



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: MK1 Charles G. Nowak, USCG **Atlantic Strike Team**

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

Place: Atlantic Strike Team



Q: If you could give me your full name, rank and rate.

MK1 Nowak: Charles G. Nowak. I'm Petty Officer First Class Machinery Technician.

Q: So you're an MK?

MK1 Nowak: Yes, MK1.

Q: And how long have you been in the Coast Guard?

MK1 Nowak: Twelve years now.

Q: Okay, right out of high school?

MK1 Nowak: Yes.

Q: How did you find your way here to the Atlantic Strike Team?

MK1 Nowak: I would always hear about it through the grapevine and once in a while on a job I'd work with some of the folks assigned to the Strike Team. So it seemed like a good opportunity.

Q: Were you here that morning of 9/11?

MK1 Nowak: I was actually working a job for the EPA up in Johnstown, New York. It's about an hour west of Albany.

Q: What kind of job was it?

MK1 Nowak: It was an abandoned tannery where they would take hides and skins from animals and make leather gloves out of them. It was abandoned in '96. The town would have gone bankrupt if they had to clean it up. It was a Superfund site so we were helping with that.

Q: Were you called back to the unit right away? How did that happen?

MK1 Nowak: I was on the side of the road that particular morning and a passer by drove by and she told me that an airplane had run into the Twin Towers. So that's how I found out. Then, a few minutes later, there was a neighbor in the neighborhood who called me over to her house and she's like, did you see this on TV? So I was invited to this stranger's house and I watched it unfold on television. It was something that I had never imagined.

Q: Did you know or sense that you had to get back to the unit? Was there a sense of emergency that something was going to happen, and did you check back in?

MK1 Nowak: Oh yeah. I called in and pretty much just checked in and they wanted to sort of keep the phones clear, so they said, if we need you, stay put . . .

Q: We'll call you.

MK1 Nowak: Yeah, stay put. Do what you're doing. Carry out your mission there and then we'll call you.

Q: Is that what you did?

MK1 Nowak: Yes.

Q: And when did you start to respond?

MK1 Nowak: Well actually I was filling in that week for the Federal On-Scene Coordinator while he was on his Emergency Response Duty that week that I was up there. So what happened is he was deployed to New York City and I just kept his role as his representative at the site to keep the continuity going.

Q: What are some of the things that you do here at the unit?

MK1 Nowak: Well primarily back at the unit I maintain all the oil response gear; skimmers, pumps, and tractor-trailers. Pretty much anything engineering wise I'll maintain.

Q: At what point did you come back here or were you sent to New York.

MK1 Nowak: I stayed up at the tannery pretty much the whole time.

Q: Uh huh, and when did you finish that job?

MK1 Nowak: It's still going on today, but roughly maybe three weeks afterwards I came back to the unit.

Q: Uh huh. So you've been working on that project right straight through?

MK1 Nowak: Yes.

Q: What's it like to be involved in something like that when you've got this colossus going on a few miles away?

MK1 Nowak: I guess good and bad because I could see, not the disorganization, but, you know, it's like I got a little project that I was working on up there at the tannery and I could see it through, and that was sort of nice.

Q: You had control over your own universe.

MK1 Nowak: Yeah, right.

Q: Oh that's great. When you got back here, what other kinds of things that . . . well you're involved in maintaining all this gear going in and out. Was it obvious to you that a lot of this stuff had just been ground up by being used so much?

MK1 Nowak: Can you rephrase that?

Q: This unit is heavily operational, so I would imagine that maintenance is continuous. Was this any different, looking at it from the outside, that stuff was being used more than usual, or was it pretty much what you would expect?

MK1 Nowak: I'd say it's what I expect. Some the equipment got used more than I would say normally, or at a different capacity. But usage . . . if it comes back broke I'll fix it. I don't look at it that way. But the equipment was ready to be used.

Q: Did the FOSC ever come back to your site?

MK1 Nowak: Yes, eventually he did.

Q: And you were there when he or she returned?

MK1 Nowak: Yes I was.

Q: And did you get the full debrief about what was going on? Was that part of the . . . ?

MK1 Nowak: Yes, he told some stories and I talked back to the unit previously, so I got a lot of feedback from what was going on.

Q: Are you pretty much back here now?

MK1 Nowak: Yes.

Q: Yeah. At this stage are you writing reports, or how do you finish up a project like that?

MK1 Nowak: There's a report that . . . just lessons learned that you fill out; if we were doing a job again what would we do better. List all the personnel that were used there. List all the equipment that was used there.

END OF INTERVIEW

