

Ground Zero, I am no hero

Editor's note: This has been taken from a journal that Jon Wright has been working on as part of his healing process.

*By Jon Wright, St. John's, Merrick
Volunteer Fireman Working at Ground Zero*

Adversity has the effect of eliciting talents which, under prosperous conditions, may have remained dormant....Horace

I left my home at 7am as though it was any other day. The sun was shining and the temperature was forecast mid 70's. I am a licensed home improvement contractor and was installing vinyl soffits and fascias on my customer's house. This was perfect weather to work in. My customer, Jack, a fascinating man, is a retired teacher and is very involved with the performing arts through the Long Island Arts Council. He performs several times monthly is a likable sort.

Three weeks before this ill-fated day, I dropped my son Brendan off at Oneonta State College in Oneonta, NY for his freshman year. It was a particular emotionally day for me because I realized he is a man now, not just the eight year old boy who used to jump into my arms after a pee wee football game. Brendan helped me on this particular job and I remember his comments on how big Jack's house was and how high it seemed to be. I remember him asking me if he could see the World Trade Center from Jack's attic. I told him I doubt it but he went to look for himself. Little did I know how prophetic his word would become.

I was listening to Z-100 on the radio while backing my truck into the job site. As is their custom, they will on occasion act out some silly practical jokes like the time they called the women with the plane reservations and told her the cat she was planning to take on the plane with her was now unable to accompany her. They continued on with this farce telling the women the seating arrangements had been compromised. The poor women went berserk for a considerable time before they let on this was indeed a practical joke.

Naturally, when they started talking about a plane hitting the World Trade Center, I brushed it off as another silly practical joke, and rightfully so. As I sat and read my morning newspaper and drank my traditional morning tea, the talk on the radio continued about this charade. They talked about how Tower #1 was now burning. I thought to myself that there will be many angry listeners, but that is just part of this radio station's persona. I thought to myself "they have really crossed the line with this one".

I finished my paper, all the while thinking how ridiculous this entire scenario must be to the untrained ear. A plane hitting the World Trade Center is almost unrealizable. Small planes are not allowed over the city, and large planes simply would not fly that low. I looked in my rear view mirror and through the many trees at Jack's house, I saw a straight plume of gray and brown smoke drifting relentlessly from north to south emanating from the direction of the World Trade Center. At that moment, reality struck like a head-on train collision. I immediately called my wife Dorothy, who works for Fortunoff at the corporate office. Before saying hello, she says, "did you hear". I said "did I hear what", thinking she hadn't heard yet. She told me to get to a television, so off I went to the firehouse, about _ mile away.

When driving, I thought if a plane did hit the World Trade Center, it was probably a small one. I turned my truck radio back on and listened resolutely about what was unfurling. Only about ten minutes had passed since the initial announcement. Now people on the radio had the sound of panic in their voices, which left me entirely unnerved. It was abundantly clear that this was not a small passenger plane that struck, but rather something of imposing proportion. What we were beginning to experience was a window to the unimaginable, a tragedy unfolding of biblical proportion.

Right then my fire department pager began calling in earnest for fire chiefs to call Fire Com (Nassau County Fire Communications). As I drove, I called the firehouse on my cell phone and they told me something evil happened to the World Trade Center.

I am a member of Emergency-Rescue Company #9 of the Freeport Fire Department and when I arrived at the firehouse, a small crowd had gathered in Rescue Company quarters and were

watching the television intently. What we saw was the unthinkable, the incomprehensible. Smoke was pouring out of Tower #1 from several upper floors about $\frac{1}{2}$ of the way up the building. We all began thinking about how difficult the firefighter and police officers jobs' must be. Having to evacuate all those people from such a height is at best difficult without having a plane having crashed into it. Having to do that here in the Village of Freeport is a task, where most buildings are not more than four stories tall. Then the impossible happened. A second jetliner crashed into Tower #2. It seemed to disappear within the structure itself, also about $\frac{1}{2}$ of the way up. A split second later, the only thing visible were several upper floors of Tower #2 bursting into flames after a massive explosion. The next thing you see is the nose cone of the aircraft and an engine exiting the building at an incredible rate of speed. The fuel tanks of both planes were apparently full. When they hit and exploded, the vibrations were so intense, they were picked up as seismographic activity by the US Geological Survey as 2.4 on the Richter scale.

The incident (it was later determined to be a terrorist attack) set off a series of events and set into motion actions by the Freeport Fire Department that will forever change my life and the lives of my brother firefighters.

The first plane crashed into Tower #1 at about 8:45 am. The second plane crashed into Tower #2 about twenty minutes later. At approximately 10:15 am, another unimaginable thing happened. **Tower #2 collapsed.** While we were sat in the firehouse watching this unfold, we got the most disturbing telephone call of our lives. We were informed several of our own Freeport firefighters who are also New York City firefighters were on the upper floors of Tower #2 when it collapsed. My heart pounded. **The missing firefighters from Freeport are Lt. Tim Higgins, Firefighter Richard T. Muldowney, Firefighter Dave Weiss, Firefighter Mike Keifer, Firefighter Andre Fletcher, and Firefighter Kenny Watson,** who was not a member of the Freeport Fire Department but has a long history in the Freeport Fire Department. Also missing are **former Merrick fire chief Ron Gies, and firefighter Brian Sweeney,** along with hundreds of other fire, police, ems and rescue workers. The most improbable person missing

is David Garcia. Dave is my son Christian's Little League coach. I was most affected when I told my son his Little League coach was missing and presumed dead. Christian cried in my arms for hours.

Within minutes, several Freeport Firefighters, who are also New York City firefighters were called into work. They were at Truck Company quarters when this all started. They took the spare chief's car and off they went to Manhattan. As the day progressed, and we watched this tragedy unfold, I came to realize that we might be summoned to respond and participate in this mammoth rescue effort. By approximately 10:30 am, Freeport Truck Company #1 was summoned to respond to the incident. This was unprecedented by the New York City fire department to request a volunteer fire department for mutual aid assistance. The primary reason being Freeport Truck Company #1 has several career and retired career firefighters among their ranks. Some strings were pulled and the rest is history. They, along with many other Freeport firefighters, are highly trained in disaster evolutions. This was their ultimate test. They responded to the Roosevelt Island staging area where they stayed for all of ten minutes, then proceeded to Ground Zero. Freeport Truck Company #1 was under the command of Lieutenant Chris Stebner, whose father Kent Stebner, like my father and grandfather, is a former Captain of Truck Company. The Freeport Fire Department, as a whole, trains diligently. Their training would be put to the test on this and the following days. No training could have ever possibly prepared us for what we were about to encounter. At the same time, crews began assembling at the request of the chief's office for a standby in their respective firehouses. By now the incident had now been officially classified as a terrorist attack, with more and more information filtering in from Ground Zero, the Pentagon, and the crash site in rural Pennsylvania. By now, the second tower had collapsed and our worst nightmares were being realized. We were numbed by the news of losing our brother firefighters.

In Rescue company quarters, personnel began filtering in and asked what, if anything we could do. The answer was always the same. **Wait.**

1st Assistant Chief Wensley called my company quarters and asked Captain Dave Bentley to put together a list of firefighters who would be ready, willing, and able to go into New York City and assist with rescue efforts. Every person he asked said they would go and help our brothers, each without a single reservation. The list was compiled and given to the chief in less than ten minutes. At the same time, crews from all the Freeport Fire Department were assembling. Hose 1 would eventually end up in Far Rockaway, Queens to cover a firehouse which had been summoned to Ground Zero. Later I learned this particular firehouse had lost four firefighters in the collapse. While the list was being compiled, I had time to think about the circumstances and had time to reflect on the inequities life bestows on all of us. I quickly realized my problems were miniscule in comparison to what was happening around us.

Everyone I spoke to was affected by the events of the day.

As minutes turned into hours and hours started turning into days, anxiety absorbed us with the outcome of this diabolical incident. Some tried returning to work, but somehow we always ended up at the firehouse. Personally, I found concentrating on work difficult. I made it my personal business to go to the chief's office every day, sometimes three and four times a day to check on our brothers that were missing. The answer was always the same. "Nothing new". My stomach was constantly in knots. I remember seeing former chief Ray Maguire after his returned from Ground Zero and seeing the look of repudiation and pain etched on his face when I asked him of the fate of our brother firefighters. He said the Trade Center area was "beyond inconceivable and unrecognizable". Almost from the beginning, Ray was at Ground Zero for a considerable period and saw first hand the devastation caused by the terrorists. Ray is also an honorary battalion chief of the FDNY which was bestowed upon him in April. He received this honor from FDNY Fire Commissioner Thomas Van Essen for all the tireless work he has done on behalf of the Burn Center and his work with various aspects of the FDNY. I remember thinking about how much I wished we could all do something. Go in and participate in the rescue operations, help with the support services, whatever I could do to get our brothers home. I was breathless with anticipation.

The next few days were equally injudicious. Everyday I would go to the chief's office and

everyday the answer was the same. **Until Friday.** During the course of the week, news kept filtering in on the fate of our brothers. Were they okay? Could they still be alive? In our minds we knew if there was a way to survive this, they would find it. We were taught in fire school that when a building collapses, voids are formed where a person could survive for an extended period. There could be air pockets, maybe even food and water. We all believed there was still a chance they could somehow be alive. Deep down I think we all knew it would give us some emotional indemnification because we were doing something instead of nothing. During the week, efforts were being made to get more and more of the volunteer fire service involved in the rescue efforts. These efforts came to fruition on Saturday, September 15th thanks in a large part to the chief's office of the Freeport Fire Department. A group was being put together to have Nassau County fire departments form a caravan with all their heavy rescue trucks so that we could light up the extreme downtown Manhattan. We all felt a little better in that we could finally do something positive to help our brothers. Anything was a plus.

The group from Freeport would consist of five firefighters and one chief, who in this case was 1st Assistant John Wensley. My Captain, Dave Bentley headed Emergency-Rescue Company #9. The crew consisted of Lt. Frank Tucker, Firefighter Charlie McEneaney, Firefighter Charlie Manning, and myself. On Friday, September 14th, we began preparing our apparatus in case we were called. We checked all our heavy rescue equipment, all air packs, all the lighting because that was going to be our primary responsibility, and anything else we could think of. When I started the portable electric generator, I thought of my son Brendan and how he used to help me with the tools and equipment maintenance. I remember him struggling to pick up a Halligan tool (a tool used for forcible entry) and marveled at his perseverance when he finally did. On Saturday, Captain Bentley got the call from Chief Wensley that we were all waiting for. Chief Wensley asked how fast he could put together a crew. It took all of three minutes to contact personnel.

The crew was set and we left Freeport on Saturday, September 15th at 3 P.M. Just before we left, I called my wife Dorothy and told her it was time for me to leave. She told me she loved

me and I could hear the fear in her voice, even though she knew how dangerous our undertaking was. Her voice would stay with me during the scariest of times during the next forty-eight hours. We reported to the first staging area located on the service road of the Long Island Expressway at Little Neck Parkway. When we arrived at about 3:30 P.M., we found about ten other heavy rescue trucks from throughout Nassau County waiting. Fire trucks kept arriving until we had a total of twenty-two trucks ready to go. We departed in unison at 4:45 P.M. and entered the Long Island Expressway. What we experience on the Long Island Expressway was nothing short of monumental.

The Nassau County Police, the New York State Police, and the New York City Police escorted us. The left lane of the LIE was shut down and was used for emergency vehicles only. After all twenty-two fire trucks were on the LIE; we proceeded to the Midtown Tunnel in the left lane. Along the entire route, from Little Neck Parkway to the Midtown Tunnel, people traveling in the opposite direction were cheering us on. People were waving American flags, hand waving, flashing their headlight, and beeping their horns all the way into Manhattan. As I drove Freeport's heavy rescue truck, I often looked in the mirror with complete astonishment at all the fire trucks behind us. It was truly a sight to behold. It was as though we were about to do something consequential, and all those cheering us on knew it. The heavy rescue truck I was driving was going about sixty miles per hour on the Long Island Expressway. My heart was going one hundred fifty. Our lives were about to change forever. We continued on the Long Island Expressway, passed through the Midtown Tunnel into Manhattan. While driving through the Midtown Tunnel, I started to feel apprehensive about what we might be doing. We all stated we wished we could go to Ground Zero, but we also knew this was doubtful. Yet here we were on the most important rescue mission of our lives. I often thought how I would have felt during the explosions, fires, and subsequent collapse. My instincts tell me I would have been terrified, but I also know most of us simply put, do not know how we would respond during a crisis situation, especially when something of this magnitude occurs.

Once we were in Manhattan, we made our way down 2nd Avenue, made a left on 32nd Street, and got onto the FDR DRIVE, all the while people still waving and cheering on the side

streets. All twenty-two trucks were still together, traveling as one unit. We exited the FDR Drive and drove down South Street to the second staging area directly beneath the Manhattan Bridge. We parked adjacent to the Pathmark supermarket at about 5:15 PM. What we next experienced remarkable. In the parking lot of the Pathmark, several trailer loads of supplies had been assembled to aid the rescue workers in their efforts. Chief Brian Morris of the Manhasset-Lakeville Fire Department was the chief in charge of this detail from Nassau County and he informed us to go over to the trailers and tents, which had also been set up, and get something to eat because no one knew when we would eat again, and it seemed no one particularly cared. We all walked over and were completely overwhelmed by the generosity and caring of the support workers. They made sure our every need was met from being fed to giving us new work boots to cots for sleeping to facemasks. Anything we could have possible needed, they provided with a smile. It seemed as if they all knew something we didn't. We returned to the truck and waited for our orders.

After about an hour and a half, we got our orders from Chief Morris and we prepared to leave. Everyone got on the truck and Chief Wensley jumped in the front seat. He looked at me as we pulled away from the curb and said to me "you're not going to believe this". I asked him what he meant, he looked at me with his piercing blue eyes, and said, "**we're going to Ground Zero.**" I alluded to him that he was not funny when he looked at me again and didn't say a single word. That is when I knew he was serious. I have known John Wensley for well over twenty years, and although we have had our differences, I felt I knew him well enough to realize he was not joking. I pulled the truck away from the curb and headed towards the tunnel right in front of us that would lead us to the West Side and Ground Zero. We exited the tunnel and the closer we got, the dirtier the streets became. As we turned on to the general proximity of the World Trade Center, the streets became almost insurmountable. With wreckage everywhere, we felt as though we were entering a warzone. It looked like a scene from the Tom Hanks movie, Private Ryan, or as though a bomb had been dropped, which is in essence exactly what happened. While we worked our way through the streets, incredibly large amounts of dust kicked up every time I hit the accelerator on the truck. When I looked in the

rear view mirror, visibility was **Zero**. We came to a stop at the final staging area just outside the Millenium Hotel next to the catwalk and an FDNY engine company who was pumping water to one of the Tower ladders inside Ground Zero. This was our final stop before entering Ground Zero. Chief Wensley went inside to get our assignment from the incident commander whose name I do not know. While we waited, our social security numbers were written on our arms at the suggestion of one of the battalion chiefs' aids. In addition, while we waited, a group of firefighters from FDNY Rescue 1 began filing past us. I immediately recognized two of the firefighters as Frank Fee and Paul Hashagen from Freeport Truck Company. While Frank acknowledged us as he walked past, Paul Hashagen stopped, said hello, and shook everyone's hand on our truck. He managed a smile at us as he continued on with the task at hand and Frank also managed to acknowledge us again. In the aftermath of our tour at Ground Zero, I have realized what a difficult task it was for those two intrepid and altruistic firefighters to manage a smile in such horrible conditions. They had both been at Ground Zero almost from the outset and they both had to be tired, both emotionally and physically. What I can truthfully say is that we all appreciated that we were acknowledged by these two men who were about to get back to work. I know I was certainly glad to see them as they are two of the FDNY's absolutely finest and if anyone was going to be found alive, they are the two that could do it. What we were about to attempt was starting to set in. It really hit home when I looked towards the front of the truck and saw Timmy and Kevin Muldowney standing there. They had the eye of the tiger at everyone who walked out of Ground Zero. They were looking for their brother, Richie Muldowney, who was in one of the towers when it collapsed. They asked if they could come in with us. I asked Chief Wensley over the radio and he okayed it. I told both of them and their brother in law Tommy to get into the back of the truck and grab any gear they could find. My eyes started to tear so I walked away from them so they couldn't see it. Their brother Richie Muldowney worked for me part-time before he became a FDNY firefighter. I had a personal interest in helping to find him. About five minutes later, Chief Wensley called me on the radio and asked if the truck would fit under the catwalk. I told him not to worry about it and if necessary, we would let some air out of the tires to get under. At

about 7 PM, we pulled our truck into Ground Zero and were immediately and completely spellbound by what we saw.

Chief Wensley came out and escorted us inside past the tight security as I drove the truck past the catwalk at a snails pace. It felt like inches at a time. I had cats eyes. They were wide open and watching everything in sight. Chief Wensley marched in front of the truck and as we passed the catwalk we made a left turn past this massive crane to get to the center of Ground Zero. As we inched along, we came across a wrecking ball about the size of a livingroom television. A construction worker came up to me and asked if it needed to be moved so the truck could pass. I told him yes and yelled to the guys in the back of the truck to give him helping hand moving the wrecking ball. Before they could get out of the truck, this construction worker went up to the ball and proceeded to move it by himself. I estimated the ball to weighed 800-1000 pounds. This construction worker rolled it out of the way like a child playing with a beach ball. After he moved it, we pulled the truck into position. The front bumper of the truck was positioned over the curb of the circular driveway directly between the remains of the Twin Towers. We had arrived at **Ground Zero.**

Immediately after setting the parking brake of the truck, we got off, got our wits about us, and, within thirty seconds, we were working with the other rescue workers trying to find out fallen and missing brothers. We started on one of the bucket brigades, and with five minutes, FDNY Battalion Chief Campbell called for lights down inside the pile of debris, about 100 feet in front of the truck and slightly to the right. Lt. Frank Tucker immediately accommodated him with our circle D lights. When we ascended the pile to the bring up the lights. We got to a point about fifty yards from the truck. At this point the pile was about twenty feet high. We had to run several extension cords from our truck to deep inside the pile. We handed the lights up and were informed they had just found a ladder truck with several firefighters in it. The ladder truck was crushed beyond recognition, but looking into the pile, I could clearly make out the word “**Fire**” on one portion of the truck. With that, Lt. Tucker descended into the hole and proceeded to set up the lines for the lights. About five minutes later, they called for bolt cutters and again we gave them our equipment. Our heavy rescue truck was right

smack in the middle of Ground Zero and our equipment was easily accessible. It started getting crowded where we were because FDNY firefighters were beginning to congregate in the area where we had found the ladder truck. The FDNY simply wanted to bring their brothers' home. We had just assisted in finding our first bodies and stepped aside so our brother FDNY firefighters could remove the remains. This was only the beginning. As time went on, more and more specialized tools were needed, and due in large part to the proximity of our truck to the pile, we kept using our equipment. Before long, the equipment from our truck was all over the site and we were working at full throttle. There was a continual barrage of requests for additional equipment, which we kept bringing into the pile in between our other duties. We were doing everything from handing out equipment to digging with our hands and filling the endless supply of five-gallon pails to climbing into voids and spaces where someone might still be alive. That part was the most emotionally taxing in that we kept finding body parts in these voids. There was an ever-continuing series of plastic bags being brought out with body parts in each of them. We were finding everything, except survivors. I remember being in one of these holes and checking my cell phone for a signal. I did this because just before we entered Ground Zero, I overheard one of the other rescue workers saying if you had a cell phone, keep it in your coat pocket. This was in case there was another collapse while we were in one of these voids, we might be found through the ringing of a cell phone. Just after midnight, slowly I began hearing people saying "QUIET" and the "SHHHHH" sound. I was climbing under one the large box beams that permeated Ground Zero. When this started, I was frozen in fear. We had heard stories over the past couple of days that more collapses were imminent. Goose bumps covered my body. I became so silent the only person who could hear my breathing was my spirit and soul. My breathing was fast, and my heart was not only racing, it felt as though it was going to pound right through my chest, yet I am certain I am the only one who can hear it. It was deafening silence. At first I thought another collapse was about to happen. After a couple of minutes, I realized the reason the incident commander wanted quiet was that someone thought they heard a sound of someone possibly tapping on one of the beams from the pile. Maybe this was survivor. It

turned out to be a false alarm, although I was thoroughly astonished at how quiet Ground Zero became. With several thousand rescue workers in the immediate area, you could hear a pin drop. This happened several times during the night and each time was the same. At the same time I stood still and quiet, I looked around Ground Zero and saw what appeared to be numerous engineers and surveyors with the surveying equipment in full function. They apparently were also concerned about collapses. Those people had my full and undivided attention. My heart raced with anticipation in hopes of finding someone alive. After about six hours of not finding anyone, I began to realize that it would indeed be a miracle to find someone alive, but we kept digging. I kept thinking of my youngest son, Christian, and how we would hide together either under his bed or in the outside shed, hoping mom would find us. Never did I imagine this platitude would be a prelude to a real life tragedy.

At one point, I climbed down into a hole the size of a milk crate. As I descended I could smell the distinguished odor all firefighters dread. The smell of death. I descended further into the hole, the smell got stronger. After about _ hour of unrelenting digging, I decided to call for a cadaver-sniffing dog as they were in abundance. As I emerged from the hole, I told my partner from the FDNY, whose name was Tommy, I thought I had something down here. He refused to let me go into the hole without his being at the entrance with a lifeline. He called for the dog, and after about five minutes, the dog and his trainer arrived at my location. The dog's name was **Mercury**, a German Shepherd, and the trainer asked me what I had. I told him I thought there was a body down there because of what I smelled. When I crawled out of the hole, the trainer sent Mercury

down into the hole, and after about 1 minute, Mercury returned, and at the entrance to the hole, **Mercury just sat**. That was the sign the trainer was looking for. The trainer said we had "a hit", meaning we had found another body. We began digging frantically and after about an hour, we found the body of a young woman dressed in a flowered dress. I said a short prayer and I had to get out and get some fresh air. Our replacements eventually pulled the body out

and we began digging elsewhere. When remains were found and removed, the rescue workers observed a moment of silence out of respect and many of us offered similar prayers.

About every hour, I made a point to take a five minute breather, as did most of us that were digging. On one of these breaks, I met an old friend of mine, Rob Middleton. Rob was an FDNY firefighter for over twenty years and had recently retired. Rob was a member of Vigilant Hose Company #2 in Freeport for several years, and when he got on the FDNY, he did not have time to dedicate any longer and resigned. He is a great person and I was deeply moved when I saw him. He was a friendly, familiar face among all the rescue workers and I welcomed his good tidings.

As the night progressed past midnight, I began seeing many other Freeporters that we all knew. From the Freeport Fire Department we saw former chief Julie Ellison from Hose One. We saw Freeport Police Officer Rich Samuels. Second Assistant Chief Jimmy Butler was working right along side of us at one point. He is a city firefighter. The most emotional time for me was when I was climbing out of a hole in the pile. I had to climb out backwards in a very compromising position. I don't think I will ever be called a gazelle. I was unable to exit the hole with my helmet on so as I got close to the opening, I removed my helmet and pushed it through the hole. When I begin sliding out, in this loud, boisterous voice I hear "what are the chances of running into you here". I immediately recognized the voice and as I got out of the hole, I turned around and there was my old friend Brian Durr, former chief of the Bethpage Fire Department. Brian and I met well over twenty years ago when we played ice hockey for the Nassau County Fire Commission. We had become very close and as with all good friends and relationships, with time and distance, we lost contact. Brian is the chief's aid to Battalion Chief Campbell and we worked side by side from that point on until he was relieved to go home. I felt incredibly good working with him after not seeing him for so many years. He is a terrific friend and firefighter. The FDNY and the Bethpage Fire Department are indeed lucky to have him. I learned many things from him over the years. I was reminded by him of the time my oldest son Brendan, who is now in college, got stomach sick all over his new carpeting, about 10

seconds after he told me “don’t let him loose on my new carpeting”. Brendan was only 1 year old at the time. Funny the things you remember when you’re in a crisis situation.

As time went on, we started to tire as some of us had been up for two days. I struck up a conversation with Battalion Chief Campbell. He was truly grateful for our presence and was not afraid to let us know. I find him to be friendly, conversant, and knowledgeable. He was talking about a myriad of subjects, all relating to firefighting. I

made some mental notes and did some research when we returned home that Sunday morning. I called my old friend Vinnie Segreto who is member of Freeport Truck Company and a retired FDNY firefighter. Vinnie is extremely knowledgeable and was forthcoming with answers to my questions. In my experience as a firefighter, I have trained continually over the past twenty-nine years on basics of firefighting as well as EMS. After some thought, I remembered that a human body is consumed when exposed to 1600 degrees Fahrenheit.

What I was unsure of is what jet fuel is comprised of. I asked Vinnie and he informs me jet fuel is now made up of Kerosene and #6 crude oil, which burns hotter than conventional jet fuel and at considerably less expense. He went on to say the estimated temperature of the initial explosions was in excess of 3200 degrees Fahrenheit. I took comfort in the fact that the innocent people who were exposed to that explosion were immediately vaporized and did not suffer. It was bittersweet knowing those people never knew what hit them. Additionally, when steel is exposed to temperatures in excess of 1400 degrees Fahrenheit, the steel begins to relax and at 2800 degrees Fahrenheit, the steel melts. The reality that no one survived was beginning to set in, but it made me feel no better about knowing my brethren were missing. I felt like I was trying to appease my worst fears, but to no avail.

As day turned into night and night turned into day, pure exhaustion set in. At about 6:30 the next morning, Chief Wensley informed us we would be going home after an extensive, relentless, and unyielding search for survivors. We originally came in to Manhattan to light up lower Manhattan and support our brother firefighters and police officers in their grim search for survivors. We left knowing we had just spent considerable time at Ground Zero at the scene of the absolute worst attack ever to take place on American soil against innocent

Americans. We were right smack in the middle of it and when we realized how bad it was, we at feverish pitches all night, but to no avail. We found **no survivors**. We said our good-byes to all the firefighters, police officers, and other rescue workers, who were all strangers when we arrived, but were family when we left. I felt like I had become part of a new family in the light of this terrible attack. I knew I would probably never see any of these people again, but I felt a gratification of sorts. We would forever be bound together emotionally because of this horrific tragedy. We all boarded the fire truck and as we began backing up the truck to leave, I felt a sense of camaraderie as some of my brother firefighters waived to us. As a tear streamed down my face, I felt good about what we had just done and I knew I could always depend on my brother firefighters when the need arose. They were genuinely grateful, as was I. When we pulled out of Ground Zero, the wrecking ball that was in our way at the beginning was now mounted on a crane as counterbalance for the bucket that was also attached.

I felt like I was on an ant farm, with thousands of different people all working at completely different jobs all pulling in the same direction. We drove back under the catwalk, made a left turn on Liberty Street and made our way through the streets on our way to the tunnel towards FDR Drive. There was a fuel tanker parked on the side of the road giving fuel to all the trucks that needed it. We stopped and filled up just before we got on the FDR Drive. Exhaustion was beginning to set in. While I drove on the FDR Drive heading towards the MidTown Tunnel, I started to cry when I realized the enormity of what we had just been through. We went through the tunnel and as we approached the tollbooth on the Queens side, we started to quip about who was going to pay the toll. We were waived right through the tunnel to the Long Island Expressway and home we went. It seemed like the longest drive of my life and I cried all the way home.

When we arrived back at our firehouse in Freeport at about 7:30 am, we were all glad to see it. Freeport Fire Department Chief Paul Russer was there to greet us, along with third assistant chief John Maguire, who is Ray Maguire's brother. Chief Russer asked us all to come inside for a few minutes before we began to clean up the truck. Once inside, Chief Russer made very

clear to us how pleased he was with what had transpired. Equally as clear was the fact that some of us might need counseling after such an ordeal. This was made available to all that wanted it. We welcomed his congeniality and I personally thanked him. He and I have not seen eye to eye over the years, but in my opinion, he did everything right. The look in his eyes was of genuine concern for all of us. In my twenty-nine years in the Freeport Fire Department, no chief has had such immense responsibility thrust upon him so quickly and intensely as Chief Russer did. As Chief of the department, it was his duty to send firefighters in the city where the situation decreed. It is a tremendous responsibility to live with and all of it fell on his shoulders. He acted admirably, professionally, and compassionately. He did a great job and the Village of Freeport is fortunate to have him. After his comments, emotions started running high and acerbically I asked him if he was going to help us clean up the truck and it's equipment. Very simply, he said "absolutely".

As we went out to the apparatus floor and began stripping the truck, Chief Russer was right there with us and stayed until we were finished. After he left, we all commented on how much we appreciated his help. We had to strip the truck completely because there was a layer of dust everywhere, inside and out. It took almost two hours and even though we were completely fatigued, we knew we had to get the truck back in service because if there was another call, either in Freeport or the city, we had to be ready to go on a moments notice, and we were.

I left the firehouse at about 9:45 am and went home. When I parked my van in front of my house, my wife Dorothy and youngest son Christian came out to welcome me. That was the greatest feeling in the world. My son just held on to me for what seemed an eternity. I kissed my wife and went inside. The hugs and kisses kept on coming. I was home. What I witnessed that fateful night in September was an embellishment of man's humanity towards his fellow man, not his inhumanity, like the terrorists expected. It was an extraordinary turn of events, and I thank **God** I was there.

For Mike, Richie, Timmy, Dave, Andre, Ronnie, Tim and all our fallen brothers.

For Dave Garcia.

Rest in peace.