

Court Officers Responded Quickly, Going in Harm's Way

Joseph Baccellieri, New York Law Journal

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Chief Joseph Baccellieri talks about the sacrifices of court officers on 9/11 at a memorial service last year. Jack McCoy

The writer is the chief of training for New York State court officers as well as the commanding officer of the court officers training academy. On Sept. 11, 2001, he was a captain/police instructor assigned to the academy where he was responsible for day-to-day operations.

Our day was just beginning, and we were preparing to conduct an in-service training course for veteran court officers when we heard the loud roar of a low-flying jet followed by the loud impact as it crashed into the North Tower of the World Trading Center. From our locker room on the 12th floor of 123 William St., we had a birds eye view of the Twin Towers and we could see debris and smoke billowing from the side of the tower.

Our first thought was that this was a terrible accident, and I made the decision to immediately head to the scene along with two of our instructors, sergeants Andrew Wender and Alfred Moscola. As we headed toward the towers, running west on Fulton Street, we had to fight through the crowd of thousands who were fleeing east towards the South Street Seaport.

We responded so quickly that we were present before the fire and police departments and emergency medical services. The only uniformed personnel we initially made contact with were the Port Authority Police who were assigned to the building. One of the first horrific things we heard and witnessed were the people crashing to the ground who were jumping from the upper floors in order to escape the fire and smoke. I had never witnessed anything worse.

As we entered the North Tower we could see people walking around dazed and some incoherent. We directed them outside and decided we should do floor-by-floor searches as we made our way up to the floors where the plane had entered the building.

There was a lot of confusion, and radio communications were limited at best. While we were formulating a plan to provide assistance, the second plane hit the South Tower, and it was then that we realized that this is not an accident but an attack, and we reacted accordingly.

Despite the chaos, danger and carnage, we knew there were people who needed help, and we began heading up the narrow staircase to assist any and all we could. One of the first things we noticed was the stream of jet fuel mixed with water cascading down the stairs. People were walking down the stairs from the upper floors and firefighters were beginning their ascent. We carried equipment to the upper floors.

As we arrived on each floor I advised both my colleagues to conduct a search and then return to the stairwell; they were not to head to the next floor until we were together again. At times, we had to literally use force to remove individuals who were sheltering in place.

'You Need to Get Out of Here'

At one point, we crossed paths with Port Authority Police Chief James Romito. He looked at me and asked, "Where are you going, kid?" I simply responded, "To where the plane went in, chief." He looked at me and said, "I have worked in these buildings for years, you need to get out of here, this is not good." I thanked him and explained that we had to help and that we would continue our ascent.

Chief Romito did not make it out of the towers.

We made it to the 51st floor of the North Tower. It was me, my two colleagues and three plain clothes Port Authority police officers. I do not believe anyone made it any higher. The building began to shake violently, and the emergency lighting dimmed. What we did not know was that the South Tower collapsing.

Seeing fewer and fewer people the higher we went, we began going back down.

We came across firefighters and a NYPD detective who was holding someone he believed may have been in contact with the terrorists via cellphone. He asked me to take him into custody which I did.

When we finally made it to the ground floor, it looked nothing like it had when we first arrived. The windows were all blown out, the walls were cracked, there was debris everywhere and white dust covering every square inch.

We left through a gaping hole in the building, and as we exited, we were shocked to see that the South Tower was gone.

Knowing that this was a life threatening situation, I released the individual I had in handcuffs and we made our way to the street. At that moment, we heard loud banging, and debris began to fall. We looked up and it was the North Tower collapsing and the banging was the windows blowing out. We all ran west on Vesey Street attempting to avoid the falling debris.

I picked up a pregnant woman and firefighter who had fallen and helped them run west. The dust cloud and debris covered us and blocked out all light to the point of total darkness. The dust was so thick that you could not see and breathing was almost impossible.

I began to yell for my guys, asking where they were and if they were OK. I was on the ground when I heard a voice saying, "If you hear me, come to me." The voice was that of a firefighter who sought shelter in a bagel shop. I crawled to the voice and at some point was grabbed and brought inside where the air immediately cleared up. I was hosed down, clearing my eyes so I could see.

I immediately left the bagel shop and began assisting anyone and everyone including my colleagues and other first responders and civilians, but unfortunately, considering the magnitude of the incident, there were few survivors. We continued doing that until the air cleared enough to make movement possible and additional first responders arrived to assist the remaining injured.

We made our way to the Criminal Court at 100 Centre St. where we met up with scores of court officers who had also responded to the attacks. It was then that we realized that three of us were unaccounted for: Captain William Harry Thompson, who shared an office with me at the academy, and officers Thomas Jurgens and Mitchel Wallace.

In the aftermath, we continued to work at Ground Zero and assist in any way possible. In some ways, this was cathartic and helped us cope. We had been involved in the most vicious and evil attack on our soil in the history of our country and we had witnessed the most horrific things any human could ever witness.

It's hard to explain as each of us deals with tragedy in different ways. The combination of support from family, friends, colleagues and professional therapists has helped, but, I cannot forget the horrors I witnessed.

The 9/11 attacks changed us as a nation but on a very personal level, it made me appreciate life, and I am grateful that I am still here to watch my six children grow and that my wife and I can continue to be a part of their lives. What I have also come to appreciate is that while we witnessed the worst of humanity, we also witnessed the best. We are blessed to live in the greatest country in the history of the world, and we are fortunate to have men and women who put themselves in harm's way to protect and serve no matter the cost.

We continue to suffer the effects of these vicious attacks. Our first responders are falling ill and succumbing to diseases directly attributed to our exposure to the toxins at Ground Zero. I myself am a survivor of a rare cancer attributed to my exposure. I am grateful for the support that we receive from our elected officials and our countrymen.