



Chaos - Managed: The Other Story of September 11

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I was there. I watched it happen.

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I stood below, and looked up a hundred stories, and saw the buildings enshrouded by their billowing robes of thick, black, choking smoke. I saw the fiery red wounds that the airplanes had made when they sliced through the towers' walls, the angry, bloody gashes made by two knives.

And I thought of the Book of Job: "And I only am alone escaped to tell thee."

But I am not alone; I am not the only one who escaped from Lower Manhattan that day. Still, I am bound to tell something of the tale, because almost no one has heard the story of what happened there on the morning of September 11, 2001.

Or rather, so many people know only half the story.

Yes, all America - all the world - has seen the photographic negative of that event, dark with tragedy, with mistakes, with unpreparedness, but they have not seen the glossy print - the story *not* of the nearly 6,000 who perished in an unspeakable act of barbarity, but of the 25,000 and more *who were rescued* thanks to the heroism and skill of emergency service line personnel and managers. People the world over have watched the Twin Towers fall, over and over again, but they have not seen those towers *as they stood*, one for 56 minutes, one for 102, after having taken a bull's-eye impact from one of the largest passenger aircraft made, fully fueled and traveling at full throttle.

Much has been said about the horror of that day, and rightly so. For every name on the list of missing and dead, there is a future lost, a son or daughter grieving, a wife or husband bereft. For every casualty, there is another weight on the scales of justice against a group of men whose evil is that much more diabolical because they have convinced some others, and perhaps even themselves, that they are angels of light.

There is no doubt that mistakes were made that day, that obsolete procedures, or a lack of forethought, or a lack of vigilance did not help in the rescue effort: firemen, seeing the towers collapse, threw themselves under their trucks as they had been trained to do, only to be crushed by their own rigs; secretaries and stockbrokers who headed for the stairways were told by their superiors that the safest thing to do was wait at their desks, only to die at them later; fire chiefs set up forward command posts inside the burning buildings, as department procedure demanded, only to lose their lives as a quarter of a million tons of concrete and steel descended on them. These lapses in the training and operations of emergency services, or law enforcement agencies, or rescue units, and even in the safety training of the accountants and lawyers who worked in the towers and whose daily jobs do not normally include high-rise rescues are quite rightly the subject of ongoing review.

Now, though, more examination needs to be made, more needs to be said of, what went *right* on September 11, what worked, and how a terrorist assault that became a national trauma was prevented from becoming a calamity of horrifyingly larger proportions, and how systems put into place to protect lives - systems created without anyone having contemplated an event of the magnitude of September 11 - performed so far beyond their design specifications, if you will, that safety and rescue personnel at all levels accomplished a task that in some ways they did not even realize they were doing.

The size of the management problem posed by the September 11 attack cannot be underestimated.

Both towers of the World Trade Center were sliced open by Boeing 767 jets fully laden with 10,000 gallons of fuel, and traveling at full speed, smashing into the buildings with about 25 million pounds of force. The towers had been engineered to survive a direct hit from the largest passenger plane in the world in the early 1970s, but, as the designation implies, the aircraft used in the September 11 attack were six generations larger than the 707.

literally faced with the situation of *starting* to fight a war with all of his generals, many of his colonels, and much of his Special Forces - the department's elite heavy rescue units - killed.

The highest levels of command were right in the line of fire as well, as if President Roosevelt had had to start World War II standing on the dock next to the *USS Arizona* as it was being bombed on December 7, 1941. Mayor Rudy Giuliani had his emergency command center, with its fantastic communications and coordination capabilities, in 7 World Trade Center, right below the towers, and he and the city's top emergency service commanders literally had to flee for their lives through the basements of nearby buildings to escape the punishing wave of rubble and dust expelled by the towers when they collapsed.

Yet, despite losing their top field commanders, and their brothers in the department's best-trained, best-equipped elite units, the city's firefighters never hesitated, never lost their way, never stopped the rescue effort. The high level of training all of our firefighters receive - and our police officers as well (it should be noted that the Police Department's own top-flight elite disaster corps, the Emergency Service Unit, took heavy losses when the towers collapsed) - gave them, it seems, an almost instinctive sense for how to come together and function as a single organism, despite having lost their leadership and having had their internal communications system crippled. The rescue effort never hesitated, never abated, the engines and ladder trucks never stopped coming, and though it took some time to assess what exactly needed to be done, the city was never faced with hundreds of firemen standing around or running in circles, panicked and confused to the point of paralysis.

Without a word of request, we might also note, thousands of off-duty firefighters and police officers instantly leapt into the nearest vehicle and sped to the scene, and within minutes there were also on-duty and off-duty emergency personnel from neighboring counties and states, and even across the nation, galloping to a single block in Manhattan to help. Again, all that volunteer effort simply fell into place, and was coordinated on scene in an orderly fashion, despite the chaos of the rubble.

Even civilian assistance simply seemed to fall into place. One trio of teenagers from the west - I cannot recall if it was Utah or Colorado - jumped into a car on the morning of the attack, drove 24 hours a day in shifts, and arrived in New York a day and a half later, just well-meaning young men with strong backs and no other particular skills, but with amazing hearts. They got to the city with nothing in their pockets, just wanting to help, somehow, and were almost immediately put to work at one of the kitchens serving hot meals and providing clothes and resting spots to the professional rescue teams. How can one plan for that kind of spontaneous generosity, or that sort of immediate and unexpected assistance in the peripheral support services such a titanic rescue operation requires?

Our mayor himself, and his senior staff, though never having trained for something like this, reacted instinctively: the city was wounded and so had to be protected - the police commissioner, Bernard Kerik, immediately set about getting military air cover for Manhattan; the scope of the situation had to be defined, so the mayor immediately contacted Vice President Cheney, and shortly after that President Bush, to gauge whether this was the opening salvo of an all-out attack, or could be dealt with as a complete incident; bridges and tunnels were ordered closed, Manhattan was sealed off except for rescue vehicles, and a security cordon was thrown up around other possible targets. The mayor's presence and his decision to be the personification of the rescue effort for the press and the cameras was perhaps the most significant single contribution to the rescue effort: the sense of calm, of confidence, of stability, of competence, of organization and awareness he radiated kept a city that had been shaken to the schist below Manhattan Island from panicking, and kept the rescue effort of those at the site itself, those supporting them, and those participating in the city's and the nation's response focused and calm, vigilant but not over-tense, optimistic but realistic, energetic but controlled.

In my own area of responsibility, I was able to watch as quick-witted teachers and school administrators evacuated children from four elementary schools, one middle school, and three high schools, all of them located within blocks of the towers - some as close as 600 feet. That is some 9,000 students, aged just 5 to over 18, not to mention teachers, staff and parents that morning, who had probably drilled to evacuate their own buildings (though, remember, this was still only the first week of the new school term), but had never foreseen a situation in which they would have to race a mile to safety. Still, not a single child, not a single teacher, was lost. There were no panicked crowds of children cut off or forgotten or left to their own devices when the tidal wave of debris crashed through the streets.

I know, because I was there. I saw that, and I am, thank God, one of many who have escaped to tell thee.

So, when we look back at September 11, we should see the complete picture.

We should see the tears on the cheeks of the brother and mother and father of 23-year-old probationary fireman Michael Cammarata