

Memories of 9/11 will always be with me



By Jeff Parsons

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Twelve years ago, I was one of the chosen few ordered to recovery and cleanup duty with the New York Army National Guard at what was once the World Trade Center. In 1970, 31 years before the twin towers fell, I stood on the deck of a U.S. Naval destroyer in Brooklyn Navy Yard and photographed the half-complete towers.

After a 20-year absence from military service, I found myself at annual training on the eve of my 55th birthday (Sept. 12) in battle dress uniform, guarding the airfield at Fort Drum, while seated in an armored personnel carrier. Less than three weeks later, I'd be at the "pile" in zone one, along with eight officers of the New York Police Department, to provide security assistance.

In order to preserve these moments and hear the voice of America once again, my mind must focus on these memories:

- The display of American flags hanging from interstate highway overpasses and building cranes, and painted on barns as we rode by charter bus to our briefings (350 miles away from our Western New York homes) at Camp Smith, near West Point on the Hudson River.
- The “thank you” from a complete stranger, which validated my entire military career, as I awaited a subway train in Grand Central Station. I was proud to be an American in uniform.
- The sight of Battery Park, filled with Army vehicles, Red Cross tents and the view of a U.S. Coast Guard cutter, as it stood like a white sentinel between the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, daring anyone or anything to sail into New York Harbor.
- The sight of the Empire State Building, with its red, white and blue lighted upper stories and its renewed status as New York City’s tallest building.
- Standing at the center of the Brooklyn Bridge at 2 a.m. during a terrorist alert with the odor of the still-smoldering pile in the chilled morning air. I looked toward Brooklyn, but couldn’t see the Navy Yard.
- The word that Father Mychal Judge, chaplain of the New York Fire Department, was the first recorded “line of duty” death at ground zero. A graduate of St. Bonaventure University in Allegany, his heart had given out while breathing the pulverized concrete cloud from the collapse of the South Tower of the World Trade Center.
- The service at the site following the discovery of the bodies of 12 New York City firefighters, attended by Mayor Rudy Giuliani. The band played and the soloist sang “God Bless America.”
- The hospitality of the city and the camaraderie of New York police officers.
- The discovery on Oct. 8 of the first NYPD remains – traceable only by their service revolvers and shoes. All human remains, no matter what the size or origin, were saluted by firefighters, police and National Guard personnel.
- A family of Japanese tourists who took my photo from behind barricades as I proudly walked down the center of Wall Street with a corporal from Olean and stood before the Merrill Lynch bull.

- The solemn and holy ground at St. Paul's Church where hundreds of photos of missing loved ones were placed as the message begged: "Have you seen him/her?"
- Inside St. Paul's, the podiatrist from Ohio working 12-hour shifts administering cortisone shots and orthopedic insoles to firefighters, police and National Guard members.
- The 2 feet of rubble that covered the gravestones of the historic dead just outside the church. It would wait until the "pile" was cleared and no more newly dead could be found.
- Finally, the Iranian freighter with its orange and green markings docked at a Staten Island shipyard directly across from our Governor's Island living campus, as it played "The Star-Spangled Banner" over its public address system. A group of Navy SEALs struggled to reinforce the sea wall on our side, 50 feet away.

On Oct. 7, 2001, as we awaited the Waterway ferry to return us to our quarters at Governor's Island following 16 hours of duty at the "pile," we received word that the United States had bombed Afghanistan. This is when reality speaks and you know that in order for the old world to live in freedom, the new world must act. Sept. 11 has evolved to be America's finest hour, as well as my own.

In late October, two young stockbroker types helped me load my gear onto a subway train as I returned to my civilian career as a community health worker/case manager for the Cattaraugus County Department of Community Service.

The sights and sounds, the backache, the sore feet and the ground zero cough have all faded away, but the smells will always be with me.

So that we won't require another wake-up call, stories of ground zero should be told every Sept. 11 – our Patriots Day. Let there be no further threats of suicidal evil that seek to destroy our freedom and our lives.

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