

9/11 thoughts

For me, September 11 started on September 10. Let me tell you my story. My wife, Ann, and I were returning from a cruise on the Elbe River, flowing through Germany and Czechoslovakia. The cruise was uneventful, but we were struck by how little East Germany had progressed since the fall of "the Wall". We departed Prague, via Berlin for our return home. The night hours passed with a minimum of turbulence. At 12:25 A.M. on Sept. 11, 2001 we made our final approach to Kennedy Airport. I had a window seat on the starboard side. As always, the view of the New York City skyline gave us both a feeling that it was good to be home again. I noted in particular, the Twin Towers with their flashing red lights designed as a warning to air traffic. Yeah! It was good to return to the Big Apple.

My son Larry Jr. picked us up at the airport gate for the short trip to our home in Valley Stream. We said our thanks and sent him on his way. We were welcomed home by the realization that we had left the freezer door open. Ten days ago! After tucking my tired wife into the bed she had been missing, I turned to the task of cleaning up the mess. After an hour, that bed never felt so fine.

Ann woke me with the news that a plane had hit a building in the World Trade Center. Reluctant to give up my warm and cozy comforter, I dismissed the occurrence as a small Piper Cub or Cessna. They were always circling the twin towers. Under my breath, I wished them God's speed. Ann came in again. This time urging me to get up

and see for myself what was happening. The images on that television took my breath away. Feelings of anger and despair conflicted with the need help, but where do I start?

Having worked in downtown Manhattan as a Chief Officer, I had been involved in many responses to the WTC complex. These responses included training sessions utilizing WTC personnel and FDNY units, so in the eight years posted in Battalion 1, I had a fair idea of how the complex was laid out, as well as the various players in the WTC complex. There was only one thing to do – go in! My wife registered a minor protest/comment as I dressed for what would turn out to be one of the most unforgettable days in my life.

I took Ann's car because I knew it had a full tank of gas, and proceeded to the parkway towards the City. I immediately encountered a Police van with 5 or 6 police officers followed by an unmarked PD cruiser. I flipped on my headlights, jumped in behind the cruiser and began what was to be the wildest ride I had ever experienced. In my years as a firefighter I've driven many apparatus to situations, but none like this day. As we proceeded along the Belt Parkway and onto the Conduit, I was riveted by the task of keeping up with the caravan. The sights and sounds of cars and trucks pulling over and the drivers and passengers getting out and watching the rising column of smoke under which NYC was suffering. Once we past the NYPD checkpoint at the base of the Brooklyn Bridge, the police turned south. I turned north to the firehouse on Duane and Broadway, just 2 blocks north of City Hall and 5 blocks from the WTC complex. I was fortunate to find a good parking spot in front of the firehouse. By this time the first tower, Tower B also known as the South Tower, had just come down. The dust, smoke, debris and terrified civilians were everywhere. My goal at the firehouse was to get whatever I might need in order to lend assistance to civilians and FDNY personnel at the site.

On entering the firehouse I encountered Steve Rogers a 15-year veteran firefighter who also came in from home, and a probationary firefighter by the name of Tony Bonadettos. I quickly checked the TV and Tony, and found that it was Tony's first day/tour in the firehouse. He had just graduated from Firefighting School. As we spoke, Gideon Gaudet, a photographer with FDNY credentials who I had known for about 2 years, asked if he could "tag along" with Tony and myself. Gideon went for batteries and other stuff. Time was of the essence so we left Gideon behind. Tony, my brand new Proby and me!

As Tony and I headed south on Broadway we encountered hordes of people heading north in various degrees of panic and hysteria. Our advice to all of them was to go to the Brooklyn Bridge and seek whatever safety, help and counsel would be available. As we went down Broadway a gentleman approached me and introduced himself as Father Bravo. He thought that as a member of the clergy he might be of some help.

Consider this; a 66-year-old retired firefighter, a probationary firefighter who hasn't experienced anything more dangerous than a car fire, and a priest who calls himself Father Bravo. What a team! This team was immediately taxed by the demands of the injured we encountered. We flagged down ambulances, private cars, whatever we could command to move the injured, the frail and hysterical out of the area. As time progressed we heard the sounds, felt the crush, saw the smoke and tasted the dust plume. It was a scene beyond anything Hollywood could ever create.

Pretty soon, Tony, the good Father and me, and everyone else in the streets were having trouble breathing. Handkerchiefs were just not cut out for this kind of work! Our game plan had to be adjusted; we went into office buildings, dragging people indoors in order to get a breath of air. As the dust would clear slightly, we'd dashed down a block or two until we ran out of air again. As we entered the buildings, I would counsel the managers to put their buildings on emergency generators or, recall their elevators and conduct evacuations using exits not exposed to or facing the WTC complex. At one point in our trek down Broadway, dust and smoke obscured the sunlight. It looked more like 11:30 at night than 11:30 in the morning of what started out as beautiful sunny day.

My goal was to get to 10/10, a term used by firefighters to describe the firehouse for Engine Co. 10 and Ladder Co. 10. Located on Liberty Street, it is at the south end of the 16-acre WTC complex. We happened upon a firefighter who said he was having a heart attack. I stepped in front of the first ambulance I saw and was almost run over. The EMT said he was full and I said here is some more. As the stricken firefighter was loaded into the front seat of the ambulance, I took his Handie Talkie. This tool would allow me to communicate with command posts already set up at the north end of the WTC. As you might well imagine, the verbal traffic was staggering but I got through so that my fellow chiefs would know that I would be setting up a command post at 10/10.

I took my “team” down Cedar Street, which passed behind 10/10. Liberty Street was impassible. We entered the quarters of 10/10, where I had been a thousand times. Our entry was through the rear windows, or rather, where the rear windows used to be. Climbing over debris and into the kitchen I encountered firefighters both off duty and on. Some I knew. Some I didn’t. They all responded with their best. We made our way through the firehouse to the front doors. Because Engine 10 and Ladder 10 had left quarters at the first plane crash, the doors to the firehouse were open and raised. Debris had blown onto the apparatus floor to a height of at least five feet! Climbing out of 10/10, my “team” and I climbed onto one of the main piles in search of survivors. As we rose to the peak of the debris pile, the silence was deafening! There was not a sound. Not cry for help. Not so much as a whimper. Only the sound of paper rustling as it was blown across the devastation. We knew that all we could do was dig, survey, and pray. Jesus wept.

The rest of the day was spent forming five man companies from among the volunteers, dispatching them in response to calls from various sources for various kinds of help, organizing companies to fight fires and/or conduct surveys in neighboring buildings. As the day wore on, the volunteers made our job at 10/10 much easier. Bottled water arrived. Sandwiches appeared. Face filters were delivered. Hotel towels to wash our faces found their way to us. I could go on and on.

I want to thank my “team”, the citizens of New York City and our great nation for coming to our aid in so many ways – Thank You!

P.S. Tony walked back to the firehouse. Father Bravo took the subway home (another story) and I spent the night in Bellevue Hospital (another story, still).