



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: **Marine Science Technician First Class
Robert Joseph Schrader, USCGR**
Emergency Response Coordinator
Atlantic Strike Team

Interviewer: PAC Peter Capelotti, USCGR
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Place: Atlantic Strike Team

Q: I'd like to start off by asking you how long you've been in the Service, or in the Reserve? You're a Reservist?

MST1 Schrader: I've been in the Reserves a total of five years and I have a total of 14 years in the Service.

Q: In the Coast Guard?

MST1 Schrader: Yes. I had 11 years active duty.

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

MST1 Schrader: I've worked with the Strike Team in my civilian job.

Q: Which is?

MST1 Schrader: I'm an Emergency Response Specialist with the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection.

Q: And you're an MST1?

MST1 Schrader: Yes.

Q: What's your role here with the Strike Team?

MST1 Schrader: I work at the MST shop. I respond to environmental emergencies, acting as an Emergency Response Coordinator. I do a lot lab work, chemistry work, instrumentation and readiness.

Q: Do you work with Chief Dugery? Are you a part of his operation?

MST1 Schrader: At the time, yes. He was part of the Chem Shop. Now he's with training.

Q: Do you remember where you were that morning of 9/11?

MST1 Schrader: Yes, I was sitting in my office with my civilian Emergency Response crew and we were watching it on television.

Q: Were you one of the folks who came here to the Strike Team, or how did you wind up working with them after that?

MST1 Schrader: On our original call our team split up. One team went to Jersey City and one went to Atlantic Highlands as the people were being ferried off of Manhattan to New Jersey for decon. Under the state I had to go over there. That was Tuesday. Wednesday I got the call to come here and I came here.

Q: You were mobilized eventually, or whenever they got paperwork?

MST1 Schrader: I was mobilized. Well actually I was doing my active duty; my non-consecutive active duty. So I showed up for work and my job at first was to get everything ready to go; me and two other reservists.

Q: Where you eventually mobilized full-time?

MST1 Schrader: Yes. On the 14th we were mobilized for one year.

Q: Okay. Are you still on active duty?

MST1 Schrader: No I am not.

Q: Okay. How long were you on active duty for?

MST1 Schrader: Until January 23rd.

Q: Oh, okay. So you had about four months?

MST1 Schrader: Four months and ten days.

Q: You were here at the Unit for the first two days and then where did you go from there?

MST1 Schrader: Ground Zero.

Q: And what was your job there?

MST1 Schrader: We were to air monitor all the abandoned buildings, or the vacant buildings, and then escort - I called them - clients, or brokers, and their computer techies to their computer servers, their PCs and their desks for them to gather information and to bring it back down.

Q: Can you recall going into the city for the first time and what your response was? What did you see? What did you smell? What did you hear? For somebody who lives here in New Jersey this must have been a . . . I assume that you're in and out of the city . . . ?

MST1 Schrader: This was the fourth time in my life I've gone to the city.

Q: Really? Okay.

MST1 Schrader: I live close by.

Q: Well I live in Philadelphia and I've never been to the Liberty Bell.

MST1 Schrader: We went over as a group. There were nine of us that went over as a group with Petty Officer Telehaney and LT [LTJG David] Reinhard in charge.

Q: How did you get over there?

MST1 Schrader: By the Staten Island Ferry. We met at Battery Park where we had our vehicles. We had three vehicles and we were given maps.

Q: Do you remember what kind of vehicles they were?

MST1 Schrader: I was driving a Ford 350 dual crew cab; a Coast Guard truck.

Q: An Amtrak truck.

MST1 Schrader: A beautiful truck. I wasn't driving.

Q: And from there you went right to Ground Zero to do this air monitoring.

MST1 Schrader: Right to Ground Zero.

Q: I've had some interesting impressions of what it was like to escort people who are making half a million dollar salaries, up to their offices and so forth. Did you have any sensations like that?

MST1 Schrader: They were very gracious. One group we took up to the 44th floor of, I think it was M40 Broadway - and that sat across . . . Broadway was Ground Zero basically - and we took four of their folks up to the 44th floor, and while we were in that building on the 44th floor, while they were gathering their gear, the alarm went off for the stability of the building. While they were doing their jobs, me and another petty officer; Petty Officer Kenny from the Gulf Team were looking out the window and we could look and see all the people running out of our building. There was quite a pucker factor there. So we had to gather our folks and we got into the foyer where the elevators are and the stairs were . . . I looked, I was basically the Officer-in-Charge. I looked at the clients as I called them and I said, well how lucky do you feel, and we jumped in the elevator and came down. When we got down everybody was still running away, so we just got in a line of people running away from Ground Zero.

Q: I take it the building didn't collapse behind you?

MST1 Schrader: No it did not. But they had lasers on them, and what was happening was the winds were hitting the building and causing it to flex because some of the windows were blown out of them and it was gathering air inside.

Q: I've heard a lot about the impressions of the grayness because of the dust. There wasn't any color in the city.

MST1 Schrader: It was black and white.

Q: I remember that first week was strange because it was so quite because there were no planes overhead. Did you have any sensations like that when you first got there? Obviously you've got this disaster in front of you, but that the city was not the city anymore?

MST1 Schrader: The city was stopped. It was like walking in that movie "The Day the Earth Stood Still." We virtually walked down Broadway and there was nobody; absolutely vacant of people. We walked down on Wall Street. One of our jobs was to go into 64 Wall Street to check that building for carbon monoxide, oxygen, and any other toxins that might have been in the air that we could measure, and we were the only ones there; absolute only ones there. We were alone. We could go into any building we wanted to. Go anywhere in that building we wanted too.

Q: Did you feel like you were in kind of a strange science fiction movie?

MST1 Schrader: Absolutely.

Q: Manhattan had emptied out and you were the only people left alive.

MST1 Schrader: Well that was because across the street and one block down was Ground Zero. There was no electric. There was no sound except for sirens in the background. There was like oatmeal dust because it had rained that Thursday and it was like muck everywhere, and when it dried it turned like to paper maché. It became a hard crusted material that you can take and just squeeze it and it would just go to dust.

Q: Did you have a sense then from your emergency response background and MST training that this was becoming clear now that this was a fabulously dangerous area? Did you have a sense then of how dangerous this was in terms of . . . you look at the lists of some of these biohazards and all the rest? I mean everything that could hurt you pretty much was there.

MST1 Schrader: I personally was more concerned about the biohazard than I was more of a particulate matter. We did have the first couple of days, paper masks that were supplied, and as it progressed we got half-faced MSAs and we did wear them. Absolutely did wear this. Whether or not it filtered out everything I couldn't tell you.

Q: But it was a definite concern right from the beginning.

MST1 Schrader: Absolutely. It was a concern the first day when our folks were going over to Jersey City and over to the Highlands. When we were swiping these people and washing them down, they had red rashes. A lot of people had very bad red rashes.

Q: These are people that are evacuating the city?

MST1 Schrader: Yes. They were still covered with dust and blood. What we did was we wiped them down. We checked them for chemical hazards basically; a chemical weapons-type thing. We were using all the swipes; spot testing.

Q: And where were you doing that?

MST1 Schrader: We were doing that in Jersey City and in Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey, which is up by Sandy Hook.

Q: And these were two places that had been set up for evacuees.

MST1 Schrader: Civilians coming in.

Q: How many Coast Guard people were there?

MST1 Schrader: None. I was there with the State of New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection.

Q: Oh, that's where you were the first day.

MST1 Schrader: That gave me an idea of what to look for when they finally sent me to Ground Zero. We had a fairly good knowledge; I did, of what we were looking at.

Q: Of what people had walked out of there with.

MST1 Schrader: Absolutely, and the rashes turned out to be jet fuel.

Q: Really?

MST1 Schrader: Yeah.

Q: Incredible. Well I appreciate this very much. Did you participate in the Anthrax response?

MST1 Schrader: No I did not.

Q: How about over at Fresh Kills, did you visit that site?

MST1 Schrader: Yes I did. But one thing I wanted to tell you. Well actually two things. It was at Ground Zero. There was an absence of glass, concrete, wood and plastic. But at the same time that everybody was around there, there was an absence of racism, bigotry and hatred. Unbelievable; I've never seen anything like it in my life.

Q: I heard one person say that it was like a perfect world for about two weeks and then everybody began to sort of gradually revert to type as they got back to their own lives. Is that a sense you had that people were doing that?

MST1 Schrader: No. I was there until after Thanksgiving.

Q: And you still had some of that feeling.

MST1 Schrader: When I left there . . . I still do. I still have a good feeling for those folks that are up there. There were things there that I don't ever want to see again. You know buildings come down but

people come apart, and that's what we were finding, and that's one of our jobs. That was one of the hardest parts.

Q: Yeah. Was there any part of that scene around Ground Zero that made a particular impression on you? I mean there's obviously this overwhelming catastrophe, but at some point you start to focus in on little areas of it. Or perhaps you see little areas of it and you don't see the big picture. Did you sense that in yourself? Was there a point where you either were looking at things closely and stood back, or were you looking at things in the big picture and you finally looked at the details?

MST1 Schrader: I look at details first, and as you saw things you knew where not to look again and what to look for and what not to look for. We were very lucky because we had an overall picture of the whole thing, and because we were able to go to the top of these buildings and look down and see lines of buckets and lines of men and women and dogs digging their hearts out.

Q: Yeah. Was there a moment, or did you have a moment or a time when you could sort of stand back and reflect on the magnitude of this?

MST1 Schrader: That was the other thing I wanted to tell you. We set up at Battery Park with the Coast Guard right there, and right next door the police set up one of their little, I guess, outposts or whatever, and they said for us to come over there because they had soda and food there for us, because all we had were those MREs.

Q: They only go so far.

MST1 Schrader: It's like eating toothpaste. They taste like meat. I don't know.

Q: Or something.

MST1 Schrader: Or something. So we went over there and it was Petty Officer [MST1 John] Kapsimalis and Petty Officer Crease and myself. We were sitting there and we were drinking some sodas and just having some cookies and stuff. And the Lieutenant for the police . . . it was the change of shifts and he wanted to relay to his men what went on. He said the first night; Tuesday night, the Father from Saint Paul's - which is right there at Ground Zero with whom we met and ferried around quite a bit actually - went into that church and there was a man sitting in the pews weeping and he asked the man what happened. The man told him that he lost his brother and he lost his father and that he didn't feel God in the Church, and the Priest said that's because God isn't in the Church. He's on the hill weeping. I still get goose bumps. That was one of the emotional times, and when you think of it that way, that's the kind of thing that drove that first whole month.

Q: Yeah, that's pure emotion.

MST1 Schrader: Pure emotion. You don't get to see that.

END OF INTERVIEW

