



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: **Senior Chief Marine Science Technician
Dean E. Matthews, USCG**

Interviewer: PAC Peter Capelotti, USCGR
Date of Interview: 21 February 2002
Place: Atlantic Strike Team offices

Q: How long you've been in the Service?

MSTCS Matthews: Twenty-two years.

Q: Were you on active duty at anytime or are you straight Reserve time?

MSTCS Matthews: I've been straight Reserve time except for the initial seven months.

Q: And your rate is . . . I'm sorry?

MSTCS Matthews: I'm an MST [Marine Science Technician].

Q: MST, okay.

MSTCS Matthews: Although they don't know me as that around here because I've been filling a DC [Damage Controlman] billet for ten years.

Q: Is that right?

MSTCS Matthews: Yeah.

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

MSTCS Matthews: Well I was in Gloucester City and then Philadelphia at the MSO [Marine Safety Office] for 11 years I guess it was.

Q: At the Reserve Unit?

MSTCS Matthews: At the Reserve Unit in Gloucester, and then I moved to Philly doing Port Ops work.

Q: How long were you in Philadelphia?

MSTCS Matthews: I think 11 years.

Q: Eleven years, okay. How did you like that unit?

MSTCS Matthews: I liked it a lot. What got frustrating was every time a new Captain of the Port came in all the Reserves had to requalify, and I was always first in line to get qualified for the various port ops duties. It was about the third time and I said, I'm getting tired of this.

Q: Yes.

MSTCS Matthews: In fact I was going to go to the Vessel Augmentation Unit in Cape May. I'd had that kind of tentatively set up, [when I] heard that the Strike Team had just set up the previous fall and they were looking for Reserves. So seven of us came over, actually ten years ago this month.

Q: From Philadelphia?

MSTCS Matthews: Yes. Well I'm sorry. There were seven of us initially. I think five of us from Philadelphia and two from one of the shore stations.

Q: Well I've been pleasantly surprised this week driving here. There hasn't been much traffic.

MSTCS Matthews: Yeah, it's not too bad. I live in Buck's County. It's like an hour drive.

Q: You've been here for how long?

MSTCS Matthews: Ten years.

Q: Ten years. Had you been mobilized for duty with the Strike Team before September 11th?

MSTCS Matthews: Not with the Strike Team, no. The last time I was called to active duty was during Desert Storm and we didn't actually end up going anywhere, just the Unit was kind of packed and ready to go, but they didn't.

Q: And you came on active duty after September 11th or on September 11th?

MSTCS Matthews: Well I had a phone call when I got home on the 11th.

Q: What do you do in civilian life?

MSTCS Matthews: I'm a schoolteacher. At Carl Sandburg Middle School. It's in the Old Bridge School District.

Q: What's your specialty?

MSTCS Matthews: I'm a shop teacher, although they make it fancy and call it "Technology."

Q: Yes.

MSTCS Matthews: But yeah, actually I told my principal that day, I said, look, I have a feeling I'm getting a call. And he's funny. He goes, you'll tell me right? Can you tell me? (Laughter)

Q: I always tell them that I can get called up but I can't tell you what I'm doing, just so they have more respect for me than they would otherwise. (Laughter).

MSTCS Matthews: The fellow who just walked out the door in fact; Grant Smith, he called me just as I was walking in the door on the 11th. He said, I don't know exactly when, but you'll be called up, which I kind of figured. And on the 18th actually I just came in here because we had a day off from school and I had a day of, I think, Non-Consecutive Active Duty to finish up. So I just came in and said, put me on. They said, well that's good because we were calling you anyway.

Q: And what were your duties when you came onboard?

MSTCS Matthews: Well when I first came onboard I was just working engineering support back here with the team and that was on the 18th. Then on the 30th I went to Ground Zero for the first time.

Q: What kind of engineering support duties were you doing?

MSTCS Matthews: Repairing equipment. I basically kind of wanted to work the woodshop here.

Q: Was stuff coming back from the field?

MSTCS Matthews: Yeah, stuff was coming back broken. The 23-footer needed some pieces made, just odd bits to help hold things together.

Q: Yes. So they were getting run pretty hard up there?

MSTCS Matthews: Very hard.

Q: Could you see the difference? I mean you do this, I guess in a Reserve capacity. Could you see the difference during these operations that the equipment was really being ground up quickly?

MSTCS Matthews: Yeah. We have a lot of stuff that can sit in the box or in the hangar for years and never go anywhere. It gets broken out and preventative maintenance done. This time things were getting beat up.

Q: When you were sent up to New York what were you doing?

MSTCS Matthews: Contractor monitoring with the decon [decontamination] stations and the truck washes at Ground Zero.

Q: Yeah, I'd heard yesterday that you had to decontaminate people without telling them that's what you were doing. Has that become an issue?

MSTCS Matthews: Well yeah, that word decontamination is not popular. So it really became a word game. You know, well the mess that's here we're trying to keep it here so it isn't all over the city.

Q: Right, and what sort of things were you doing to get that done?

MSTCS Matthews: Well the personnel washes; mainly boot washing, enforcing hand washing, and as much as possible that they use a vacuum to get the dust off of them, especially going into anyplace they were eating.

Q: You got there on the 30th?

MSTCS Matthews: Yes, September 30th.

Q: So it had been about, what, almost three weeks since the incident?

MSTCS Matthews: Right.

Q: What were your impressions arriving there at that point?

MSTCS Matthews: Well I was on the night shift. I worked two in the morning until ten in the morning and that was a strange time to see that place, and especially for the first time. I mean I'd seen the pictures and films that everybody had seen, but to walk in there and see it for real the first time in the lights; with the smoke in the lights, it was staggering. I tried calling home and describing it and I really couldn't.

Q: Looking back on it now is it something that you're glad that you were able to witness? That you as a teacher might use this, or have this for students in the future that you were there and were able to do what you're doing now?

MSTCS Matthews: I feel honored that I was there. I think if we have anything that can be called hallowed ground outside of all the great Civil War battlefields . . .

Q: You think this is sort of hallowed ground for our generation?

MSTCS Matthews: I do, and it's a hard thing to convey to people who weren't there physically. That was something I found frustrating, just trying to describe the scene to people, and they'd say, well yeah, I've seen it on TV. I'd go, no, you didn't see it. You didn't see it because you didn't smell it. You didn't hear it. I'll try to use it in teaching anyway I can.

Q: You mentioned the Civil War. Do you think of it in terms of a combat-like experience in the sense that it was for all intensive purposes had the appearance of a war zone? Is that what you would conceive of a city in an industrial war zone looking like?

MSTCS Matthews: That's what I would think that it would look like. My imagination really couldn't do any better.

Q: Many folks have said it was like walking into a science fiction movie.

MSTCS Matthews: That's a good description, especially when those pieces of the facade were still standing; something about the angle of them, the jagged broken-off look.

Q: Yes.

MSTCS Matthews: But I couldn't understand when I first got there, I expected to see, you know, piles of desks and computers and things you'd find in offices. There were two things. There was dust and there was steel, and it took a while to realize that that's what happened to concrete and that's what happened to everything in between all those floors, was just ground up.

Q: Turned into a pile of dust.

MSTCS Matthews: Yes. So that was a shocker. But I think beyond the physical site, I think it's the stories of people I met that were there when they were coming down that I'll remember longer.

Q: Were there stories like that of people that you encountered that stay with you now?

MSTCS Matthews: Yeah, there was a story that a fellow told. He had actually been working on a roof in a building just next to the South Tower. It was a roofing crew. They were on the roof when the first plane hit and they were actually being pelted by fist-sized pieces of debris coming down on this roof. They were on scaffolding. That whole crew was about half way down the building when the second plane hit, but they all made it. They all got down. I remember that.

I remember a chaplain coming up to a group of us, and we were use to seeing chaplains at this point and they'd usually come up. They had kind of a standard routine: how'ya doing. They'd be looking for somebody who looked like maybe they weren't doing well. I think it was Rob Schrader and I . . . this fellow came up to us and he needed us at that moment more than we needed him. He'd had a tough day and he just came up and he said, I just did last rights on two vertebrae, and he needed a break.

Q: So you were comforting the Chaplain.

MSTCS Matthews: I'll remember that guy's face for a long time.

Q: Well thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW

