



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: **BM1 David Mark Bittle, USCG**
Atlantic Strike Team

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

Place: Atlantic Strike Team

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

BM1 Bittle: About 15 years.

Q: All active duty?

BM1 Bittle: Fifteen years active. I've got actually a year and a half Reserve time from way back when.

Q: How long have you been here and how did you get here? What have you done before in the Coast Guard?

BM1 Bittle: I've been in the Atlantic Strike Team for about, I want to say seven or eight months. Before that I was at Coast Guard Station, Atlantic City. For four years I was a coxswain of a 44-foot Motor Lifeboat. I also ran the 41-foot Utility Boat and our other RHIs there at Atlantic City. Before that I did three years at Coast Guard Station, Eden's Neck at Northport Long Island where I was a boat coxswain there also and a Boarding Officer at both stations.

Q: What were your duties that morning after it became clear that the unit was going to be responding to this event? They wanted to get the boats up and out of here quickly. Where you here then and what were you doing that day?

BM1 Bittle: We were in training for our 40-hour Hazardous Material School. That's our 40-hours that we have to go through. When it all happened someone saw the news and they came in. When the first

plane hit everybody thought it was an accident, and when the second plane hit that's when all hell broke loose here. Everybody kind of knew that we had to get ready and find out when and where we are going to go. When the word came down for us to bring the boats up . . . I was from Manhattan; I worked in Manhattan before that. Before I went to Northport I actually had five years in the Coast Guard working in Manhattan, so I knew the waters and I was still a currently qualified coxswain. So I was one of the first coxswains to be picked amongst the other boat crews that went up.

Q: You knew the waters around there as well?

BM1 Bittle: Right. I was pretty familiar with the waters.

Q: Well that must have come as something of a body blow to see those buildings come down?

BM1 Bittle: It was horrible. The first time I was in New York I got transferred out there in 1986 on the Coast Guard Cutter *Sorrel* [WLB-296] and that was my first experience with New York City. I spent two and a half years there. I love Manhattan and every time we're out at sea the first thing we saw was the World Trade Center and we knew we were getting close to home. I did those two-and-a-half years there and then I went back to Captain of the Port in New York in '91, and like I said, spent a lot of time in Manhattan. I love Manhattan, and it was just overwhelming what those people did.

Q: So you got on the road with the boats immediately to Sandy Hook? Did you launch from there?

BM1 Bittle: Yeah. We took the boats to Sandy Hook. We went up there and we had our big tractor-trailer to tow our 32. We put that in the water. That was the first boat to go in the water out of Sandy Hook.

Q: So when you got to Sandy Hook it's early afternoon?

BM1 Bittle: I want to say it was still daylight. I want to say maybe, if I can remember, maybe four or five hours approximately after the attack in the late afternoon when we finally got the boat launched. We launched it from Sandy Hook.

Q: And what was your tasking at that point? You were chopped to Activities New York?

BM1 Bittle: We went to Activities New York and we pulled into Station New York, which is a little bit down the road from Activities New York. That's where all the docks are.

Q: Station New York is also on Staten Island?

BM1 Bittle: Yes.

Q: So you went down there and I guess everybody was collecting to find out where they were going and what they were going to be doing?

BM1 Bittle: Right. I was also onboard with BM1 McNealy.

Q: What was the scene like at Station New York? Where vessels converging or what was going on?

BM1 Bittle: There were a lot of vessels already getting underway. There were vessels that were still in the pre-stage. There was still a lot of confusion. A lot of people were showing up. We kind of showed up. A lot of people converged on Station New York. There really weren't enough places to put people up

for maybe the first three days. The first day basically everybody was just so strung out and stressed out about what happened. We basically just checked in with them and got underway.

Q: Where did you go? Do you remember where you went?

BM1 Bittle: I believe the first night we got chopped to, I think, one of the 270s was actually . . . no, 270 wasn't there yet. I think there was a 110 that was actually On-Scene Commander at the time. I'm trying to remember. Like I said, it was three weeks that I spent there. But the first night we basically just went to the upper bay of Manhattan. We went down by the southern portion of Manhattan and just basically took the boat around, and I think we went the first night to North Cove Marina to start help.

Q: You did?

BM1 Bittle: Yes.

Q: So you very quickly wound up in North Cove?

BM1 Bittle: We were right next to Ground Zero that first night.

Q: Can you describe the scene as you came into North Cove that night?

BM1 Bittle: It was like a science fiction movie. It was horrible. It was very smoky. The smoke plume was coming up and going towards the east; towards the Brooklyn side, and as you pulled up into the Hudson River there and just before you get to North Cove it was just the smoke. And just the fact that those buildings weren't there and all the people were down there. I mean parts of the building that were there right next to North Cove, you could see the tops of the buildings were collapsed and all the damage alongside.

We pulled up and there were a lot of firemen. It was actually hours after we got there. We were underway. We went down there because there were a lot of firemen and a lot of people; emergency workers that needed rides, either back across to Jersey - these were all people that came over from Jersey by vessel. They didn't have rides, and some of these firemen and rescue workers were pretty strung out. So we kind of just went there on our own to start shuttling - because this boat I was on was like a mini-landing craft - and we were just shuttling rescue workers back and forth from Jersey to . . .

Q: Were you being directed by another Coast Guard vessel? Was there anybody in nominal charge there at North Cove?

BM1 Bittle: There was but it wasn't really set in stone. They kind of gave us like a security zone to work first.

Q: They said this is your area.

BM1 Bittle: Yeah, this was our area. I think we had the Buttermilk Channel, which is on the other side of Governor's Island, on the southeast side of Manhattan. But we weren't equipped with weapons. We didn't have boarding officers onboard and we knew that the vessel we had . . . because they had all those rivers shut down already with Station New York boats. So we would go off on our own to go help where we knew we could be best utilized with the vessel I was on.

INTERVIEW INTERRUPTED

Q: I'm continuing the interview with Petty Officer Bittle; coxswain of a 32-footer. Well go back to this point you were just on about fatigue, standards and so forth, and all of that being out the window. What do you recall specifically about that?

BM1 Bittle: I would say basically that day began like a regular day. We got up and everybody was at work at seven o'clock in the morning. We got a couple of hours of class, and by the time all this happened and by the time we got the boat up to Station New York and got underway, I think we were probably underway for ten hours that night. So we probably went 24 hours without sleep. There's fatigue standards for like normal operating procedures for a vessel. It's like ten hours underway when it's calm out. You know, there's no weather or stuff like that. It was basically, people went out there and we did what we had to do the first couple of nights.

Q: Where did you go back to, do you recall? You launched late afternoon so you're out there until after midnight I guess?

BM1 Bittle: We were underway. We stayed on the night shift that night and I believe we were underway until about, I think eight o'clock in the morning.

Q: Really?

BM1 Bittle: Yeah.

Q: So from the time you launched you didn't stop until . . . ?

BM1 Bittle: No, we didn't stop until the next day.

Q: And you went back to Station New York?

BM1 Bittle: We went back to Station New York where, like I said, the logistics weren't done yet on where we should be staying because there wasn't enough room. There were people sleeping on pool tables, people sleeping under pool tables, and people pulling chairs together to try to sleep.

Q: And you actually have a crew of yourself and two others?

BM1 Bittle: Right.

Q: Then you had an HS with you on that day as well.

BM1 Bittle: No. We had two coxswains onboard the first night; myself and Petty Officer McNealy, and we had two crewmembers onboard for the first night, I believe.

Q: What were some of your concerns in the Harbor that night? I mean during the night traffic; congestion and people. You don't know if there are other terrorists around.

BM1 Bittle: The main concern was some kind of secondary device or something, because it was so horrific what they did to this country. You didn't know what else they had planned. You know we all had thought about. If they could do something like that; plan something like that, how do we know they don't have a nuclear bomb or a dirty bomb somewhere that's going to be a secondary device, which is common to most terrorists? That was the biggest thing. Then just being at that site like that, you just . . . that was the biggest concern. We talked about it, but as Coasties do, you kind of take what happens and you do your own thing.

Q: Well the start of the second day you get in at eight o'clock in the morning. You catch a few hours sleep and you're right back at it that afternoon I guess?

BM1 Bittle: Yeah. We got put on, I believe that first day, 12-hour shifts.

Q: So you started in that second day settling into a routine?

BM1 Bittle: Right. We were on all-night shift. I think it was seven at night until seven in the morning.

Q: And that was operating out of Boat Station New York?

BM1 Bittle: That was Station New York originally. But then they had so many boats starting to come in Station New York there was a traffic problem getting in and out and I think it was three days later where we had moved to Military Ocean Terminal in Bayonne.

Q: And did you operate out of there for the rest of the time?

BM1 Bittle: Yes. That's where we stayed. That's where we had enough berthing.

Q: Do you use the MICP to keep in contact with your boat and the unit? Is that how you guys were staying in touch?

BM1 Bittle: Yes, MICP has radio comms in there. They have phone capabilities and computers. They have VHF. We talked to them and also Station New York and Activities New York.

Q: Looking back now it has been a terribly long time. But with the hindsight that you have now, are there things that you would do differently? Are there things that worked or that didn't work? How do you look back on that now? If you could do it all over again - and obviously you can't prepare for a city being collapsed like this and the communications going out - but is there anything that you wanted; that you would like to have in a situation like that in the future that you didn't have this time? You mentioned weaponry.

BM1 Bittle: Well weapons definitely. Most of my career was dealing with weapons. Like I said, I'm a small arms instructor. I've been a boarding officer about eight years. The environmental side of the Coast Guard; the Strike Team, most of our jobs and duties, weapons aren't a part of it because we're not going onboard these foreign tank vessels and inspecting them. We're going to major events that have happened inside, within the . . .

Q: When the foreign vessels spill something.

BM1 Bittle: When they spill we deal with that. But in a case like this we are absolutely involved in bio-terrorism. I believe that weapons should be . . . I wanted weapons that night because we actually got tasked for the next couple of days to do security patrols in these rivers and stopping people and turning them around. And some of these people, we didn't know if they were of Arabic descent or whatever and if they had some kind of agenda, and we had no weapons onboard. I'm not used to not carrying weapons.

Q: Right.

BM1 Bittle: And I definitely . . . if we're involved in bio-terrorism . . .

Q: What would you recommend? I mean for a vessel the size of your 32-footer, would these be handguns, shot guns or fixed weapons?

BM1 Bittle: On a 32-footer, it's a non-standard boat. Our general weapons are 9 millimeter Berettas, 12-gauge Remington 870 shotguns and M-16 A-2s.

Q: So that's what you would be comfortable with, that suite of weapons?

BM1 Bittle: Yes, because there's no other . . . you'd have to alter those vessels to be able to support an M-60. You'd have to actually fabricate some platforms to support them like on our 41-footers.

Q: Was there any thought of coordinating, say security patrols with raider boats or something that did have weaponry so that you had a kind of armed convoy with you?

BM1 Bittle: They did. I'm not sure when they showed up. But our lead dets did show up with their fast boats; the Fountains. They showed up. I can't remember what day. I think they had two of them in the harbor. But you also had a lot of the station vessels around that did have boarding teams onboard. We were tasked because a lot of the cutters probably didn't realize that we didn't have weapons onboard, and we were also used because you'll have one vessel that needed to be relieved for fuel, food or whatever. So we go take their spot. We got thrown into that job. But like I said, there's also - the Coast Guard cutters - a lot of people don't realize that probably Strike Teams . . . we didn't come equipped with weapons. We came equipped with equipment.

Q: I think when people hear the words Strike Team they assume that.

BM1 Bittle: Right. We do everything and anything. It sounds like, yeah, National Strike Force.

Q: Right. You guys must have lots of weapons, exactly.

BM1 Bittle: But that's the one thing they don't have here. But definitely the way this is now; fighting this terrorism, I wanted weapons that night.

Q: You were there for about three weeks?

BM1 Bittle: Right.

Q: How did your evolutions as a boat crew take place? Did things start to settle down a little bit and did people start to get a little bit of rest? How do you proceed after those first few days?

BM1 Bittle: I know myself, I'm going to say the first three days were very stressful. I mean, indeed, the rage that I had in me, you know, I wanted to look on the news and see that whole country and every Middle Eastern country getting put up in a mushroom cloud. That's what would have made me feel better, even if we weren't getting sleep. I was just so mad.

Q: Did it give you a sense, or at least some kind of comfort to know that you were there serving your country?

BM1 Bittle: I had to be there. That was one place I had to be. My mother had called me maybe an hour after it happened crying and she just knew that I'd have to be sent. I was telling her, I don't know yet, and we were actually loading the vehicles when I told her, Ma, I don't know. We might not have to go. I'm not sure if we have to go. But she was devastated. My sister called. She's crying. Everybody's in such a panic because this country is under attack and now we've got to go. But I'm sitting here trying to tell mom and sister that . . .

Q: Things are fine.

BM1 Bittle: Yeah. We might not have to go, but we were putting the trailer on a tractor. But after the first three days we actually got hotel rooms up there. People started getting a routine going and you kind of accepted what happened and the guys; the Coasties are great. You get a good boat crew rapport going and the next thing you know we can start joking about other things and talking about other things, not just this.

Q: So after the first few days things started to lighten up a little?

BM1 Bittle: Three days. It took me three days. I didn't sleep for three days. There was no sleep involved. You'd get maybe an hour or two of sleep on the boat when you had another coxswain onboard, where you could sleep, because there was just no place for us to sleep at Station New York.

Q: When you get back to Station New York are you spending your time, when you're not on the water, with the routine maintenance, things like that?

BM1 Bittle: No no no no. We were our own people. If you weren't a part of that duty section; if you weren't at that station, no. We were our own . . . everybody's in their own independent unit. In other words they supported us, like whatever we needed for our vessel.

Q: So they would refuel you?

BM1 Bittle: Yeah. We had to do it. I don't know if they refueled us there, maybe at first. But then actually we had a contract with Theea (phonetic) Marina in New Jersey.

Q: There was some concern I see in the paperwork that runoff from the World Trade Center might be polluting the Hudson. Was there anytime when the unit started to do water monitoring or sampling?

BM1 Bittle: No. I think that maybe came a little bit later. I'm not sure because a lot of the other Strike Team members who have been here were qualified. They were at Ground Zero setting up at our Command Post because they were the ones who were qualified to do the air monitoring and make the Level B entries. I had just gotten here, but I was the qualified coxswain. So I had a great job. We had a great job to be on that boat, and we basically just helped people when we could.

Q: After those first few days what were you doing?

BM1 Bittle: After the first few days my boss had gotten in contact with Activities New York to try to tell the cutters that we don't have an armed boarding team onboard. That's when we started doing a lot of logistic runs; taking Chaplains to vessels. When we broke away we broke away on our own. In other words the cutter thinks we're standing by. We did our own thing because we knew the most help we could do for the people in downtown Ground Zero was help them go wherever they needed to go. All the firemen and all the rescue workers had to go up to that Navy hospital ship. A lot of people had to go up there to eat or change.

Q: Was it you folks who took the Master Chief or the Commandant over from Activities over to MOT-B [Marine Ocean Terminal - Bayonne]?

BM1 Bittle: That might have been Chief Fields or BM1 McNealy. I didn't take the Master Chief. I was actually supposed to pick him up I think, up the river, but we had gotten diverted to do something else.

Q: Do you remember taking any other Coast Guard officers or visitors?

BM1 Bittle: We took quite a few officers. I couldn't tell you by name, but we were taking a lot of people down to Ground Zero.

Q: So nobody stuck out to you, this is so and so?

BM1 Bittle: We had so many come onboard; commanders and lieutenants. The only one who really stuck out was the Chaplain. He had the best attitude. He was just a good guy and he was really friendly with the crew.

Q: Do you remember his name? He was a Coast Guard Chaplain?

BM1 Bittle: Yes, a commander. I'm not sure. He had another lady with him also and another couple of people. But they were just really friendly and had good spirits and we took them for a couple days to different cutters. They stood out the most.

Q: Terrific. After that three weeks, when did you get the word that you were packing up and heading out?

BM1 Bittle: Probably three or four days before hand because we tried to keep it on a 21-day rotation.

Q: And you brought the boat back here?

BM1 Bittle: When did we bring the boat back? I think . . . no the boat stayed up here. I think the vessels had stayed up here at that time because we still had another crew come up for three weeks.

Q: So the boat stayed there and you got another crew?

BM1 Bittle: Yeah, I believe so. I'm trying to remember. I came back here for maybe a week and then I went to the 40-hour Hazmat School up in Edison and the day I graduated I got beeped to go down for the anthrax in DC. So I was graduated for four hours and . . .

Q: And then put your experience to work.

BM1 Bittle: Right to work and spent another three weeks down there.

END OF INTERVIEW

