

World Trade Center Task Force

September 21 - 23 , 2001

The NYPD officer's name was Chris, I don't remember his last name. I had just gotten back to the staging area at Battery Park from walking around gawking and gasping at what was visible from the police lines four or five blocks from the World Trade Center Plaza; he was with a group from the Tioga County squads who he had just taken into the 'hot zone' – right in to the building rubble. He was thanking them, and excitedly getting someone to take a picture of himself with them. I stood near him; he kept saying "Thank you, Thank you all so much for coming down here....", and he turned and hugged me, clenched me while I kept hearing his muffled, choked "Thank you" I just hugged back, and when he finally pulled away, I started to say "But I didn't do anything" looked at his face and stopped. We had done something. We had come there.

Then we laughed and got into a group and had the pictures taken; he put his hand on my shoulder and I reached and squeezed it because I couldn't think of anything else to do. I hope he knew what I was saying.

There were more 'thank you's' than I've heard on all my previous visits to the city combined, it seemed. Standing by our ambulances waiting to be deployed, next to the joggers path at Chelsea Pier and people jogging by waved and shouted "Thank you!" (The EMS Command Post people said their van had been parked in the path originally and that the bikers and joggers complained it was in the way and they had to move it to the other side of the fence. That's New York.) The people serving the free food near Battery Park said "Thank you". The FDNY people assigned to our staging area said "Thank you". The bus drivers who took us to and from the mercy ship where we spent our off shift time said "Thank you". The EMS Command people said "Thank you". The guards at the various areas we went to said "Thank you". And we didn't do anything, never had a patient, but we were there and that's what counted to them.

There were 10 ambulances and over 50 crew people in our Task Force, from Columbia County and the Albany area. Another convoy from Tioga County passed us when we took a rest stop on the thruway, we met them at Chelsea Pier and were deployed with some of them to Battery Park, the 'South Staging Area.'

Our feelings (mine, anyway, and I'll guess many of the others) when we met for briefing before leaving were a combination of excitement and apprehension. What were we going to get to do? What might we see? And could we handle what we did see and do? We never had to find that out, as we never got to do much of anything. Some of the rigs never left the Chelsea Pier, and their crews were antsy and disappointed. Those of us who did get deployed commiserated.

Driving down we joked and talked and laughed, but always with an undertone. Then we got lost - well, not lost, we knew where we were but the signs we were supposed to follow weren't there, so we went to lower Manhattan by way of Queens. When we did get

into the city we drove across 34th Street; the Javitz Center looked like the Police Command Center, it was a bustle of activity with people everywhere even at 1 am, there were tents and canopies over stacks of donated relief supplies, and out in the open a huge barbeque cooker, tables, and more supplies.

When we got to Chelsea Pier we hung around while the task force heads talked with EMS command, then we were split into crews and one crew went to the mercy ship (the WW II Red Cross Hospital Ship 'Comfort', docked in the Hudson River at the 54th St. piers, a tourist attraction pressed back into active service, signs said "No Tours") to sleep. Not that any of us did sleep much. We dozed in the ambulance until daylight morning, found a place to get coffee and tea and bagels (the newness of police officers was apparent by the fact that the groups who were on every corner weren't sure where we could go for that – "Maybe a couple of blocks up there", when all was to be had at the gas station across the street. However, another NYPD officer, assigned to the staging area, spent time assuring us of his prowess to protect both ourselves and himself from anything or anyone that came along. I'm glad it didn't.)

During the night I heard a radio transmission from the site that a "large amount of body parts" had been found, and a following discussion about picking them up to be transported. That pretty much did away with sleep.

There are flags and signs everywhere. Flags hang on poles, on buildings, on car antennas, on lapels (or people have red, white and blue ribbons), on the trucks working hard at the scene, painted on buildings and billboards, many joined by sentiments like "God Bless America, United We Stand".

The little park where we sat to eat our bagels and drink our coffee and tea had burnt candles tucked into the flowers. Along the fence beside the staging area were coolers of drinks and cartons of snacks and medical supplies and clothing. A plastic bucket held old flowers, beneath the shelf it was on an old paper had the headline BATTLE CRY, and a face mask was discarded on top of the paper. Posters from school children around the state and nation were taped to the fence, thanking the brave firemen, policemen and workers.

A constant parade of dump trucks of every size rumbles past, as do groups of motorcycle police with lights and sirens on, busses escorted by police cars front and back. We stand around and talk to each other, other squads, policemen, EMS command workers; I take pictures, Bob rummages through the cartons for items we can use. Dan plugged in his travel razor and shaved. We are assigned a task force number, ours is "73H3" – maybe we will get somewhere after all. Then, Yes! We are deployed to the South Staging Area.

We follow two of the Tioga County ambulances down the West Side Highway; past lines of dropped refrigerator trailers and containers parked on either side of the road, just sitting there – and after a block or so it hits me what they are there for. To store what the workers find in the rubble. Sobering.

More signs, spray painted on plywood: "Food – Supplies – Free". Everything is free

to us. Closer to 'Ground Zero'/'the Hot Zone', along side streets leading towards the Trade Center Plaza, piles and piles and piles of donated goods line the sidewalks, stacked against buildings that are not open yet. One store's signs "V.I.P. YACHT CLUB" were overlaid with duct tape "SUPPLIES".

Streets are blocked off, with narrow access roads created by fencing and trucks and equipment. Plywood covers mounds of cable and hose we drive over. We follow the twisting route, turn a corner and there slamming in front of us is the scene. Jagged remains of the once tall and proud buildings now teeter over a mountain of rubble, cornerstoned by towering cranes and swarming with workers. Flags are on all of the buildings still standing around the plaza. These buildings show their own damage: broken windows, missing masonry, huge lengths of beams dangling in the air, and all are either white with dust or have black scorch marks.

We stare, stunned, pointing out to each other more signs of the destruction. Workers are walking everywhere, and Dan asked "Do you notice anything about their expressions?" I look and realize and answer, "They have none". Each person's face is cast from the same mask: blank, void, completely expressionless. Perhaps they regain one when they leave, when they are removed by distance from this site, perhaps they smile, even laugh. I think it must take them a while, and I do not think they will ever be removed from this in their emotions.

Salvation Army tents, booths, trucks and workers are very much in evidence down here-aiding with supplies, food, a place to pray. Uptown, the Red Cross seems to be in charge of the victims' families and the people who have come to help.

Windows on buildings all around the site are shattered, even many blocks away. Dust covers everything, later when I am walking around I pass workers hosing down buildings, to get the dust off and am warned by police nearby that it is asbestos-we were warned in the task force paperwork about the dangers of breathing in asbestos dust.

Past Ground Zero a team stands on both sides of the street with a tank truck and hoses and rinses the lower part of the ambulance, to get hazardous dust off it we guess. A vacant lot has been turned into a vehicle graveyard and we all gasp when we see crushed, dust-covered, battered ambulances, pumpers and ladder trucks with cabs only a foot or two high and the ladders bent and crumpled stacked in it – these are the vehicles that were there when the buildings collapsed. "Oh, my God..." becomes the phrase of choice. The next day Steve told me that when one ladder truck was found there were three firemen in the crushed cab.

We park in the South Staging Area, listen to the instructions and advice of the NYFD person in charge of it. There was a nice view of Staten and Ellis Islands, the Statue of Liberty, and the Coast Guard ship in the harbor. To "Watch our backs", the staffer said.

When we got to Battery Park, the people who lived in the apartments along the river between the park and the Trade Center were being let back to their homes, one person said it was to check them and gather more needed items; another said they were being let go back

home, I never did find out. The police were carefully checking identities; the press was obnoxiously covering the scene, with microphones, cameras and recorders in the people's faces. Just how DO you think they feel, folks? Few of the residents gave long interviews, and after a bit the police put up a barricade and made the press stay behind it. News is news, but just how do you think they feel?

Our crew took turns walking a few blocks from Battery Park to a 'soup kitchen' and then walking closer to the scene. The food area is set up in another small park, tables with sandwiches, pastry, fruit, drinks, hot food – all free to rescue workers. It is fenced, and a National Guardsman looks at my ID tags and asks why I want to go in there. "Uh, for food?" I take a sandwich, later one of the other EMT's says he had potato soup that was just delicious and when he asked he was told it was donated, huge tureens of it, by a restaurant from uptown. I put \$5 into a jar marked 'donations', put the sandwich and a peach in my pockets and walk away drinking my orange juice.

We were first told that cameras would not be allowed, but at the pre-trip briefing they said we can take pictures but to be discreet, and move away if we are told to. One officer did tell me to, and I did.

Two flatbeds rumble down from the site with big twisted, tortured and broken steel beams on the back. One is bent into a very tight 'u' shape; it was probably two to three feet wide and several inches thick. Broadway is lined with roaring generator trucks. The trucks all have flags, waving and/or painted on the cabs and trailers.

The statue of the bull that signifies Wall Street has flags tied to each horn.

I've seen a Salvation Army semi (I didn't know they had them), a Feed The Children trailer is dropped under a roadway between the site and Battery Park, and I later see a truck from Texas parked on the West Side Highway with "Disaster Relief Supplies Going To NY" and "Texas Loves (the heart symbol) NY" on the trailer.

When I got back to the staging area the policeman Chris was there, and we all gathered around to have our pictures taken with him – the designated photographer was handed at least a dozen cameras. One of the Tioga County members who went into the 'hot zone' promises to send his photos, we exchange addresses and emails.

Leaving, we head back to Chelsea Pier by way of the FDR Drive and crosstown on 23rd Street. Along there, two cars pull to the curb and whip in front of our ambulance and a Gray Line tour bus to make a U-turn. Bob and the bus driver give each other a 'Waddaya gonna do' shrug. Parts of New York are back to normal.

The noon to midnight crew takes over the rig. We get our bags and get on the shuttle bus – dozens of NYC busses are now in service only to transport workers and volunteers to and from their assignments. We're going to 'the ship', for food and rest. The bus stops just past the Red Cross victim's families' center, with its wall of missing people photos.

Credentials are checked at the entrance to the pier, and at the 'gangplank' a metal detector gate is set up, manned by six to eight soldiers who examine the contents of our bags, and have to swipe the detector all around me when I set off the buzzers-finally he decides it's something on my pant cuff or shoes, but none of us can figure out what.

It's a long walk up to the reception area, which has posters, letters and t-shirts with messages from children around the country commemorating the relief efforts and thanking those giving them. We have credential checks again before we are assigned a berth. Well, the guys were assigned, I had to wait while they made sure there was one and where it was – I told them it didn't matter, 'I sleep in a Freightliner'. I was shown to the galley and had lunch.

When I went back, they found a berth, and someone gave me blankets, towels and soap and led me there. The shower felt great, and I said 'oh, boy, now some sleep', but it didn't really come.

Some of the Tioga County people came in and I talked with them a bit, and then decided to walk around outside. I wrote down the number of the room I was in (a women's quarters, bunks three high, lockers between them, showers and lavatory at one end), and ended up being very glad I did, because when I went back I couldn't find the right stairs and corridor! Those leaving the boat got a sticker that indicated we had already registered.

The area is swarming with people from every group imaginable that is helping: Red Cross, National Guard, emergency services both volunteer and paid, FBI, FEMA, city, county and state police agencies; from across the state, the country and beyond-I see patches from counties statewide, from Siloam Springs (Arkansas), and inside I saw three EMT's from Mexico. All the vehicles have EMS insignia of some sort, most have red lights flashing.

First I went up to the fence covered with photos. It is beyond heartbreaking, and I leave choked up. Pictures of parents with their children, the missing person's face circled, plaintive messages 'have you seen' and 'missing', descriptions, identifying marks. One lovely girl's picture is in the space where the stars would be, the rest of the page is the stripes of the flag.

Then I walked down to the Intrepid, but somehow I missed that there was a police line I wasn't supposed to cross, and when I got near that ship's area, there were sawhorses and a cruiser and two young policemen who asked "You come from the ship?" "Um, yes." "Okay", and they waved me through, "We thought so".

I got a slushy to drink and sat in the little park next to the Intrepid and watched people jogging and roller blading and biking and watched the river and people boating and thought "these people are being normal – and 5,000 people are entombed in rubble only a few miles away from them! You should be doing something!" And then I thought they are. Returning to normalcy is the best thing they can do, it is the most help to the most people. Everything that can be done is being done.

I walk back up to the ship, the Comfort-a very apt name-and notice what I didn't before, the soldier on the deck, behind a bunker of sandbags, scanning with binoculars and

next to his rifle; another patrols the walkway between the pier and the ship.

A fire truck sirens past on the way to an alarm, people on the street wave and shout to the men and they wave back, but not all of them smile.

I see this and I think that those who committed this horrendous atrocity must think they were going to bring America to its knees by their acts. They did – as we knelt to pray for the victims and their loved ones, and to then pray for the strength and courage and help to do what next must be done. And then we stood up with thanks and with more patriotism and determination than ever and with the resolve that they would not win, that we would keep our life and our freedom and our country and our spirit.

That spirit is on the faces here-the 'we are one, in this together' expression, the pride that we did what we could. The same expression I saw a week before at a collection point in Latham, when people were bringing things to be shipped to the city – 'we're doing what we can to help' – and that help, that giving across the country has left food and supplies on every corner.

I stand to watch the sunset, near the front of the Comfort, and look around. Across the West Side Highway, there is a park and through the trees I can see children on swings. I think, "Our knees, my ass – this is America – this is what we do" and I think that everyone who has returned to as normal as they now can be, everyone who is helping and has helped in some way is saying the same thing, their way, in their words and thoughts and actions.

Back on the ship, I am examined again, even though I have the sticker saying I am registered. Bob sees me in the registration area and pulls me to a side room where free massages are offered, I protest that I don't need one, other people need it more, but the masseuse says, "No, you need it too". Okay, and it felt great.

There are t-shirts for sale that have the Statue of Liberty and a flag design, and say:

'Terrorists may crumble buildings,
but they can't touch my patriotism'
'In memory of those who paid for freedom with the ultimate price.
September 11, 2001
God Bless America
Still the land of the free and the home of the brave'

Of course I buy one; they say that a school class in Colorado designed them.

We go back to the galley and I eat again (delicious Cajun baked fish) and talk to other squad's members and go down to rest some more – but I got lost and had to have someone show me the right stairs, glad I wrote the numbers down!

Then we got on the bus and shuttled back to Chelsea Pier to wait for the other crew to get back. A convoy of about ten busses goes past, with the police escorts, from the looks of

the riders I guess that it is a crew going in to dig and look in the rubble. I wave to them. The noon to midnight crews come back and we make sure everyone is accounted for and get into our rigs and come home, we're back at quarters about 3:30 am. I take the two Valatie members to their quarters, come back and pick up trash and left behind belongings in the rig to unwind a little, and finally go home and drop into bed about 5 am Sunday – and wake up at 7:30. More sleep is not going to come, so when tones go out for help at a standby at the hunter pace trials at Highland Farm I dress and go up there.

It's a beautiful day; I stand in the sunshine and look up the hill and watch the horses canter over it, silhouetted against the blue sky and white clouds and it is a world and a lifetime away from 24 hours ago.