WORLD TRADE CENTER TASK FORCE INTERVIEW

EMT RICHARD ZARRILLO

Interview Date: October 25, 2001

Transcribed by Nancy Francis

MR. CASTORINA: Today's date is October 25th, 2001. I'm Ron Castorina conducting an interview in the office of BITS. Your name --

MR. McCOURT: Tom McCourt.

 $$\operatorname{MR}.$$ CASTORINA: -- is also accompanied with me conducting this interview.

- Q. Your name, sir?
- A. Richard Zarrillo.
- Q. And your rank and title?
- A. I'm an EMT working in fire operations as the special event coordinator.
- Q. Can you tell me, on September 11th, 2001, the events that took place that day, whatever you can remember?
- A. Sure. While sitting at my desk, probably just after the first plane had hit the tower, Chief Ganci had come running across the hall yelling something about a plane hitting the twin towers. Most of us thought he was joking until we looked out the window and saw one of the towers had flames coming out of it. I placed a call to Chief Peruggia to ask him his location. He told me he was just coming over the Verrazano Bridge about to get in the HOV lane. I told him maybe you want to start heading to Manhattan, I'll

meet you in the city, this way we could hook up and do whatever we needed to do. At that point he thought I was joking. He cursed at me and hung up. Captain

Nahmod was sitting next to me and he said we need to get some equipment, find out who's going, who's not going, try and make our way there.

I spoke with Chief Peruggia. He called me back and said maybe you and Abdo, Captain Nahmod, need to head into the city to be part of the command, runners or administratively, whatever we can do to help out. I was able to locate a helmet from one of the people in RCC. Captain Nahmod and I tried to find a car to get into the city. Chief Ramos was bringing us downstairs to get a pool car, so I think Commissioner Drury happened to be walking in at the wrong time and we asked him to drive us into the city.

I'm not sure of the exact time, but I believe as we were coming over the Brooklyn Bridge was when the second plane hit the second tower. We parked -- I want to say it's on like Broadway right off of Vesey Street, between Vesey and Barclay. Captain Nahmod and I started heading down Vesey Street towards where we thought the command post would be. At that time we had received a page per Chief Peruggia to go into OEM at

- No. 7 World Trade and activate our post in OEM.

 Captain Nahmod and I were running down Vesey Street stepping over airplane pieces, several bodies and whatnot.
 - Q. Can you describe how much debris was around?
- A. There was what looked like the front wheel assembly of an airplane. Unknown the size of the plane that had hit, it just looked like it was one pair of wheels on an assembly, pieces of metal with rivets in them, a few body parts scattered around.
 - Q. Was debris still falling?
- A. Debris was falling. It looked like birds.

 There were people falling from the towers or jumping,
 whatever it was they were doing. Abdo and I went into

 No. 7, activated OEM, placed calls to EMS Citywide,

 RCC, to tell them we were there and we were activated.

Maybe five, ten minutes, not even ten minutes later, a rep from OEM came into the main room and said we need to evacuate the building; there's a third plane inbound. That was the only thing I really heard because I said, Abdo, we've got to go, and we made it down to the lobby of the building, street level, met up with Chief Peruggia in the lobby of the building. He said that there was no third plane but we needed to

re-establish OEM right there so we can coordinate what was going on. He had already been to the command post, so he told us, and he was trying to release people back to be operational. He was looking for the Fire guy to go back in. He was there with Captain Yakimovich. In OEM with Captain Nahmod and I was Chief Maggio, who is now retired, and another firefighter from the 1st Division. We were really trying to establish OEM and a treatment sector in the lobby of the building because there were people coming around us.

Again, times are a little fuzzy initially for me. A few minutes later, John came to me and said you need to go find Chief Ganci and relay the following message: that the buildings have been compromised, we need to evacuate, they're going to collapse. I said okay. I went down Vesey Street towards West.

- Q. You were by yourself?
- A. I was by myself, me and my helmet and my radio. I got to the corner of Vesey and West. I found some EMS vehicles. I think I saw Chief Gombo there.

 I'm not really sure. I mentioned to the EMS people there, again, not knowing who they were, I said you need to get away from here, the building might collapse, we need to leave this spot.

As I was walking towards the Fire command post, I found Steve Mosiello. I said, Steve, where's the boss? I have to give him a message. He said, well, what's the message? I said the buildings are going to collapse; we need to evac everybody out. With a very confused look he said who told you that? I said I was just with John at OEM. OEM says the buildings are going to collapse; we need to get out.

He escorted me over to Chief Ganci. He said, hey, Pete, we got a message that the buildings are going to collapse. His reply was who the fuck told you that? Then Steve brought me in and with Chief Ganci, Commissioner Feehan, Steve, I believe Chief Turi was initially there, I said, listen, I was just at OEM. The message I was given was that the buildings are going to collapse; we need to get our people out. At that moment, this thunderous, rolling roar came down and that's when the building came down, the first tower came down.

The command post was situated right in front of 3 World Financial, the American Express Building.

The garage was open and as that rumble started and we saw it was coming down, the firemen that were in the command area, I believe most of the chiefs, we all ran

into the garage of that building. It became dark, hard to breathe. Nobody had any equipment because most of the firemen dropped everything as they were running. It became an obstacle course to get into the garage.

Again, it's sketchy with time, but it may have been anywhere from ten to 20 minutes by the time we found an emergency exit to get out of the building. It was dark. There was no light.

- Q. Who were you with at this point? Were you by yourself?
- A. I had two firemen. What I did was I took about ten or 15 running steps into the garage and hugged into a corner of a wall, an indentation, and I felt like two or three guys get in behind me and actually made it a tighter huddle. The dust, the cloud came rolling in. It got dark. As the dust and the noise started to settle, we were all tapping up to see where each other were.

I met up with Chief Cassano at the stairwell, and I believe Chief Carrasquillo was around there. I know I met up with him outside on the lobby of Vesey Street from that building, when we got out. Lots of firemen, you know, faces, no names I could really identify, except for Sal.

We made it up the staircase into the lobby, I believe it was 3, it may have been one of those little cross lobbies that were there, and got out onto Vesey Street. I met up with EMT Mike Ober, who had been driving Chief Kowalczyk. He was his driver for a while. I met up with him. I found Chief Carrasquillo, who was with Chief Cassano, a few others, you know, faces, again, that I found, and we were walking around trying to make -- what happened? It was still cloudy, that very fine but heavy dust that was in the air.

Once I got out of the building, maybe ten minutes from there, that unforgettable rolling started.

- Q. The same sound you heard earlier?
- A. The same sound I heard earlier.
- Q. Where were you at this point?
- A. I was on West and Vesey, probably in the middle of the intersection, trying to find people that I knew. At this point I didn't know where John was, where Abdo was. I don't know what happened to No. 7. I knew the building was coming down. I watched it come down on us, but I don't know where anybody else is.

As that roar was happening on the second time around, I was running down Vesey Street towards the water with a few thoughts in my head. One, if I hit

the water, I was swimming home, or just getting into the water for cover, if necessary. The marina was right there. I ended up making a right on North End Avenue and there was a building -- EMS, again, I know Chief Villani was there. I saw Chief Pascale later on. I believe Chief Kowalczyk was in there also. The MERV was stationed on North End Avenue for a while and I remember emergency service was on the southbound side of North End near Vesey for a while also. We made it into that building as the second one came down. Again, the clouds and all the other debris.

- Q. You were protected in that building?
- A. In the building.
- Q. Which building was that?
- A. There was a building right there on the corner. Maybe 15, 20 feet off the corner, there was an entrance into a building, and that's where -- it was mostly glass windows and we were concerned that the glass was going to implode.
 - Q. Did that face the river?
- $\hbox{A.} \quad \hbox{It faced the river and that was protection in} \\$ $\hbox{my view.}$
 - Q. About a three-block distance?
 - A. It's actually one city block, but still that

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cloud came over and passed and --

- Q. Did it get black there, too?
- A. It got really dark. Most of us were looking for cover, trying to avoid anything else that was coming down. While we were in that building, we were told -- again, I don't know where anybody is.
 - Q. You had no radio, right?
- A. I had a 400 radio. I couldn't get through to anybody.
- Q. Were you hearing anything, Mayday, anything on the radio?
- A. No. The 400 -- I was on EMS Citywide and I don't know if my radio was clogged or the batteries. It could have been a hundred different things.
- Q. Can you just mark on the map where you were? Just roughly.
 - A. We were right about here.
 - Q. Okay.
- A. I didn't know where John was. Outside of the job, John, Abdo and I are old friends and that was my concern, you know, how am I going to tell these guys' wives, we all live near each other, that I followed his direction and now I can't find either of them.

While we were in this building, we were told

that there was a gas main rupture or a gas leak and we needed to evacuate that building.

- Q. Who told you this?
- A. It was just somebody, a security guard or somebody. But then Chief Villani and all the other chiefs that were in there said we need to gather all of our equipment because they had set up a treatment area, there were ten sets of equipment with stretchers from ambulances, and we all took all that stuff out and started heading down North End hoping to find -- or maybe it was down toward -- no. Down North End Avenue to try and find another place we could go into.

Again, at this point there was a lot of disorientation. Nobody really was fully aware as to what was going on. The radios had gone silent, you know, guessing, because the repeater tower went down. Nobody knew what was going on. I thought I heard a helicopter. There were a lot of people running, lots of patients or would-be patients running past us.

- Q. Where were they headed?
- A. Anywhere they could get away from. The water.
 - Q. Heading away from the buildings?
 - A. Running north on West Street. I went into --

there was a school not too far down from here. I meet up with Mike Cahill from Division 6 and Gerald Garcia. They were down there. The MERV had already tried to find another place to set up and was moving down North End Avenue. I think it was Garcia. We went into a school. I wanted to just wash my face off, use a bathroom, and as we were in that school building, we were told we had to evacuate that building because, again, a gas rupture. That came from one of the school officials, a name I couldn't tell you. Face? Probably not now recognize.

We made it back on to West Street, I don't remember what the cross was, and we started heading -- I heard people saying we're going to Chelsea. I heard Chief Pascale say she was going up to Chelsea Piers, we were going to try and re-establish up there, you know, do a count and try to run the operation.

When I went to that other building, I lost most of those people, except for Cahill, and then when they told us to evacuate that building, I just had to get out of there. My thoughts were that I needed to get home, get my wife from midtown and just get home for my daughter.

I got onto West Street and met up with

Captain Stone, Greg Brady from Division 1. I found Chief Hirth and Grace Cacciola and they said we're all going up to Chelsea, let's go re-establish our command up there, again, not knowing where anybody else was. You see the plumes of smoke, the dust cloud that was coming down, but we just really wanted to find a safe place for that. Probably about ten blocks up West Street you heard the jets flying overhead, so lots of thoughts running through people's heads, what's happening to us here?

- Q. What kind of jets?
- A. Military jets.
- Q. Military jets?
- A. Yes.
- Q. This is --
- A. This is right after the second collapse.
- Q. After the second collapse?
- A. Well, if I say 15 minutes from the time we got to that school building and started walking towards Chelsea, maybe ten, 15 minutes had passed by the time that --
 - Q. Half an hour?
 - A. Again, I do apologize for that.
 - Q. No, everybody has that problem.

- A. Time wasn't --
- Q. There's no perception of time.
- A. It's still very surreal. There I was talking to Chief Ganci and relaying that the building is going to come down and then it came down on us. It's very bothersome.

We hitched a ride with a police van up to the Chelsea Piers. Chief Kowalczyk was there, Chief Pascale, a slew of ambulances. There had to be 50 non city ambulances up there from everywhere. I saw Captain Boyle there. I met up with Captain Pinkus. Captain Stone, myself, Brady, Chief Hirth and Grace went into the -- there was some restaurant on the edge of the Chelsea Pier area, you know, to try and clean up a little bit, use the rest room, which I needed to do a while ago. I met up with a lot of my counterparts from the Secret Service because that's where their fallback was becoming. All their agents from the building were in there.

Mark Stone said he felt his shoulder was hurt and Chief Hirth was looking to get out of there to go someplace else. He wanted to check -- I honestly don't know what was going through his head. He said I need to go away from here, I need to go get a car, I need to

go to the division or a hospital. Whatever the case may have been, they took Captain Stone to Bellevue to be treated. He was treated and released.

chief Pascale and Chief Kowalczyk were establishing their command, and doing this for -- you know, between chiefs and what I do now, I fell into that command structure to say, okay, I'm here, let me help you with this, and I handled staging and some other logistical issues with them for about two or three hours, and then I made my way back down to the command post. Probably within an hour of us getting up to Chelsea, Chief Kowalczyk said to me that John is okay, he heard him on the radio, and that he was going down to the command post that's been re-established to either help out or take over from him.

Then, like I said, a few hours later,

Lieutenant Nevins and I made our way down south back to

Chambers Street where the other command post had been
established. That's really about it.

MR. CASTORINA: I think you've covered virtually everything. The time now is 1202. The concludes the interview.