



*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: Captain W. Russell Webster, USCG**  
Chief of Operations, First Coast Guard District

Interviewer: PAC Peter Capelotti, USCGR  
Date of Interview: 2 April 2002  
Place: Conference room of the First District Commander  
Boston, Massachusetts

---

**Q:** Captain Sir, how long have you been in the Coast Guard?

**CAPT Webster:** I've been in the Coast Guard almost 25 years now.

**Q:** And are you out of the Academy?

**CAPT Webster:** I'm a 1977 graduate of the Coast Guard Academy.

**Q:** In fact that reminds me; I interviewed one of your classmates this morning.

**CAPT Webster:** Who's that?

**Q:** Captain [Richard P.] Yatto [USCG].

**CAPT Webster:** Oh, Rick. Yes, he's a good guy.

**Q:** And we had that same conversation about history. Were you here that morning?

**CAPT Webster:** Yes, I was in the District office that morning.

**Q:** And your position here at the 1st District is?

**CAPT Webster:** Chief of Operations.

**Q:** Chief of Operations. When it became clear that this was more than an accident and it was going to be something serious, did the Admiral [Rear Admiral George N. Naccara, III, USCG, Commander, First Coast Guard District] call you and his senior staff together to try to figure out what the response was going to be?

**CAPT Webster:** Yes, I recall the Chief of Staff and the Admiral getting us all together, and the early priority from some of the early conversations we had, had to do with the Force Protection Condition at our units protecting our people, and the decision was made - I want to say within the first hour - to upgrade the FPCON; Force Protection Condition, throughout the District. I believe throughout the day it changed from the normal peacetime rating to what we eventually ended up at towards the end of the day, at FPCON Delta; the most stringent force protection condition available.

**Q:** What does that mean to a petty officer down at [Coast Guard Station] Brant Point ? Does he have a weapon's locker he goes to and pulls out a side arm? I mean does that mean any substantive thing when you get down to a boat station?

**CAPT Webster:** Well at a boat station probably the biggest thing it means is that those same petty officers who are going out as boarding officers and boarding team members -who were directed very early on to provide an active presence to reassure the American public of their safety and the fact that the Coast Guard was on the job - that same talent pool was tapped to stand a gate guard duty and protect the local Coast Guard facilities.

**Q:** That whole issue of presence is important. I'm sure you've seen this over your career and I wonder how it ties in with 9/11, is the way people respond to the Coast Guard as opposed to say the Marines or the Navy. They seem to see the Coast Guard differently because of this strange civilian/military . . .

**CAPT Webster:** The Coast Guard is what I would characterize as a continuing local Federal presence, and we have, what I would say, a unique role in providing initial disaster response on the water irregardless of circumstance, whether it's a terrorist attack or oil spills or mass casualty type events; airplane crashes. They're used to the Coast Guard being first on-scene in a leadership role on the water and I think that particular element is reassuring. I'm sure the Admiral's told you and I've had similar experiences where in the days and weeks after the World Trade Center , people would come up to us and openly accost us in a very public way and thank us for just being there.

**Q:** I spoke to one of the [Coast Guard] Strike Team guys - I think he's a warrant officer who has a lot cutter time - and he said it's strange because in your cutter everybody hates you because you're interfering with them trying to fish. You're enforcing this treaty and you're capturing them smuggling drugs, so they can't stand you. And he said that it was sort of a strange experience for cuttermen to be in New York as members of the Strike Team and have people buying them dinner. It was a very unusual. And on the cutter side it seems that although senior leadership has said that any military presence would have been reassuring those first few days, I get the sense from talking with people on the ground that the Coast Guard reassures us without being threatening. I don't know if that's your sense from your experience.

**CAPT Webster:** I think that clearly the Coast Guard is recognized as having that duality of role of being the same guy that plucks you out of the water when you're in trouble and also the cop on the beat or the Smokey of the sea. In this sense I think it takes it to a new level where you not only have the diet of search and rescues bread and butter, but you have this mission where our new diet is true grit. So I think it was long standing in the eye of the public with this positive image that I think went a long way when people were in a difficult circumstance.

**Q:** In terms of the Service itself; this dichotomy, one of the things that was a shock to me coming on active duty for the first time was not even being aware of this dichotomy between the "O" [Operations] people and the "M" [Marine Safety] people and that the "M" people don't have boats, and that if the Captain of the Port needs to get across the harbor he calls the "O" people to get him across the harbor.

**CAPT Webster:** Sure.

**Q:** And it's hard to explain to the general public that the Coast Guard has to liaison with the Coast Guard in certain circumstances. Is there going to be a point after 9/11 where in the Marine Corps every Marine is a rifleman, is every Coastie going to have to be trained to be a battle ready shore combatant, or do we have a different role in border security?

**CAPT Webster:** I think there's a need now more than ever before for us to parse off these new centurions of Homeland Defense, because one of the biggest challenges I see right now - and it's a major issue in the field right now - is the same guy who's out there who is the life saver; the rescuer, the same guy who's going onboard the recreational boat with his moccasins so that he doesn't scuff up the deck today may be faced with the dilemma of going to our Level 6 continuum of Use of Force; deadly force, on that same vessel in a very different circumstance the following day, and I don't think it's fair right now to ask our people to have not only the same breadth of knowledge they had before about SAR [Search and Rescue], plus the 600-odd fisheries regulations, but now a whole new domestic terrorism continuum Use of Force, and I think the time is probably right for us to address that by creating this new legion of people who are specifically trained to act in certain ways.

**Q:** Would it still be called U.S. Coast Guard? It seems that there's this tension between the life savers; the offshore folks, and now you've got Port Security, which has reemerged bigger than it has been since the Second World War. And starting off as a Reservist at MSO [Marine Safety Office] Providence 12 years ago, that's what we did. We trained for mobilization to guard the port of Providence, but when the Soviet Union went away it seemed like that mission vanished into the vapor and now all of a sudden it's come back. Do we reconstitute Port Security Units [PSU]?

**CAPT Webster:** I'm not sure. I don't have the answers. I clearly sense this tension that you talk about but I also have to deal with the impact from the field commanders, and clearly at this stage, six plus months after the World Trade Center attacks, their top priority issue is we now have this additional cadre of skills, knowledge and experience that has to be shoved into a new rating. A new rating, by the way, that is amalgamating with Quartermasters, RDs [Radarman] and others now. It may be time to be more like the Department of Defense with a specialty corps and that may just mean reconstituting a PSU like rating.

**Q:** Yes. Did 9/11 exacerbate or accelerate the consideration of these issues in your mind, and throughout the Service?

**CAPT Webster:** Clearly. I was the team leader for the Joint Ratings Review that came up with a scheme of the new sets of ratings that were accelerated anyway. Those ratings were accelerated by a preponderance of domestic tragedies like *Morning Dew*, Jericho River and some other cases that had gone afoul. I think the World Trade Center attacks have not only fast tracked them but identified issues that were only on the periphery prior to 9/11. For example the Joint Ratings Review recognized this future need for a specific law enforcement rating but left it to other studies to address.

**Q:** Yes.

**CAPT Webster:** And certainly as many studies as that particular team looked at they did not consider a future world that had terrorism, or Maritime Homeland Security, as one of its primary pivot points for the Service.

**Q:** So you don't think it would be necessarily wise that a Coast Guard boarding would be a Coast Guard boarding, regardless of Aunt Millie and her sailboat or a potential terrorist ship coming in. They all get the same person in the same suit with the same armor, and so forth and so on.

**CAPT Webster:** Yes, I see the conundrum that we have created, but clearly without enough resources to do everything perfectly we're going to have to come up with some type of compromise. And part of the main issue with the projected growth over the next 20 years of 65 percent new recreational boaters in that same waterway where we want to bring in the high interest vessel cargos, we have to do business differently. And I think part of that new business is to recognize that there are these key events where there's especially high value, not only to us domestically for energy resources, but also high value for terrorists in their war on the United States.

**Q:** The morning of 9/11, what kinds of things were thrown at you in the operational arena?

**CAPT Webster:** Well clearly the major issues that we were addressing were self force protection; implement an immediate scheme - like we did in every case prior to this - get as many resources into the affected area as possible, provide an overt visible presence to reassure the American public that they were safe and to evacuate Manhattan and to reestablish communications with Activities New York through Station New York. Those were the top priorities for, I'd say, the first 12-hours.

**Q:** So operationally you had lost communications for all intents and purposes with Activities New York?

**CAPT Webster:** Oddly the best communications we had with Activities New York was through e-mail. It's odd when we talk about e-mail these days, but the phone communications was spotty. The cellular was sketchy at best, and for whatever reason through the routing we could get e-mail through them, and occasionally we'd get this burst of information that would come and spread like wild fire through the District and update everyone. The Activities, I think, reconstituted communications through relay through Station New York. The ESU [Electronics Systems Support Unit] Commander here did an outstanding job; Commander Bob Day, in bringing in INMARSAT [International Maritime Satellite Organization] units that were part of a Strike Force package and through other means, and they put together a ninja team of C4ISR [Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance] people who went down to New York and got us as good as we were going to get given that the main communications hub had been destroyed.

**Q:** As a District Officer, when you go into these staff meetings are you - and as a lifelong career officer - are you looking for anything particular out of your leadership? Do you look to them in a crisis to behave in a certain way?

**CAPT Webster:** I won't ever forget the . . . this is not necessary a leadership thing, but it was clear to me that my staff was seriously affected by this event. Even though we were not at the nexus of the actual attack, you could see the controllers who on a normal day look out that window and look at Logan [International Airport, Boston]. There was a lot of spot-checking going on while there were still airplanes going out. And I think part of the leadership's challenge at that point was to reassure our own people, both in the building and in the meetings, that things were rapidly coming under control. And probably the thing I'm proudest about the leadership of the staff here is they focused on the task at hand. How do we get as many resources as possible into the affected area so the operational field commander can do his job as well as he can and how do we reestablish communications with New York? So that was leadership's principle challenge was reassure itself, providing resources and reestablishing communications.

**Q:** Do you take those, and throughout your career, have you taken those lessons from senior officers? Where do you get your own sense of command?

**CAPT Webster:** Well I've been fortunate to work with [Rear] Admiral [Richard M.] Larabee [III, USCG], retired, on two previous occasions for the [John F.] Kennedy [Jr.; Kennedy's private plane crashed off Nantucket Island on 19 July 1999, killing Kennedy, his wife and her sister] case and for the EgyptAir 990 [On October 31, 1999 EgyptAir flight 990, a scheduled international flight from New York to Cairo, crashed in the Atlantic Ocean about 60 miles south of Nantucket Island] recovery operation. And I guess he's been my model -of at least in the last three years - of someone that has faced these incredible white hot intense events with media and emotion and done an incredible job of remaining calm, providing a sense of reassurance, and a sense of emoting to the people around him that he was involved, not only operationally but also emotionally. And he provided a model, I think, for reassurance in the face of fire.

**Q:** Yes. That morning when this first happened, Captain Yatto, or one of his staff members, was telling me this morning that when the second plane went in they made the decision to send whatever they had to New York .

**CAPT Webster:** Sure.

**Q:** Was there a similar sense here that very quickly you needed to get everything on the move toward the city?

**CAPT Webster:** Yes, one of the first decisions that was made after the Force Protection Conditions were changed had to do with mobilizing any unit that was underway with the exception of the north and south search and rescue cutters, which was something we protected religiously throughout. All of the Bravo and Charlie cutters were brought to Alpha unless it didn't make sense, and in most cases the ships had already taken those initial actions themselves. In many cases they had already gotten themselves underway without a set of orders and had proceeded in the general direction of New York/New Jersey.

**Q:** Did those orders come down from Operations here in the District?

**CAPT Webster:** Yes. I have those and I can provide those to you.

**Q:** Essentially what is your area of responsibility is, is to assess the situation and find out what resources you have and to get them underway and get them on the move. Is that a fair statement?

**CAPT Webster:** I'm a resource person. The District Commander commands the District and, for example, we went to the Atlantic Area command for Atlantic Area command-controlled resources like the cutter *Spencer* [WMEC-905]. We went to them to have the *Spencer* chopped to us and directed the *Spencer* down to New York under Activities New York's operational command. And what we do up here is we certainly control the aviation resources, but when a field commander like Rick Yatto makes a wise decision to send helicopters to Floyd Bennett Field or something like that in the midst of this, it's a just the matter of an acknowledgement. All the black hulls work for us here and the majority of them were dispersed to New York and some I think were retained for Boston recognizing it was a major port here.

One of the other key early decisions was that some of the most volatile cargo ships were kept out from port. I think there was an early active consideration about an LNG [Liquid Natural Gas] coming into Boston that was delayed; principally resources, redirecting resources from other missions with the exception of the backup SAR cutters.

**Q:** I just want to show you from the Abstract of Operations to see if this is what you had a sense of. These are the boat forces the first four days showing where everything was on September 10th, and then the surge, not only in hours, but in the change of mission obviously.

**CAPT Webster:** And I would suggest that the changes were even more radical here in the 1st District because . . .

**Q:** Well that was my first question to the guy who does these at Headquarters. I said, are these broken down by Districts, and he said, no, we haven't gotten to that level yet.

**CAPT Webster:** I have that data here if that would be of some interest to you. I think you'll find that the impact was greater in the 1st District and continues to be so.

**Q:** Is that across platforms, cutters, boats and aircraft?

**CAPT Webster:** Oh clearly. And whatever arrangements were made at the District level for District controlled resources, the groups were making their own negotiations. So you had Group Moriches feeding small boat resources to Activities New York. Group Wood's Hole doing the same thing, and Group Long Island Sound. You had these multi-layered negotiations going on and we do have these numbers if they'd be of some interest to you.

**Q:** I think the comparative . . . I've got to give this data out to the talk in Hawaii in another month or so, and that's what I have from over all the Coast Guard. But I think that similar graph for the 1st District would be very revealing.

**CAPT Webster:** This kind of summarizes what I told you where our head was, so to speak, in terms of . . . it's kind of interesting. I published - just as an aside - maybe a couple of weeks before 9/11 I published the new Operations Goals and Objectives for 2001 through 2003, most of which became obsolete on September 11th.

**Q:** It's this kind of thing that I've been saying for years. They should have a - just like they do at the Pentagon now - is have a daily Coast Guard press briefing where they show where all of our resources are and what they're doing so it can provide the American people a much better picture of where we are and what we're doing.

**CAPT Webster:** I don't know how deep you want to get into this Chief but there maybe historical records of the actual transits of these vessels and their actual activities on the hours and days afterwards that were recorded in electronic logs. We have a system in the 1st that's unique called a CDPD. It's a cellular based system where I can click on a website and go back. I can't remember how far, but we can go back and see where a cutter has been, how fast they were going, and if we wanted to we could send them an e-mail by this system.

**Q:** I think that would be very valuable because one of the things I would like to do for this study is to show where our forces were in the 1st District on the 10th and not to show where they wound up, you know, we're now in Port Security, but to show the tracks that they all took to get there. To show them converging, and if that data is at Headquarters, I haven't found it yet. This is about the hours that were involved. It's about what we have, and some of the smaller vessels like the *Line* [WYTL-65611], the *Adak* [WPB-1333] and the *Wire* [WYTL-65612], I have nothing for; some of those vessels that responded to New York. And I'm going to try to get done interviewing Captain [Patrick A.] Harris [USCG] and his staff on Thursday. So I'm going to try to get some of that material then.

**CAPT Webster:** Sure.

**Q:** I've got good coverage from the *Juniper* [WLB-201], the *Katherine Walker* [WLM-552], and I've been in touch with the *Bainbridge Island* [WPB-1343], but I haven't made contact with them, and the *Grand Isle* [WPB-1338], the *Monomoy* [WPB-1326], the *Ridley* [WPB 87328]; those guys got me some good stuff, the rest of them. I think where the weakness is right now, and Captain Harris and I've talked about this and we're going to try to rectify it at some point, is that we have nothing from the boat force, and those guys took such a whack in this situation. But one of the problems with our SITREPs is that it will say, well, cutter this, cutter that, cutter "Z" are here and are going here, plus seven small boats. You don't have their numbers. You don't have their stations. So you could never track those people down later.

**CAPT Webster:** Well those numbers can probably . . . I mean it's going to require some effort, but can be reconstructed through the AOPS [Abstract of Operations Data System] data. I know we had to collect that data along the way to show that we'd consumed 20 years worth of a UTB's [Utility Boat] life in the first month.

**Q:** How was that determination made up? I've heard that figure used and how exactly do you make that determination?

**CAPT Webster:** It was a summary of the boat hours in Activities New York area for the 30 days after September 11th. And I have no doubt they have really good boat record hours data, but we have some fairly insightful, concise summary messages that came out in the days and weeks afterwards. We were trying to come to grips with the impact of what was this new burn rate doing to us, and like you've probably heard the fact, okay, they've changed 85 propellers in the first week after 9/11 because the contractor who goes around New York Harbor recovering drift wood stopped working after 9/11, and they became very proficient at changing propellers on 41-foot UTBs. But I know the OPR [Operations Planning Review] folks here have a lot of data on the small boats. Because right now we're trying to figure out what new caps to assign the groups in the stations because some stations have used up 400 or 600 boat hours per year allowance already in the first six plus months of the fiscal year, or less than six months, and they technically should only use 200 more hours.

**Q:** Before they're sitting in the dock for the rest of the year.

**CAPT Webster:** Yes, during the busy SAR season. So that isn't going to happen. So we have a lot of this stuff. Let me see what I can dredge up for you.

**Q:** That will be very helpful, Sir. I appreciate that. Well this has been a real help

**CAPT Webster:** Okay.

**Q:** And I think that's the, as I say, that's the big gap that I have right now.

**END OF INTERVIEW**

