

An Interview with Pete Dunn, 9/11 Responder

Interviewed by Justin Sulsky

I am 57 years old. I retired in 2002 from the New York City Police Department (NYPD) and I am currently an adjunct instructor at Suffolk Community College where I teach criminal justice. I started in the NYPD in January 1982 and I have a B.A. in Criminal Justice from C.W. Post. I attended Hofstra University where I earned a Master's in Social Studies Education while I was the commanding officer of the narcotics module in Brooklyn South. I actually had a class scheduled on September 11, 2001.

I was on duty the morning of September 11 and was sitting at my desk preparing for my Hofstra class. My office was in a small building along the waterfront in Brooklyn. After the first plane hit, we didn't know what happened. We thought that this was some kind of an accident, a crappy pilot. The approximately 100 people that reported to me got ready to report to the crash site before the second plane even hit. When the plane hit the second tower, we knew something was going on. I was then beeped and called my boss to say we were on our way. I told my men to grab all the water and soda they could from the vending machines because I knew we would be there for a while.

It was not hard to get into the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel because we were cops and I was in a uniformed shirt. We drove through the tunnel filled with smoke; it was very difficult. We parked in front of the Downtown Athletic Club. That is the home to the Heisman Trophy and I actually saw it in the lobby.

Both Towers Fell

By the time we got there, both towers had fallen. It was a pretty chaotic scene. There was no information while riding over or on the radios. I got the best updates from my wife who was watching TV. I called my daughter who was a freshman in college in Pennsylvania. My brother was working in the American Express building across the street from the World Trade Center. I remember the 1993 bombing when he was told to go back into the building. I told him that time that he needed to get out. He took my advice and told everyone else to leave the building. I called his office number on my way to the crash site and he was aware enough to leave a message on his phone saying that he was okay.

We went to Pier 11 where they sent the Organized Crime Control Bureau people to muster. We were waiting for someone higher up to give instructions but it was chaotic and people were trying to formulate plans as to what to do. After a short while we didn't hear anything and my partner and I said to our squad, "Let's go! Let's see what we can do." We started in what we thought would be a rescue effort and decided to go to the AMEX building on the corner of West and Vessy Street. We went to the 7th floor rotunda and stepped out of a window where the top of the "pile" was. The towers "pancaked" when they came down so there were many stories of rubble to go through. All the responders kept to their own pile. The interactions were good between firefighters, police officers, construction workers, and other civilians who were helping. We dug down with our hands because we didn't have much equipment, and felt removing small bits would be safest. We had five gallon buckets to help get through the rubble. We were looking for survivors, but everyone was dead. Saint Vincent's Hospital had a triage set up but nobody went. It was just a dust debris pile with incinerated body ash. There were a couple of intact bloody bodies but most of it was pieces of people.

In a situation like this, you have a job to do, just like any other job. You didn't have time to be emotional. If you get emotional, you're no good to anybody. It was hard because everybody knew somebody who could have been in there. I knew a number of firefighters socially and people knew there were a lot of cops and bystanders who went in before the towers fell. Everyone was just doing their job and following the directives of their individual supervisors. What else could you do?

At about 3 PM, we went to 7 World Trade Center. We were in there for a little bit looking for people. Then a guy from the FDNY, a "white shirt" [high ranking supervisor], said this building is coming down. 7 WTC was a concern because the Secret Service had some things in there. The "white shirt" did not elaborate on what those "things" were. We stood outside 65 WTC and it was very impressive how it was falling. My father was a demolition engineer and the way it came down was just unreal.

At about 6 or 6:15 PM, we assembled at West and Vesey Streets to make sure that everyone was accounted for. If you came with “X” amount of guys, you wanted to make sure that the same number remained. Fortunately, everyone in our squad was accounted for.

At 7 PM or so, there was a temporary morgue set up where we could bring remains, including pretty small remains. Everything was logged in and there was some semblance of organization. The rescue and recovery operation combing through the rubble continued until 2 AM. At 2:15 we were told to return at 5 AM the next morning. My partner and I went back to the office. It was easy getting through the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel at that point. We got to the office at 3 AM and then I drove to my home on Long Island. I needed to show my wife and son, who was high school age that I was okay. We touched base about what happened to a number of people we knew, mostly firefighters. I showered and then immediately made my way back to my Brooklyn office.

I arrived at the office at 5 AM and by 6 AM we were back at West and Vesey. We continued the same process as the day before and we worked until 5 PM. After that we split in two shifts. One group worked from 5 AM until 5 PM and the other from 5 PM until 5 AM. I was assigned to the night shift. Unfortunately, there were not many people to pull out. We hoped there would be survivors in the garage or in the smashed subway station. We expected to be part of a rescue operation, but that was not what we saw.

Unprepared for What We Found

At the start, while we were sifting through the rubble, we were either wearing gloves or working with our bare hands. Later on we were issued dust masks to wear. Nobody knew what the correct procedure should be to insure safety. There was no precedent for this type of operation so how much can you second-guess? But Christie Todd Whitman (Governor of New Jersey), Rudy Giuliani (Mayor of New York City), and Bernard Kerik (New York City Police Commissioner) all said the air was safe. They said they did tests from helicopters and that none of us would be harmed by the particles in the air.

On September 15, I had the first day where I could relax a bit. Later, I was assigned to the in Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island to sift through garbage looking

for body parts, pictures, and anything else that could be used as a record of a person. We had cadaver dogs to help. Eventually we were issued special HAZMAT suits, boots, and more appropriate equipment. The operation continued for two and a half months. We were weary but we had a job to do.

There is no way to know if the recovery effort could have been done any differently. It was such an unexpected event. However Mayor Giuliani and the other officials could have been honest about the air quality and the impact it would have on responders. People would have done their jobs anyway; they did not have to lie to us. Giuliani made his name as the “9/11 Mayor,” but when I was walking into the towers, he was going out the other way. He made his name famous on the backs of other people. Maybe what he did was outstanding, but how could we really know?

I was already planning, before 9/11, to retire from the police force in 2002. At first, along with a lot of other guys, I thought I might stay on; but then I changed my mind again. I said to myself, “How important am I really? Someone else will do my job.” So I went ahead and retired in the spring of 2002. I am not a political guy. I was definitely pissed about what happened, but if I let my emotions get a hold of me, I would not have been able to do my job. I do not consider myself a hero. I was just doing what I had to do. The people in the plane over Pennsylvania were heroes because they prevented the plane from hitting another target. The construction workers and other regular people, civilians, who volunteered to help out at Ground Zero were heroes.

I have had health issues since 9/11. My lungs are shot and I basically can’t breathe. About a-year-and-a-half after 9/11, I went to a pulmonologist and he told me my VI (ventilation or breathing rate) is a high 50 when it should be in the 90s. The Mt. Sinai/WTC Monitoring Program at Stony Brook University has provided me with medical care since 9/11 and I have been satisfied with them. They were running out of money until the Zagroda Bill (James Zadroga 9/11 Health and Compensation Act of 2010) extended federal support to provide care for first responders. After 9/11, you would walk down the street in uniform and be treated as a hero. There was such an outpouring of patriotism. Slowly but surely things started changing. It annoys me that it took so long to pass a bill to provide healthcare for 9/11 responders.