

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: MST1 John Kapsimalis, USCGR **Atlantic Strike Team**

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



CDR Gail Kulisch (left) and MST1 John Kapsimalis brief President George W. Bush on the equipment used by the CG Atlantic Strike Team during his visit to the Port of Newark on 24 June 2002.

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

MST1 Kapsimalis: I've been a Reservist for a little over 12 years.

Q: And were you on active duty before this, or straight reserve time?

MST1 Kapsimalis: Straight reserve time.

Q: You and me both. How long have you been with the Strike Team?

MST1 Kapsimalis: Since '95.

Q: Ninety-five, okay, so six years?

MST1 Kapsimalis: Yeah.

Q: So you've been through these drills a few times before?

MST1 Kapsimalis: Not this one.

Q: Not quite like this.

MST1 Kapsimalis: Not an interview.

Q: No, not an interview. I was talking about 9/11. In civilian life what do you do?

MST1 Kapsimalis: I'm retired. I was a Captain with the Department of Corrections in New Jersey.

Q: Oh okay. So you had a lot of preparation for Coast Guard bureaucracy then, having dealt with inmates. Do you remember where you were that morning on 9/11?

MST1 Kapsimalis: I was on what the Coast Guard calls terminal leave from my employer. I was just burning up time pending my retirement. One of the neighbors called and said one of the Trade buildings was on fire. I turned the TV on and I was watching the fire and just heard the announcer say that a plane had hit one of the towers. We were looking at it and I thought it was just a bizarre accident. I saw the next plane come around and saw it disappear and then just saw the next building aflame. I then realized what was going on and I called the unit. I live about eight miles from here.

Q: Did you get through? I guess the phone service here wasn't disrupted.

MST1 Kapsimalis: I got through right away. MK1 Pat McNealy was on the desk and I asked him, do you need me to come in? I called again about 15 minutes later and I just realized I really wasn't busy, so I just came in. I went to Ops; [LT \[Scott\] Linsky](#) and I just said, could you use me? He said absolutely. He said stay, and I said okay. Subsequently my orders reflected I was activated on September 11th. Immediately what I think we started doing was just getting boats together to get them out.

Q: Are those the kind of things that you would have done in an ordinary incident or was there something different about this? What kind of responses had you done before . . .

MST1 Kapsimalis: No.

Q: . . . where the whole unit sort of gets together? Was there anything like this where the whole unit sort of . . .?

MST1 Kapsimalis: It hasn't really been implemented, to my knowledge, where they actually had a call out where they said we need all the reservists to come in. That happened. I don't know if it happened that day. I think it happened a couple days later where they had a phone tree or something where they just bring everybody in. I wasn't really that cognizant of it because I was already here. I was already activated.

Q: Right, and what sort of things were you doing that day? You were getting the boats ready?

MST1 Kapsimalis: As I remember I was just getting the boats together and getting our trailers together. We were just anticipating what we have is going up.

Q: Was there anything that you noticed that morning a sense of urgency? Did everybody realize that this was going to be sort of an overwhelming event that it very quickly became?

MST1 Kapsimalis: I thought it was overwhelming that we didn't know what was happening. We didn't know what was happening, and then you heard reports of a plane hitting the Pentagon. Now we really didn't know what was happening, but obviously it was something.

Q: Was there anytime that morning - I know the CO wasn't here - but was there anytime that morning when the unit got together as a unit and just sort of said "the . . . hit the fan"? This is what we're going to do. Let's load up and move out. Or was it more piecemeal sort of; we need to do this?

MST1 Kapsimalis: I don't recall mustering together as a unit. They were just delegating; do this, do this. Also each area knows what its area of responsibility is. So the Chem people were getting their Chem stuff together. As I recall, the first thing that went out was the boats. We had to send the boats up, so they put a crew together and people were just helping out getting those together now out the door. I think the next thing was the MICP (Mobile Incident Command Post) was going to be going out, so we started by getting that ready. You know, by afternoon's end the boats went out, probably I think before noon. The MICP our big trailers were used. So they went out. I stayed here that day just getting ready and I got called back about ten o'clock at night and I went up to Staten Island. That was up at Activities New York. We brought some equipment up there.

Q: So you were up in New York by the end of the day?

MST1 Kapsimalis: Yes, and I think the next day as I recall I was up at Liberty Island at the terminal where we had the MICP because we moved it around a few times. I think one was at Bayonne and within a couple of days it was at Ground Zero.

Q: What were your general impressions or specific impressions when you got to New York. I remember that first week or so being unusual in that it seemed a lot more quiet than usual because there were no planes overhead. When you got to New York were the things that you saw or smelled or . . .?

MST1 Kapsimalis: It was eerie. Absolute disbelief. As we all were taking the Staten Island Ferry over - that was our mode of getting there - and seeing that, first; there was no boat traffic in New York Harbor. Secondly, it was the Coast Guard there you could see had just completely shut it down. You had cutters. You had raider boats. You had 41s. It was a military presence, but it was a Coast Guard presence, and that was the first thing that just jumped right out. The Coast Guard just shut this harbor . . . all it was was Coast Guard, and then getting into Battery Park.

Q: How did it make you feel as a Reservist, as an American and as a person, that when you see that the Coast Guard's on the job?

MST1 Kapsimalis: I can't explain, except impressive. I felt proud. I knew already that there was a tremendous swell of people wanting to do something and that was something that never left. And so many of the people I had spoken to while we were there, you couldn't miss it. You just knew everybody wanted to do something and most people couldn't, but we could.

Q: Right, so you had a sense that you could do something that other people couldn't.

MST1 Kapsimalis: And we were there and we were real appreciative for that. And in getting there, it was so surreal. There were already, as I remember, there was the military. You had the National Guard at Battery Park keeping people from going in, and certainly when we were taking the ferry over you were just watching billowing smoke. You just can't describe it. It was beyond any movie you could have seen. You'd see fighter jets going over New York. It was what I would have imagined war would have been. This was a war zone. You just kept saying, we've been attacked. We're at war right now.

Q: We've been attacked.

MST1 Kapsimalis: And just the magnitude. Like I said, the military presence; the fighter planes . . .

Q: Was there any speculation along that line . . . that's interesting. Now you know it's five months later. We've all heard about Osama bin Laden adinfinitum, and we've gone to war in Afghanistan and all this. But in those first few hours nobody knew who had done this or had any real idea, except for a few insiders in the government. Did you yourself, or with others, take time to speculate as to whom, how or why this might have been done?

MST1 Kapsimalis: Disbelief. It really wasn't more than that. It was disbelief. It was just tearing your heart out. And the closer you got there, to Ground Zero; you got a real quick sense of just the overwhelming support we were getting. You could see, just trying to get through into the area, the mobs of people saying thank you, which made you tremendously uncomfortable. We all did. They're thanking you and you're grateful for being there and you already knew so many people had died. That was something else too, because we anticipated; because we knew real quick, we found out how many people could be in there. We found out that each tower could hold like 50,000 or something, 40,000. There's over 20,000 visitors a day.

Q: So you were looking at approximately 100,000 people being killed.

MST Kapsimalis: Yeah, and as you recall from the Mayor on down, they wouldn't give an estimate. So we had visions just in our heads that, my God, it's beyond disbelief. You're talking over 50,000 people might have perished.

Q: Yeah, in terms of a Hiroshima level of death.

MST1 Kapsimalis: Just the magnitude of it. And that was our thought was, my God, there could be 100,000 people in there.

Q: Do you know . . . because in those first few days the estimates were hovering around anywhere from 10,000 to 50,000 people.

MST1 Kapsimalis: And we never heard one. I made a point of it. We had very, very long days. You'd get back to the hotel and you would click on CNN to get most of your information. That's what we did.

Q: Right.

MST1 Kapsimalis: That's what I did.

Q: Where were you staying?

MST1 Kapsimalis: Let me think. I've been sent out so many times.

Q: Which Motel 6 was it? (Laughter)

MST1 Kapsimalis: The Staten Island Hotel.

Q: So you were staying over on Staten Island?

MST1 Kapsimalis: We all were, yes. The unit actually didn't start staying in Manhattan I think until a couple months after that.

Q: So nobody was on Governor's Island or staying over there?

MST1 Kapsimalis: No.

Q: Nobody from the Strike Team?

MST1 Kapsimalis: No. And then we started . . . do you want me to ramble?

Q: No, by all means.

MST1 Kapsimalis: Then we started getting the assignments. The first one was we were just going into the buildings that were still standing - and some that looked like they even shouldn't be standing anymore - and we were doing the air monitoring, because we were told very quickly that the need was for the government to borrow billions of dollars right away. They needed money and they couldn't do that, and we got a real quick education in how the bond market works. So we did the air monitoring in the bond brokerage houses. That was okay. Then we started bringing technicians in.

Q: How was that explained to you? Was this just as an aside? Do you recall what they were saying about why you needed to get in to make sure these buildings could be . . . so people could get back into those buildings?

MST1 Kapsimalis: No. They just said we were going in. There were a few teams of us and all we were doing was air monitoring, like confined space stuff; combustible gases and O2 levels. That lasted for about a day or so, maybe two. Then we were told they were bringing technicians in so they can bring out their hard drives and computers. I was with one of the techs and I just asked him, I said, I know those are important, but could you explain it to me why? Then he gave me a good lesson in the way the bond market worked and why it was imperative that they get their equipment out so they could get going. He said they really didn't care about the Stock Market. When we got the techs out there we started bringing in . . . actually in many instances we brought in some upper level management.

Q: Do you recall any of those escort missions of bringing in any senior management back to their buildings?

MST1 Kapsimalis: Yes, and you didn't realize it because there was no line of delineation from people anymore; their status. There was this one real nice fellow. His name was . . . I'm Rich. Hi ya doing

Rich, and we took him into his office; a colleague and myself from the Gulf Team. It took us about a half an hour, so he said, why don't you come in my office? He was the CEO. His desk was mahogany, bigger than . . . this was the Captain and that's whom we started dealing with and you wouldn't have known it. I didn't realize it until I saw on his wall these pictures he had with presidents playing golf and arm wrestling on a bar with Sean Connery, because they wanted to take a picture of a couple of bald headed guys. They were so appreciative that we could do this for them and we were so appreciative that we could do something. Then we got the bonds. So that was in place, and then we started escorting the actual banks so they could get the bonds out to write them. This whole episode was just so beyond belief. It was surreal is the only word I can use for it.

I was with a woman about my age and a couple older gentlemen. We picked them up. We went up to Broadway and Canal. That's where we picked people up and shuttled them into the area. This was the Deutsche Bank. I had already made about three entries in there over the past several days. The same thing; gathering artifacts. I don't recall her name. But anyway, she said, John, look. We've got to go in the vault, and I said okay. I said, what do you want to do? I already shared with them some ideas on what we found when transporting things out. Those huge recycling . . . what the buildings would use for recycling used papers. I said, grab those. Believe me they work better than anything, particularly if you're dragging stuff down 40 flights of stairs. We went into one of these vaults and as you would take copy paper, reams of it, we were in this vault and she said it was raining outside. So as I'm taking these baggies she said, John, here. She just ripped it open and handed me a stack. I'm sticking these baggies in a linen cart because I knew there was going to be more than that. Well what I was doing was, like through a process, I said, what are these? She said they're blank bearer bonds. I filled up a linen cart in baggies with blank bearer bonds - oh my God - three or four feet deep. The worth of this was beyond millions. You couldn't estimate the value of what I had. All you had to do was put a name and a number on them . They were as good as . . .

Q: Whatever you wanted to write on there.

MST1 Kapsimalis: Whatever you wanted to write on there. The woman, I later found out, was the one that actually issued these, and the older gentlemen, who I assumed were her superiors, were in fact her subordinates. They asked her; well do you want to start signing these out? She said, no, let's skip it. We've got to get them out, because we were all under time constraints to get this stuff. We're not to stay in these building that long. I remember looking to them and I said, could I assume we're circumventing some procedures of yours? And they all looked and said, you would not believe it. How it turned out was we loaded this up. One of the fellows here had gotten the pickup truck, loaded it up and dragged it out, and this was just part of how surreal everything was. We stopped at, like I said, Canal and Broadway. I'm dragging this linen cart down; letter cart, loaded with blank bearer bonds just waiting for whoever came; an armored truck or whatever, to get it. It was just part of how unreal this whole thing was.

Q: Yeah. So did you ever think an MST1 in the Coast Guard would be carrying 50 million dollars worth of bonds around Manhattan? Somebody mentioned yesterday that one of these grateful executives had offered a Picasso or something? Do you remember that?

MST1 Kapsimalis: BM1 Telehanney was part of that group. You had to watch what you were saying. I remember looking at these posters they had in this one particular bank, just leadership sayings; management type, and I remarked, I said, they're really sharp. John, take them. No, that's not why I said that. I just think they're very sharp. No no, take them, please. Then you get into that argument. I'd say, it's okay.

Q: Yeah, I think that a Picassos probably just a little bit above the \$20 limit for government gifts.

MST1 Kapsimalis: Yeah.

Q: Was there any point when you were air monitoring or entering these buildings that you felt that this was hazardous to the point of dangerous?

MST1 Kapsimalis: In terms of the structure or the air quality?

Q: Both or either.

MST1 Kapsimalis: You didn't really give a thought about how dangerous those buildings were.

Q: Really.

MST1 Kapsimalis: You really didn't. You were just in that adrenaline rush, that mode like it's got to be done and we're getting it done. The air quality; they had us using those dust masks.

Q: So you had these full masks on?

MST1 Kapsimalis: I had it on my hip the whole time. I never used it. You didn't want to give the impression that the air quality was worse than it was.

Q: Right. I got that impression yesterday by part of the washing people. They had to decontaminate people without telling them that they were decontaminating them or giving them the impression that they were being decontaminated from something, to keep from raising alarm and panic.

MST1 Kapsimalis: There's no such animal as a wash down station. It's either you're deconning or you're not, okay. The first week or so we're walking around with those dust masks, which are absolutely functionally useless. They are useless. But you know, what's the image? Are we going to walk around with what we think is appropriate; our full-face masks. No, because people think there's something here. Then after a week or so everybody's issued these half-masks.

Q: Did you talk about that at all those first few days, because now it seems clearer that the environment was much more dangerous than people had either led the public to believe, or believed themselves?

MST1 Kapsimalis: Of course it was. I got done listening to CNN at night saying that there's no elevated asbestos. Well really! I can tell you I purposely didn't eat on the *Spirit of New York* because of it. I missed . . . what was that young lady's name from - the guys were so tickled about it - the one in "My Cousin Vinny", Marisa Tomei was out there eating food. That's all right. I'm going to find a Campbell's Food truck. (Laughter)

Q: Yeah. She might be pretty but she's poisonous.

MST1 Kapsimalis: It's just we knew better.

Q: Well this is great. Thank you very much. There's probably going to be a couple of things here that I want to follow up on.

END OF INTERVIEW

