

WTC - Sept 11, 2001 - Commentary by Theodore J. Druhot



In the mid 1980's a marketing survey for the Borough of Manhattan in New York was conducted to determine where the eight million people who moved in and about the City during the day congregated at what hours. The purpose was to measure the effectiveness of mass transportation, security, and other public services. The study pointed out that among the many crowded places, the area in and around the World Trade Center had approximately thirty seven thousand people constantly present from eight AM until six PM - Monday through Friday.

The New York/New Jersey Port Authority that owned and operated the World Trade Center took notice of the report and did a review of its own to determine how best to serve and protect the occupants of their seven buildings. The Authority noted that medical services was a matter of concern. They contacted St. Vincent's Hospital and Medical Center, the major hospital and trauma center serving the lower west side of Manhattan and asked for assistance in developing a program of medical care for the World Trade Center. As a first effort, the Hospital and the Port Authority established a physician medical office in the WTC. This was not the answer since most of the medical needs were emergent. As a second effort the Port Authority built an infirmary adjacent to the lower parking facilities in the WTC. The hospital agreed to staff the infirmary with paramedics and to place three ambulances at the curb of the WTC for immediate response.



In addition, to reduce the response time for people who suffered heart attacks or other life threatening events the hospital agreed to train individuals on each floor of the twin towers in CPR and first aid. The Port Authority Police established a medical emergency call system that connected to the infirmary and summoned the paramedics. They in turn were in radio contact with the St. Vincent's Emergency Trauma Center. The system worked well.

On February 26, 1993 terrorists attacked the World Trade Center at approximately three in the afternoon. The buildings and streets were crowded. The method of attack was to place a truck filled with explosive material in the underground parking of the WTC. The intent was for the explosion to cause mass casualties and collapse the foundation of the Towers killing thousands. It was a poorly planned attack. The area where the truck exploded was the strongest point of the structure. Nevertheless, six people were killed, all within the parking facility, and over a thousand suffered various degrees of injury. The explosion did demolish the WTC Security Office and the Infirmary. Fortunately both were vacant at the time. Within minutes after the explosion St. Vincent's ambulances were filled with victims and transported to the hospital. The hospital, at the first call, went into Disaster Plan Response. The majority of injured were treated at St. Vincent's. It was obvious that a strong bond would be forever present between the World Trade Center personnel and St. Vincent's Hospital staff. They were neighbors and friends.

Following the 1993 attack the Port Authority did a detailed analysis of its disaster program. It noted that a high percentage of casualties resulted from smoke that filled the north tower up to the ninety fourth floor. People tried to evacuate the buildings without direction or control and became injured. The Port Authority took advantage of the established medical response plan and trained people on each floor in addition to medical emergencies to take charge in the event of other emergencies such as fire or another attack. A detailed evacuation plan was put into place. This program saved thousands of lives on September 11, 2001.

I had the privilege of being an employee of St. Vincent's Hospital throughout the 1980's. I was honored to work with the Port Authority officials over those years and formulate the medical response program. A few years before the first attack occurred I had transferred to St. Elizabeth's in Boston where I retired in 1994. After moving to Hilton Head in 1995, I volunteered for the national disaster response program of the American Red Cross. I was assigned to a government liaison position within the National Disaster Response Plan conducted by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Red Cross and FEMA sent me to a special training program at Mount Weather in Virginia to learn the conduct of response to terrorist attacks. The training reminded me of the

computer games my grandchildren played. Massive explosions, mass casualties, and bad guys running all over. Nevertheless, I pushed the right buttons and had things under control when a terrorist threw an anthrax bomb into my shelters. We were all killed. This could never happen, I thought.

The morning of September 11, 2001, I was enjoying the comfort of my home in Palmetto Dunes on Hilton Head Island. Around nine AM, as was my custom, I placed myself in front of the television to get the latest news. Suddenly on the screen, my World Trade Center appeared. The North Tower was burning. The commentator reported that a plane had crashed into the building. I called my wife into the room to see the report. "There's been an accident. A plane has crashed into the World Trade Center," I shouted. My wife watched the report and wisely stated that it was no accident. Within minutes another plane crashed into the South tower. Then the South tower collapsed followed shortly by the North tower. I remembered the marketing report that thirty seven thousand people were there. I told my wife that I estimated at least twenty thousand people had been killed or injured.

That afternoon the phone rang and the Red Cross directed me to go to New York as a part of the Red Cross disaster response effort. Since all planes had been grounded I was advised to go the Amtrak station at Savannah and report to the station master. He would see that I was given a seat on the next train to New York. That night I was on my way to New York tightly squeezed into a roomette. A few hours into the trip a heard a knock on the door. A gentleman asked if I was the Red Cross worker going to the World Trade Center. When I said I was on my way to New York he asked if I would look for his son who, when they last heard from him, was in the North Tower. He gave me his business card and wrote his son's name on it. I promised him I would do what I could. His visit was followed by another with a similar request. When the train finally pulled into Grand Central Station twenty hours later after security checks at every major stop, I had the names of sixteen people reported missing at the World Trade Center that I had been asked to look for.

I collected my bag from the security room and found a cab that took me to the Red Cross building on West Amsterdam Ave. on the upper west side. People



were mulling around the building without any particular order but there was a sense that organization was in process. I roamed around and finally found the liaison desk. It was manned by one person who had been at his post for twenty four hours. I asked how I could help. He asked me to find him a cup of coffee. When I returned with cup in hand, he was sound asleep. The phone lights were all flashing. I placed the coffee next to him, sat down, and began answering phones. The calls were almost all the same – my husband is missing, - can you tell me how I can get into the City - Is there anyone who can help find my daughter - where are the injured - . Carefully, I wrote each request with a call back number on the list already containing hundreds of names and requests. I added my sixteen from the train. I had no answers. At that point there were no answers.

I remained at the desk for several hours. Other volunteers arrived. We began to relieve the New York Red Cross volunteers who had been on duty since the attack began. A supervisor appeared and advised me that I had been assigned to Ground Zero. On the way I was to stop at a hotel where I had been assigned a room and check in. The hotel was on Seventh Avenue across from Carnegie Hall. The lobby was filled with refugees waiting for the airports to reopen. We set up a desk to help them with accommodations and to make contact with family. It was late at night by the time we had completed the task. I checked into my room and went to sleep. Early the next morning we again set out for Ground Zero.

The lower end of Manhattan was closed south of 14th Street. From there we had about a mile walk to the World Trade Center. On the way I passed St. Vincent's Hospital and I made a brief visit to say hello to my former colleagues. The Hospital was in full disaster mode. Physicians and nurses, technicians, and ancillary personnel were all in waiting but no casualties had arrived except for a few responders who had been injured.

At Ground Zero we were taken by NYPD to the command center, a school building at the edge of the world trade center property. Inside it resembled a world war two front line command bunker. FDNY, NYPD, Port Authority Police, and the New York City Emergency Management team worked with State and Federal officials in attempt to form the disaster response. We could only wait directions. Meanwhile the New York City Red Cross volunteer who had been on duty for nearly two days remained in charge of the ARC group. He suggested that

I move out to the “pile” and see if I could be of help to the firemen. With reverence, I walked out of the command center toward the mountain of debris that had been the North and South tower. An EPA worker handed me a respirator and directed that I should wear it at all times. I thanked her and dutifully adorned the mask.



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At the base of the “pile” I stared with amazement at the gigantic amount of debris. It was smoldering. Smoke rose from every area. The air was

thick with fumes. The odor was unbearable. In spite of it all, rescue workers walked over, around, and in some cases under, the remains in search of survivors or the bodies of victims. I noted with surprise how quiet it was. Thousands of people were buried here. Many of whom, I was sure, were friends and associates with whom I had worked to prepare for this. We never thought it would happen. People seemed to be speaking in whispers as all ears strained to hear sounds from those buried alive. There were no sounds.



Less than a few yards from me a fireman got off his knees and attempted to stand. He fell and tried again to stand. I rushed to his side to help. This time he grabbed my shoulder and pulled himself up. He was a large man and he used me as a human cane. We walked off the “pile” and I guided him to the school yard of the command center. I sat him on a bench, ran inside found a bottle of water,

and handed it to him. He unscrewed the top, took a long drink and poured the remaining water on his face. He took off his fireman's helmet and I saw the thick red hair that went along with his very Irish face. I tapped him on the head, shook his hand, and asked, "how you doing, big fella?" He smiled, then began to cry. He punched me on the shoulder, and said, "OK little guy". He closed his eyes and slept. They kept coming and we continued to help them with water, food, and a place to rest.

Outside the school yard lines were forming of firemen from around the country that had somehow managed to get to New York. I was directed to keep track of the number in line so they could be used in relief of the FDNY personnel. New Jersey, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, were first in line but soon others from the Midwest, South, and West arrived. Emergency Management had set up respite centers on tour boats, cruise ships, and tugs. Local restaurants opened their doors to emergency workers. The disaster response was getting organized.

My liaison assignment was finally made. I was assigned to the liaison section of the American Red Cross headquarters in an old school building at the base of the Brooklyn Bridge. In less than three days a full blown emergency plan had been implemented. The Emergency Management team for the City of New York had carefully followed the National Emergency Response Plan. The response was happening. This ARC Headquarters was another old school building more recently used as a Red Cross Service Center. All of the Disaster functions in which the Red Cross was participating were headquartered in this building. The liaison desk coordinated the functions and did what was necessary to avoid confusion and delays. Our job was to expedite all requests. It was very similar to the control tower at a very busy airport. All kinds of requests and information came to us and we in turn forwarded the information to appropriate agencies, followed up on all requests, sent activity reports to City, State, and National agencies, gave



orientation to arriving disaster personnel, and assisted individuals with locating their assigned positions. Because of the broad scope of our activity we were aware of the conduct of entire disaster response. We knew, for instance, that all of the many requests for information about missing persons were now being answered, including the sixteen that I had added to the list from my train ride. We knew that body parts, human remains, personal effects such as wedding rings etc. were collected and taken to temporary morgues where identification was being attempted. We knew that feeding stations in and around ground zero had been opened to feed homeless and displaced persons from buildings adjacent to the impact area. We knew that social workers and mental health experts were walking the streets of lower Manhattan counseling all who needed their assistance. Social Workers and Mental Health advisors were also in the suburbs assisting the families of those missing or known dead. We knew that the City of New York had opened Madison Square Garden as a reception and counseling center for all who had come to the City in search of their loved ones. We were made painfully aware of looters and schemers who offered to help victims for a fee and then disappeared with the money. We helped the NYPD trace these activities and apprehend the criminals. After midnight we coordinated the influx of truck convoys bringing supplies into the City still locked down and under control of City Police, State Police, and National Guard. Every other day we would take turns riding the supply trucks around the impact area. The purpose was to review the activity and meet the people who called us with requests and reports. People lined the streets and applauded the trucks as they passed by. There was no small amount of gratitude for the response effort from the people of New York.

All of these activities and many more were on going and constantly changing. We kept track of each and every change and made sure all who needed to know were informed. My duty shift was from 2 PM to 2 AM every day and night. Another volunteer was with me at the desk during those hours. We were constantly busy although after the first week routines were established and the calls began to taper off after midnight. One night my partner was on break when the phone rang. I answered it to hear an official voice tell me that a call was being forwarded to me from the Governor's Office in Albany. The caller explained that a person had called the Governor who wasn't available so the call was being

forwarded according to protocol. There was a click and a male voice said, "Hello, I'm calling to tell you that I am now going to kill myself" He sounded serious. This was no joke. I had handled many difficult calls but his one scared me. Carefully, I asked the caller if he wanted to talk. He, as first, repeated his threat then he wanted to know when the Governor would be available to listen to him. I said I didn't know but promised to find out and call him back or, better yet, if he wanted to stay on the line I would try to find someone who could answer his questions. He proceeded to explain that he had been in lower Manhattan on September 11. He saw it all. His place of employment had been destroyed, friends had been killed, and he was out of a job. He wanted the Governor to know how he felt before he killed himself.

The mental health section of the Red Cross was just across the hall from my desk. Desperately, I tried to flag the mental health duty officer to come to my assistance. Finally, a person saw me waving my arms and brought the psychiatrist on duty to me. I motioned for him to pick up the other phone. He listened carefully and then began to talk to the caller. I carefully bowed out without further comment. After a while the Doctor hung up. He told me the caller was living in the Bronx and agreed to come to see us tomorrow. The Doctor was confident that he had talked the caller down. I felt that I had made a save. The next day the caller arrived and care was given. Instead of being a casualty this man became a victim. I realized that while all casualties were victims not all victims were casualties. Twenty four hundred people were brutally murdered in the World Trade Center. Several thousand more were physically injured. There were, however, tens of thousands of people throughout the Country that were victims of this terrorist attack. They would need care of various kinds for many years to come.

Three weeks on the job and it became obvious that New York City was showing signs of recovery. Stores were opened. Commerce was restored. Schools and Universities were back in session. Subways, and rail transportation were partially restored. Air traffic in and out of New York was still limited but functioning. One afternoon as I reported to my duty station I was told that I was to attend a general staff meeting at nine the next morning. It was going to be a short night. The next day at the staff meeting we were told that the Red Cross with the rest of the disaster effort was transitioning from the Response phase to

the Recovery Phase. Furthermore, relief personnel were arriving. A few hours later I was introduced to my relief who would work with me that night and I was handed a letter that authorized my transportation by air back to Savannah. I was scheduled to leave the next morning from LaGuardia at 10:00 AM. I had to be at the airport three hours ahead of departure. Another short night.

With bag stuffed with laundry I arrived at LaGuardia around 7:00 AM. Long lines were formed outside of the terminal. No one was allowed in until cleared by security. I tried to figure out which line led to my airline but it seemed that all roads led to Rome. Several members of the NYPD walked along the line checking tickets and ID. When they came to me I produced my letter from the Red Cross. The Cop looked me over and called for backup. The second Cop conferred with the first and then informed me to grab my bag and come with them. "My God," I thought, "they think I'm a terrorist." We walked into the terminal, went back of the ticket counters, and into a large room with a few tables. Several Cops and Firemen were standing behind the tables. They looked me over. A fireman took



my bag and placed it on the table. He explained that he had to do a security check that was being done on all luggage. The fireman was a very large man with an Irish face and red hair. As he finished checking the bag he asked me where my Official NY Identification Badge was. I had worn it every day for the past

three weeks but today I had put it in my wallet when I left the hotel. I explained that I didn't think I had to wear it since I was off duty. He seemed to think little of my reply. "Aren't you proud of what you did here," he asked. "Damn proud" I said. "Then wear it with pride" he said. With that he said, "OK little guy. You go home. Thanks for the help" I knew I had seen him before. The little guy remark

did it. A tear came to my eye. "It was my HONOR, Big Fella," I said. Then the Cop who took me out of line handed me my ticket and boarding pass. I went home.

A few months later I received a letter from the American Red Cross directing me to attend an advanced training program in disaster response at the recently formed Clara Barton Training Center at Fort Smith Arkansas. The subject material concentrated on response tactics to terrorist's attacks by weapons of mass destruction such as improvised explosive devices utilizing chemical, biological, or radioactive material. The classes were similar to those that I had attended at Mount Weather. More computer games, I thought. Only this time I prayed and have continued to pray every day since then that I never have to use this training. That was thirteen years ago....

The World Trade Center is gone but it remains as a strong memory. Three years ago, St. Vincent's Hospital closed its doors permanently after over one hundred fifty years of service to New York City. The Hospital was a very significant part of my life. The Palmetto Chapter of the American Red Cross was downsized a few years ago to a Service Center. The Palmetto Chapter inspired me to be a disaster volunteer. A few years back I took special note of the amount of heat rising from the number of candles of my birthday cake. It's time, I thought. A few days later, I resigned as an American Red Cross Disaster Volunteer. All things come to pass.

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