



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: Lieutenant Commander Kevin Gately, USCGR
Planner, Waterways Management Division, Activities New York

Interviewer: PAC Peter Capelotti, USCGR
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Place: Station Sandy Hook

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

LCDR Gately: Twenty-two years in the Reserve.

Q: And had you been activated before 9/11?

LCDR Gately: Actually I was already doing Non-Consecutive Active Duty and in fact I was in Washington at a Port Security seminar for Port Readiness.

Q: You were at that meeting on 9/11?

LCDR Gately: At the Transportation Department.

Q: Yes.

LCDR Gately: Yes.

Q: Do you know LCDR Coven (phonetic) from Headquarters, OCU [Office of Cutter Forces]; the planning folks there?

LCDR Gately: It sounds familiar but I can't quite . . .

Q: She was at that conference that morning also.

LCDR Gately: I have a feeling I met her, yes.

Q: What's your usual job in the Reserves for Activities New York?

LCDR Gately: I work for the Waterways Management Division of Activities New York. I'm a planner. Mostly I plan exercises.

Q: Uh huh. Well that's a good question. Give me a sense of what your budgets, your tasking, and so forth were for planning, and for exercises, in say, the previous five or ten years in the Reserve.

LCDR Gately: I couldn't tell you the budgets because I don't know the numbers. The kind of work that I was doing was basically . . . we're responsible for periodic SAR [Search and Rescue] exercises and for periodic Port Readiness Assessment exercises and certain others. Our division was also in charge of things like military loadouts.

Q: So you had conducted Port Security exercises at the time?

LCDR Gately: Yes.

Q: Give me a sense of what those exercises would be like leading up to 9/11.

LCDR Gately: Okay. Port Security exercises are such like what we did here. No, we weren't doing that. We were doing Port Readiness exercises.

Q: And what would be the character of those?

LCDR Gately: That was preparing us for a military loadout for the Port of New York being used for a large scale overseas shipment of Army divisions, things like that.

Q: In your planning, was there ever any thought given to conducting an exercise that envisioned such a thing that happened on 9/11?

LCDR Gately: Well yes. As a matter of fact I was involved then, and I'm still involved, in an exercise which was sponsored by the State - it is still being sponsored by the State of New Jersey; the Office of Emergency Management - called Gateway Response. I've been a liaison to that exercise and Commander McAllister has been playing for Activities New York in that series of exercises. And ironically the scenario of that exercise was an attack on a New York Port Authority facility by terrorists using a Weapon of Mass Destruction with Coast Guard involvement, and so on and so forth. So that was actually . . . that was a good coincidence. Our involvement in that, I'm certain, made the Command - the operation people in particular - far more ready mentally for what happened on September 11th.

Q: How closely - and I know nothing can be that close - but how closely did the scenario in that exercise match up with the reality of what happened on 9/11?

LCDR Gately: Well the location was different because the location of the exercise was in New Jersey. Our Port Security response was basically exactly what had been postulated in the exercise.

Q: Really? And when was that exercise carried out?

LCDR Gately: The series of exercises began in the spring of 2000.

Q: So when you were doing this, did this envision a kind of coordination between state, local, federal authorities and so forth, and did you role-play those types of things?

LCDR Gately: Sure, absolutely.

Q: So this plan was on the shelf in essence, or the results of this exercise were on the shelf when 9/11 happened?

LCDR Gately: You can say that. Not in final formal published form, but we did have the experience of those exercises.

Q: Where were you that morning? You were in Washington. When did you come back?

LCDR Gately: First I just want to finish answering the last one.

Q: Yes, go ahead, sure.

LCDR Gately: The part of the emergency that the exercise didn't anticipate was the evacuation problem. That was completely unanticipated. That entire thing was improvised on the spot.

Q: So there was no plan on the shelf say that envisioned the total evacuation of lower Manhattan?

LCDR Gately: No. It was never dreamt of in our philosophy.

Q: Is that something now . . . it's a silly question.

LCDR Gately: Obviously.

Q: I assume that's in the front of everybody's mind now?

LCDR Gately: Obviously.

Q: Is it in everybody's mind to the extent of saying we can get "x" number of people now across "x" bridge, "y" bridge, and we can get so many over on the ferries, but what happens if we get a tunnel or a bridge down; those sorts of things, or is it not that specific? In other words, if we were to have a 9/11 tomorrow how would we get people out of lower Manhattan? Would it be the same kind of ad hoc way?

LCDR Gately: The way we did it, in my opinion, the way we did it worked so well. We couldn't possibly improve on that.

Q: Really?

LCDR Gately: I think we, and everybody else in the city, would do the same thing again. It's just re-flexible.

Q: Would everybody go to sort of stations where they had to sort of feel their way around the stations on 9/11 or is it more of an automatic reflex now? We're going here. This is how we're going to get these people out and so forth.

LCDR Gately: Oh yes. I think, yes, I think it would be almost a routine drill the second time around.

Q: When you got back from Washington what did you find? Where did you go and what did you find?

LCDR Gately: Well the timing was interesting because we were in the Department of Transportation and I was going down to get a cup of coffee. I saw everybody staring at a TV in the lobby and I said, hey, what happened? They said, a plane hit a building, and I looked on the TV monitor and it was the World Trade Center. While I was standing there watching, the other plane flew into the building. And of course from the second impact, as far as I was concerned and as far as anybody at Activities was concerned, it was obvious it was terrorism because two planes don't, by accident, hit the World Trade Center. I was down there with Lieutenant Kathleen Garza and we decided we better come back.

We got back to our hotel, got our car back and we were driving out of Washington when we heard on the radio that the Pentagon had been hit, and of course we followed this on the radio all the way up 95.

Q: What was 95 like that day?

LCDR Gately: Ninety-five was normal.

Q: Just normal traffic?

LCDR Gately: We didn't see anything unusual.

Q: No increased State Police?

LCDR Gately: Only when we got into the immediate area of New York. All of the bridges into New York were closed.

Q: Uh huh. Where were you trying to go?

LCDR Gately: We were trying to go across the outer bridge crossing into Staten Island.

Q: And that was closed?

LCDR Gately: That was closed. But of course we were in uniform. We had ID cards. We were in a government vehicle and so they let us through.

Q: Oh you did? You were allowed to go over the bridge?

LCDR Gately: Yes, the emergency people were allowed to get over the bridge. When we got back to Activities we found things were pretty chaotic. The key reason for the chaos was simple. We had no telephones. Activities New York has a digital phone system and that system went through the World Trade Center, so it was destroyed and there was no redundancy. There was no back up in the system, so we just had no telephones.

Q: Did you get back that night, the night of 9/11?

LCDR Gately: I got back at about one o'clock in the afternoon.

Q: In the afternoon?

LCDR Gately: Yes.

Q: So you had a pretty fast trip up the highway then from Washington?

LCDR Gately: Yes. (Laughter)

Q: So you were there that afternoon?

LCDR Gately: Yes.

Q: And what did you find when you got there? I mean other than the fact that the phones were all out and nobody could communicate with anybody?

LCDR Gately: There were no telephones. There was a major evacuation going on. All of the authorities in New Jersey had rolled out a major Medical Evacuation Plan. They had people out at Military Ocean Terminal Bayonne, Liberty State Park, the Staten Island at Homeport and some other sites.

Q: And this is where they were going to take people?

LCDR Gately: They were waiting for mass casualties that never showed up. On the other hand there were a lot of non-injured people trying to get off the island and they were basically just being taken to the same locations because they were convenient. And one of the taskings that I was given right away was to try and get that more organized and coordinated so that the commercial vessels that were evacuating people would take them to the locations in equal amounts.

Q: And how did you do that, or attempt to do that, with spotty communications?

LCDR Gately: It was essentially futile.

Q: How was the tasking going from Activities to the vessels if the communications were so bad?

LCDR Gately: VHF radios.

Q: Was it, as the Lieutenant was saying earlier, that you've got limited range and so forth, or is that only when you're talking about secure VHF?

LCDR Gately: Well secure was gone, because secure . . . well lets put it this way. Secure voice in the Activities New York setup was very difficult with the technology we had on September 11th, and secure message traffic relied on the phone lines. So that was gone, and as did the High-sight communications, which are the long distance radio communications. The VHF worked but it was congested. You know we had a lot of congestion.

Q: Was it your sense, as you were saying earlier, that fairly quickly they went to this three channel . . .?

LCDR Gately: That's a communications plan that Mr. McKenzie established after he got on-scene, as On-scene Coordinator.

Q: Oh, okay. So that wasn't in place. That was something that he did and he said, all Coast Guard go to this channel, all New York go here.

LCDR Gately: Right. Prior to that the stations were basically managing their boats out of Station Sandy Hook and Station New York from their own communication centers by VHF as best they could. And of course there was a lot of reliance on cell phones in that first 12-hour period. The only telephone communications we had . . . we had some old analog phone lines that somebody remembered, found some analog phones and hooked them up. So all of Activities New York had maybe, I don't know, half a dozen phones.

Q: What was the atmosphere like at Activities New York as all of this was going on?

LCDR Gately: Very chaotic. Not in the sense that people were confused or didn't know what to do, but the pressure was intense, okay. Everybody was multi-tasking. Everybody was trying to keep ten balls in the air at the same time. Nobody knew what was happening exactly. Were there going to be more attacks? You know, how long was this evacuation going to go on?

The general theme was to round up as many assets as possible, get Reservists in, get people in from other commands, get more boats, get some people out there on the water protecting the key assets, and also manage the evacuation. Calls were going back and forth to D-1, to Atlantic Area, to Headquarters. You know a flurry of activity would be an understatement.

Q: After this initial attempt to sort of coordinate, as you said, this futile attempt to coordinate this, what was your next task as you remember it, or how did that situation evolve over the next day or so? What kind of things were you working on?

LCDR Gately: Well the medivac thing was basically over with by six or seven and our next problem was that the . . .

Q: Was it pretty clear by six or seven that night that there weren't going to be mass casualties?

LCDR Gately: Yes. Basically most people got out in one piece or they didn't get out.

Q: Right.

LCDR Gately: You know it was the majority experience. Yes, it was pretty clear by, I'd say, about five o'clock that evening.

Q: Did that take some physiological adjustment or did people sort of make the transition into a recovery mode at that point? I know that hope was held out that some people might be found over the next few days, but how did Activities New York sort of make this transition into a response recovery mode?

LCDR Gately: Well from the start Activities knew it had two missions, which was first of all, the evacuation, and second of all, the Port Security mission. And so the evacuation mission just wound down by itself and all those assets just shifted over into the Port Security mission. Both of them were going forward from the first minute.

Q: So it became almost exclusively a Port Security mission after, say, the first 12-hours or so?

LCDR Gately: After the first 12-hours it was exclusively a Port Security mission, that's correct.

Q: What sorts of things were you doing in the next week or so?

LCDR Gately: The biggest problem that we had in our division; the Waterways Management Division, was that the harbor was closed and the industry needed that harbor opened. There were ships that wanted to come in. There were ships that had to go through. Tugs had to bring barges up to Albany, you know, to the ports up the Hudson. The ferries wanted to run so that people could get to work, and we had totally shut down the harbor. You know we had said, everybody freeze. And so in my division the main activity was trying to put together a plan to open up the harbor in a way that would be secure, you know, be safe.

Q: Uh huh. Did that include Coast Guard patrols, boardings and so forth, of high interest or high-risk vessels?

LCDR Gately: Yes. The plan that emerged was a two-part thing. First of all, all merchant vessels would be inspected and cleared before they could come into the harbor.

Q: And what were they inspected for?

LCDR Gately: They were mainly being inspected to make sure that the people on them were the people who were supposed to be on them. We would ask the Master for a crew list - or I should say the Agent for the company - and they would tell us these are the people who are supposed to be on that ship. Then we would board and we would check for passports. We'd go around and make sure there were no stowaways. Make sure the ship hadn't been pirated and so forth.

Q: Did you have much materials inspection as well?

LCDR Gately: You mean?

Q: Just checking the cargo manifest and making sure that was exactly what was onboard?

LCDR Gately: There were some regular Marine Safety inspections going on.

Q: Was that heightened in the first few weeks? Were they over-concerned that there might be a ship coming in with something that the people didn't want coming in?

LCDR Gately: There was absolute concern for it. That was the reason for that entire program. We did not let one ship enter this harbor after ten a.m. on September 11th that hadn't been boarded by the Coast Guard.

Q: Did the Coast Guard, through Activities New York, have in place before September 11th things like - or on your radar screen - things like monitoring cargo for things like dirty bombs or armed stowaways; the kind of things that everybody had spun scenarios out since then?

LCDR Gately: To my knowledge we didn't. We were aware of it. Certainly it was part of the exercise series that we were participating in. Have we ever made any formal plans along those lines? I don't know. You'd have to ask Towanus (phonetic). (Laughter)

Q: How did you see this evolving over the next several months? I mean how did the event sort of go through its life span from your point of view?

LCDR Gately: What I saw is that basically the first 48 to 72 hours we're getting organized. From the third day out it was an organized effort, you know, it was squared away. It was on an even keel. It was efficient. It had a regular rhythm to it. Things were going very well.

After about a month we began - I don't want to say crack under the strain - but we simply couldn't sustain that pace anymore. We didn't have enough boats. We didn't have enough people. The boats were breaking down. People were working 80 or 90 hours a week. We just couldn't hack the pace anymore, and so we had to stand down almost from necessity. So we started sending people back to their home stations. We started releasing Reservists. We started sending cutters away and we got down to what we called a sustainable level.

Q: I just want to make sure I get two questions in here.

LCDR Gately: Sure.

Q: What, in particular, what waterways traffic, waterways management challenges, did this whole situation present to you that perhaps you hadn't seen before?

LCDR Gately: Basically closing an entire harbor to both commercial and recreational traffic and keeping those closures updated, and communicating that to the customers. It was very difficult and very challenging.

Q: Was there a lot of pressure on you to get the harbor open?

LCDR Gately: Yes.

Q: How did that manifest itself?

LCDR Gately: Lots of phone calls from the industry. Some people from the industry sometimes calling Washington. Sometimes Washington calling us, you know, saying, when can this harbor be opened? But we were never under any pressure to open it in a way that would not be secure.

Q: So essentially your tasking was to make sure it's secure and then worry about opening it?

LCDR Gately: Get it opened securely and as fast as possible I would say was the thing.

Q: And I want to ask you, since you've been in the Reserves for more than 20 years, where you fit this event into your career, things that you've seen before in over more than 20 years?

LCDR Gately: This is the scenario for which we were always told the Coast Guard Reserve exists. It finally happened, you know, right here at the tail end of my career. We never thought none of this was actually going to happen. We were ready for World War III.

Q: That's exactly right, general war in Europe.

LCDR Gately: We were ready to be defending the Statue of Liberty from the Russians, and here we were in the end defending the Statue of Liberty, not from the Russians, but nevertheless.

Q: Did you feel in some senses like your career path led to this point based on your preparation and your background?

LCDR Gately: Well I'll put it to you this way. The tasking I got in connection with this incident was just mainly to write the After Action Report [AAR]. Everything I ever did in the Coast Guard was perfect preparation for it. I knew about cutters. I knew about small boats. I knew Port Security. I knew Law Enforcement. So I had the background to do the job. So in that sense, yes, it was sort of like a culmination of everything coming together at the end.

Q: I'm not going to ask you about your AAR because I'm going to read that myself. But I want to thank you Sir for taking the time. This is a . . . every story I get gets more and more amazing.

Any final thoughts that you have about the event that you want to share?

LCDR Gately: Yes I would if I have time.

Q: Sure:

LCDR Gately: We had a big Coast Guard Reserve and we had a lot of people who were ready, but I think in a lot of ways the Coast Guard itself almost didn't think that this was every really going to happen. Because even though we did a really good job, in a lot of ways the Coast Guard was not ready to surge with its Reserve; to use its Reserve that way, okay. I think it's a lot more ready now, okay. And I hope this never happens again, but I hope that the next time it happens, in terms of Reserve mobilization, we're more ready than we were.

Q: I don't know if you've heard the latest figures. They are talking about going up to 17,500 now.

LCDR Gately: I'd love to know where they're going to get them.

Q: I asked [the Assistant Commandant for Marine Safety and Environmental Protection (G-M) Rear] Admiral [Paul J.] Pluta that Friday night. He said good recruiting.

LCDR Gately: We have to have fantastic recruiting.

END OF INTERVIEW

