

File No. 9110406

WORLD TRADE CENTER TASK FORCE INTERVIEW

FIRE MARSHAL JOHN COYLE

Interview Date: December 28, 2001

Transcribed by Laurie A. Collins

CHIEF KING: Today's date is December 28, 2001. The time is 1101 hours. This is Battalion Chief Stephen King, Safety Battalion, FDNY. I am conducting an interview with the following individual, Fire Marshal John Coyle from Brooklyn base, Squad 34. This interview is regarding the events of September 11th, 2001.

Q. John, whenever you're ready, you can start.

A. That morning I had worked the night before with Joe Mazzearella. Not a particularly busy night, I remember. We were all pretty much up having coffee downstairs at the base here. Steve Heavey was over near the department radio, which was on. He suddenly turned around and said a plane has hit the World Trade Center. Everybody looked at him and said, "What are you talking about?"

The TV was on. There was nothing on the TV yet. I remember a couple of us went outside and looked, and you could see smoke coming from one of the towers. You could just see it if you went around the corner of the

parking lot.

A few seconds later, a minute later or so, Supervisor Lynn came out of his office and said, "Everybody goes." So everybody started grabbing their gear and taking as much gear as you could. We wanted to take basically our bunker gear and helmets and everything we could lay our hands on. I went to my car. I had a Halligan. I grabbed that. We threw everything into the cars.

It was myself, Joe Mazarella stuck with me and John Murray was in the car also.

Just as we were about to pull out, the second plane hit. Everybody was flabbergasted. We took off. I was driving. Actually just before we took off, I asked Dave Lynn, I said, "How are we going to get there?" He said, "You've got to take the Battery Tunnel. They've closed everything else down. That's for emergency vehicles."

I actually said to him, "What about secondary devices?" That was the only thing I remembered from terrorist training, was watch for secondary devices and don't go rushing into

something. This is obviously at that point a terrorist attack, because two planes had.

He said, "That's the only way you can go. You're not going to make -- everything else is closed down." So I took Third Avenue. We really went very fast. We cut in and out of traffic, siren going.

We got over Hamilton Avenue, then to the Battery Tunnel. It let us through. I just punched it through the tunnel because I figured -- I didn't want the thing coming down on me in case there was some other problem with that.

Actually later on I was talking to some of the guys a couple days after that, and I said I must have been going 75 through that tunnel. Actually Murray turned around and said, "No, I was in the back seat. We were going 89."

We came out of the tunnel, and there were rigs everywhere. There was debris falling from buildings, because that's basically where it comes out. So I just wheeled the car around and parked I guess it must have been like Rector Place or somewhere like that, just to the left of

the exit of the tunnel. Actually it turned out to be blocked from the World Trade Center I think by a building, which allowed us to drive away later.

Then we grabbed all our gear. We popped the trunk. Everybody grabbed their bags and started walking up towards the World Trade Center complex. I guess it was Richard McCahey was walking around there, and they said everybody assemble in front of One World Financial Center.

So all of us, at least, all the marshals who came on that side of the World Trade Center, started assembling there. We were probably 20 to 40 feet in front of the World Financial Center building on a little raised platform just to the south of the south pedestrian bridge.

It seemed to us from that vantage that you were directly across the street from the south tower, although when you look at the map it seems to be off-center. You could see lots of debris falling from the buildings, what looks like ribbons almost, initially, little fine pieces of metal and everything. But as they

fell, you realized these were enormous chunks of material coming down.

There were a lot of people jumping. That was horrible. I was shook up. I have never been that shaken up by anything before. I was standing there and I couldn't believe that you could see people apparently holding their coats out to try and fly or something and then adjusting to the landing. It was fucking awful.

Anyway, I remember Joe Mazzaella, who I work with a lot, said, "Just don't look at it." We were all kind of shaken. Firemen are all marching in. We were told, "Stand fast. Don't move." I had my helmet on, my radio with me. I don't think I had any other gear on at that point. I had my Halligan with me in case we could do something.

It was a little foggy as to what anybody could do at that point. I wasn't sure what anybody could do. It didn't seem you could put those fires out.

Then I remember seeing Dr. Kelly walk by. I remember a civilian, a middle-aged couple, a businessman, it looked like, but they seemed to

be tourists or something standing near us. He was kind of smiling and pointing at the thing as if it was a tourist attraction, with his wife, I believe. He stood there for a few minutes.

Finally he said something to me. I have no idea what it was, but still with this kind of dopey grin on his face. I said, "What are you doing here?" He was like, "Well, this is something else," or whatever. I said, "If I were you, I would get the hell out of here," or words to that effect. He kind of looked at me funny, and then started walking away, it seemed.

There was a photographer there not far from us with a lot of cameras on him.

Steve Heavey and Supervisor Grogan had come in another car right behind us. They were there too. We were all standing kind of together. Grogan might have been sitting at the moment this thing happened.

I remember glancing to my right, and Joe Mazarella was at that moment looking up. I suddenly saw his face like a look of complete terror, and he just turned on his heel and took off running. I started running after him and

looking over my shoulder.

The tower was -- it looked to me -- I thought it was exploding, actually. That's what I thought for hours afterwards, that it had exploded or the plane or there had been some device on the plane that had exploded, because the debris from the tower had shot out far over our heads. It was raining down.

I ran south and then made a right onto Albany Street, which would be running west.

Q. Towards the water?

A. Heading towards the water. I was completely convinced that I was dead, that I had no chance of making it away from this thing. As I glanced up, I thought there's no way I can outrun this thing, there's absolutely no way, because it seemed to have gotten so far beyond these massive pieces of stuff.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]


[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]





I ran down the street, with pieces actually falling around me, the fastest I've ever run. Pieces fell around me. That big cloud thing enveloped me. As I made the turn -- I guess I made a left onto End Avenue, the first left.

But in my mind I remember thinking trying to get away -- I thought the building might be falling over completely, and I was trying to calculate in that fraction of a second, other than thinking of my daughter and things like that, how far is that building going to fall. It's going to crush these other buildings, I figured. I'm just trying to zigzag more or less away.

The debris cloud actually blew past me on Albany. I came out of it for a second on End Street, and then it came down in front of me too, and I was caught in it. I kept running. I could just see enough to run, and dove into the lobby of a building, a residential building, it turned out.

There were a bunch of civilians in

there, and more people started coming in. I went back out and started pulling people in.

Everybody was covered in this dust, really super covered. But nobody knew what had happened. I still thought it had exploded, something had exploded.

I started banging on apartment doors and actually found a woman who was doing construction in her house. She had a bunch of dust masks. She gave me all the dust masks, and she gave me a bunch of towels. I said, "Wet these towels." She gave me an arm load. I said, "Let's wet all the towels, and we'll hand them out to all these people."

I kept a dust mask for me. I gave one to a cop that was there. I handed out all these towels, and then went back out looking for people. I pulled a guy and his daughter in.

I then started walking pretty much away from it with everybody else down the esplanade. At that point I had no idea what had happened. It seemed that the thing had blown up. I didn't know what this dust was, whether it was part of the building or what the heck had happened.

There was a huge crowd walking down the esplanade. I ran into Brian Grogan after a few minutes. He seemed almost in shock. We didn't really speak much. It was senseless chatter on the radio. I couldn't make heads nor tails of it.

I got down to the battery. I think that's where I ended up. I know I was at that fort at some point. Then the other tower came down. When that dust cloud came again, I gave my mask to a little girl who was with her father. I ran south. They were in one of those little nooks in the fort.

Then I kind of wandered back up. I ended up up near the exit for the Battery Tunnel again, trying to get back towards the thing. Then I heard on the radio all marshals are to report to -- and I have no idea where it was. Oh, near the Jewish memorial thing.

I made my way over there, found Mazzarella. All the guys who were with us were okay. We stood there for a few minutes, and eventually I said, "We shouldn't even be here. This is the Jewish thing. This is a terrorist

thing. This is a dumb place to be standing. This thing might blow up." No. Everybody I think at that point still thought these things were blown up. So I was fully expecting anything else to blow up.

I think we mentioned that or somebody mentioned it to one of the supervisors, and then they said, "Oh, yeah, okay." Then they took us down to the very end of Battery Park near a restaurant and made us sit there for what seemed like hours, but it was hours.

Eventually we were all wanting to go back up and help. They were saying, "No, you have to stay right here. We'll maintain control," which made no sense. Finally they said, "Go see if your car is okay. If you can get your car out, bring it back here."

We went back up, me and Murray and Mazzarella, found the car, which was completely covered in rubble but wasn't really damaged badly. We cleared the windshield off, got in it and drove it back to the base of Battery Park.

Then at some point they said, "Okay, we're reassembling now up on West Street." I

guess it's the West Side Highway there. It's quite a bit up. There was a school, and they used that as an assembly point. I don't know the address.

Q. Manhattan Community College?

A. That might have been it.

We drove back up there, pulled in. Our car was promptly surrounded by rigs. We went into this thing and stood around for more hours. Well, it was hours with the cops. I don't remember that many firemen. I remember marshals, cops.

Rumors were sweeping, that the Washington Monument was down, the Sears Tower was down, all the stuff like that.

Eventually we made our way back -- I don't remember how -- to Manhattan base. They said, "Go get your car again," eventually. We went to get the car. We were inside the perimeter, more or less -- that's where the car was -- of where Seven World Trade Center was.

We started back going east, I guess it is. I don't know what street it is. Let's see. Six or seventh. We were probably here.

Q. Murray?

A. Murray, I'm guessing.

We started going back east. We were inside this perimeter, although we didn't realize it at the time. We saw a rig with the compartments opened. We stopped. They were actually reversing. I kind of pulled up along side them. Murray yelled out the window, "Your compartments are open." The guy yelled something back at us. They kept backing up.

We went forward to I imagine it's the corner of Murray and West Street. Just as we were approaching it, we saw a person run north in front of the car, and then Joe Mazarella, who was sitting in the passenger seat, just started screaming, "Reverse, reverse, reverse, reverse." I didn't even look. I just threw it in reverse and punched it. We flew backwards without being able to see out the rear, and building seven came down in front of us.

At that point we just parked the car. I pulled it over, and we walked back and left it there until much later in the night when they told us to finally retrieve it.

Q. When you backed up, did you go across West Street?

A. I'm guessing -- if we were on Murray, we probably approached West, whatever this is here. Because it came down basically like this, right in front of us. I just reversed it back to the street here.

Q. And debris went past Murray Street, would you say?

A. Oh, yeah. It was like another one of those giant clouds. It shot through here. I didn't even know what happened at that point.

While I was down at Battery Park, I finally got through on my phone to my father and said, "I'm alive. I just wanted to tell you, go to church, I'm alive. I just so narrowly escaped this thing." He said, "Where were you? You were there?" I said, "Yeah, I was right there when it blew up." He said, "You were there when the planes hit?" I said, "No, I was there when it exploded, the building exploded." He said, "You mean, when it fell down?" I said, "No, when it exploded."

I still didn't realized what had

happened. I totally thought it had been blown up. That's just the perspective of looking up at it, it seemed to have exploded out. But that I guess was the force of the upper stories collapsing down.

That's really it. After that then they had us kind of compiling lists of missing members and then going to the various stations and trying to figure out who had been working and who had jumped on the rig and compiling all these lists.

Then we returned back to Manhattan base. After that we just stayed here for about three days at the base. I slept on the floor in the weight room. Then they had us up that morning.

Q. Okay, John. That's good.

CHIEF KING: The time is 1119 hours, and the interview with Fire Marshal John Coyle is concluded.