

File No. 9110019

WORLD TRADE CENTER TASK FORCE INTERVIEW

LIEUTENANT BRIAN BECKER

Interview Date: October 9, 2001

Transcribed by Maureen McCormick

MR. MURAD: The date is October 9, 2001. The time is 12 o'clock, 1200 hours, and this is Murray Murad the New York City Fire Department.

MR. CUNDARI: George Cundari.

MR. MURAD: I'm conducting an interview with the following lieutenant.

THE WITNESS: Brian Becker, Engine 28, Group 22.

MR. MURAD: The New York City Fire Department. We are currently at Engine 28, Ladder --

THE WITNESS: 11.

MR. MURAD: -- 11, regarding the events of September 11, 2001.

Presently there is no one else in the interview room, and we will be conducting the interview with Lieutenant Becker.

Q. Lieutenant, would you like to give the story of what -- your accounts of what took place on that tragic day.

A. Okay.

Q. And your role.

A. I had relieved the lieutenant from the night tour. He had left -- I was in the kitchen with the

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other firemen. I was standing up with a cup of coffee, and I heard a loud explosion. It sounded like it was coming from the back of the firehouse. I thought it was north of the firehouse.

I put down my coffee, and I said to the guys, "I think we're going to work. That was an explosion." So walking out to the apparatus, we heard the voice alarm came over and said there was an explosion in the World Trade Center. So we were putting on our boots, getting ready. The engine was dispatched on the box. The time was 8:48.

I knew right away. I felt right away it was -- I remembered thinking they got us this time, because I heard the explosion, so I knew it was a large explosion, and the World Trade Center, so I figured we were on route to a big disaster.

There was never a doubt in my mind, as I recall, that it was anything other than a terrorist attack.

We went east on Houston Street to the FDR, down the FDR Drive, and by the time we were approaching the Brooklyn Bridge, we could see the tower. We could see fire lapping out of the tower. Seemed like all four sides.

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I guess we could see two or three sides from the FDR Drive and could see fire lapping out of multiple floors from about three quarters of the way up the building.

We made our way around the Battery, plowing through traffic, and made our way up West Street past the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel. We saw -- on arrival, we saw a lot of debris in the street on West Street. I could see what seemed to be -- coming down the FDR, I could see both towers, but I could see -- I only saw the fire in the north tower. The other one hadn't been struck. I'm sure of that.

We saw a lot of debris in the street as we came up, and I was concerned. I could see what seemed to be remains of bodies in the street. I told the chauffeur to stay as far to the left as he could, because I didn't want to get hit with a body in the cab and die right there. I remember thinking that.

We drove just past One World Trade Center, and we stopped under the pedestrian overpass, just north of the -- we got in a sheltered spot. We dismounted the apparatus. I'd say that was right here. We stopped.

Q. This is where the apparatus was, on West

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Street?

A. Right, I would say we stopped just about underneath there. Underneath -- if that's a pedestrian walk --

Q. Right.

A. -- we stopped the apparatus under there just to stay out of shelter, because I figured there were jumpers, and I figured it was a very dangerous place to stop, so we stopped under the overpass.

We got off the rig. I asked the chauffeur, "Where are you headed?" He said -- whatever he said, he ended up hooking up on Barclay and West Broadway. That's just north of 7 World Trade Center, which it all interconnected, we think. You know, I'm pretty sure. Or maybe he was on Vesey. I'm not --

Q. Between Barclay and Vesey he parked?

A. Okay.

Q. He parked there.

A. As we were heading into the building, one of the guys said -- we were very excited and very pumped up, and it was a terrible situation. It was like a battlefield. It wasn't -- we kept it together, but we were -- as we were heading in, one of the guys, I forget who, said, "I forgot my mask." So we were

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delayed. I said, "well, you got to get your mask. We'll wait for you here under the overpass."

So we probably waited about 30 seconds or a minute or so. I would say 30 seconds to a minute while he ran to the rig, which was still, I guess, blocked by traffic and pulled his mask off, so we stayed as a unit. That delayed us for a few seconds.

All these things contributed, I think, to our survival. That's why I mentioned that, because, you know, every little -- every second made a difference.

Q. At that time, the rig was still on West Street and --

A. Well, I guess it was like a few -- a few -- maybe -- you know, there was traffic and a lot of -- you know, it was rush hour still, so he hadn't made the corner. He hadn't -- anything like that, so I would say 30 seconds to a minute.

So I grouped with the other firefighters under the overpass, and we gave him riding positions, and I gave the senior man the nozzle and things, and then when the other guy came back, we said, "Okay, let's make it a direct route right into the -- let's move fast."

So we moved into 1 World Trade Center from

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that northern pedestrian overpass, from underneath that, so we took the shortest route, and I think we just went in a window. I think the glass was blown out there.

I remember getting the impression that the elevators were blown out, and I kind of can verify that, because a chief grabbed me by the shoulder, and he said, "Engine 28, you're teaming up with Engine 4 and just take four roll-ups and head up."

I don't know who the chief was. There was no command. It was chaos in the lobby.

Q. Can I just interrupt?

Was there any communication at that point from the time you got off the rig and you waited for the other firefighter to get his gear and the 30 seconds?

Was there any radio transmissions or was there any direction?

A. Nothing that I recall. Honestly, nothing directed to us for certain, and we didn't direct anything. I didn't speak with them, because I knew I bounced the first division for years, and I responded to the World Trade Center several times, so I knew the procedure, you know.

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Even though this wasn't typical at all, I was still going on that I knew I was going to report into the lobby command post. I knew where it was.

So we got into the -- like I was saying, when the chief grabbed me by the shoulders, he said, "Take four roll-ups only between the two companies. Team up with Engine 4 and start your way up," and I remember specifically asking him how are we going up, and I remember thinking that it was a stupid question, because I knew the elevators were blown out, but I just asked it anyway, just in case he knew something I didn't know, and he said, "You're walking."

I have an impression of smoke around the elevators, and bent doors, and it was pretty -- the lobby was pretty devastated. I don't remember who that chief was.

So we teamed up with Engine 4. I knew the officer, Joe Farrelly, so we were talking, making small talk and making our way up, and about two or three levels up, there were a lot of civilians coming down, and it was very -- pushing through them, so heavy traffic against us, and I saw a building personnel person, and I said, "Is there a better staircase?" And he goes, "Yes, there is. I'll take you to another



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one." He took us up maybe one or two more levels, either to the 3rd or 4th Floor, and I think we switched either from C to B or B to C. I don't really remember the letters any more.

We made our way down the hallway on the 3rd or 4th Floor, both units, and by then I think there was a chief with us, and as I recall, he had an 11 on his helmet, so I presume since then it was not the division so I presume it was chief from the 11th Battalion, and so we pretty much then traveled up as a unit, 4 Engine, Engine 28 and this chief.

There was also -- I remember a fireman or two from Ladder 8, and about the 10th Floor or so, the chief made a decision to -- the new stairway we were in had a lot of people coming down, and the chief made a decision that we were going to pause and get these people to another stairway and direct them to another stairway to try to vacate that stairway as best we could for us to go up and use it as an attack stairway.

So I would guess we were something like on the 10th Floor or something. So we probably spent a couple of minutes directing civilians to another stairway. They were all very cooperative, and there

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was no panic to speak of, and I remember reassuring of the civilians saying, "You're all right now. Just continue now. You are safe now."

I asked people occasionally has anybody been coming from a fire, you know, a floor where they have seen fire or smoke, just trying to determine how far up we had to go. So I had the impression we were heading for Floor No. 60, but it actually would have been higher.

So the firemen were getting pretty tired by then, and they wanted to take little breaks every few floors, so our progress was pretty slow. We weren't aware of any -- of the other plane. We heard rumors that another plane was on route, and one of the guys, Lieu, "Did you hear that? There's another plane on route, another one."

So we kind of knew somehow that a plane had hit. We knew it was a terrorist attack. Just -- I don't know -- accumulated knowledge along the way, I guess, from civilians talking or a little handy-talkie chatter, but by then, I presume, it was already 9:30 or something.

Q. You never heard the second plane?

A. We never heard the second plane.

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Q. Just to verify, you were in the first tower that was struck, which was in the north tower?

A. Yes.

Q. And you had --

A. World Trade Center No. 1.

Q. And you had --

A. So I would say within -- we were probably in there like at probably 9:04, 9:05 or something like that, so I would say just as we were in the stairway heading up, the other plane probably hit the other tower. I would say -- but we weren't aware of that. We had very poor handy-talkie communications. We didn't hear much of anything. There must have been Maydays galore out in the street. We didn't hear any of them. I didn't. The chief didn't apparently either.

I remember it took a long time. A couple of the firemen were having a tough time keep going. We stayed as a unit, all of us still, all -- both companies, the chief, and by the time -- I remember we got -- had to go in to Floor No. 28. I said, "Come on, guys, we are at 28. Come on, next stop is 28th Floor." So that's accurate in my mind.

After that, I think we made another push

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after that, but that is not as accurate in my mind, that I'd say we were in the 30th or 31st, 32nd Floor, or something like that, and a few of the guys were lying wiped out on the floor, you know, taking a break with their masks off and lying in the hallway when there was a very loud roaring sound and a very loud explosion, and the -- it felt like there was an explosion above us, and I had a momentary concern that our building was collapsing.

Looking up, guys were diving into the stairway, and then it was like -- everybody was very scared by then. I'm talking the firemen, and then we were very worried about what was going on. We didn't know, but apparently that was the other building falling. I think we were that far along.

So we regrouped in the stairway for a couple of minutes, and I told the guys, "All right, hang on. Let's see what's going on." I still wanted to go up and fight the fire. The chief was very good. He said, "All right, everybody calm down."

A couple of firemen said, "Did you feel that rush of air?" and things like that, and how it was going on. It really felt like our building was coming down, and then the chief, who was out of sight for a

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few minutes, then came running up the stairs, and that's my impression, and he was saying -- "All right--" everybody was very adamant and loud, and he said, "Everybody, we are -- all Fire Department personnel are out of the building. We are getting out. Leave all your equipment," he was yelling, "Leave your equipment, and just get up and go, go, go," like that.

So I presume that he got the word that the other building had fallen.

Q. What floor were you guys on?

A. I would say 30th or 31st, something like that.

Q. That's when the chief --

A. That's when we were notified. I think this was the 11th Battalion. I think his body was recovered yesterday.

Q. Oh, boy.

A. But I'm not sure, because I thought that the 11th battalion also was with Ladder 6 when they were -- so I'm not clear on all this.

So we made -- we started to make our way back down, and there were no civilians to speak of in our stairway. There were a couple of stragglers being

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helped by somebody or other. We did tell them keep going down, and there were -- we might have seen a couple of firemen, but everybody was in the process. Everybody was heading down. Nobody was heading up any more, and it was pretty clear that we were getting out.

Q. Did you have an idea what time you guys started to descend down?

A. I would say it was like one minute after the first building collapsed, the first collapse of the other building.

Q. So five after ten then?

A. Right. It took us a long time to get up there.

Q. There were firefighters above you?

A. Not that I know of, no. I mean, we didn't see anybody going up ahead of us. We just saw civilians coming down, and by the time we were heading down, there were really no civilians any more, and we had a clear track to the -- and to the lobby.

When we got to the lobby, there was total devastation then. When we went in, it was blasted apart, and there was broken glass everywhere. All the windows were out, but when we got down, just my

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impression was that it was like being outside. You know, you weren't even in the building any more. It was devastation, but we were in the northwest corner of the building, so we were diagonally separated a hundred percent from the first collapsed building. We were on the opposite corner -- we were the most sheltered part.

We got to the lobby, and we saw things. We saw an arrest being made of some Arab-looking type guy. I think he had a blue uniform type World Trade Center type maintenance type person. It was my impression. It didn't seem important to me. It seemed like he was being arrested by a Port Authority type policeman. That's my impression. I remember them putting cuffs on him, and I remember one of the firemen saying, "Look, they're arresting the guy," and I said, "Never mind that. Never mind that."

You know, it was not our concern. There was chaos in the lobby. It was random people running around. There was no structure. There were no crowds. There was no -- no operation of any kind going on, nothing. There was no evacuation. It was just people running around, a few Port Authority police, and I think Engine 4 made it down.

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I was talking to guys this morning. You know, we were with them. I remember on one or two floors above, Joe Farrelly, the captain, saying, "Oh, Brian, how you doing? I thought you were behind me," you know, but I ended up ahead of him the last flight. We were checking floors intermittently on the way down occasionally, make sure there were no firemen and stuff. We were trying to do a dignified retreat.

We didn't really realize the extent of what was ahead or what had already happened, and we got to the -- then we got to the lobby.

I have no more recollection of Engine 4. We gathered Engine 28, me and the four firefighters. We gathered by the edge of the lobby, the northwest corner of the lobby by the broken glass, and I made a move towards going out, and then I was worried that we were going to be hit by bodies or falling debris, and then I said -- "I don't know, you know, what --" this is the truth, this is what happened actually in that moment.

I said, "I don't know. Maybe we should stay here for -- maybe we are safer here at the edge of the lobby." And one of the senior guys said, "Let's get the F out of here." So we said, "Okay, let's go, let's -- Ready, here we go. Let's head for our



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overpass."

So we just ran as a unit to the overpass again, and we took a look up, and it was like one -- it was like, holy shit. It was like -- because it was like -- I guess the building was kind of -- I don't remember specifically, but I remember it was, like, we got to get out of here. So I think that the building was really kind of starting to melt. We were -- like, the melt down was beginning. The collapse hadn't begun, but it was not a fire any more up there. It was like -- it was like that -- like smoke explosion on a tremendous scale going on up there.

I said to the guys -- I said, "We are in the collapse zone." I mean, that sounds like a joke, but I said, "We got to -- we can't stay here." So we started running up West Street, and I'd say within 50 yards or so the building was collapsing behind us, and then it was like everybody was, like, oh shit, you know. This is it. Every man for himself, running up West Street.

Q. So what members of the Company 28 were with you that day? Do you recall?

A. With me?

Q. Yes.

A. Chelsen, Ippolito, Campagna -- he's an

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eight-week guy -- and Kehoe. He's the famous photographed firefighter of Engine 28 on the steps.

Q. Did you happen to remove any injuries or civilians or any of your own members following any collapse?

A. After the -- after the collapse, we were about 50 to a hundred yards north of the pedestrian walkway, and the collapse was occurring, and the firemen were all ahead of me, but my four firemen were ahead of me running up West Street, and then the black cloud just came roaring at us, and then we got separated for an hour or so, and I made -- I was torn between -- after like, you know, five or ten minutes, I guess, if I kept trying to get it together. Everybody -- you know, it was chaos. You know, it was pure chaos, and after maybe ten minutes or so, trying to figure out what had happened, and where we were, and letting the dust settle a little so we could see where we were, I kind of figured my four guys were safe.

I thought my chauffeur was dead for sure, because he was parked somewhere near the building. I made a little effort to -- I headed back. I figured I have to head back and try to see about my chauffeur, and I started back on my own, but we were confronted,

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like, with a huge pile of burning building, and the -- not even getting near the overpass where we were, and there were other buildings burning, like towering right to the side, and I was by myself, and I just talked to myself, Well, geez, I just almost got killed, and I'm not going to tempt fate any more. Didn't seem like there was anywhere to go.

We were kind of blocked. All the rubble was on West Street, so we would have had to go all the way around by the river to get around to the other side, so --

Q. Just going back to the handy-talkies, the communication.

A. Right.

Q. While operating prior to the first collapse, and following the first collapse, were there any communications?

A. We didn't hear anything. I didn't hear anything.

Q. Also during the second collapse --

A. After the second collapse, it was pure pandemonium on the handy-talkies.

Q. Is there a certain channel that you guys operate on?

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A. We stayed on the primary technical Channel

1. We never switched.

Q. You never switched.

Just going back, given the current status of any member missing or deceased member, did you see them or did you --

A. No, I never saw a firefighter die. I never saw -- turns out our chauffeur made it. He was pulled into a building. He had experienced both collapses on the street, and he had been somehow pulled in on the second one that would have destroyed our apparatus totally. He was pulled into a building by a policeman or something into a federal building or something.

MR. MURAD: George, any questions?

BY MR. CUNDARI:

Q. What did you hear when the building starting collapsing the second time? Did you feel -- just started coming down? You didn't hear anything, feel anything?

A. We felt -- our whole building that we were in, when World Trade Center 2 collapsed, that was the first one to collapse. We were in World Trade Center 1. It was a tremendous explosion and tremendous shaking of our building. We thought it was our

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building maybe collapsed, there was a collapse above us occurring.

It was tremendous shaking and like everybody dove into this stairwell and waited for, I guess, 20, 30 seconds until it settled, and that was our experience of the other building collapsing.

MR. MURAD: Lieutenant Becker, I would like to thank you for allowing me to do this interview with you.

The time now is 1220 hours, and I'd like to state this concludes the interview.

Thank you very much.