



U.S. Coast Guard Oral History Program

Attack on America: September 11, 2001 and the U.S. Coast Guard

U.S. COAST GUARD ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
Operation Noble Eagle Documentation Project

Interviewee: YN1 Matthew T. Leahy, USCG **Atlantic Strike Team**

Interviewer: PAC Peter Capelotti, USCGR
Date: 22 February 2001

Place: Various Locations at Ground Zero

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

YN1 Leahy: Almost 22 years.

Q: How long have you been with the Strike Team?

YN1 Leahy: Approximately six years.

Q: What did you do before that?

YN1 Leahy: I was the Housing Officer out of Group Moriches.

Q: Okay, and you grew up in this area?

YN1 Leahy: Yes I did. I was born right across the river in Jersey City. I grew up about five or six miles north in a little town named Guttenberg, which is even with the 79th Street Boat Basin. I grew up approximately two blocks from the Palisades cliff.

Q: How did you hear about things on the morning of September 11th?

YN1 Leahy: Well it happened to be that morning I was sick. I was home with a stomach bug. At about nine o'clock my telephone woke me up and it was my sister-in-law and she had asked me about what was

going on up in New York, and I had no idea. She then asked me about my wife and where she was and I explained she was at work, and she asked me again, she said, what's going, and I said, I have no idea. She told me to turn on the television. When I turned on the TV I saw the Trade Center in flames and then they showed the second plane come in as a replay and I couldn't believe it.

Q: And you went to Activities New York that night, is that right?

YN1 Leahy: Right. I was home that day. I called in right away to find out if they needed me to come down to the unit. There was a lot going on at the unit. I realized that. But our Ops Boss, Mr. [LT Scott] Linski said, no, stay home and get well. But if they need me they would call me, and I basically stayed by the phone. That night I got call to assist one of our reservists on a supply run to Activities New York and I actually wound up spending two weeks there. I actually wound up staying there that night.

(LOOKING AT BUILDINGS)

Mr. [CWO Leonard] Rich: So you could tell that was definitely a safety hazard at one time; all that broken glass hanging from those windows.

YN1 Leahy: Okay, that was a flatbed that was crushed. The whole car was crushed. It was just a flatbed. Actually I was just in there a little while ago . I walked in there.

Q: Mr. Leahy, could you tell us where we are?

YN1 Leahy: Right now we're standing actually in the Northwest corner of the complex. Physically we would actually be right around Building Six. The gap you see over here was actually where Building Seven stood, which was across the street from Tower One on Vesey Street. The rubble pile that you see right there and the adjoining crane and trailers; that was actually Building 5.

Q: So that rubble pile right here is?

YN1 Leahy: This is actually part of Six and somewhat of Building Five. Building Six housed, I believe, Customs and a few other government agencies and also there were some small shops in the bottom level which ran along Vesey Street. Also there was a parking garage, which is what this general area is right here as you can see. Right now the reason why they haven't attacked this parking garage is because the structural integrity of the bathtub itself; the slurry wall, is being held up by this parking garage. If they take these walls down or they take the parking garage; the existing structure down, they might compromise that slurry wall and could possibly flood the zone.

Q: And this is the wall that was really scooped out to make this, what, 25 years ago?

YN1 Leahy: Correct. When we get around to the other side you'll be able to see clearly where they're actually going in and they're fixing the structural integrity.

Q: And this is one of the trains that was running into the station that morning?

YN1 Leahy: Correct. That's a PATH train. It either came from Hoboken or it came from Jersey City. Three or four days ago they uncovered that train. There were two cars behind it, or aft of it, and one car was crushed and the other car was actually completely gone. It was just a flatbed. They have since pulled that car out; about two car lengths.

Q: Where are we in relation to the two Towers?

YN1 Leahy: Actually Tower One is just below us in the pit. The front facade is just down where you see the watermark; down below that white structure. That's where Tower One sat. That was the North Tower. Tower Two sat in the back corner and as we make our way around you'll be able to clearly make out the front; the facade of Tower One and also the side of Tower Two.

Q: Tell us what this is Matt.

YN1 Leahy: What you're looking at there is actually the Amex Building. This is part of the World Financial Center. On the upper left hand side of the building you'll notice there's a lot of structure missing. What we had there was, we had a large number of beams that had fallen off of Building One; off of Tower One, which were actually impaled into the building and they were sticking out approximately 30 or 40 feet. So just imagine a 60-foot long steel beam jutting out over the street. We had a number of different places; I'd say probably four or five places where you had crossbeams that also were wedged in there, and you'll notice all the windows that have been boarded over. Those are all the windows that were blown out.

Also across Vesey Street we have the Verizon Building. That's also damage from Building One when it did collapse. It actually fell completely over Building Six and a lot of the damage occurred to Building Seven that way. Some of the Tower from One fell into Building Six and I believe one of the antennas actually fell into Building Six. It came straight through if you look at an aerial shot. But the rest of the debris that fell, a lot of it fell on Building Seven, which actually knocked it down. Building Seven came down about five o'clock that night. Immediately everything started coming down. Then once Tower One collapsed, that's when more debris fell on it and actually made it come down. It's amazing anybody survived this.

Mr. Rich: Now the last survivor to get out of the hospital . . .

YN1 Leahy: Got out last night.

Q: Yes?

YN1 Leahy: Yeah. He had burns over 50 percent of his body.

Q: Where was he?

YN1 Leahy: He was in one of the towers.

Q: Yes?

YN1 Leahy: I don't know which tower he was in but he was in one of them.

(WALKING TO ANOTHER LOCATION)

Q: Can you tell us where we are right now Mr. Leahy?

YN1 Leahy: Right now we're actually standing on the pad in between what was Building Six, which would be to my right, and Building Five, which would have been to my left. This was a simple walkway that went to the courtyard that actually sat between the two towers. If you look in the pit right below the structure down here, that front wall where you see those beams, that's actually the front side or the west side of Building Number One, and Building Number Two is to the left, just behind that roadway. Right now they're in the process of building a bridge so traffic can come in and out to get some of the debris out of here.

Q: And what we're looking at over there are the original foundations, where they originally scooped out the earth to build the Trade Center?

YN1 Leahy: Right. You're actually looking at what they call the bathtub or the slurry wall.

Q: So at the bottom down here, say down where those beams are and the floor is kind of chopped off . . .

YN1 Leahy: Right. That's actually bedrock.

Q: I was going to say is that underwater or is that under the level of the river, or is that . . . ?

YN1 Leahy: Well the problem with the slurry wall is you've got . . . the slurry wall was built . . . that's why they call it a bathtub is to keep the forces of the Hudson River and East River out. From the drilling of the wall to keep its structural integrity they've had some water come in, so right now one of the main concerns is that west wall. They're really worried about the west wall off of West Street. It's a problem. In fact they set up site markers to go all along the wall so they could shoot a laser through it to make sure it doesn't move. It's moved in the last couple of weeks from my understanding; how far I don't know. But it has moved and they're quite concerned about it. If that wall went there's no telling what would happen. I'm sure you'd have a large pool.

Mr. Rich: Here we're filming the public.

YN1 Leahy: That's the Millennium Hotel.

Q: The Millennium Hotel?

YN1 Leahy: Right. That's been out of commission since the thing happened. It should be open fairly soon is my understanding. Directly next to it is Century 21, which is a discount department store. That will be opening up within the next week.

Q: So life is starting to . . .

YN1 Leahy: Return to normal. Yes, very much so.

Q: . . . at least get back to what might be the new normal.

YN1 Leahy: Right, correct.

Q: What are we looking at here?

YN1 Leahy: Right now you're at the southeast corner of where the Trade Center was. We're directly across the street. This is Liberty Street and we're in front of Engine Ten/Ladder Ten. These gentlemen lost, I think four or five people in the incident and we have a wall with all types of patches from all different fire companies, EMS companies, police departments that actually were here lending a hand to recover personnel.

(TALKING TO INDIVIDUAL)

YN1 Leahy: This is Mr. Rich from our unit and Chief is actually the Coast Guard Historian. He's here to document what we did here.

Unknown Speaker: Basically what we did here is we cleaned the house from the top to bottom. This much dirt was upstairs. We've been here since October 1st.

We do decon. We clean the house from top to the bottom twice a day. They sleep in here. They eat back there, and it's a GPS unit that's running out now. Every time they find something out there they run over to the plot and we stop the contaminants right here as much as possible; like the Coast Guard is doing it; the fellow from the Coast Guard there. We try to keep all the containments, all of it up front and then I clean it out and wash it down the drain and try to keep the back of the house clean.

In the process I'm going to be selling these Coast Guard some patches and some helmets and some hats and they're all donated to this Engine Company; Ladder 24, Engine One. They lost ten guys. This is the Ten House. That's this house right here. They lost seven guys, and all the proceeds from these patches, the hats and the helmets are all going directly to the widows and the children. No firemen, no nobody, directly to the widows and children. They're five dollars, \$25, and \$20.

Q: Take one to her and show it to her.

YN1 Leahy: Yeah, we'll go in the tent too. I'll show you the tent.

Q: Tell us where we are Mr. Leahy.

YN1 Leahy: We're actually right now on the roof of Engine Ten, Ladder Ten. We're in the southeast corner of where the Trade Center stood. If you look in the pit, the structure at the bottom of the ramp, that's the west facade of Tower One. Tower Two would actually sit just underneath that ramp that goes down; now the man-made road. They're in the process of putting a bridge in for traffic for a future date.

Q: And this tent in the background here, that's where you've been working at?

YN1 Leahy: Right. That tent in the background is called a Sprung structure. Basically it contains a boot, a hand and face wash, a respirator wash, and also it houses the feeding facilities provided by the Salvation Army. If you look just to the corner here you'll see the large open pit. That's actually the subway station; the Cortland Street Station for the One and Nine train. That's blocked off somewhere up the track as well. You can also see the PATH train that's down below. In five month's time it's remarkable because my first view that I got of the site was actually coming right down here on Greenwich Street. I actually got a look at the site on the Sunday after and you can just imagine, I stood on that corner back there on Albany and the debris pile was approximately 90 feet high, and it was just debris everywhere. The ground was covered with ash and people just walked around just stunned. You know, it's four or five days afterwards. Everybody was just so numb from what happened, and we look now and we're down to bedrock; 90 feet down. It's amazing the process they're made in a few five months. It's just amazing.

Q: This bank here; the Deutsche Bank, this is one of the buildings that your folks and the Strike Team had to go into to inspect the air?

YN1 Leahy: Right. Well it's my understanding that they made the attempt to go in. I think they may have gone up to the fourth floor but that was about it. What happened with Deutsche Bank was Tower Two was the first tower to collapse. It was the second tower hit but it was the first tower to collapse. If you've ever seen pictures of Tower Two when it collapsed, the top 30 floors don't implode. They actually slide off of the top of the building, and the result of that sliding off is what fell onto this facade here on Deutsche Bank. Also there are some pictures where you may see an EMS truck that was flattened out. That EMS truck actually sat on the corner of Greenwich and Albany right down here in this corner here. Debris completely went over the top and came down on all the cars and all the other vehicles that were down on this corner. It's pretty remarkable. I saw an EMS truck that was probably flattened to about three feet high.

Q: This must have had a devastating impact on you as an almost native New Yorker, living right across the river?

YN1 Leahy: Yeah, it was tough. I had a tough time controlling my emotions . You know it was almost like a roller coaster. You went up and down. Sadness from one moment and then as I got to look at it more I just got angrier and angrier and angrier, and even today I still have a lot of emotion. Every time I look at this debris field there's something . . . it's just amazing.

Q: And you lost a childhood friend in this?

YN1 Leahy: I did. He was found about a week ago at the base of Tower One. He was a police lieutenant. We grew up together in elementary school and high school; a great guy. He's been involved in either the EMS or the police force since he was 18 years old. He left behind six kids. He was found at the base with five other police officers and a woman in a rescue chair. They were probably about 20 to 30 seconds from getting out of the building.

Q: What was his name Mr. Leahy?

YN1 Leahy: His name was Lieutenant Robert Cirri; Port Authority policeman, a lieutenant, a great guy. It was just devastating.

(INAUDIBLE SECTION - EQUIPMENT NOISE)

Q: You were telling about the problems with getting into the train area.

YN1 Leahy: Right now the train station is uncovered as far as the PATH train goes and also Cortland Street Station, which is just down below. One of the main problems they have is the Fire Department has been dealing with the EPA for the last three or four days regarding the level of Freon; apparently because of the large cooling units. It was the largest collection of Freon . . .

Mr. Rich: Right. Each tower had 160,000 pounds of R22 refrigerant.

YN1 Leahy: Right.

Mr. Rich: Each tower. Not including Buildings Five, Six and Seven, and Three and Four.

YN1 Leahy: Right. So that's a big problem right now. Everything down below is a confined space. So the process of entry, having the right PPE, making sure it's safe for entry . . .

Q: PPE is?

YN1 Leahy: Personal Protective Equipment. So that's a main safety issue right now.

Mr. Rich: And when the electricity had been cut off to this whole area of Manhattan, emergency cables three to four inches in diameter had to be routed from various locations to this area, and they were digging tunnels down streets. I mean not tunnels, but ditches to put those cables in and cover the tops of them, and there were six-inch water lines in case of a firefighting need. The safety; everyone had to work safely here. It just was incredible.

Q: As a Site Safety Officer I guess it's safe to say that you've never seen anything approaching this?

Mr. Rich: For a fleeting moment I wish I did have a video camera, even though I didn't want to do anything but work here. I wanted to video tape 20 minutes worth of walking down one street three days after the event, because such a safety training video that would have made as far as look at all of the training hazards or safety hazards that are in this picture. Yet everyone knew what was hazardous and really worked well with all the hazards that existed.

Q: Is that the way you felt about it Mr. Leahy?

YN1 Leahy: Oh yeah. It's incredible from a safety standpoint to see what's going on here. If you were here even two or three weeks ago what you basically had was organized chaos. To have 30 pieces of apparatus in that hole and everybody digging and pulling stuff out and trucks moving about and people walking about, it was just actually amazing. Today I think we've only had ten injuries. The most severe actually wasn't even on the site. I think it was at the Verizon Building. I think a gentleman lost a finger with a saw.

Q: A Site Safety Supervisor's nightmare.

YN1 Leahy: Exactly, and there's a number of Site Safety personnel. Each company has their own Site Safety personnel. But for the overall Site Safety Officer, that's actually Liberty Mutual Insurance Company who I believe is the underwriter for the Trade Center and the Port Authority New York. One thing I'll point out to you is the area back in here beyond the apparatus that you see; it looks like a garage area. That was actually like a mini-shopping mall. There were all kinds of stores down there; delis, pizzerias, little shops to buy clothes and things, records.

Some of the buildings . . . this was Building Four, which stood right here in this corner, basically that had a couple of places in it. Building Five had a Starbucks in it. It had a Border's Book Store on the corner. So you can just imagine people lost lives and those people that did survive lost jobs and basically have no livelihood right now. Another interesting point is right where the crane is in the pit you'll notice that parking garage area and the PATH terminal that's down below. I think it's the 26th, on the 26th it'll be the ninth anniversary of the '93 explosion. So that's the area that was actually taken out in the first terrorist attack in 1993. And, you know, just what they've done to rebuild it and then to have this happen.

Down below what you're looking at is the south facade of Building Number Two; Tower Number Two. Tower Number Two was the first building to come down. You're looking directly north. The first plane actually came from the north and came right at us when it hit Tower One; the position that we're standing in now. The second plane came in and actually came down the Jersey shoreline and turned into Building Number Two.

Eventually this road is going to go away once this bridge is active. They still have some other work to do on it. Right now they believe that there are quite a few bodies below this area because this was a main staging area for fire vehicles, EMS vehicles and other personnel. So they think there's going to be quite a few people underneath this structure.

This is a memorial that's in North Cove for all the people that have lost their lives; all the firemen and the policemen. This is the Port Authority Police; my good friend Rob Cirri. He's in the second row in the middle and there's another picture of him up here on top. It's a photo taken. It was probably left by his wife. Another gentlemen down here; Chris Amoroso, he's from the same town I'm from. His dad was good friends with my brothers. They went to high school together as well. It's tough to come back here.

(LOOKING AT MEMORIAL)

YN1 Leahy: Yeah, this is the North Cove area. This area was just incredible with the number of people and things that were going on back here. There was food being served back here. We had boats in here serving food. There were firemen everywhere. It was incredible. You'd come in here and there were

firemen just lying against the gates and the fences just finding a place to sleep. Guys in broad daylight so exhausted.

Q: And this is one of the staging areas to get people back and forth from New Jersey?

YN1 Leahy: Right . We had people coming from Bayonne, people coming from Jersey City, and they were coming here picking people up, taking people in; EMS personnel, Salvation Army personnel, Red Cross personnel, other firefighters from other places; Jersey City. I had a friend in the North Bergen Fire Department that was here and family that were from North Bergen Fire Department that were here.

Q: Do you remember seeing a lot of Coast Guard small boats going in and out of here?

YN1 Leahy: Oh yeah, quite a few. We had a number of them that were coming in while I was doing the Cost Doc for the initial response. I can't tell you how many boats they had that were listed on our Cost Doc. It was incredible. We had small boats from just about every unit in the area with different crews. We were borrowing crews from places because we didn't have enough people to man those boats with a 24-hour shift, and it was just crazy. One of my first experiences was walking into Building Four and I was with Lieutenant (jg) Reinhard and Andy Confortini who's an EPA OSC. He was the one responsible for getting the market back open and he wanted to go up to the tenth floor of the building.

Q: This is . . . ?

YN1 Leahy: That's Building Three of the World Financial Center.

Q: This is the Financial Center building.

YN1 Leahy: Right, Building Three. I found a back door to get into the area and of course all the lights were secured. There was no electricity back there. I actually walked into the front foyer of that building and Mr. Reinhard says to me, do you smell that, and I didn't catch it at the time, and then Andy Confortini says, what's that smell? Mr. Reinhard gave me a funny look and we were actually in the morgue, and it was pretty tough.

Q: So this was being used as a temporary morgue?

YN1 Leahy: Right. The end of the building was actually the temporary morgue for the initial part of the incident, and then they also had a morgue set up at the Javits Center on 34th Street and also they had the regular morgue.

(LOOKING AT MEMORIAL SITE)

END OF INTERVIEW

