Guard and yet he doesn't have a Command Pin.

Q: And Captain [Pat] Harris was your . . . ?

RADM Bennis: Deputy.

Q: Your Deputy?

RADM Bennis: He was my Deputy.

Q: Is he the equivalent to your Chief of Staff?

RADM Bennis: Yes, I'd say so. There's an Activities Commander and the Deputy, and essentially we are a leadership team. The Chief of Admin handles a lot of those XO functions. He handles a lot of those issues, and that way if I wasn't there Captain Harris was right there.

Q: I was told by somebody that day when I interviewed five or six folks at Activities New York that - or maybe it wasn't even Activities New York - but somebody mentioned to me that of all the scenarios that you had on the shelf for 9/11, the only one that you didn't have, or hadn't really thought through, was a total evacuation of Manhattan, or parts of Manhattan. That shore-side security; security of the bridges, nuclear plants, whatever it was, those had pretty much been covered in conceptions of operations. Is that accurate?

RADM Bennis: I would say - you've got to flush that out a little bit - the total and sudden evacuation. I mean this was a catastrophic . . .

Q: Right. You had to get everybody off the island all at once.

RADM Bennis: This was a catastrophe sudden evacuation and a lot of the people . . . we were doing an evacuation while many of the people were fleeing.

Q: Right.

RADM Bennis: It wasn't that everybody was going down there and mustering. Some of the people were, just for good reason, absolutely terrorized. I mean the only way off the island was walking over the bridges.

I know we had, before all the bridges were closed, we had a brand new government vehicle. I think it was a big diesel Suburban; a beautiful black, good-looking car. On 9/11 I looked at it that night. It was functioning as one of the guard supports, and the whole side was ripped out of it. I said, what happened to our new car? And they said, somebody fleeing the city in a van or a U-haul truck . . . they hit cars all the way out and they just ripped right down the side of our car. People would drive over anything to get out of the city.

Q: Desperate to get off the island.

RADM Bennis: And so the sudden and catastrophic evacuation was . . .

Q: You were on your way out of town that morning?

RADM Bennis: I was on my way south. I was going down to Charleston, South Carolina. We were going down there considering looking at retirement property.

Q: Yes.

RADM Bennis: And Pat Harris, the Deputy called me and he said, you've left town again. Every time I left town something happened.

Q: My wife says the same thing.

RADM Bennis: The last time I left town prior to that it had been the hang glider that landed on the Statue of Liberty. He said, if you've got a TV, he said, we don't know what happened but a plane just hit one of the towers of the World Trade Center.

Q: So he was on the phone with you when the first plane hit?

RADM Bennis: He was on the phone with me when the first plane hit.

Q: Do you remember where you were when he called you?

RADM Bennis: I was just south of Quantico on Route 95. I had just gotten on 95 South. We'd spent the night in Quantico. I'd said to my wife, we really got out of there quick; you know a nice expeditious start. And I pulled over to the side of the road when Pat called and in the trunk of the car I had a little battery operated TV. I brought it out and handed it to my wife and I said, Pat said a plane just hit the World Trade Center. I was turning around to head back just in case and she turned on the TV and she's working the antenna and she said, oh, here's an instant replay, and it was the second plane. She got the sound up and it was a complete and total shock. Then we had the radio going. We had that going and I had the hands-free piece on the phone and almost all the way back I was talking to Pat.

Q: What went through your mind as you saw those images the first time?

RADM Bennis: Initially we really did believe it was just one of the many small planes that are all around the World Trade Center.

Q: It's amazing what a psychological transformation all of us have undergone since then.

RADM Bennis: And suddenly that happened and here I am trying to wind my way around Washington, DC. Within my private car I've got the NYPD Police pass and I've got my credentials that are good for getting me through things like that. But still in my private car, in the breakdown lane, going pretty quick, headed north, and then the Pentagon was hit. And as I'm going over the Woodrow Wilson Bridge and I look to my left - you know you get that view - and all I saw was this huge ball of black smoke just rolling out of where the Pentagon should be.

We got around DC before the traffic happened and we went about 95 miles an hour all the way back and nobody stopped me, and I just kept going. They said the Jersey Turnpike was closed and Manhattan was closed. I'd called ahead and talked to Pat and they had a boat waiting for me at Sandy Hook.

Q: So you drove right to Sandy Hook?

RADM Bennis: I drove straight to Sandy Hook. My wife was a little nervous about the speed and thought I was going to get a ticket, and I said, that's not going to happen. I said, we're well credentialed, and that was that story.

Q: Were you able to get some reports from her on the way up? Was she able to keep the TV on or does that not work when you're driving?

RADM Bennis: Oh yeah, it works when we're driving. We had the TV on all the way. We also had the radio on all the way.

Q: When did you become aware, was it more or less instantaneous when the second plane went in, that you were under attack?

RADM Bennis: Oh instantaneous. There was no question at that point. One; it's a horrible tragedy, and two; it's just not a coincidence. We instantly figured it out.

Q: You don't have to answer this if you feel its secured information, but as Captain of the Port in New York, were you aware or briefed in any kind of level of awareness before September 11th?

RADM Bennis: No. I remember when we got to Sandy Hook the coxswain on the boat had been on the George Washington Bridge. He was a Reservist on his way to work and he saw the first plane go in. He immediately drove right down to Sandy Hook where he's a Reservist and just showed up without being called.

As you come from Sandy Hook under the Verrazano, I mean it's almost one of the most beautiful sites imaginable, and everybody on the boat, we all had tears. It was just fire, smoke, and just an awful thing.

Q: The other side of that is the morning that you became aware of this as a Coast Guard event. When did it dawn on you that Activities New York was not only going to be stretched to the limit, but essentially that all the east coast of the Coast Guard was going to descend on you?

RADM Bennis: We asked for it. We asked for every single thing we could get. We asked for PSUs. We asked for everything we could get. Communications was a problem. I mean I lost comms with Pat several times. Apparently cell phones seemed to be one of the things that did work.

At one point I called my son who lives in Staten Island - I knew that we would always have comms at the stations and at the Activities by radio - and I said, walk up to Quarters "1", walk up to the station - and he was the only person I could get at that point - and I said, get Pat Harris on the radio. I talked to Max Mosker, the CO of the Station, and I said, I'll talk to him this way. We'll go that way. And my son said, well Dad, I'm at the entrance to the Station and there are guys out here with M-16s. I said give me their names, and he read the names off their tags and I said, okay, give it to, I don't know, it was Jason Bertly or somebody, and he handed him my cell phone - and this guy thought he was nuts - and I knew this petty office well. I said, Jason, it's the Admiral. That's my son. Let him in. Oh, yes Sir, and they took him down to the Station and I reestablished comms that way at that point.

Q: And your son's not in the Coast Guard?

RADM Bennis: No.

Q: How close did you live from Activities New York itself, or do you live on Staten Island?

RADM Bennis: You were at the Station, right?

Q: I was at Sandy Hook, Activities New York and Station New York, so I've been to all three.

RADM Bennis: Station New York; the house with the flagpole at the top of the hill. That was Quarters "1".

Q: Oh okay. So you're right next door?

RADM Bennis: Yeah. The fascinating thing, a little frustrating, but the thing was the lack of people outside of New York understanding what we had lost in communications. I would take my little bitty cell phone and I'd go outside the command suite of the Activities and I'd lean against the bicycle rack by the galley there because that was where I had the best reception. I had a button that said [Admiral James] Loy [Commandant of the Coast Guard] that I programmed in. I had a button that said [Vice Admiral Thad] Allen [Atlantic Area Commander] that I programmed in, and I had a button that said GNN for [Rear Admiral] George Naccara [III; First District Commander] and I would call them on my little - it was one of those tiny ones - my cell phone, and I'd say, this is the status report. This is what we're doing. I'll call you again in 40 minutes, an hour, an hour and a half. I said to the Commandant, you need to know that everything we need to be doing we're doing. We're doing it well. We need more people. We need support. We need logistic support. But everything that you want the Coast Guard to do, or think the Coast Guard should be doing, we're doing it. The only thing we're not doing is demonstrating it to those of you outside of New York because we have no comms.

Then I get a call from . . . in one of my conversations it got so it was a conference call. I'd call and there'd be a speakerphone and a lot of people there and I'd get questions saying, have you seen the latest security update? I'd say, well we have no phones. We have no computers. We have nothing . Well we faxed it to you. I'd say no, faxes are phones. But we got this all the time. Somebody would say, we sent you this or we sent you that and we'd say, we don't have that capability.

The CAMSLANT folks were sending up a communications trailer that they put on the point at the overlook at Fort Wadsworth and they got us back on line. But in that period of time we had the capability to talk by radio to everybody in the area, but we didn't have the capability . . .

Q: To get the outside world.

RADM Bennis: MLCLANT sent up a hundred cell phones with 757 area codes.

Q: What about the Strike Team's MICP; that Mobile Incident Command Post?

RADM Bennis: That came up as well. As all those things came up we got better, but it depended on where things got set up.

Q: Do you remember who the first senior leadership person was you talked to that day?

RADM Bennis: I called George Naccara when the first plane hit.

Q: Did you?

RADM Bennis: I called him and I said, George, did you hear? He said, I'm right here in my office, and he said, we're watching it on TV. We talked about the horror of it all and I said, I think I should turn around. He said I think so too, and I was able to talk to George a lot that morning on my way back because Boston obviously hadn't lost communications. We were able to coordinate a lot of things through the District.

Q: Once you got to New York did you have several messages waiting for you from the people above, at the area?

RADM Bennis: No comms. No messages from anybody because there was no communications. We didn't have any incoming capability, and it's like asking about the faxes. There were no communications.

Q: Even on the cell phone you were using, like you say when you stepped out to talk to Adm Allen?

RADM Bennis: No. As long as I assured them that we were doing what we needed to do they were very phenomenally supportive. They gave me everything I needed, and at the same time they

understood our need to be able to do what we needed to do, and as long as we had a comm-sked where I would call into them . . . and they got used to it quickly. I think it was 1600. Wherever I was at 1600 I'd call in and it would be the Area Commanders, the Commandant, the District Commanders, MLC, Bert Kinghorn; everyone would be on the other end of that phone line.

Q: What was your impression of those calls?

RADM Bennis: It was, in the early days . . . I was always the . . .

Q: They were all looking at you.

RADM Bennis: The Commandant would sort of welcome me and then they'd start it off with me and I would give the brief. This is what we've done. This is where we are. This is what's happening at Ground Zero. This is what we anticipate. I mean I remember on the first evening reporting that we were working with the City and standing by. There was an ice rink that was going to be used as a morgue if necessary. Just saying those things and reporting those things is . . . the hush on the other end as I'm reporting out these things and as the numbers are going up, and as I'm explaining it to them that, you know, two weeks, two months later as I report in it continues to burn. But I'd give a good quick summary of what we were doing and what was happening with all the government agencies. I'd let them know who'd reported in, how they'd gotten there, what were we doing to support them and what their needs were. Then it would go to George Navcara, to Admiral Allen, to Bert Kinghorn, and then anybody else that had any questions. Seldom, if any, were there many questions. They were taking in the information.

Q: Was there anything that they offered from other Districts; the things they had done, or solutions? Did anybody propose anything that you might try to do there for communications? Did the Coast Guard ever envision having communications in an entire area just shot?

RADM Bennis: The biggest discussion was the CAMSLANT response in sending in the technicians from all over the Coast Guard to help us. We had, I think when we finally got our phone lines back . . . there had been some talk of running that through the Bell Atlantic building, but that too was coming down. When we finally got our phone lines back . . . I don't understand any of this. I don't know any of this communications stuff. I just know it came through Denver.

Q: Don't ask why.

RADM Bennis: So I didn't ask, but they explained it. We had an awful lot of bootlegged phones that the TTs . . . they brought in analog phones and they plugged them in, and they had the little screen, and I called my wife at one point and I said, Honey, I got a phone, and she said, it says Tony's Pizza on the Caller ID, and I said, I don't know what line they're using . . .

Q: But it works.

RADM Bennis: . . . but it works.

Q: What sort of personal relationships did you have or collegial relationships? How well did you know Nacvara, Allen and Loy before all this happened?

RADM Bennis: Naccara was my best friend and it worked out very well. I'd known Admiral Loy for many, many years and I had an excellent working relationship with him, and Admiral Allen and I had never worked together but we'd been together on occasion and we had a pretty good working relationship as well. So I didn't have to go out and introduce myself to anybody.

Q: Sure.

RADM Bennis: They were all pretty confident with our abilities and capabilities.

Q: They were looking for a lot of information from you. Was there anything you were looking . . . other than say resources or technical aspects, was there anything you were looking for from them? I ask in this sense that in a crisis I think people look to their senior leadership. Obviously everybody at Activities New York is looking at you to see how you're responding, and I want to get to that in a moment. But did you look to them to act or respond in a certain way?

RADM Bennis: I looked to them early on to find out what was in their heads. I wanted to know. I knew what I wanted to do. I knew from working with the city the best way to accomplish it, and with all the task forces. But I wanted to know, was I in fact a free agent, and I was. As the Commandant put it out later, he said, he allowed his field commanders to let their creative juices flow and do what they needed to do, and I was able to do that. But I needed to know if I was going to be able to do that or were they going to micro-manage. They didn't send a team in based on what do you need.

Q: Make sure Bennis doesn't do anything stupid.

RADM Bennis: Yeah. They sent in exactly what I needed. They sent the people I needed, and it worked out very well.

Q: You have three decades in leadership positions in the Coast Guard and you've got this sort of towering figure at Headquarters; a combat veteran in Vietnam as head of whole Service. It seems from on the outside looking in that this was adult leadership time for the Coast Guard. That we had, essentially people who knew what they were doing, in the right places at the right time. Was that the view you had from your area as well?

RADM Bennis: I was absolutely totally comfortable with the way it was all transpiring. Secretary [of Transportation Norman Y.] Mineta is great. The Commandant is great. I mean they're all wonderful folks and we all knew exactly what we needed to do. If you look back on it and reflect on it, its one of those just, oh my God things. But at the same time we knew what we had to do. We knew how to do it. We knew what to do and we compartmentalized a lot of it. I'd say we were the lucky ones. Every person in this Nation was looking to do something from September 11th onward and we had something to do. We had something to focus on. There was no question of our mission and our focus or where we were headed and what we needed to do, and we did that. We did it brilliantly. I mean we really did.

Q: Let me ask that question from the other way around. What do you think - from the first moment you got to Sandy Hook over to Activities New York, everybody's, again, looking for the people above them to see how they're reacting in a crisis - what do you think the people there were looking for from you, and do you feel you have to act a certain way in a crisis as a senior officer?

RADM Bennis: What I did is what I always do. I went in with the folks. I sat down with them. I got a briefing; the first of thousands of briefings. I asked very few questions; some pointed questions just to be sure we're going on the right track, and I had a team that I had complete trust in and I let them know that right up front. I said, we're going to do this together. I pointed out to them that I was going to make darn sure that we all stayed together and they didn't burn themselves out. I mean there's that period of time when you're just running on pure energy and at some point I would circulate amongst them and say, it's time. Go hug your wife. Go get some sleep. The horror of it all . . . some of them I just sent home for an hour. You need to go home. Your wife needs to hug you if you don't need to hug her. Your kids need to hug you and see you if you don't need to hug them. But I had a phenomenal crew. I just had a tremendous crew, and I'm a huge believer in empowerment. I told them to go out and make magic and be brilliant, and they always do. I just tried to stay there in the midst of them, but absolutely, I never micro-managed them because they didn't need that at that point in time.

Q: It's amazing just traveling around the Coast Guard how absent that - for the lack of a better phrase - Alexander Haig impulse is to say, I'm in charge here and we're all going to do things my way. It's sort of everybody gets together as a team and decides what the best path forward is.

RADM Bennis: Yep. We build it together. If we don't like the way its going we'll take it apart and put it back together again.

Q: What were your biggest fears, your biggest concerns in those first few days?

RADM Bennis: We shut down the Port and within 20 hours I was getting calls from the White House. They knew how to get me. I was getting calls from the White House saying they're running out of gasoline in Portland, Maine, because New York is a huge petroleum port, huge. We supply the petroleum to Logan Airport and all these other places and people don't realize that. We reopened the Port very quickly in conjunction with working with Admiral Larabee and the Port Authority, and we secured the Port. We opened the Port and we kept it secure and we kept it tight. I think the biggest concern of the first 24 hours was, is there going to be another attack? And if it is, where is it going to go and what can we do to prevent it? We were pretty sure it wasn't going to be from air at that point, but what was the next mode? What did they want to do that they failed to do on the 11th? Was there a second wave? You have to look at prioritizing what you protect with your limited resources and it was a huge decision to make. I mean the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, it blocks everything. You know that shuts down New York Harbor. The nuclear power plant, the Statue of Liberty; it's an icon, the largest refinery on the East Coast, the largest underground propane tank on the East Coast, the United Nations. All those things that you've got to protect, you've got to prioritize them. What's more important; the big fire, losing the Statue of Liberty?

Q: There seems to be something of a consensus that these folks like lots of bodies.

RADM Bennis: Right.

Q: And they want to get on TV.

RADM Bennis: A dramatic effect.

Q: And so something that, say a bridge would be nice, but it wouldn't give them the body count they want. But in any case . . .

RADM Bennis: But if they want to cripple our economy that's a good way to do it.

Q: Yeah. I think that's plan "B" for them is to take down the economy.

RADM Bennis: Yeah.

Q: Of course then shutting everything down sort of plays into that strategy. But at the same time you can't leave everything wide open for them to exploit, so they really put you in a box.

RADM Bennis: That's right.

Q: I had never heard of Al Qaeda before. I don't know how people . . . you know a few people say that they had heard of them before this. When did it become clear that there was a group of people specifically trying to take down the economy, or was that your sense? Was this a symbolic attack or was this an economic attack, or was it something of both? Have you had a chance to sort of think of it in those terms?

RADM Bennis: Its just classic terrorism. You know, do everything they can to instill fear in the people and destroy the economy and destroy the way of life . I mean it was just classic terrorism. It was all of that and more. But as far as focusing purely on the economy, it was just a textbook perfect terrorist attack.

Q: What do you think these people want?

RADM Bennis: Their minds are so screwed up I absolutely have no idea. How a human mind can think that way and know what the consequences are actually going to be and still do them, it's beyond comprehension. We as an American people, we can't even comprehend thinking that way, so it's pretty hard to figure out what they want or what they're thinking?

Q: Do we need to know what they want to defeat them or is that, at some point, irrelevant?

RADM Bennis: I think it's irrelevant. I think we need to know how they operate and where they are, how to find them and how to stop them? But I don't think their motives . . . they're pretty much irrelevant as far as our mission is to stop them.

Q: Where do you place this event in your career and in other events in the history of the Coast Guard? Was the response to 9/11, say on a par with *Valdez*, *Mariel*, or the Coast Guard in Vietnam? Where would you put it on a scale of . . .?

RADM Bennis: I think it's unequaled. I hope nothing ever exceeds it. I hope nothing ever surpasses it. But to think that anything beyond it is . . . all of those pale in comparison. I was involved in most of those others and they pale in comparison. Certainly they were phenomenal responses, but the horror wasn't there in all of those responses. Did they talk to you about my health in any of the discussions; anything of interest?

Q: Well a bit, but it was sort of one of those things that people are very reluctant to talk about; other people's health.

RADM Bennis: Where's this going? Is this just an archiveable thing?

Q: I don't know if I said that in the e-mail. These aren't digital video. Perhaps somebody would look at this 200 years from now to see what you looked like in 2002. But what will happen eventually is that the audio track will be taken out and there will be a transcription done and I'm going to use that to write the history of the whole operation.

RADM Bennis: I mean it's not a secret. I've been battling cancer for three years.

Q: One in particular?

RADM Bennis: I had melanoma and it spread to my lungs and spread to my brain.

Q: Yes?

RADM Bennis: Its three years this month since they told me I had six months to live and I chose not to listen to their advice.

Q: How have you been surviving?

RADM Bennis: Well when I was going through a lot my treatments I'd go through a week to ten days of hell and then I'd have two good weeks, and I'm willing to take that trade-off. I'll trade-off the week or two of hell . . .

Q: Were you going through these treatments or have you been regularly?

RADM Bennis: I've been going through the treatments for three years. I haven't gone through treatments in about six months now, but I had . . . and you name it, we've tried it. I mean my cancer is incurable. I mean its not one for which there is a cure right now and by rights I should had been gone six months after it had started. But I've been getting treatment for my lungs. It's spread through my lungs. I've been getting treatment for that and it spread to my brain. They said, we're going to do

brain surgery. We're going to take out this tumor in your brain. They said, we can do radiation or all these other things, but they said, it's easy. All I will say is, compared to all the other stuff I've been through it was a piece of cake.

Q: Really?

RADM Bennis: Brain surgery, you know, never one to . . .

Q: So you did have the surgery done?

RADM Bennis: Oh yeah. I had the brain surgery. I was under the knife for six or eight hours; the steel plate in and the whole bit. The next day I got my Chaplain to smuggle me in some Popeye's fried chicken and that afternoon I was fighting to get out of there, and a day and a half after the surgery I was back at the office.

Q: Well if that's not an anti-carcinogen then I don't know what is.

RADM Bennis: Yeah, that's right. It was a good plug for Popeye's. But it was a traumatic experience.

Q: How much of this was the Coast Guard aware of?

RADM Bennis: Fully aware of it. I mean that was one of the reasons I was still there that last year is I was still going through some treatment at Sloan.

Q: Why were you given a flag at the end of your career? Was this sort of a reward for your service or...?

RADM Bennis: No. I got selected for flag . . . you know my life has been an emotional roller coaster. I got cancer. It went away. They felt that the Melanoma I had was treatable and they did the surgery and it was gone. Mine was a great success story. It didn't spread. It's not fatal unless it spreads.

I was selected for flag along with my marriage and the birth of children and the birth of my grandchild. It was just one of the great days of your life. I got selected for flag and two weeks later I was told my cancer had come back and spread to my lungs, so they never knew I had cancer. It was independent of the selection.

Q: So for all intensive purposes you were assuming that the sky was the limit; that you could run up for District Commander or whatever. You were in it for the long haul.

RADM Bennis: But I had the brain surgery, and September 10th they took the staples out of the back of my head.

Q: September 10th of last fall?

RADM Bennis: September 10th, the day before September 11th.

Q: Incredible...

RADM Bennis: They took the staples out.

Q: So you had the surgery done last summer?

RADM Bennis: Uh hum, and that's when we were saying maybe we ought to slow down and retire. So we were headed down to look at a retirement home.

Q: Did you have a target date for when you were leaving?

RADM Bennis: I was transferring in the summer. I hadn't decided. We were going to get a retirement home. We hadn't decided if we were going to retire.

Q: So you were planning that this spring was going to be your last spring in the Coast Guard?

RADM Bennis: No, not at that point.

Q: Oh, you were going to transfer, maybe get another post?

RADM Bennis: Yeah. We were going to buy a retirement home to have for when the time came. So I had the staples out on the 10th and I said to the doctor, can I travel? He said, you can do anything that you want. I said, great. So we traveled.

I recall I was at something on September 15th or 16th, or something, and I heard somebody say something to one of the Chiefs around the corner from me. They didn't know I was there. Somebody said, Chief, we need a break. We've got to take some time. We've got to get a couple hours off, and the Chief said, . . .the Old Man just had brain surgery and he's been working 23 hours a day for five days. (Laughter) So I tiptoed back and went the other way.

Q: You didn't want to spoil the moment.

RADM Bennis: I didn't want to spoil the moment. But I went home and told my wife. But it's been quite a ride.

Q: Did it, and does it, make a difference in your personal battle that so many people were just wiped out that day and just lost everything instantly? Have you thought about that through those times?

RADM Bennis: You know when it's your time it's your time. After I had one of my surgeries or something . . . I restore cars as a hobby and I had a Volkswagon Beetle convertible I'd restored.

Q: I do Volkswagon buses myself.

RADM Bennis: I had a '71 Super Beetle convertible; candy apple red, and I believe in driving them after you fix them. I had my surgery, and it was one of my first or second days back at work for the very first time and I almost got run over by a fire truck. I pulled over to the side of the road, got my cell phone and called my wife, and I said, wouldn't it just piss you off if I went through all this, I lived, and I get killed by a fire truck the next day. I mean it's the way it is, you know, you never know.

Q: George Patton surviving World War II and getting hit by a car.

RADM Bennis: Yep. It's just the way it is. It helped me. I mean what I've been through truly helped me on 9/11. I don't want to get philosophical but I truly believe sometimes when you survive something you wonder why you survived it. At one point I remember thinking that maybe this was why God's kept me around, is so I could help in this response to 9/11. It was just an incredible time. Everybody compartmentalized. If you looked at it all at once it was totally overwhelming.

Whenever I went to Manhattan - I frequently went by boat - and one of the joys of leaving Manhattan by boat is you'd be in the back of that 41 and you'd watch the city as you left the Battery get smaller. And for a period of time you couldn't look at it. It was just heartbreaking because you saw a new skyline with smoke coming up from it, and it was just tragic.

Q: Two questions to ask. Would it have made a qualitative difference in the Coast Guard's response if we still had Governors Island?

RADM Bennis: You know we talked about that a lot and it probably would have been a problem.

Q: Because you were so close?

RADM Bennis: In one sense we say tactically and strategically, what a great place to be. But the other thing we probably would have had to do is evacuate the families and we probably would have had to have an awful lot of personal protective issues for about six weeks for anybody that remained on the island. I mean anyone in the lower Manhattan area would have been working with facemasks and respirators for a period of time. So tactically, strategically, geographically, it had tremendous advantages. But the other side was . . . because it was like setting up your command post in a hazardous waste site or something, although we didn't know what the challenges were at that point.

Q: The Strike Team did.

RADM Bennis: Yeah. We had lots of discussions where we said, boy, wouldn't it be something if we were still on GI, and then we had other discussions saying, where would our families be if we were still on GI? We would have had to send them to Grandma and Grandpa in Keokuk or something. And there were days when the wind was right, that Fort Wadsworth, you could smell Ground Zero.

Q: Did you go to Ground Zero and when?

RADM Bennis: I went there often. Usually I'd go there when the Commandant or the Secretary went, and I'd go there with the City folks if the need be.

Q: What was your first response when you first saw it?

RADM Bennis: It was just incredible. It was totally . . . you're awestruck at the total devastation. All the public saw was the shots of "the pile". They didn't stand in the middle and look around and see how far out it went; you know, 16 plus acres of complete and total devastation, and constant smoldering, burning; the fire and everything. I mean if you haven't been there you can't fathom it. I never went there "as a tourist", although one morning early on - I think the first Sunday afterwards - my wife and I went there with several of our Chaplains. We didn't go to Church that morning. We went to Ground Zero with the Chaplains just to be with the folks that were there and the folks that were responding there. My son wasn't in the Coast Guard but he worked in the marine industry and he was one of the workers at Ground Zero afterwards and we saw him there as well. But it was a very moving thing.

Q: What was the interaction between you and the Commandant when he would visit, or when he visited Ground Zero? Do you remember what he said to you or the kinds of things you would talk about?

RADM Bennis: I think when we first took him to Ground Zero we flew over it. We flew over everything and, you know, he's a New Yorker in his soul. I mean he's been stationed there and he's very much a part of the New York community. There wasn't a lot of talking. There was a lot of stunned silence; a lot of awe. It all sinks in then.

Mayor [Rudolph] Giuliani brought as many people as he could to Ground Zero because all talking stops, all questioning stops, all Monday morning quarterbacking stops, and all "what's the fuss about" discussions stop once you see it first hand. There's no question what it's all about.

Q: Did it make you angry?

RADM Bennis: The event?

Q: Seeing the wreckage at Ground Zero.

RADM Bennis: There was a piece of it . . . my wife would say to me . . . we took a lot of it personally like, you know, they hurt my city. They hurt my town. They hurt our world. It did. I just took it very personally. This was not just a terrorist attack. This was an attack on my town, so it was a complete mix of anger and emotion.

Q: Was there anything that the Coast Guard did, now that you've got some hindsight, that would of been done differently or that you would have tried to do differently now in terms of resources, technology, anything like that?

RADM Bennis: The thing we hadn't geared up for totally was the communications side. In the Coast Guard; Bert Kinghorn and MLCLANT, they really stepped into the fray very quickly and resolved a lot of our problems. Like I said, they sent that initial instant shipment of out of town cell phones. They sent up the TTs. They sent all those folks up. And we're going to get them now; I wish we had more PSUs; more capability to keep them around a little longer, a little better. The Deployable Pursuit Boats; the very go fast, go fasters, they've been mothballed. They were only a couple of years old but they'd been mothballed for various reasons. They were absolutely in their element there. That was where, without knowing it, that's what they were designed to do. That was where they were designed to be. They were a very good tool for a public that completely respects and appreciates the Coast Guard. At the same time they always know that the Coast Guard can't catch them . You can't catch us. We're faster than you are. You know my Boston Whaler is faster than your Coast Guard 41-footer. We got those Deployable Pursuit Boats early on and I would have them run from the George Washington Bridge to the Verrazano Narrows Bridge at speed, several times a day, so people could go, what the hell was that? It's the Coast Guard. And just knowing that we had that capability deterred an awful lot of folks, be they tourists or people that were violating a security zone. They all of a sudden realized that we did have that capability.

We had folks on the shore frequently make the comment that . . . I had a firefighter from Ground Zero - we were waiting for the President, and when the President's helicopter lands they have to have firefighters there, and there's these firefighters completely covered in ash and everything else. They brought them from Ground Zero for the helicopter to land, and I was over talking to them and I'm looking at their equipment. Their equipment is brand shiny, spanking new; everything laid out in case something happens to the President's helicopter. I'm looking at their equipment and I said, wow, and they said, all our equipment was lost in the trucks at Ground Zero along with 16 people from our company. But we got to talking because we're kindred spirits and one of the firefighters said, we're watching; I had a 110 and I had the go-fasters and the Deployable Pursuit Boats and the PSUs out there, which we always do when the President arrives, and he said, you know the way your family feels when a fire truck goes through the neighborhood and checks the hydrants and everything, and I said, yeah. He said, well that's the way my family feels when they see the racing stripe out on the water. He said, we feel that same way. We feel there's just a sense of reassurance that we're okay in that arena, just like you know that you're okay in your neighborhood. There was a lot of hugging and a lot of crying. I mean it was what is was all about.

Q: Does it make a difference to have a white hull with a stripe than a gray hull? Do you think that the public looks at the Coast Guard differently than say they would at a Navy frigate?

RADM Bennis: We made a conscience decision not to bring DoD assets into the New York Harbor.

Q: Yes?

RADM Bennis: We had a battle group offshore. They were giving us air cover and everything else. We made that conscious decision because we felt the Coast Guard presence would reinforce, reassure, and make people feel very good about what was going on in the water. We felt that perhaps if we brought in that DoD presence they might almost be terrorized by the fact that, oh my . . .

Q: By their own forces.

RADM Bennis: Well not by their own forces, so much as the fact that, oh my God, are we really going to be attacked any minute now again? And we were there. They're familiar with seeing the racing stripe out there. Only instead of seeing one or two they're now seeing 45 or 60, or whatever it turned out to be at any given moment. They're used to seeing us work with NYPD, so the blue boats with their white stripes and the white boats with red stripes . . . and we made a lot press, intentionally, about the PSUs; the gray hulls with the black stripes. We made sure that everybody knew that this was not a typical domestic . . . we don't deploy them domestically with that weaponry in a normal environment. So they knew that we had a definite heightened level of security out there beyond what the Coast Guard usually has patrolling, and at the same time they were very confident and comfortable that we were there.

Q: Just to follow-up on the PSUs. Was there much discussion about these guys with their 50-caliber machine guns and that four-mile range on those, and having to use them in an enclosed space?

RADM Bennis: I had a lot of discussions with them early on. I told them we're not going to do well if an errant round goes and hits somebody in the shower in Park Slope in Brooklyn. We talked about that a lot. We talked about what we were really going to use, what we were going to show, and we had some very clear Rules of Engagement and Use of Force. We were pretty clear with everybody from the get go as far as what we're going to do, how we're going to do it, and it certainly doesn't hurt for people to see this. But let's keep in mind what we're going to use initially if we actually have to do that.

Q: And the other side of that coin I guess is, is if there had been, say a second wave attack; a bunch of guys jumping out of a container or whatever, are we ready, or were we ready that day to deal with something like that?

RADM Bennis: Which day?

Q: That very day on the 11th. How would the Coast Guard have responded if they had been hit by a second wave that day or in the next several days?

RADM Bennis: Well we shut down the Port. But the Port Authority Police Department, Customs, Coast Guard, NYPD, the State Police; New Jersey State Police, New York State Police, we'd have hardened everything up phenomenally. We really had. I mean I'm not saying that they probably would of been able to jump out of their container and they would have made some progress, but it wasn't far to go for the law enforcement folks to reach out and touch them and grab them.

Q: Yes. You're in a unique position in many respects, not the least of which you're now sitting here. Could you just give me a little bit about how you got from there to here?

RADM Bennis: I was looking at my future. Where was I going to go? What was I going to do? And this was created. I had some conversations within the Department, and my plan, was I going to retire? I was retiring last week. [USCGB] *Eagle* [WIX-327] was going to be in New York for Fleet Week. I was going to have a retirement/change of command on *Eagle*. It was going to be a grand and glorious thing. Once they got sort of wind of my availability and possibility that I could be an asset within the Transportation Security Administration . . . I mean it's all under the Department. So the Department kind of reached out . . . and they wanted me earlier rather than later. They wanted me part-time before I retired, and I was here before I knew it. This is a tremendous opportunity.

Q: What were they looking for from you? I mean you obviously have vast experience in port operations and security. Is that what they're looking for you specifically, and how much of what you do inter-figures with the aviation side and all the rest?

RADM Bennis: There are two operational modes in TSA. One is Aviation Operations and one is Maritime and Land, and I'm Maritime and Land. In my focus I've got a vast background within the container world as well. I was involved in some things that created the early Container Inspection

Program. I have a big background in security and a big background in disaster response. So they're looking at all those things and also just to build an organization from the ground up. We haven't set it up on traditional modes. We haven't got it stove-piped anywhere. Instead of having a Rail Department, a Highway Department, a Mass Transit Department, a Pipeline Department, a Maritime Department, I have a Cargo Department, a Passenger Department and an Infrastructure Department, which is Facilities and Terminals, and I've got experts under that. But this was just too good an opportunity to pass up; an opportunity to give something, yet again, back to the country. Something to make us more secure, and its all part of that maybe that's why I'm still here thing.

Q: Yes.

What are your biggest concerns for container security and for port security as you've made this transition now, as you guide other people in setting policy?

RADM Bennis: In container security - my world as I call it - point of origin to point of destination, or if it's a person, if you want to say Brussels to Biloxi, or something. I mean I'm interested in the whole trip. I want to make sure that as that passenger or that piece of cargo moves from origin to destination, that as they move from mode to mode, that it is secure from mode to mode.

Q: How do you get the ports in Brussels secured? Do you make a lot of trips to Brussels, or somebody on your staff does?

RADM Bennis: We're already been doing a lot of outreach with the Container Working Group, with Customs, and everybody else. It's that pushing back the borders. It's the trusted ports; Operation Safe Commerce, which I'm sure you've heard about. And as TSA was created we picked up Civil Aviation Security, which has what we call CASLO, which are Civil Aviation Security Liaison Officers. So we already have security exports strategically located in foreign cities and we're working with them to enhance their maritime land expertise. So we are trying to take advantage of some of the existing infrastructure because we're trying to get this as a flat organization.

Q: Do you see Coast Officers in every strategic port around the world at some point overseeing container security?

RADM Bennis: I don't know. It all depends on how the Coast Guard, TSA, Customs, and the Department; how our roles are all going to ultimately go.

Q: You see that as very much up in the air?

RADM Bennis: Not too much up in the air with the Coast Guard and TSA. We are very much aligned. We've got a working MOA that's about to hit the street, because people want to know how are TSA and Coast Guard going to relate? How are they going to interact? The day we were created and I got the job, I met with Adm Loy and Adm [Thomas] Collins [Coast Guard Commandant following Admiral Loy] and we've talked frequently ever since. Adm Loy is now coming to TSA. Did you hear that?

Q: Just this morning Sir. He said he was taking all of three weeks off.

RADM Bennis: And that's bad for me. My wife heard that at the change of command and she said, he took three weeks off and you took Saturday and Sunday and moved me and that was it.

Q: Well ADM Loy is probably the kind of guy who's, after about two days he's going to be so climbing the walls and he'll be knocking on your door.

RADM Bennis: I hope so because it'll take some of the heat off of me.

Q: Where's he going to be in this organizational structure?

RADM Bennis: He's going to be the Chief Operating Officer. In other words there's the Undersecretary and then the Deputy, and he'll be a Deputy and Chief Operating Officer. Then under that is the Associate Undersecretary. It's the two operational ones; Maritime and Land, and Aviation. And there's the Chief Counsel in Investigations, and Inspections and Regulations and Policy.

Q: So you move up a rung and he moves down a rung or something like that?

RADM Bennis: I stay exactly in the rung I was at and he's going to move into a new rung. I'm tickled pink that he's going to be here.

Q: Does this have an affect on the whole issue of where the Coast Guard eventually resides or is that a dead letter now? Do you still see that as an open issue?

RADM Bennis: I don't think so. I think it's an open issue. All we know now is where Jim Loy is going to reside. We know where he's going to reside. Where the Coast Guard resides is still up to other folks, but I think they're going to stay right there if I had to guess.

Q: Where should it be? Should it be here in Transportation?

RADM Bennis: I think so. I mean as the Commandant's always said, no matter where we are we're never completely within the Department in which we operate. I mean we do things for Justice and we do things for EPA and we do things for Transportation and we do things for DoD. So where do we belong? No matter who we work for we still have six other masters.

Q: Well that's a nice lead-in to the only, a kind of surprise question I try to give to all the flags, which is, if every Marine's a rifleman, what's every Coast Guardsman?

RADM Bennis: I like that. We're the people that have the day job in war and peace. It doesn't matter. We've always got the day job. We always have our missions and we are a multi-mission organization, and you saw that in Activities New York. I mean we do great things everyday. We stole a chapter out of an average day in the Coast Guard in that this is what happens. I sat down and I said, what's an average day in Activities New York? And you know it's a hell of a lot. It's just a gee-whiz figure we throw out there. Forty million people move by water in New York. We transport them by passenger ferry in New York every year. That's a huge number. The amount of petroleum that moves through New York, the amount of SAR cases we have.

Q: What do you think would have happened in New York on the 11th if LT Day hadn't jumped on that Harbor Pilot boat and acted as a traffic cop?

RADM Bennis: One of the other lieutenants would have done it.

Q: But in a broader sense, if the Coast Guard . . . if there had not been any vessel traffic control . . .?

RADM Bennis: The port community would have stepped in. The pilots themselves would have stepped in. Other people would have stepped in. The only thing they don't have is the authority. But I think in the volunteerism in New York City it still would have worked. Not the same, but it would have worked. New York City abhors a vacuum and they would have just filled it.

Q: Does the City of New York now - I know you had this well developed relationship before 9/11 - do they look at the Coast Guard differently? Do they look for things from the Coast Guard now that they might not have before 9/11?

RADM Bennis: I don't think so. I think we just reinforced an already good solid relationship. I think the one thing that did happen is post-9/11 . . . I know some of the OEM folks came to us and said, we need to talk about water evacuations as a plan. We need to come up with a pretty good plan, and we worked with them on that since then.

Q: Any thoughts you have that you want to add here, either about this specifically, or on more general terms?

RADM Bennis: The two biggest takeaways are - and I will until death - I will say that there's no better way to run a railroad than - I don't care what you call it - the Activities' concept. It's good for the folks inside the Coast Guard and it's good for the folks outside the Coast Guard. Take Capt Thompson down in Galveston who's the Group Commander down there. How many Captains of the Port was he supposed to support? Every one of them is saying that their issue was the most critical one. That's not the way to run a railroad. He had the toy box and he had five Captains of the Port.

Q: So even if you have more than one MSO they can still coordinate?

RADM Bennis: Well it was tough. Houston said that they needed this. Galveston said they needed this. A port out there said they needed this. Corpus Christi said they needed this, and there was only one this. At least in the Activities' concept there's one person in the entire area that owns all the assets. They own all the assets and they own all the problems, and they get to decide how to disperse it. If you've got five people trying to decide and one person that owns all the assets, obviously everybody feels that theirs is the most critical thing to protect; so infinitely easier, easier to operate, easier to make the decisions, and easier for the people to know what to do and how to do it.

Q: How does the Coast Guard translate that into places that do have these kinds of strange geographic groups; multiple MSO areas?

RADM Bennis: Turn them into Activities. I mean it's as simple as that. I think there are some places that absolutely lend themselves to instantly become Activities. Charleston; I mean it's all inside the same gate.

Q: Right.

RADM Bennis: It's all fenced in there. Boston; easy to do. Seattle; probably quite easy to do.

Q: Did this movement get its final impetus at 9/11? It seemed like this split open in the early '70s and it has sort of gradually been trying to close between M&O. But do you think that's a dead issue now?

RADM Bennis: No, I think we've still got a long way to go.

Q: Yes?

RADM Bennis: I'm not saying you're going to see Activities in the next couple of years. Some people don't like the name. Some people don't like their concepts. Some people don't like the loss of command opportunities. If we as an organization continue to put the big emphasize on, well we can't promote him because he hasn't had a command, then we've got to continue to create commands. I mean we've got commanders out there that are 0-5 COs that have seven people. I've got a Prevention Compliance Division Chief that has 111 people and he might not get promoted because he hasn't had a command. So I mean it's a cultural thing that the Coast Guard's got to wrestle. They've got to wrestle it to the ground. They really do. That's a problem that's as old as time.

Q: And you had another thought. Was there something besides that?

RADM Bennis: The other thing was the communications thing.

Q: Is there a solution to that problem? I mean if somebody comes in and waxes your primary/secondary/tertiary communications, is there something that you've seen, either off the shelf or that could be developed, military/civilian, whatever technology? Does anybody have a solution?

RADM Bennis: Even now there's not a real capability for . . .you know, you have the Navy come in on their jiffy fast patrol boats and you've got the Coast Guard out there and you've got NYPD out there, and not one of them has a common radio, and we instituted that in most ports. But it's really if they're sharing handhelds or something. We've seen stuff off the shelf here that works for them, it's mobile vans that I think everybody can talk to everybody else, and we think that's something that we're going to - if we get the money - we're going to put that out in all the ports and all the local places, and say, hey, there's a chance for the government, the DoD, the State and City folks to talk to each other.

Q: So you're talking about the governmental communications, like cross-governmental. Not necessarily with industry but with all the government response organizations?

RADM Bennis: With all government focus; city, state, the Feds, and the DoD.

Q: So they can switch on one frequency or whatever it is.

RADM Bennis: One frequency, or have a mixer in there; a computer thing that you could hit one button and it's going to all the right people.

Q: And you see that as a near horizon?

RADM Bennis: Yeah, we do actually. I don't think it's going to be a Coast Guard initiative, but it's something I think I can maybe drive out of here.

Q: Well Sir I want to thank you very much for your time.

END OF INTERVIEW



John Flattery, Department of Transportation's Chief of Staff, awards RADM Bennis the Transportation Distinguished Service Award at Bennis's retirement ceremony on 15 March 2002.

