



SUE KEANE

AGE 42

POLICE OFFICER

PORT AUTHORITY OF NEW YORK AND
NEW JERSEY POLICE DEPARTMENT
MANHATTAN CRIMINAL COURT

Port Authority police officer Sue Keane told us that she comes from a long line of strong women.

"My great-grandmother, my grandmother, and my mother are all very strong and capable women," she said. "I've never known any of them to panic. I guess they must have passed along that backbone to me."

Listening to Sue's account of September 11 certainly didn't convince us otherwise. We were amazed at the number of times she skirted death that morning. With 13 years of military service and 8 years of experience as a police officer, Sue was well prepared to react under the worst of conditions. Her clear thinking and refusal to panic helped save her own life and the lives of many other people that day.

By the time we interviewed Sue, four months after the attack on the World Trade Center, her memory had become a lot clearer about what had happened. Even so, she still wasn't sure exactly where she'd been, what exploded, or which buildings were falling around her as she searched for safe ways to get people out of the complex.

"Every once in a while," she said, "I'll remember something else. I'll remember someone I saw or something I did. I don't wake up from nightmares anymore. I just call them 9/11 dreams. I'll probably have those for the rest of my life."

"It started to get dark, then all of a sudden there was this massive explosion. We were on the mezzanine, which is all encased in glass. The windows blew in, everything went black, and we all got thrown."

—Sue Keane, January 26, 2002

"Anything that connects New York and New Jersey is maintained, run, and controlled by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. We're responsible for the George Washington Bridge, all the Staten Island bridges, the Lincoln Tunnel, the Holland Tunnel, the Port Authority Bus Terminal, and all three airports. We have an interstate compact and we work under both governors. We have police powers in both states.

"The history of the Port Authority Police Department goes back to the days of prohibition, when bootleggers would run liquor from New York into New Jersey and turn around and say, 'Well, ha ha, you can't touch us, we're in another state.' The Port Authority got wind of that, and their toll collectors became police officers. Today, we police all the facilities that the Port Authority runs.

"I've been a Port Authority police officer for eight years. I spent most of my time at the bus terminal, but I've been working as the Port Authority Court Liaison Officer for the NYPD for the last two years.

"On September 11, I was at the court building about five blocks away from the World Trade Center. I went outside and got my coffee at the coffee wagon, and I heard a plane that sounded like it was flying really low. I looked up, and all I could see was this big orange fireball at the Trade Center. I dropped my coffee, ran back in the building, called my command, and said, 'Something just happened at the Trade Center. I'm going over there.'

"The World Trade Center is where the Port Authority Trans-Hudson (PATH) trains come in from New Jersey. We have two commands at the World Trade Center, as well as many offices, so I knew a lot of my colleagues would be there. There's a park off Center Street, and I cut through that and got there within minutes.

"Things were starting to drop down from the building—airplane pieces and people. I looked up, and I could see the end of the plane sticking out of the Tower. I was on active duty with the Army for 13 years, and the military trained

me not to panic. I was back and forth to Saudi Arabia as a mobilization sergeant for the 77th ARCON Unit during Operation Desert Storm in the early 1990s. I was in Lebanon in 1980 after the Marine barracks were blown up. Things like that prepare you for times like this. You assess the whole situation before you panic, because once you panic, that's it. You're gone. You're useless.

"I decided to go up to the Port Authority Police Desk to see where I could help. People were running past me. They were looking at me like, *Why are you going that way when we're all going this way?* Other people were running up to me saying, 'I'm an EMT. Where do I go?' I had to say, 'I don't know. Don't follow me. Don't follow me.'

"The Police Desk is in Five World Trade. I came in from Church Street, where they were first starting to evacuate people. I saw Sergeant Bobby Kaulfers, one of the only people I ever let call me 'Susie,' and he said, 'Hey Susie. Where are you going?' I said, 'To the Police Desk.' He said, 'Okay. Go on.'

"It's hard for me to talk about this, because we lost Bobby that day. I keep looking back like, if I had been with him, if I'd stayed with him, I wouldn't be here. There were a couple of other people I saw during this time, and I came to find out later that they're gone, too.

"I'm only familiar with Building One, so they told me to go over there and help evacuate people out of a stairwell. At that point, there was already debris in the plaza from the plane and people jumping out the windows. They said the heat was so intense up there that people just couldn't take it anymore.

"It was a beautiful, gorgeous day. I was in a short-sleeve uniform shirt with my uniform pants, my regular shoes, and my side holster. I had a pair of handcuffs and keys. I didn't even have my gun belt on. Later on, I realized that not having it on probably helped save my life. A lot of people who had equipment on got caught on things.

"I crossed the plaza and went over to Building One. There was a stairwell there, Stairwell C, and people were coming out. These people were amazing. They'd all learned how to evacuate since the bombing in 1993. The women had sneakers on, not high shoes. They had masks and flashlights. All the sprinkler systems had gone off, so there were a lot of puddles, and everybody was wet.

"Three or four Port Authority police officers showed up from our other commands. I'm telling you, people from our commands got there so fast. It was like a mass mobilization. Another guy was there who looked like a building engineer, and there was a guy from the FBI and a captain from the NYPD. We were all directing people out, and the firefighters were coming in.

"I kept hearing this whistling noise, so I turned around and saw the bodies coming past the windows. I thought, *Oh, dear mother of God*. The first one I saw had to be female, because she had on a flowered dress. At that point, I think I shut my mind down to it.

"When a body hit the ground, it was a 'thump' with no echo. That's how I knew it was a body. I knew that from training with the military. I could also hear the breaking glass when the bodies hit the skylights on the lower part of the building. Someone told me later that when people jump from that high, they usually have a heart attack and die before they hit the ground. I didn't hear anybody coming from above screaming. People on the ground were screaming, but all I heard from anyone who came from above was a whistle and a 'thump.'

"I said to the other officers, 'Don't let anybody near the windows.' I didn't want anybody to panic. People would try and look out, and I would say, 'No, stay against the wall.' I got very authoritative. 'No. You're going this way. Keep going. Don't worry about anything else.' Usually when you evacuate a building, people will argue with you, but the majority of these people were absolutely fabulous. The people who got out of there deserve a round of applause. They followed everything we told them to do.

"There was a woman who was having an anxiety attack, and we brought her over to the side and tried to get her to calm down. She was saying she was having an asthma attack, and I asked two of the officers to take her downstairs because she was just getting hysterical.

"My survivor guilt is astronomical, because those two officers ended up missing. I know it's not my fault, because we were all just doing our jobs. I know I didn't send them into the burning fires of hell, but I did send them downstairs with that woman. Everybody keeps telling me, 'You can't think that way,' but it's part of my reason for not sleeping half the time.

"All of a sudden I heard the second plane. It sounded like it was coming full force. We were in the stairwell trying to hurry people along, and we heard it hit. Over the radio, I heard, 'Tower Two just got hit.'

"We continued to evacuate. The people coming down the stairs were exhausted. They were having breathing problems. I started seeing people from our medical office, which was on the sixty-third or sixty-fourth floor. I was so happy to see them, because it meant we were getting people out from that far up in the building. Every once in a while the people would stop coming down, and we'd go up the stairs. I made it up as far as the sixth floor, but I couldn't get any farther. I didn't have bunker gear, and the jet fumes and the smell of the fuel were too much. The water running down the stairs was black.

“I think the good thing about that day was that it was Election Day. A lot of people weren’t there yet, because they were going to stop and vote on the way in. It was also the first day of school for some kids, so a lot of people were coming in late. Had it been 11 o’clock, this would have been 10 times worse. The observation decks would have been open, a lot of tourists would have been there, and it could have been a lot more devastating.

“There was an older man in a brown suit with a briefcase. I’ll never forget him. When I got him out of the stairwell, I stood him by the wall and said, ‘I want you to relax for a minute before you leave,’ because he looked like he was going to have a heart attack. I was thinking, *I don’t have time to do CPR here. I’ve got to get everybody out.*

“A couple minutes later, it sounded like bombs going off. That’s when the explosions happened. I could hear it coming, and I knew something was going to happen. I braced myself. It started to get dark, then all of a sudden there was this massive explosion. We were on the mezzanine, which is all encased in glass. The windows blew in, everything went black, and we all got thrown.

“In the military, they blow things up around you so you’re not afraid of it. You don’t panic. If something blows up, we cover, we breathe into our shirts, we wait for it to pass over, then we look up before we get up. All that stuff stayed with me. I jumped on the old guy to protect him, and I remember thinking, *If he wasn’t already having a heart attack, I just killed him.*

“There was this incredible rush of air, and it literally sucked the breath out of my lungs. Everything went out of me with this massive wind. I instinctively pulled my shirt over my face like a mask. Stuff was just flying past. Then it stopped and got really quiet, and then everything came back at us. I could breathe at that point, but now I was sucking all that stuff in, too. It was almost like a back draft. It sounded like a tornado.

“When the explosion happened, there were officers in the stairwell. The door slammed shut, and there was something blocking the front of it. The guy in the brown suit got up and he was okay, and the captain grabbed me and said, ‘C’mon, let’s get out of here!’ I turned around and heard the officers in the stairwell banging on the door. There was a buckle in the doorframe, and I could see their flashlights through the crack. I pulled myself away from the captain and said, ‘No, I’ve gotta get back over there.’ The captain left with the man in the brown suit, but all these people were trapped in the stairwell, and I wasn’t going to leave them behind.

“It was pitch black now, and I followed the wall back to where I could see the light behind the buckle in the doorframe. I slid my back down the wall and took

my feet and pushed whatever was blocking the door out of the way. I've always felt that women are stronger in the legs than we are in the arms, and I know that's true for me. There's also that 'mother strength,' where in emergency situations mothers have been known to pick up cars off their kids. So I just slid down the wall and used my legs to push away whatever was there.

"There was no handle on the outside of the door, so I yelled through the door, 'Go ahead! Open the door! Open the door!' They pushed the door open, took one look at the blackness behind me, and pulled me into the stairwell. Someone told me later that the explosion sounds I'd heard were actually the cement floors hitting each other when Tower Two was coming down. I never in a million years would have thought the building would fall. I never would have thought that Tower Two had been compressed into seven floors.

"People were still coming down, and we walked up the stairs to see if we could find anyone else. By the time we came back down and opened the door again, everything looked white. It looked like a massive dustbowl out there. It looked like a war zone, like what you see on TV happening in Israel and Ireland. People were still coming out, and we were all shaking off our shock. Then it got really quiet again. I don't know if anybody else felt it, but when it got really quiet, I looked around and said, 'This isn't good. Something's going to happen.'

"Then everything started turning black again, and I heard that noise again that sounded like a railroad train coming. I told everybody, 'Get out of here!' and that's when the second explosion happened and I got thrown and separated from the other guys. I turned around, and all I saw was a beam falling. Or maybe it was a floor. I was on one side of it with a couple NYPD officers and some firefighters, and the Port Authority guys were on the other side. At that point, you couldn't tell what was what. There was paper flying and copy machines falling. And that's when the body parts started to fall.

"I don't know if that was when One World Trade started coming down or if maybe some other building had come down. I really don't know. The timeframe is totally out of whack for me. Again, I got up and started shaking myself off. Every time I got thrown, I felt like I landed on a cloud of air. I never got hurt. When I got to the hospital, any blood that was on me wasn't mine. I was bruised, I had a few scratches, but I was not cut at all. I did a point-check on myself. *Okay, I'm here, I can stand up, I can move. Okay, I'm good.* And I moved on to whatever I had to do next.

"I'm only assuming that Building One was still up at that time. There were still some people there, and there was a doorway to the outside toward Building

Five. We had to look up before we went out because body parts and things were falling from above.

“It’s amazing how civilians and people from other departments just clicked and worked together. Standard Operating Procedures and all that crap just went totally out the window that day, and it was like, whatever you could do, up to the point that you could do it, you just did it. This guy—I had no idea who he was—said, ‘You gotta look up, you gotta let me know when it’s clear. I’m only going to let two through at a time.’”

“Everything was dusty. I don’t know what time it was, but you would have thought it was the middle of the night. I crossed over to Building Five, and I didn’t know what I was stepping on. I didn’t know if it was a beam, a copier, or a body part. I was hoping that whatever I stepped on didn’t squish. I didn’t look down; I only looked up to get those people across safely.

“We did that for a good 10 or 15 minutes, then that guy came across and the door slammed shut, and we didn’t see anybody else come out. There were two firefighters and a civilian guy there with me, and we were standing outside Five World Trade. I was thinking in the back of my mind that those other Port Authority officers were gone.

“Then I heard voices in Building Five, and I told the firefighters, ‘If you go this way down this wall, there’s a doorway that will put you into Building Five.’ The Police Desk was in Building Five. I knew that every time I came to the Medical Office, I had to go to the Police Desk, get a pass, and go over to Building One. I didn’t know anything else about the World Trade Center complex. I only knew how to get from the Police Desk to Building One, and that probably saved my life.

“We started climbing over debris. Everywhere we went, there was debris. There was nothing that looked like a normal building anymore. Absolutely nothing. Somebody said something about the Pentagon being hit, and that’s when I went into total military mode. The training the Port Authority gave me helped me a lot that day, but the instincts that came from my military training really took over. I said, ‘We’re at war.’ I unclicked my holster. This was nuts. Everything was happening too fast.

“We went into Building Five, and another firefighter was hollering, ‘We can get out this way!’ Building Five had an escalator that went down to Vesey Street. We were standing at the top of this escalator, and I saw some guys from the Emergency Services Unit down at the bottom. They were helping a very heavy woman we had gotten out of the stairwell about an hour before. I thought, *Jesus Christ. I saw her two explosions ago.*

“Outside, it did not look like the beautiful day it was. It was so dark that it seemed like it was 5 o’clock, and I know it wasn’t. Something broke my watch at 11:30, so I know that from 9 o’clock until at least 11:30, I was in between and around those buildings, still having no idea what was going on.

“All of a sudden, everything went quiet again. I said to the guy behind me, ‘Brace yourself,’ and again, another explosion. That sent me and the two firefighters down the stairs, on top of the ESU guys. Again, everybody shook off and got up and tried to regroup. We were trying to get this woman up, and she was really heavy and out of breath; I don’t even know if she made it.

“I heard the rumbling again, like a locomotive coming. We all jumped on top of each other and huddled up against Building Five. I may have been in military mode, but there was a part of me that was scared to death. I didn’t think I was getting out of there alive.

“Then the same thing happened again, where the wind sucked the breath out of me. I held on to everybody and put my face in my shirt. I braced myself, because I knew that whatever went that way was coming back this way. I think they knew it, too, because none of the others moved.

“Whatever came back, came back in my eyes. We got up and were trying to get the woman on a backboard, and I said, ‘Guys, I can’t hold on, because I can’t see.’ I felt useless, because I was tired and I was getting sore. I can’t tell you how many times I got banged around. Each one of those explosions picked me up and threw me, but I never got caught on anything, which was amazing. I had to have had a guardian angel in there with me.

“There was another explosion, and I got thrown with two firefighters out onto the street. I looked over where the guys had been helping that lady, and there was no one there. I didn’t hear them, and I couldn’t see the lights on their helmets. Nothing. To this day, I still don’t know what happened to them.

“We were outside, but you couldn’t tell the sidewalk from the street. There were smashed fire trucks and police cars. It literally looked like a war-torn country. We started climbing over debris, and I remember climbing over a white Explorer, then climbing over a fire truck. We broke the window out to see if anybody was in it, but nobody was. It was half buried in debris.

“I got stuck in debris twice, and the firefighters grabbed me and pulled me up. If there was a soft spot, I sank into it because I was smaller than they were. As I was climbing out of all this stuff, I saw one of my Port Authority classmates, and we stood there for five minutes hugging each other. There were all these little

fires going on around us, but they were minuscule compared to what we'd just been through. The fires at this point meant nothing.

"I started walking down Church Street, and I thought I was in Belfast. All I could hear were sirens. At this point, my body was probably going into shock. My mission was to find Port Authority officers. All I saw were firefighters and NYPD and EMS. It was like *The Twilight Zone*. You come out of this thing, and you're thinking that you're the only one there. Every time I looked at my watch it said 11:30, and it was like time had stopped and I was the only Port Authority officer left.

"What was also going on in the back of my mind were my two kids. Now I was coming out of military mode, and I was going into single-mother mode. I was on a mission to get a hold of my kids to let them know I was okay. I was thinking, *Oh my God, everybody must think I'm dead*. Every time I saw somebody, I asked, 'Do you know where the Port Authority is?' Half of them didn't know what the hell I was talking about.

"I looked down, and my shield was loaded with debris. You couldn't even tell I was a cop. Someone had given me a bottle of water, and I started pouring water over my shield and my patch. I guess I figured that if I dropped dead in the street, they'd know who I was.

"Every time I saw a firefighter, it just killed me, because I kept thinking back to all the ones who went up in the stairwell. I don't think any of them came out alive. I was also thinking about the officers I lost in the building. I was thinking, *I've got to find the Port Authority to tell them that these guys were in the building with me and I lost them*. I found out later that they actually made it out.

"People were being nice to me, wanting to help me, but I wouldn't let anybody stop me because I was on a mission. Someone from an ambulance tried to wash my eyes out and gave me a patch to put over my eye. A firefighter grabbed me and said, 'Are you okay?' I said, 'Yeah, but I gotta find the Port Authority.' They had a hose going, and he threw me under this hose, which in a way felt great, because I didn't realize until then that my skin was actually burning.

"I had burn marks, not like you'd have from a fire, but my face was all red, my chest was red, and for three or four days there was stuff coming out of my body like you wouldn't believe. It was like shrapnel. It's still coming out. I'll look over and have this little pinpoint under my skin and it will be bleeding. My doctor says, 'Welcome that. Your body has its own natural immunity, and it's going to reject anything that doesn't belong there,' which it did for days. I was coughing up black stuff, and there was black stuff coming out of my ears and my nose. There was so much stuff in my eyes.

"I saw a Port Authority lieutenant, and he took me to the Command Post they'd set up. There was an ambulance there, and they stuck me in there with two firefighters. I found out then that it was 1:30 in the afternoon, so for the last two hours I'd just been wandering the area. And I wasn't the only one. We were all bumping into each other—firefighters, police officers, and EMS workers. It looked like *The Night of the Living Dead*. We were all just walking around saying, 'Which way am I going? Have you seen this one? Have you seen that one?'"

"They took me to St. Vincent's Hospital, where they were very well equipped. They had neurosurgeons standing by for head wounds and ophthalmologists for eye and face injuries. They had been through this before with the 1993 bombing. As soon as I got out of the ambulance, I heard one of the eye doctors yell, 'Get me her, now!' They took me into a really dark room, and I had three guys staring into my face and looking into my eyes. I could hear them mumbling, 'What's in her eyes?'"

"Then another guy came up to me and said, 'I'm a psychiatrist. I'm going to take your gun.' I put my hand on it and said, 'No, you're not.' A cop came over and took my hand and put it on his shield and said, 'I don't know how bad your eyes are, but I really think that if they're going to be doing stuff to you, I should take your gun.' I was feeling with my hand that he had a shield, and I said, 'Okay, you can have it.'"

"I finally got a hold of a friend and asked her to call my kids and my mother to let them know I was okay. Another officer from the NYPD came in and sat with me and rubbed my head and asked, 'All you all right?' He just sat there with me. He stayed as long as he could."

"I was home for about 10 days, and I was kicking out the walls. I wanted to go back to work. I wasn't sleeping, because I was worried about everyone else. I had the classic symptoms of post-traumatic stress syndrome and survivor guilt. I was obsessed with vacuuming my apartment every day. I did not want to see a speck of dust. I was doing a lot of pacing. I didn't like being closed in. If you wanted me to go down into a basement, good luck."

"I think people need to know that the Port Authority Police Department was there that day. The World Trade Center was a Port Authority facility. Even though the fire department lost more than 300 members, we actually took the biggest hit percentage-wise. We lost 37 officers. We had probably 1,000 officers there in the first few hours that day, and we lost 37. That's a big hit for a department our size in the span of a day. Plus, we lost a lot of Port Authority employees. We lost 74 people altogether, including the police officers."

“One of the people we lost was Captain Kathy Mazza. I remember many times we had to close the building because of bomb threats, and she was absolutely fantastic. She kept her head about her, and I admired her for that. I never saw panic in her. And always, after every situation, she walked around and thanked everybody. She never forgot to come up and say, ‘Thank you. You did a great job. I know it was hard, I know you had to stand here for five hours and you didn’t get a break, and I really appreciate it.’ Kathy Mazza was a great woman to work with.

“I’ve always worked in a man’s world. I’ve worked in the military where there were 10 females and 250 guys in a unit. I’ve always adjusted to it. But sometimes I feel that people don’t give women the credit they deserve. I think we react faster and think much more quickly on our feet. People will argue with male cops, but a woman can walk in and defuse a situation before it escalates into something else.

“I know guys who are Vietnam vets who say that September 11 was worse than Vietnam. These are guys you’d never see cry, and I watched them cry. I’ve seen more men cry since September 11 than I ever have in my entire life—even in the military, with Lebanon and everything else. I’ve seen a lot of guys cry over this. They’ve lost their partners and their friends. We all did.

“They always say, ‘God takes the good ones,’ and in this situation, he did. The officers we lost were terrific. You would trip all over yourself to work with these people. I admired their work ethic, the way they did things, and I think about them a lot.

“I live alone, and I try to occupy myself when I get home. I probably sleep on average two hours at any given time, and I won’t sleep upstairs in my bedroom. I haven’t slept upstairs since this happened. I sleep downstairs on a futon, just a few feet away from the door. I have to be able to get out. I’m still in escape mode. I have to make sure this will never happen to me again.”