**HAZ MAT**

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By Robert Ingram

From Chief of Department Peter Ganci's office window at Fire Headquarters in Brooklyn, we had a clear view of the North Tower from the east side and could see smoke billowing out from the upper floors after the first plane hit. We all knew we were needed, and a convoy of staff proceeded to the scene, including the on-duty and off-going citywide tour commanders, chief of operations, chief of department, chief of safety, and several members of the commissioner's staff. We drove past City Hall, monitoring the radio for preliminary and progress reports from the battalion and deputy chiefs on the scene. As we got closer, we had to maneuver past hundreds if not thousands of fleeing civilians. We finally stopped on the southbound side of West Street, the western roadway boundary of the World Trade Center (WTC) site. The second plane had still not hit.

We had a quick discussion to establish a department command post on this western side of the street near the entrance to the underground parking garage of the World Financial Center (WFC).

I suggested to Chief Ganci that he contact air traffic control at the airport to request information on the type of plane and if it was reporting any trouble. This was an early attempt to determine whether it was an accident or an attack. As we were speaking, we heard the second plane's engines roar through the steep bank it was taking on its path toward the South Tower. As I looked up, a shift in the wind moved the smoke from the North Tower, and I could see the nose of the second plane just prior to its hitting the South Tower. The sound was indescribable, the fireball was big, and debris was raining down. It was clear we were under attack. This was no accident.

Citywide Tour Commander Joseph Callan had already reported to the North Tower lobby command post and assumed command from Deputy Chief Peter Hayden. This was the standard position for the command post in our experience of typical high-rise fires. Many responding agencies as well as fire companies reported to this location for assignments and support needs. Within a few minutes after the impact of the second plane into the South Tower, Chief Ganci requested one fifth alarm for the North Tower, a second fifth-alarm assignment for the South Tower, and a third fifth-alarm assignment in staging on the Brooklyn side of the Brooklyn Bridge.

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| http://images.pennnet.com/articles/fe/thm/th_105363.jpg *Photo 1*  Click here to enlarge image |

Among the units arriving on the first fifth alarm was Haz-Mat Company 1. As members dismounted from their apparatus, I told them to take radiological and chemical agent detectors with them and report to the North Tower. Since this was an attack, we needed to determine as quickly as possible whether these planes were carrying any materials that would pose additional hazards for our members and civilians.

On West Street, at the chief of department's command post, responding units were arriving and reporting in. The department's small mobile command post van was parked in the parking garage ramp on the side, and the command board was set up in the middle of the ramp in front of the security gate and guard booth. We staged ladder companies on one side of the ramp and engine companies on the other in the order in which they reported—with the earliest- arriving units at the top of the ramp and the later-arriving ones down the ramp into the garage area.

At the ramp entrance were an NYPD Emergency Services Unit (ESU) sergeant and two ESU officers. They were equipped with weapons and protective vests and were looking up at the fire and smoke pushing out of the towers. I requested that they search for secondary devices in the parking garage since we were using it for staging and wanted to make certain it was not booby trapped. They were reluctant at first to comply, so I explained that security and searches for secondary devices were police tasks and I was officially requesting them to perform these tasks. They then conducted the search and reported later that it was clear. During the days that followed, I heard they were thankful for having done this search, as they also used the garage for safe refuge when the South Tower came down.

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| http://images.pennnet.com/articles/fe/thm/th_105364.jpg *It took more than a dozen firefighters, some civilians, and eventually a vehicle to stretch large-diameter hose from a fireboat to the intersection of West and Vesey, where a mini-manifold was waiting to establish a water supply. Photo 2*  Click here to enlarge image |

Many chief and company officers were reporting in to the outside command post by this time, some directly from their response, others who had already reported in to the North Tower lobby command post and were bringing out information to Chief Ganci.

Throughout this operation, debris continued to fall from the breaking windows, the building, and the plane. People trapped in the upper floors also began to fall down. Whether they jumped, slipped, or were pushed out from the pressure of people behind them trying to get fresh air at the windows, we will never know. If there was any screaming, I could not hear it. I heard only the sounds of their bodies hitting the lower canopy and ground. Members continued to report in, stage, and receive assignments until the South Tower fell.

There had been talk about partial collapses on the upper floors, but no discussion that I recall of a total collapse. There were also only a few members of the Mayor's Office of Emergency Management staff who reported in to the command post on West Street. We did not have a lot of—if any—communication with police staff chiefs. When the South Tower came down, it was a complete surprise to everyone in the command post area.

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| http://images.pennnet.com/articles/fe/thm/th_105365.jpg *Photo 3*  Click here to enlarge image |

Then we retreated into the parking garage as debris fell all around us. The entire sky became dark; the rush of air blew dust and debris on us, over us, and all around us. Breathing was difficult; you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. Many of us in the command post did not have SCBA with us, but the collapse was so sudden and so quick that even those that had breathing apparatus with them did not have time to don it.

After a time the noise subsided, and a surprising calm filled the area. The area around us was still black; visibility was zero and the air so filled with dust I felt as if I were chewing it. I actually thought we were buried in the garage because it was so dark. Members began to move around; a couple of us remembered we had flashlights. We turned them on and began to search for a way out. Members were calling out to one another to check on injuries. After several minutes, someone found a door out, off to the side of the main garage doors. We formed a chain to help guide one another out. The outside light looked so good even though it was still a very thick haze, not a clear sky. As we all made our way out, I remember standing next to Chief Ganci as the dust cloud cleared. He was looking up at the empty space in the skyline and said, "The whole building is gone." As I looked up, I could see he was right. The South Tower had completely collapsed.

We immediately began to regroup. I began directing members to head north to West and Barclay streets where we would begin a new staging area from which to regroup and assign members to the new task of searching for our own. Captain Al Fuentes went back into the garage to conduct a secondary search to make certain all of our members had made it out from there. It was about this time that I believe Chief Ray Downey left the command post and headed to the area of heaviest collapse to assist members there. Chief Al Turi was still with us and working to help reorganize.

The mobile command vehicle was damaged, but some radios were still inside, and we handed them out. The North Tower was still intact but burning heavily. We were definitely concerned about its stability and began to evacuate firefighters. As the firefighters made their way out toward us, we continued to direct them to the new staging area. We continued to operate between the two pedestrian footbridges but closer to the north one. It was about this time that I saw Chief Joseph Pfeifer emerge from the WFC building. I realized weeks later that he had been in the lobby command post of the North Tower and after the collapse of the South Tower had made his way out of the building across the footbridge to his present location. Fuentes had completed his secondary search of the garage and left to assist Downey near the collapse area of the South Tower.

The area around us was covered with several inches of debris, much of it paper. Several fires were burning. The dust had made breathing and swallowing difficult.

Then the sound came again. We looked up, and the top of the North Tower was beginning to cascade down. I ran north under the footbridge as fast as I could. I lost track of where those around me ran. I can only assume that those who died either stayed close to where we had been or headed south while I went north. I still had on all my bunker gear, and it seemed like I was running in slow motion as debris began to fall around me. I held on to the radio but lost my hand light. When the debris began to overtake me, visibility was decreasing rapidly, and breathing began to get difficult, again from the dust. I decided to take my chances under a tower ladder I was passing. I dove under the tail, rolled up against the rear tires, pulled my collar around my face, and closed my mouth and eyes.

I don't remember thinking, praying, or even moving at all during this time. I just listened to the noise around me and waited. The air movement was also incredible as pieces of debris were being carried over, around, and under the tower ladder, some hitting me.

I don't remember how long it was before the dust lifted. It came in stages like a dawn, going from pitch black to lighter shades of gray. Again, there was an incredible silence as nothing around me moved. I can only guess that everyone, including myself, was going through a slow mental checklist: breathing—good, head moves—good, arms and legs—good, and so on. I could hear people around me coughing from the dust.

I pulled myself up into the street and began to adjust my vision as the dust was lifting and visibility became better. I directed those with medical needs to head north to the staging area. Those of us in good shape (if there was such a state at that time) started to assemble at the corner of West Street and Vesey. This would become one fire department command post (it wasn't until much later that I realized there were several as officers began to assemble around the WTC footprint), and I operated out of this post until late that night. The first staff chief I remember encountering was Assistant Chief Frank Cruthers, who had responded in from his home early after the report of the first plane crash. Fire crews were assembling and new companies were reporting in. There were fires burning on both sides of West and Vesey streets in the structures and many fires burning in the street, including many of our response vehicles. The paper coming down was inches deep on the street and was acting as a trailer, allowing the fires to spread. One NYPD Emergency Services vehicle was burning in the middle of the intersection; I immediately knew it would become a danger to us if we didn't get it out quickly because of the equipment it carried. Several fire trucks were burning as well, and the north pedestrian bridge was down and covered in debris, two or three fire trucks crushed underneath its weight.

Several members of Haz-Mat Operations along with several members of Haz- Mat Company 1 had assembled and re-ported to me. I asked them about the status of the HM company apparatus and other Special Operations Command (SOC) vehicles, particularly for the chemical agent detectors and radiological monitors. I directed them to find this equipment, which they did. They informed me that the on-duty member assigned to the resource position had remained with the apparatus (procedure) throughout the collapses and was now securing it away from West Street and Vesey, the original location. I split the haz-mat members into two teams and directed them to completely circle the WTC site in opposite directions to begin testing for other "materials" that may have been on the planes. They had only one radio each, but we all expected to meet back at the intersection of West and Vesey as the best means of communicating. It would be almost two hours before they reported back to me. The whole site was blocked by so much debris that traveling around it was extremely difficult and time-consuming. Their initial monitoring was all negative. We were all relieved by this report, and I relayed this information to Chief Cruthers.

Radio traffic was difficult at this time; I cannot remember any communications from units operating around the other sides of the WTC site. The hydrant water system was severely damaged, and fire crews were pulling long lines from the few sources that were good. We received word that one fireboat had tied up south of the WFC and was feeding a large-diameter line to crews operating from the south on West Street, below the south pedestrian walkway, which was still standing across the road. Word was that a second fireboat was responding. I would secure a site for it to tie up and assemble crews to stretch a large line east down Vesey Street to West Street. We directed other officers to secure a mini-manifold and position it at the intersection for the purpose of feeding multiple handlines. The fireboat officer and I were able to communicate via department radio, and it tied up close to the small park area at the west end of Vesey. With a dozen or so firefighters and civilians, and eventually a van, we stretched the large-diameter hose from the fireboat to the intersection of West and Vesey, where the mini-manifold was waiting. Lines were connected and put into operation as soon as the water flowed.

I worked at this intersection through the late morning and most of the afternoon. At some point during this time, there was heavy fire in 7 WTC; stability was a concern. Some members from SOC had placed a transit on West and Vesey and were monitoring 7 WTC for movement. This showed the building's movement just prior to its collapse and enabled us to keep everyone out of the collapse zone.

All during this activity conducted from our intersection, reports via radio and runners were coming in from several sides of the site from several command chiefs—but none from Chief Ganci. He had not been seen since the North Tower came down. Deputy Chief Nick Visconti had reported in to the West Street command post; when he heard that I was with Chief Ganci during the collapse of the North Tower, he asked where I had last seen him. We decided to travel through the WFC buildings, through the large atrium area, and down into the garage area where we had staged initially. We climbed out of the garage ramp area over piles of debris—steel beams, girders, and lots of dust. There were what appeared to be several hundred rescuers spread out over the debris field searching every void they could find. There were about 40 to 50 firefighters searching the area where I had last seen Chief Ganci.

We realized this was going to be a long operation, so we took some members out of the area so we could form teams and rotate them to allow for rest and hydration. We also were going to need a lot of specialized cutting tools, torches, lights, and so on.

I had already received a call that the NYC FEMA USAR cache of equipment was being moved from its storage location into Manhattan. The team needed to find an area to establish a base camp from which to organize, operate, and distribute the equipment. I went to help establish the base camp. We were looking for an area large enough to handle the equipment, not too far from the site yet not too close where it could become part of it; it had to be secure. We drove for nearly an hour, winding our way through the streets, some closed off, many others strewn with debris, without finding a suitable location. Fortunately, we received word of a fenced-in playground on Chambers just east of West Street. The site was hosed down to remove the blanket of dust, and tents were set up and equipment was moved in. Supply tents as well as storage areas would handle the truckloads of equipment that would be delivered there over the next few weeks.

A communications system was set up. These radios provided our search teams with extremely good communications capability separate from regular fire and police frequencies, and we operated with them effectively for several weeks. Joint fire and police search teams began the first few mornings from this site with tools and PPE for the tasks assigned until separate agency supply depots were established. OEM had taken control of the first floor of a school on the southwest corner of West and Chambers, and this worked as a focal point of coordination for many agencies in the first two to three days.

We worked through that first night getting the base camp established and running tools down to the site for the SOC teams working voids. (For several days, tools were physically carried the six to seven blocks to the site because it was impossible to move vehicles that close. Eventually, as crushed vehicles and debris were removed and ATVs were brought in, this became easier.) 7 WTC had already come down, but several other buildings were still burning, and a few additional surrounding ones were being monitored for movement and instability. Chief Ganci's and Commissioner William Feehan's bodies were found on West Street, but many were still unaccounted for.

SOC chiefs were ex-tremely busy coordinating incoming crews while still providing some special operations coverage to the rest of the city. This was a daunting task, as every member wanted to be at the site digging for survivors. Even when their shifts were up, many members chose to stay and search.

On September 12, SOC crews arrived at the base camp. We assembled teams; used rescue and squad company captains as team leaders; equipped them with radios, PPE, and tools; and assigned them to one of four quadrants. I spent most of this day coordinating between the search team leaders and the quadrant commanders, some of whom were not familiar with the capabilities and equipment of the SOC/USAR group.

It was also becoming more difficult to get a few uninterrupted minutes with the incident commanders, mainly (in my opinion) because of the close proximity of the command post to the site and the lack of scene security. There were thousands of firefighters, police officers, emergency medical technicians, iron workers and other teamsters, and many civilian volunteers. In addition, many state and federal representatives were now present, as were an unbelievable number of specialists with the "robot or meter or diamond-tipped drill that was the answer to all of our problems on scene," and they all had to talk to the incident commander. This caused a very chaotic command post that hindered operations; the IC was pulled in a thousand directions with little time in between to act on information he had just received.

There was a notable lack of security around the command post as well. We had already lost many senior experienced chiefs, and we did nothing initially to protect the ones we had left. We should have asked for it more quickly than we did; the NYPD should have provided it more quickly than it did.

We had many false reports of survivors found, including one that involved two New Jersey firefighters who had made their way into the pile through some voids and were mistaken for survivors. Accountability of workers at the site was impossible without tight perimeter control. This was not accomplished until a fence was placed around the entire perimeter several days later and checkpoints were established.

A second critical area that hindered operations was the lack of a unified command. Each agency had a separate command post and structure. This was compounded by the fact that the Mayor's Office of Emergency Management (OEM) command center, where all agencies would work together, was destroyed in 7 WTC. OEM was having some luck in gathering many of the agency representatives at its commandeered facility at Chambers and West, but there was no senior ranking fire official there for planning purposes. At the fire command post at West and Vesey, we lacked key representatives from the other local agencies. We were still regrouping as a department; Chief Dan Nigro was appointed chief of department and Chief Sal Cassano chief of operations.

Operations continued through the second night, as the outer area of the debris field was cleared to provide access for the big cranes needed to lift the steel that covered the site. SOC/USAR teams continued to search voids and assess nearby buildings for stability. The WFC building had been pierced by steel girders from the North Tower's collapse about 30 stories up and created a severe hazard for members working under it. The Bankers Trust Building was shrouded in black mesh to prevent debris from falling from the 20- to 30-story gash ripped in the face of the structure from the collapse of the South Tower.

Fixed facilities for food, drinks, and rest were in the works but were not fully established. Hundreds of civilians walked among the rescuers handing out homemade sandwiches, soup, and drinks. That was so incredible and so sorely needed.

About 2 a.m. on Thursday morning, I needed a break and sat down on a cot at the SOC/USAR base of operations. I had been in my bunker gear and leather boots for 40 hours and was still coated in dust. My feet had swelled to the point where I could not get my boots off by myself. At 6 a.m., we got the next shift of SOC members outfitted and assigned to sectors. I again acted as a coordinator between the SOC/USAR teams leaders, who knew what they wanted to do and were trained for it—void searches, confined spaces, and so on—and the sector chiefs, who were not familiar with the SOC/USAR leaders' training and experience and were hesitant to allow them into certain areas.

Early in the afternoon on Thursday, I left the WTC site and drove to fire headquarters to speak with Chiefs Cruthers, Sal Cassano, and Nigro about the use of the SOC/USAR personnel and the functions of the FEMA USAR teams that were beginning to arrive and establish base camps. I expressed the need for one overall command post away from the site and distractions caused by the lack of command post security. I also felt that we needed to establish a more permanent command structure for the site to replace the current practice of changing it every 12 hours when the tour commanders relieved each other. The fire department needed to start bringing together all of the agencies working and represented at the site daily and develop overall site search and safety plans.

At a meeting at headquarters that evening, we discussed the attendance of several members of SOC/USAR that would help structure the search and rescue component at the site. Chief Nigro decided to divide the department into two, one that would fulfill the normal responsibilities to the city and a smaller group of approximately 1,500 that would be detailed to the WTC. Chief Cruthers was assigned as the WTC commander, and he was to establish his staff to meet the site and department needs. Chief John Norman was assigned as the WTC rescue officer, Chief Peter Hayden was the executive officer, and I was assigned as the haz-mat officer. Battalion Chiefs Don Hayde, Tom Richardson, Jack Corcoran, and Pete Stuebe were reassigned to SOC Command with Jack Spillane and Bill Siegel, and would begin operating as sector coordinators between the SOC/USAR teams and the sector commanders; they would also bring SOC companies back on line to cover the rest of the city.

Within the next few days, several other positions were filled by experienced chief officers including Deputy Chiefs Charlie Blaich and Ron Spadafora and Battalion Chief Joe Pfeifer. By the beginning of week two, we had also moved the WTC command post to a facility on Duane Street, several blocks from the actual site. At this site, Chiefs Cruthers and Hayden held planning and strategy meetings twice a day.

"It was like after a blizzard when there's nobody out and everything is very quiet and you can't really see," Captain Michael Donovan told interviewers. "There was nobody. There was nobody. It was like Hiroshima after the bomb." In Captain Donovan's interview, he recounted searching West Street for survivors after the second tower collapsed. Minutes earlier, the department's senior commanders had been gathered there, struggling to recover after the first building fell. Now, he said, all he could find were lost masks and fallen equipment, buried fire trucks and burning cars. "I searched there for, I would say, 20 minutes to half an hour, and I didn't see anyone," he said.—**"9/11 in Firefighters' Words: Surreal Chaos and Hazy Heroics," Kevin Flynn and Jim Dwyer, The New York Times, January 31, 2002**

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(Photos 1 and 2 by FDNY Photo Unit; photo 3 by Abraham Schwimmer.)