

## **FAA's First, First Responder: José W. Marrero**

On September 11, 2001, Aviation Safety Inspector José W. Marrero left his Manhattan apartment and drove to his office at John F. Kennedy International Airport. As an inspector in FAA's New York International Field Office, he was looking forward to an uneventful day at the office. During a regular morning meeting, a co-worker entered and said he had just heard that an airplane had hit one of the twin towers. Someone quickly turned on the office TV and within minutes saw an aircraft fly into the World Trade Center. "Was this a replay," they wondered. It must have been they thought. Then the TV went blank. The New York City television networks' antennas had been mounted on the North tower, the second one attacked.

Marrero, who is fluent in Spanish, and is first generation from Puerto Rico, switched to the Spanish channel based in New Jersey, Telemundo. He translated the reports for his colleagues. In disbelief, with both towers engulfed in flames, it was then clear what had happened, but how and why? Soon thereafter the Eastern Region closed its offices to ensure the safety of its employees.

Before leaving the office, the South tower had collapsed. On his way home, the North tower fell. The police had closed the bridges, and tunnels into Manhattan. Not sure how he would get home, he took a chance and followed the emergency vehicles, and when questioned, was allowed to continue into Manhattan via the Queens Midtown Tunnel. Once safely home, he walked to the twin towers site, which took about 25 minutes.

Walking south, he passed many people walking north covered in soot and grey dust, trying to get out of the area. José recounted, "I couldn't see much of my surroundings because of the dust. There was six to ten inches of soot on cars, building, sidewalks, and streets, with paper blowing everywhere. It looked like everything in the area had been annihilated."

Getting closer to the site, he found a training certificate that was laying in the debris, and thought that a family member of the victim might want it, but decided not to as José felt it would be disturbing "Hallowed Grounds". When he arrived at the twin towers site, he saw a "mangled mess of steel beams and rubble." Some responders were there, with a few emergency vehicles driving by, which kicked up tons of dust.

José then returned to his neighborhood and checked on his mother and other family members. Finding that everyone was safe, he and his sister, Linda, walked crosstown to St. Vincent's hospital to see if they could help in any way. They found the emergency staff waiting outside for survivors, but none came. He described the scene: "There were no cars on the street, just people. Some like zombies, as they could not fathom what had just occurred."

Later that evening José, along with his brother-in-law and nephew, Kenneth Shaffer Sr., a retired NYC police officer, and Ken Shaffer Jr., went back downtown to provide any assistance they could in the search for survivors. By this time, volunteers were showing up in masses at the twin

towers site. José along with his brother-in-law and nephew grabbed buckets and started to work on one of the many “bucket brigades” to remove debris by hand searching for possible survivors.

They also volunteered to go into the subway station to help recovery efforts there. “The station was pitch black and all we had were flashlights”. He and the other volunteers worked on removing the rubble from there. “Every once in a while, someone would yell ‘quiet’ to listen for some type of response or noise from possible survivors. We would tap on the pipes and listen for anyone to respond.” Rescue dogs also joined the search at the site.

The first night, volunteers did not have adequate safety equipment. But, as José indicated, “We were not concerned about our health. We covered our noses and mouths with our shirts or with the dust masks that were being handed out. We just wanted to help.” Hardware stores and other retailers, however, began donating proper breathing masks, boots, gloves, and other equipment. Others offered food and other supplies. A stand down area was set up as a place to rest, providing massages to the weary workers. Red Cross volunteers examined and washed the volunteers’ eyes of dusk and grime that was in the air and unavoidable.

With many of the roads still closed going in and out of Manhattan, José could not get to work for most of the week, so he requested annual leave and continued working at the twin towers site. He spent most of the week volunteering at night to move debris and sleeping during the day.

José also offered his services at the temporary FBI command center, which was set up in a parking garage on west 41<sup>st</sup> street. There, he met with a FAA security inspector and a representative from Headquarters and was provided a security ID aptly labeled “TWINBOM” (which he keeps framed at his home). He served as a liaison between the FBI, FAA security and Flight Standards, providing responses to questions about certificates held by the hijackers. When he finally returned to his office, he agreed to go to the Fresh Kills landfill site in Staten Island, as a FAA volunteer to help sift through the debris being brought in by barges and trucks. He worked shifts there for a few weeks along with other FAA volunteering inspectors.

He described the scene at the landfill as “extremely eerie.” Working in hazmat suits, volunteers saw burned hulks of fire trucks, cars, and other equipment. While looking through materials being sent along conveyer belts, he saw money, wallets, aircraft wheels, photos, personal documents, a panel from the side of the American Airlines B767, parts and 2 aircraft engine remains. It was, he explained, generally “hard to decipher what was on the conveyor belts because things were so pulverized.”

When asked why he volunteered so much of his time during the crisis, José, being a true New Yorker, born and raised in Manhattan, explained that it is his city, his home and not stepping up, was not an option.