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Gloucester to
Ground Zero

by Miles Schlichte

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Miles Schlichte is a Gloucester resident and retired Gloucester Deputy Fire Chief. Here he tells his story of Gloucester going into the world after a major terrorist attack against the United States.

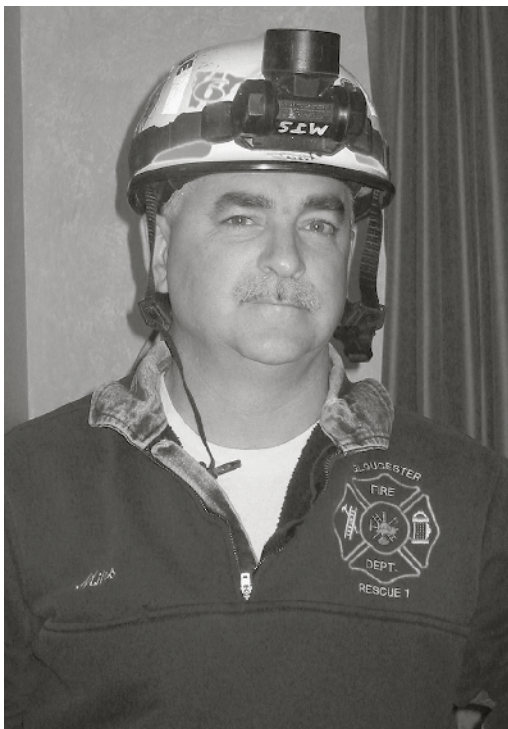
On September 11, 2001, I was in my truck heading to my part-time job in Beverly, listening to the radio when I heard about the first plane hitting the north tower of the World Trade Center in New York City.

I suspected that the FEMA–US&R¹ might be deployed to New York City, so I turned my truck around and went to the FEMA site at Beverly Airport. Since I had recently stepped aside from my FEMA position, I intended to help load the team into their trucks and send them on their way. However, when I arrived at the site, the Rescue Team Manager said with a nod, “We never processed your paperwork; go get your gear—you’re coming with us.” I will never forget the appreciation I felt for their action.

I quickly drove home to Gloucester and retrieved my equipment. I didn’t have time or the ability to contact my sons or wife Nancy, so I left a brief note on the counter saying where I was going. Cell phones were not as common then, and I didn’t have time to meet with my children at their schools

or my wife at her work in Burlington. I was focused on only one thing: getting back to Beverly Airport in time to get our gear loaded and get ourselves on the road to New York. It wasn’t until several years later that I found out just how much my leaving without saying goodbye negatively affected my young family. It never occurred to me I could have been killed accidentally or by a secondary terrorist incident while in New York. I would have left my family with the memory that I didn’t even say goodbye before I left. That was a mistake that I’ve always regretted.

I returned to Beverly, and our Task Force was en route to New York City by early afternoon. We had police escorts the entire way as we crossed from state to state, with the police blocking off highway exits and entrances. The police sped along our convoy of vehicles carrying our 85-person team led by Mark Foster of MA-TFI.² Our team included Rescue Specialists, Medical Specialists, Logistics and Planning Experts, and Search Team members with their dogs and technical equipment. Many of the team members were familiar to me as we had worked other disasters before.



Miles Schlichte in 2000.



View from the bus on approach to New York.

We arrived in New York City before sunset, probably around 4 or 5 p.m. As we approached, I remember seeing the flames and the column of black smoke. Someone on our bus had an early version of a cell phone, and we passed it around for a brief call to our loved ones at home. I took a couple of minutes then to call my wife as I didn't know when I would get another chance to call. I told her we were almost there, and what I could see was terrifying. We were a team full of experienced and handpicked emergency responders from all over New England who were used to all manner of fire, explosions,

and rescue scenarios in our home states; still, we felt deep trepidation and fear of what lay before us . . . crumbled buildings in a haze of black and grey smoke; and an empty expanse where the Twin Towers had once shaped the New York City skyline. The bus we were on was utterly silent as each member had their own thoughts. None of us had ever seen anything of the magnitude of what was growing steadily larger and more disturbing as we got closer. I knew we were becoming involved in something this country had never experienced. It turned out to be several days before I could call home again. The NYPD escorted us to the Jacob Javits Center in Manhattan, and we went to work.

Half the team was assigned to the night shift and departed immediately to Ground Zero to assess and plan for the next morning's operations. My squad and I were assigned to the day shift, but that didn't mean we got to turn in. On almost all of our deployments, all members expect to work for the first 24 hours before settling into a 12-hour-on 12-hour-off schedule. Since the FEMA-US&R teams are entirely self-contained, we had to offload all of our equipment and set up all our sleeping, eating, and support functions so they would be operational right away. We completed setting up our Base of Operations inside the Javits Center just in time to board the bus to Ground Zero to start our first day shift.

The incoming squad officers, including me, met with the departing squad officers to exchange information. The scene was chaotic. Most of the Fire Department of New York (FDNY) command staff and numerous other department officers had been killed when the towers collapsed.



You could hardly see the sun through the smoke and haze at Ground Zero.

New York City struggled to put a command system in place, and we struggled to engage with them. The City of New York had never had to request mutual aid before. They were large enough to handle anything thrown their way, or they had been up to that point. Creating a joint command and control system in accordance with the National Incident Management System with entities from outside of New York City was something they were learning on the fly under the most difficult of circumstances.

In the first couple of days, the area had not yet been secured, and hundreds of civilians were all over the scene. Not all of them were there to be helpful. My squad stopped numerous people from looting. Many more got away. It was two or three days before the National Guard could fully secure the area and before a fully functional Incident Command System was in place for us to start doing what we were deployed for. While we waited for official tasks, we busied ourselves with unofficial tasks such as unloading and setting up our equipment cache and cleaning up the debris around FDNY's base of operations directly in front of our Command Post. I firmly believe that our informal communications with FDNY personnel, while we helped with small tasks, made the newly assigned New York Incident Commanders comfortable working with us.

An important component allowing the Rescue Teams to function in the field was the work of the Logistics and Planning Team members. Gloucester's own Sal Brancaloneo was the Night Logistics Manager. Sal worked 16 hours a day ordering supplies, keeping track of equipment orders, and trying to get all of this to us on-site. Another (former) Gloucester resident, Jim Hill, worked the 16-hour day shift as a Plans Manager developing daily action plans with New York Fire Department Chiefs and FEMA National representatives trying to anticipate and plan for what our needs would be and what



Photo courtesy of MA-TF1

President Bush with the MA-TF1 team; that's the late Sal Brancaloneo from Gloucester that the President has his hand on.

our operational plan would be for our next operational period. Without the Logistics and Planning team members we wouldn't have achieved a thing.

My first official task was to take my squad and some New York ESU³ officers into the below-ground parking garages to ensure the garages had been cleared and no one was trapped in vehicles. This was a secondary search as the garages had already had a quick search early on in the incident. We found the garages clear of people, but we had a few tense moments when we came across a van with smoked windows parked in a strange area. We all remembered the previous attempt, years earlier, to take down the Twin Towers with a vehicle bomb and gave it a wide berth until the NYC bomb specialists declared it safe. All vehicles in the garages were treated as potential bombs and slowly cleared by New York Police ESU units as we discovered them.

My squad's next assignment was to proceed into the underground malls to search for any possible entrapped persons. Again, no live persons or remains were found.

Unfortunately, when we returned to these same stores a couple of days later, we found that they had been looted by people walking through the subway tunnels from an outlying station to gain

Photo courtesy of MA-TF-1



On left is Ed Stewart, a Vermont police officer. Miles is standing to the right, as they prepare to search a confined space.

access to the unprotected stores. Over the next few days, we were deployed to assigned sections on the debris field at Ground Zero to search below the pile of debris, looking for void spaces that could possibly have survivors. At one point, I directed the lowering of members of my squad into a void that turned out to be several large rooms buried beneath the debris but undamaged. We thought for sure we would find survivors. We did not.

During one confined space operation Saugus firefighter Paul Pinachio was being lowered into a void below me. He thought that the entire void was starting to collapse in on him when I

accidentally dislodged a chunk of concrete that bounced off of his helmet.

At some point, reports came in that a train full of commuters was trapped below. My squad was deployed in a rush into the subway tunnels to search for survivors. We found the train disabled and empty on the tracks after working our way past significant rubble piles from a ceiling collapse next to the train. Unfortunately, this report and a few others like it were hoaxes. As the rubble from Ground Zero was slowly cleared, the train was removed and preserved as a historical artifact with my Rescue Squad's search markings painted on its side.

For the next several days we searched underneath Ground Zero hoping to find survivors trapped in the void spaces. At first, due to the need for speed, we would only mark the voids we searched with the most minimal of markings.

As the incident wore on and other teams arrived, more accurate and detailed markings were put in place to avoid confusion and duplication of effort. We found no survivors. Numerous bodies and partial remains were found, and their locations were relayed to the command staff above us to be removed by others. We were not there to remove the dead. We were there to save the living.



Miles, along with a FEMA Search Dog Handler (and a search dog), on the way up to search Building 4. Entry from the ground was impossible due to the stairwell being destroyed.

Eventually, I returned to Building #4 and led a two-rescuer secondary search. It hadn't collapsed, yet it did have structural damage. Fire had consumed it, and access to many floors was blocked. A Search Dog Handler with his dog from another Task Force and I searched the building and fortunately found no victims trapped by the fire. This cooperation between different resources was typical of the efforts put forth by everyone on the scene. City of New York employees were working hand in hand with out-of-state responders. Union steel workers, and heavy equipment operators were crucial components of clearing hazards and creating access points for

professional rescuers. Volunteers from around the country assisted where they could, including forming a human chain to remove rubble by hand until equipment could be brought in. Normally competitive agencies worked side by side with the common goal of saving a life by searching as much area in as little time as possible. While risks were taken, they were balanced against what the potential benefit was. At one point, I asked an engineer about the stability of an area we were about to enter. He answered, "It's still standing after the hit it took; go ahead but be fast."

A couple of memories of Ground Zero will always remain with me. On my third day, I was asked to guide a HazMat (Hazardous Materials) Technician around the entire site, including the area immediately surrounding Ground Zero. He was using a radiation meter to search for a "dirty bomb" that intelligence reports said may have been on one of the aircraft. We were to be very discreet, and he was to have the volume on his meter off so he could only gauge any radiation amounts by the needle swings. Command did not want the noise of the meter to cause a panic if we did find significant radiation. Thank God we did not.

On my fifth or sixth day, I was again asked to discreetly guide an individual around the scene. This man was a private sector scientist with a meter that read the levels of bacteria given off by decaying animal matter (people). While not publicly saying so, the focus was starting to turn from rescue to recovery, and the planners were trying to get an idea of where the largest concentration of victims might be. Again, we were directed to silence the meter while we searched. Silencing the meter was a good idea as we did identify specific areas to begin recovery operations. We would then call for a search dog trained in cadaver search to search the same site. Wherever the dog alerted in the same area as the high bacteria readings, we would consider it further confirmation and relay our location back to the command center. At one spot, I did speak with an FDNY firefighter who was looking for any sign of his company which was missing. He was not working when they were dispatched, but he knew where they had been sent on the site. All I could tell him was that he should be present when they excavated where we were standing.

Our search missions went on 24 hours a day for seven days. On the seventh day we were disengaged from the operation. Most of us were unhappy with that decision as we had built a great rapport with the FDNY and worked seamlessly with them.

We were somewhat appeased when we were told the reason why. Between the attacks on New York City and the Pentagon along with the Shanksville, Pennsylvania crash site, all of the Federal Urban Search and Rescue teams were either already deployed or en route to one of those locations. There was concern that should they be needed again, no FEMA-US&R teams would be available if a follow-up attack occurred. Since we were the first team in the field and the closest to our home base, we were sent back to Massachusetts to be the only team available to the rest of the country should something else occur. We again



Photo courtesy of MA-TF1

Unknown rescue workers walking in the toxic haze.

received a State Police escort all the way home and got the team ready to redeploy if needed.

While at Ground Zero, the hardest part was not the actual work. Far harder to deal with were all of the co-workers, friends, and family members approaching us with a picture in their hands inquiring about the missing. Their fear and pain were ongoing and unending. I did not have the heart to tell them that I was not finding fully intact and recognizable bodies, not to mention that a granite-grey powder and ashes were concealing everything. Until the National Guard secured the perimeter a few days later, a steady stream of distraught people came up to us no matter what we were doing.

For seven days we repeated our process; it took its toll. I cannot fully describe the impact it had on my mind, my heart, and my sense of security. But, having witnessed how one's life balance and plans can be destroyed in an instant gave me a much keener appreciation for what I get to do every day with my family in this beautiful city where we live. Whether that is a Father's Day fishing trip with my sons, a day at Half Moon Beach with my granddaughters, cookouts with siblings or vacationing with my

wife, these are the things that are most important in my life.



Four months after Sept. 11, Miles and his wife Nancy took their sons on their first ocean cruise. From left to right are Jeff, Ryan, and Eric.

There are times when we feel a bit removed from the rest of the world while living in Gloucester. I learned from the actions of my fellow rescue workers, and the multitudes of people who came forward to help, that together we can tackle most anything. We can bond together for the positive. And during those days following 9-11, we worked as though our own family members needed to be rescued from the ruins.

Author Acknowledgments

As a husband, father, citizen, and professional rescuer I could not have blended these sometimes-conflicting roles without the support and help of all of those around me. Being a part of a team of like-minded professionals from all over New England gave me confidence and encouragement to keep participating and training during the long time periods between deployments. Even more so, the actions of my team members who did not honor my request to step back from the team shortly before 9-11 and insisted that I head to NY with them will always be appreciated.

I'd like to thank my wife's cousin US Army Colonel Kenneth Lawson, retired, whose involvement in the Gloucester400+ telling the story about his Grandmother Elsie and his father Roger (A Tale of Two Rogers) prompted Ken to ask me to write a few words about my involvement at Ground Zero. Those initial few words led to Stories Project Leader Terry Weber Mangos and intern Megan Amero working with me in a manner that was both concise and in line with the committee's goals. I thank them for their time and patience and for recognizing all of the MATF team members from around New England that responded that day.

Of course, the greatest thanks go to my wife and sons. It's only with hindsight that one realizes just how many weekend days got taken away from the family to attend training over the years. Using vacation days or utilizing time swaps at work to attend training took away additional time that was intended to be for the family. Since major disasters always occur with little or no advance notice, whatever plans we had just went out the window. Somehow, I never considered what they must have been thinking as I headed to whatever event was bad enough to require our team's response. I love you Nancy, Jeff, Ryan, and Eric.

About the Photography

All photos of the 9-11 site were generously provided by MA-TF1 in Beverly, MA. We appreciate MA-TF1's continued work to keep the history of 9-11 preserved and accessible.

Editor Acknowledgments and Notes

Thank you to all the first responders on the scene at 9-11, and to all the helpers across Cape Ann and the North Shore who did what they could to help the victims and survivors. A special thank you to MA-TF1 for sharing your photos and stories with us, including Mark Foster, Jim Hill and Rose Gould. Thank you to MA-TF1, the City of Gloucester leadership, fire department, police department and medical personnel from across the city who assisted with the aftermath of 9-11. We said we would never forget, and this story, and your story, will help us remember.

Notes

1. FEMA: Federal Emergency Management Agency; US&R: Urban Search & Rescue, sometimes written as USAR.
2. MA-TF1: Massachusetts Task Force 1, part of FEMA, located in Beverly, MA. MA-TF1 is an elite group of firefighters and professional civilians (doctors, engineers, communication specialists) selected from all of the New England states who are trained to respond as a Federal resource to large and complex disasters that are beyond the scope of what the local responders can handle on their own.
3. ESU: Extra Service Units—technical police.