



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: **Chief Warrant Officer Paul Johnston, USCGR**
Staging Area Manager, Atlantic Strike Team

Interviewer: PAC Peter Capelotti, USCGR
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Place: Atlantic Strike Team

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

CWO2 Johnston: I just went over 20 years in January.

Q: And when did you join the Coast Guard? You're active duty?

CWO2 Johnston: I was active from '78 to '88. I got out for a couple years and then came back in the Reserves to the present.

Q: Okay. What led you to the Strike Team? How did you get here?

CWO2 Johnston: When I came back in the Reserves I went to Manasquan Inlet for a few years. Then I heard about the Strike Team and interviewed and got accepted here. I've been here about seven years now.

Q: Seven years. So you've been through a few situations. I assume you've been mobilized a few times before this?

CWO2 Johnston: A few times, yeah.

Q: Probably nothing quite like this. I wanted to start on that morning, if you can recall where you were and what you were doing. Were you here or did you show up here? How did that all happen?

CWO2 Johnston: I build log homes for a living up in the Poconos of Pennsylvania and I was out in the woods building when my wife called and said that a plane had hit the Trade Towers; the Twin Towers. I just figured it was a small Cessna or something like that, and she called back a few more times and I started putting it together, realizing this was . . .

Q: Put the tools down.

CWO2 Johnston: Yeah. I guess later that day I got put on standby by the unit and about four days later I was mobilized.

Q: Do you recall offhand how many times that you've been mobilized to work with the Strike Team before this?

CWO2 Johnston: No I don't.

Q: Well put it this way. What kinds of things have you done?

CWO2 Johnston: I've done some . . . like another big job we do is LCP Chemicals down in Brunswick, Georgia. I did a lot of air monitoring and contractor monitoring down there. That's basically what the Reserves do here when we're mobilized.

Q: So when did you first get here to the unit after 9/11?

CWO2 Johnston: I'm going to say the 15th.

Q: Okay, and did you head right from here up to New York?

CWO2 Johnston: I headed right up to Bayonne, New Jersey where we were staging our boats out of. I was assigned the Staging Area Manager job up there. We have PSUs up there - some of the other units in the area do their small boats - our small boats, and we were running just all kinds of logistic runs. We were running people to and from New York. We were running all the Marine Inspectors out to the ships since the harbor was locked down. Just anything that came up boat-wise we were doing out of there.

Q: I guess that's one of your qualifications is to work with the small boat crews?

CWO2 Johnston: That's one, yeah.

Q: And when you got to MOT-B [Marine Ocean Terminal - Bayonne] and the small boats were right there with the Mobile Command Post. Is that right?

CWO2 Johnston: Yes, and coming in. I mean gosh, when I got there there might have been a dozen boats and by the time I left there were probably two dozen boats there.

Q: And these were all Coast Guard small boats?

CWO2 Johnston: All Coast Guard, yes.

Q: But the 32 and 23 were both there at MOT-B?

CWO2 Johnston: Both of our team boats, yes.

Q: What was the scene like when you arrived there on the 15th?

CWO2 Johnston: Well the site was still pretty new. I mean it was only four days; a lot of smoke and a lot of things getting ironed out still at that point. I can remember when I first went to Ground Zero on the night of the 15th, my knees were shaking. It was the first time my knees had ever knocked together. It was something.

Q: Where you there the night of the lightning strike, or did you get there after that?

CWO2 Johnston: I believe it was after that.

Q: One of those days; three or four days later, it was raining. Was it raining when you got there?

CWO2 Johnston: Yeah.

Q: Do you remember who was there that stands out in your mind from the Strike Team?

CWO2 Johnston: Well as far as the Coast Guard goes I think the Strike Team was about all I saw Coast Guard-wise there. But gosh, there were people from every agency in this country there. There were a lot of people.

Q: In terms of Coast Guard small boats . . . I'm interested in particular because a lot of the situation reports will always identify a cutter but never a small boat. It's sort of this ship, that ship, plus the other ship, and then seven small boats. Do you remember what stations in particular besides your own . . . ?

CWO2 Johnston: I think it was from all Jersey. I believe Georgia had some 41-footers up there.

Q: Really?

CWO2 Johnston: Yeah. Some came down from Connecticut. That's the most 41-footers I've ever seen in one spot.

Q: What sorts of things were they doing; ferrying people around, getting back and forth to the site, those sorts of things?

CWO2 Johnston: Everything. I mean when the firemen where just plum tired and done, they would just pile them on the 41s and just take them across to the other side there so they could get home because some of them lived across the river there. It was just anything. If they needed to move stuff around we did it.

Q: What were your duties as far as managing the station?

CWO2 Johnston: I just coordinated the boats. Now if the 110s needed fuel or water or any kind of mechanical part they came to us. We just arranged it to be there so they could keep doing their job.

Q: Any of those cutters stand out in your mind during those . . . I know the [USCGC] *Katherine Walker* [WLM-552] was in your area.

CWO2 Johnston: The *Katherine Walker* was right there. Sandy Hook's 110s were there.

Q: How familiar were you with New York Harbor before you got there?

CWO2 Johnston: Not very. I'm pretty familiar now.

Q: You learned it real fast. How did you find dock space around MOT B (phonetic) for all these small boats and cutters?

CWO2 Johnston: Well they actually . . . CDR Fiero (phonetic) [Joseph M. Fierro?], if I said his name right, was out of Activities. He was assigned to supply those needs if they arose and they did. We needed more dock space, so he came down with his people and they built floating docks within a couple days and they just extended the docks that were there with more floating docks.

Q: And where was he from?

CWO2 Johnston: Activities New York.

Q: I know one of my impressions of those first few weeks was . . . where I live, was how quiet it was because there weren't any airplanes flying overhead. I'm interested in when you got there in those first few days, what your general impressions were of sights, sounds and smells.

CWO2 Johnston: Smell is just what I was going to say. The smell of that whole thing will probably stick with me the rest of my life. It's kind of like an electrical, but a "concrete-y" electrical smell. I mean I don't know else to say it. I never smelled anything like it. But I know if I smell something close to it in the future it'll probably remind me of that.

Q: Another building has collapsed somewhere. A lot of people have described it as kind of an acrid, acidic smoke. How did you see this situation, which was obviously very chaotic at the beginning? Did things sort of smooth out quickly or slowly? I mean how did things work their way out? I assume at some point you settled into a fairly steady routine. When did that start happening?

CWO2 Johnston: I'd say after we were up there about a week we started running a lot more MIs (Marine Inspectors) out to the ships because we had gotten a grip on the harbor getting shut down. We were getting into a routine with that. As far as Ground Zero goes, there were so many people and so much gear the first few days; just getting dump trucks out and making room. As soon as a piece of room came available a crane went in or some other piece of staged equipment went in. I figured them a year cleaning that mess up. They're ahead of schedule I think. It's coming together quite well.

Q: In times of crisis people usually look to their leadership to see what they're doing and see if they haven't lost their heads yet. What kind of things were you looking for from the people around you in terms of the Coast Guard leadership? Were you looking for people in your unit? Were you looking for people elsewhere in the Coast Guard? Were you looking for people in other agencies? I mean who stood out to you as somebody that seemed to know what they were doing?

CWO2 Johnston: Well gosh, perhaps there were a lot of people involved. People were constantly coming down to the MOT-B just to see what was going on and how we were making out. Everybody from my Commander [CDR Gail Kulisch] down to the Admiral of Activities [RADM Richard Bennis] was there. The Commandant [ADM James Loy] and the Master Chief [MCPOCG Vincent W. Patton] came down. A lot of people came down.

Q: What happens in a situation like that when the Commandant shows up?

CWO2 Johnston: You know normally I think everybody gets a little stiff. But there was just so much to do and everybody was into what they were doing.

Q: Did he assemble everybody or did he talk to them individually, or what did he do?

CWO2 Johnston: Well our job running boats was to pick him up at Activities and run him over to Ground Zero. We ran the Master Chief over a couple times. He's a character. I enjoyed talking with him. But yeah, they were making their presence known.

Q: What kind of things do you remember them saying?

CWO2 Johnston: They just wanted to know what they could do or what we needed. That was the biggest thing.

Q: Were there things that you guys told them about or was it one of those situations where the senior leadership shows up and says, what do you need, and everybody says nothing, we're all fine?

CWO2 Johnston: Well we were in pretty good shape I have to say. I guess a lot of the needs were . . . I mean pallets of water were coming in, pallets of food, fuel and oil for the boats. It was a constant thing. But there always seemed to be a good supply of everything.

Q: You say one of the things you were doing was trying to make space for all this stuff. Logistically, how did you get your hands around all of this stuff? I mean did you have forklifts and what not? I mean how were you going about moving this stuff in and out?

CWO2 Johnston: Forklifts. We had our tractor trailers up there. Activities New York was right there. They were a big help in allowing us to use their facilities. We blew an engine up there on one of the boats and had to get another engine on it, and they allowed us to use their mechanical facilities and that.

Q: This was the engine; the OMC?

CWO2 Johnston: On the 23-footer.

Q: Yeah.

CWO2 Johnston: We were running 24/7 for three or four weeks and PM-ing them when we could. We'd just take them up on the boat ramp and not even strap them on a trailer. Just get them out of the water enough to get all the filters changed and get the liquids changed out and plugs and get them back in the drink and down the river again.

Q: Was there a time during that first week when you . . . some people look at details and then they stand back. Some people are overwhelmed by the big thing and then start looking at the details. Was there a time when you stood back and sort of absorbed the magnitude of what happened?

CWO2 Johnston: Yeah, surreal is a word that I heard used a lot? Where we were at, at MOT-B, we were focused on the boat situation and that was easy to focus on. When you took the whole thing in it was amazing. A lot of agencies coming together, and yeah, that's a lot of politics involved. But you know at the beginning everybody was just helping and doing their job. Towards the end more politicking got involved and there were some issues that were coming up.

Q: Looking back on it now, are there things that you would, both as a Reservist in particular and as somebody on the Strike Team in general . . . what do you think worked? What do you think didn't work? What would you do differently if you had the chance? What would you've liked to have had there that you didn't have or might want to have?

CWO2 Johnston: The one thing that I think is going to be an issue down the line is the PPE Air Masks. We were using them from the get-go when we were doing air monitorings and we knew there

was some bad stuff in the air. We tried to get everybody else online with us, and they were just focused on getting into that pile.

Q: Was there a time when you went across to Ground Zero and did air monitoring over there or were you doing it at MOT-B as well?

CWO2 Johnston: No, we weren't doing it at MOT-B. We were doing it at Ground Zero. A lot of firemen on the pile were without their masks, and a lot of policemen.

Q: I was told yesterday that you had to essentially decontaminate people without telling them that you were decontaminating them.

CWO2 Johnston: Well they're always worried about hysterics and people getting upset. You start talking about decontamination and people start thinking the worst. All we were trying to do was contain Ground Zero; a lot of concrete dust.

Q: Yes. Well I've got the list here of some of the things you guys had to deal with, or at least I thought they were dealing with; asbestos, PCBs [polychlorinated biphenyls], Freon batteries, water treatment chemicals, compressed gas, photo chemicals, fuel oil, gasoline, medical waste, a blood bank and airborne blood pathogens from victims.

CWO2 Johnston: And this is just compressed into this dusty massive pile of garbage and it was getting spread around so.

Q: Spread all over the place, yeah. Was your awareness of how dangerous this was from situations you've already been in before, or did you intuitively know this, that when something like this comes down it can only be bad?

CWO2 Johnston: Generally when the Strike Team goes onto a job they assume the worst and they dress for the worst. Then we taper down to fit the case. We went into Ground Zero with full air masks and we recommended that, and we'll have to see how all this plays out at the end. I hope nobody gets sick from it all.

Q: Yeah. It would be interesting to find out and to have tests run on you guys and tests run on the folks who weren't wearing masks.

CWO2 Johnston: That thing was burning for days and people were just in it. After a while you kind of get used to being around it and you're not thinking.

Q: Right. You're just thinking about rescue instead of safety.

CWO2 Johnston: Right. That was on everybody's mind.

Q: Yeah. Well thank you very much. This has been very helpful.

END OF INTERVIEW

