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U.S. Coast Guard Oral History Program

Attack on America: September 11, 2001 and the U.S. Coast Guard

U.S. COAST GUARD ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
Operation Noble Eagle Documentation Project

Interviewee: **Mr. Tom Murray, US Coast Guard Auxiliary**

Flotilla Staff Officer, Fifth Northern Division, Flotilla 711

Interviewer: PAC Peter Capelotti, USCGR
Date of Interview: 21 February 2002

Place: Atlantic Strike Team

Q: Sir, if you could tell me your name, rank and rate.

Mr. Murray: Okay. My name is Tom Murray. I'm an Auxiliarist in the Fifth Northern Division, Flotilla 711, located in Bayville, New Jersey along the Barnegat Bay. I'm active in the Auxiliary as a Staff Officer for Publications for Division 7 and Flotilla Staff Officer for Public Education in my local flotilla.

Q: I know nothing about Auxiliary ranks or rates. Do you have ranks in the Auxiliary?

Mr. Murray: We have ranks at the Flotilla Staff Officer level. We're the equivalent of an ensign, I believe, and my rank as shown on my collar here is the equivalent of a lieutenant, junior grade, which is what we use for the Staff Officer position or elected position as a Flotilla Vice-Commander.

Q: How did you find your way here to the Strike Team?

Mr. Murray: We had an inquiry from CDR [Stephen J.] Minutolo in Philadelphia that said the Atlantic Strike Team was interested in having some Auxiliary volunteers assist them, which came out in, I believe July of last year; 2001. When I began to look into that a little bit I found that the Atlantic Strike Team was a perfect fit for my professional experience. I'm a retired professional engineer and I've worked most of my life in chemical plants.

Q: You're a chemical engineer?

Mr. Murray: No, I'm an electrical instrument engineer. Automation was my specialty. When I heard of the Atlantic Strike Team I said, boy, that's a great match, and I live a half an hour from here so it was a fit. So I contacted them and made arrangements to come up and see what I could do for them. They felt that the Auxiliary could handle the position of a watch stander in their Incident Response Center and I volunteered for that and began in the month of August 2001 training to qualify as a watch stander with the AST. I completed my qualifications by the end of August. It was a very interesting and challenging experience to a certain extent, and at the end of August I was ready to stand watch.

Q: So you were qualified just in time?

Mr. Murray: Just in time. As a matter of fact I was not on duty on September 11th. I was home. On September 11th after we heard about the attack I had called in and they said that the base was closed down and they would be back in touch with us at such a time as they felt they could let us back on base. I was contacted I believe - I forget the exact day - but I was on duty about three days later, and very, very busy at that time.

Q: When you got here after some time had past, what was the atmosphere like here at the unit?

Mr. Murray: The Atlantic Strike Team had a major challenge at that point in time. The World Trade Center incident involved practically everybody being mobilized and the people that were left were handling two and three jobs at the same time, and the phone was ringing and it was very busy.

Q: Did they throw you right into the IRC?

Mr. Murray: I actually was at the IRC handling the phone and fax and the rest of it. It was a real serious situation and we did the best we could. We handled it and kept things running to free up personnel that could respond.

Q: What were your hours like? Would you come in and work, let's say a regular workday, or how did that work?

Mr. Murray: I'd come in around seven, seven-thirty, somewhere around there and worked until about four, and it was a very, very busy time.

Q: The traffic you were handling, was that mostly within the unit or were there a lot of calls from outside the unit?

Mr. Murray: There were calls from outside the unit for general information. There was an awful lot of phone activity at that particular time and we handled it as best we could, and things were really busy.

Q: You had been working here for - I'm trying to think - you said you started here with the Strike Team in . . .?

Mr. Murray: In the beginning of August.

Q: . . . the beginning of August. So you had been here a short time. What sense did you have of the unit in that sort of month or five weeks before this event, and then as you watched them respond to it?

Mr. Murray: Having worked in chemical plants for years I had some understanding of the nature of a chemical incident and an understanding of the nature of an oil spill etc. I knew how serious these things were and the level of training necessary to have people adequately respond to those incidents, because I was involved to a certain extent in training technicians in chemical plants. In the chemical plants we take it very, very seriously. Just as a quick illustration: The plant that I worked in had a line. I asked what was

in that line. It was a four-inch line painted purple as I remember, and they said, well that's a four-inch line with Phosgene under 250 pounds of pressure. Now that's enough to make anybody very, very serious, very, very quickly. So with that idea in mind you want to be in an organization where the people around you are trained, confident and work together as a team, and that was the environment that I'm used to working in and working as a team member. When I came here I found the very same thing. These people are team players, highly trained, highly skilled and certainly very, very dedicated.

Q: So coming from the chemical industry you have sort of a unique perspective on how well trained, or ill trained, or untrained a unit that's used to responding to Hazmats or oil spills and so forth would be. I'm interested to hear - as you see them in their training and so forth, since you've been here now for, what, six months or more - what your view is now after you've had a chance to see them work for six months.

Mr. Murray: The training and the qualifications that these people have to undergo are top-notch. When they go out into the field they are qualified to handle a very, very wide range of incidents and that makes them very, very special people in my opinion, and worthy of good support. And that's what our Auxiliary organization hopes we're going to be able to give to this unit.

Q: It seems that there was an awareness. I mean now its coming out that Ground Zero was almost certainly much more dangerous than most people thought in terms of what they were dealing with there. As someone who has seen these kind of things before and being here, did you get the sense that was something that everybody here understood. That that was, right from the get go, a very hazardous, potentially very dangerous situation?

Mr. Murray: Certainly very hazardous and certainly very dangerous, but I don't think there's anybody that could have projected or planned ahead for the magnitude of that incident. That was just totally out.

Q: Yeah. You had never seen anything like that in your experience; explosions, fires, anything like that that could compare to this in its magnitude?

Mr. Murray: I've seen explosions. I was a volunteer fireman. I know a little bit about fires, but nothing of this sort of magnitude.

Q: When you look back on this now with a little bit of hindsight, from a few months anyway, do you feel that the components of the Coast Guard; the Active Duty, the Reserves, the Auxiliary, civilians, how was your impression of how those meshed during and after 9/11?

Mr. Murray: I guess I would answer that by saying I'm almost 70 years old. I was in the Service toward the end of the Korean War. I wasn't particularly happy about it because I was a draftee. I went through the Vietnam Era, and quite frankly, I never thought in my lifetime we'd ever see anything that would pull the country together. I'm also old enough to remember the Second World War and I guess this did pull the country together. My concern is that I hope our leadership has the ability to not respond to one-on-one incidents; over respond to certain incidents, and certainly take in the big picture. We're in a situation that has never occurred before. Old solutions don't fit and we're dealing with people who have a religious frame of mind in many cases. That's not something that you can deal with simply. It's not a matter of just bombing and blowing up. It's much more complicated than that. We are challenged. We should have our best people making decisions and hopefully they will have cool heads and do the best thing they can.

Q: Terrific. Well Mr. Murray, thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW

