

# Least We Never Forget

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*(Although we are all familiar with the FAA's efforts on September 11, 2001, to shut down the air traffic system and then, over the next weeks and months, restore the system to full capacity, few know about the heroic efforts of Flight Standards personnel during the crisis. Information for this article came from interviews with John Krepp, Mike Bulzomi, Lou Alvarez, Steve Shataka, Joe DiPalmo, John Russo, Kim Miller, Mike Daniels, and from the Washington FSDO's FSDO Flyer, special edition, dated September 11, 2011, edited by Maria Papegeorgiou).*

## **The NY FSDO**

When John Krepp, a unit supervisor at the NY FSDO in Garden City, NY, went to work on that beautiful clear, crisp September 11 day, he had no idea how his and the lives of his fellow employees at the FSDO would change forever. Garden City was approximately 25 miles from New York City, and John could see the Manhattan skyline from his office. Many of the inspectors also had similar views from their cubicles.

Looking out their respective windows just before 9 a.m., many at the FSDO saw black smoke billowing up from the Manhattan skyline. With no television or radio in the office, they found binoculars and saw the north tower on fire. Like many around the agency, the inspectors initially thought a general aviation aircraft had hit the tower. A few minutes after 9 a.m., they saw the north tower on fire. They saw the towers fall. Inspector Steve Shataka exclaimed, "They're gone, they're no longer there." They couldn't believe what they were seeing.

Still not sure what was happening, but knowing that the FSDO had to help somehow, facility manager Melvin Freeman asked three inspectors, Steve Shataka, Mike Bulzomi, and Ed Florshein(?) to go into Manhattan to see if they could help in anyway. The regional office subsequently called to instruct the FSDO to close and send all employees home and requested that Freeman recall the three inspectors, then on their way into the city. Ten to fifteen minutes later, the region called and said to send the inspectors after all. After another recall notice and another cancellation, the three-man team headed into Manhattan. Although the Long Island Expressway had been closed, police allowed the inspectors onto the highway. They were the only car on the road, on emergency business, but they recall laughing, "We still had to pay the toll" to go through the tunnel. The trio arrived at One Police Plaza (1PP) around 4 p.m., not knowing what to expect.

As Mike Bulzomi explained, initially we "didn't know what our role was," we came to assist. "In a normal accident in New York City we're the first responders for the FAA until the NTSB go team arrives," but the FBI quickly determined it was a criminal act so FAA and NTSB had no formal role. We were there to provide technical assistance.

The FBI established its Joint Terrorism Task Force on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor of 1PP. Federal and state agencies staffed the command center. The FAA set up in a room adjacent to the command center, along with the Secret Service, Naval Investigative Service, Coast Guard, FEMA, NASOA county policy, federal police, and the park police.

According to Shataka, at 1PP it was “very chaotic initially,” we had “no idea on how many people had been killed, mass transit was shut down, there were power failures, street collapses, water main breaks, and no telephone service.” He had the only working cell phone at 1PP, so everyone, including the FBI used his phone until new telecommunication cables were installed.

The FAA team helped answer questions initially about the crashed aircraft, fuel loads, passenger lists, etc. As recovery teams found what they believed were aircraft parts at the “pile,” as the firemen on scene called the twin tower site, the inspectors went to Ground Zero to identify anything suspected as being part of the aircraft.

When leaving 1PP for the pile, what made a lasting impression on the inspectors was that when they came out of the building “there were people just standing there holding up pictures that said ‘have you seen this person.’” Also, they saw family members coming into the building to provide DNA samples to help identify the remains found at the twin towers site.

## **Ground Zero**

On that first day, on their way out of 1PP to inspect a suspected aircraft part, Shataka and Bulzomi passed a police officer covered in gray dust. He had witnessed firsthand the destruction and told them “the world is coming to an end.” When he first went to Ground Zero, inspector John Russo said, “When you got there you didn’t even want to look up.” He said everyone there tried to be “as businesslike as you could, but, of course, our hearts are pumping.”

Everything was covered in gray dust. The FAAers saw smoke and debris everywhere – total chaos. They describe the twin towers site as surreal – “street carts abandoned, but still with hot coffee and food on them. What also struck the inspectors every time they went to the pile was that they saw no office desks, no chairs, no computers – everything had been pulverized. Paper, however, was blowing all over the place.

Joe DiPalmo explained that “as you got closer and closer to the site, it’s almost as if color left the world, everything turned black and white, because there was light gray dust that covered everything and got into everything. So everywhere you went there was gray there was no color, I mean, even when you walked into some of the office buildings that were near the World trade center, you would see a half-eaten donut and a cup of coffee on a desk – the desk is gray, the cup is gray, the coffee’s gray, the donut’s gray. . .” He also remarked, “When you think of the World

Trade Center you think of glass, all this glass. . . I was at the site I don't know how many times and I never saw one sliver of glass." It had all been pulverized when the buildings collapsed.

The buildings had collapsed on themselves creating 150-200 feet high piles of rubble. They saw people passing buckets of rubble to another trying to clear the site looking for people. They heard "sirens and whistles going off everywhere." They asked a fireman about the whistles and he explained that every fireman carries a whistle that goes off when he/she is in trouble. They encountered a fireman man sitting on truck staring into space, and asked if he was okay. He had driven the truck to the site. When asked about his crew, he said "they're all gone." At the pile, every once in a while, they explained, you would see a stretcher and a flag come to the scene and a body carried out, most of them fireman, sometimes a police officer. It was a sobering sight.

The three inspectors spent roughly 18 hours at 1PP and the pile that first night. The FSDO then set up regular 12-hour shifts with two-man teams. John Krepp coordinated FAA's activities in Manhattan. The FAA teams initially consisted of Steve Shataka partnered with Mike Bulzomi, Dave Lithgow partnered with Ed Florshien(?), and Joe DiPalmo partnered with Tom Mineo. DiPalmo had been in upstate New York on vacation when he heard about the attack. He raced home to work in whatever capacity he was needed.

Although they did not find any large pieces of the aircraft, they did find pieces of the structure, landing gear, and engines. They found no aluminum pieces – those had all disintegrated in the fire. Interestingly, they also found a first officer's pilot certificate.

## **The View from AFS at Washington HQ**

As it did at the NY FSDO, September 11 started out as any normal day at FAA headquarters – meetings, desk work, and coordination with regional offices. As television stations began reporting a plane hitting the south tower, a relative called Kim Miller, who worked in the Flight Standards International office (AFS-50), to ask what had happened. Kim did not know, so went to talk with his supervisor, Mike Daniel. Located in FOB 10B, Daniel immediately went to the command center in FOB 10A, to find out what had happened. By the time he arrived, the north tower had been hit and everyone was aware something terrible had happened.

Daniel found FAA Administrator Jane Garvey, Nick Sabatini (AVS-1), and Peggy Gilligan (AVS-2) already busy in the command center with other staff. He received permission from Sabatini to set up an AFS command center in the building. Daniel had led AFS activities on the agency's Y2K team and had set up a crisis command center with open communications with all AFS regions and facilities and the airlines on December 31, 1999 – January 1, 2000, to ensure the smooth resolution of any possible issues. Using the Y2K model, he went to work. By the time the plane hit the Pentagon, the AFS command center was already being established.

The center maintained an open communication network with all AFS regional offices, FSDOs, and certificate management offices. The center operated 24/7, with volunteers staffing the room on 8 hour shifts. Daniel had so many volunteers he had to actually limit the number involved to 12-15 per shift because of the size of the conference room. He reported that while the command center was in operation, so many people pulled together, everyone running on adrenaline. Everyone wanted to support and help; people did what they had to do. With so many people pulling together, he said, "it makes you feel good," that so many wanted to help in this time of crisis.

The ground stop of all air traffic set the AFS center into overdrive. As Kim Miller explained, "As the skies became quiet, it increased the workload for flight standards." AFS had to account for all airliners in the U.S. to make sure there were no other hijackers aloft and, working with the airlines and the ATO to verify all aircraft were down. With assurance that all planes had landed, the AFS crisis team worked at the request of the FBI to compare passenger lists of the four crashed airlines to look for possible hijackers. This was a team effort. The certificate management officers worked with the airlines to obtain accurate passengers lists, and then sent them to the AFS command center. Staff there worked with the airmen registry office to look for any passengers that might be on the registry.

By the evening of 9/12, the command center compiled a short list of possible suspects. The short list received greater scrutiny with the registry office providing a "blue ribbon" package (an in depth examination of all certificates ever issued by the FAA) on the suspects. The FAA then sent that report to the FBI. On September 14, the FBI publically announced the names of the hijackers – all the names had been on the list provided by the FAA. As Miller recounted, we provided 7 possible suspect names to the FBI for Flight 77, the FBI announced 5 of those as the hijackers. Mohammed Atta was the most prominent name on the list – he sat in seat 8D. For some reason, Miller recounted, "that stuck with me."

Lou Alvarez who helped the command center from his desk at the NY International Field Office recalls checking names on the registry database. Watching the morning news on 9/15, he heard that the FBI had stopped an Amtrak train en route to Dallas and pulled off a couple of passengers. Those passengers had been identified by the FAA as having mechanic's licenses and were thought to have been part of the 9/11 plot.

While some AFS teams worked on the passenger lists, others began looking at how to restart the air traffic system. They talked to the airlines to assess any possible maintenance or operational issues, and to check on any crew rest concerns. They also identified where the airplanes were clustered. Some airports had satellite pictures, which helped this effort. They found, for example, the airport in Halifax, Canada, had aircraft parked almost everywhere on the runways and tarmacs. Halifax had accommodated many of the U.S. and foreign aircraft en route from Europe. The local townspeople pitched in to take care of the almost 7,000 passengers stranded there. The

AFS volunteers also worked with foreign governments to coordinate the foreign flights once the NAS reopened.

## **Washington FSDO**

Gathered for their normal 9:00 a.m. staff meeting on September 11, the FSDO staff was yet unaware of the tragic events unfolding in New York. One of the inspectors, Douglas Lundren, training in Cincinnati, called the office to let them know what happened. After the Pentagon was attacked, the Eastern Region office called to shut down the office for the day. Manager George Galo, Assistant Manager Nick Scarpinato, Jr., and IT specialist Tom Wilkinson stayed at the office. Bill Bergmann, originally scheduled to be on American Airlines Flight 77, had changed his flight to Los Angeles for a United Airlines plane at the last minute because United served his favorite Starbucks coffee. With his United flight now cancelled, he came into the office. As FSDO employee Maria Papageorgiou later reported, “The simple act of wanting a better cup of coffee saved his life.”

Wilkinson, Bergmann, and inspector Mary Pat Baxter, who had returned to the office, all left for the Pentagon to inspect the crash site. They were the first three federal inspectors at the crash site. They could not get too close to the actual crash site, however, because fires were still burning. Once they could move closer, their primary job was to sift through the rubble looking for aircraft parts. FSDO staff worked there for 18 days.

The Washington FSDO went on a 24/7 rotation schedule. Staff helped verify all aircraft in their areas of responsibility were grounded, and ensured that all of their Part 121 system operations centers were manned. They also subsequently ensured that all agricultural operations had secured their aircraft.

## **JFK Airport**

While the NY FSDO inspectors began their rotations at LPP, others went to John F. Kennedy International Airport when the airport reopened later in the week. They weren't there in their inspector roles, but rather their mission was to ensure a FAA presence in the terminal and on the ramps to help calm public fears. They patrolled the airport for a few days wearing their FAA hats and jackets. Lou Alvarez recounts that during one of his shifts a passenger pointed a suspicious person in the terminal. He and his partner reported it to the Port Authority police who investigated. They got a good look at the person and are convinced it was the man who was years later arrested as the shoe bomber.

## **The Fresh Kills Landfill**

On September 12, the recently closed Fresh Kills Landfill (named for the nearby Fresh Kills estuary) on Staten Island was reopened and designated a crime scene. Trucks began arriving from Ground Zero dumping debris from the World Trade Center site. Over the next ten months, personnel from State and Federal agencies and other volunteers combed through the almost 1.8 million tons of material looking for human remains, personal effects, aircraft parts, and other objects. AFS employees from the NY, Farmingdale, Teterboro, and Philadelphia FSDOs, and from the NY international Field office, volunteered for this task.

Donned with hazmat suits, these patriotic volunteers identified plane parts, helped look for the black boxes, and lent moral support to others working at the site. The FAA maintained a presence at the site for many months. The AFS inspectors worked in two-man shifts, doing what they could for the 24/7 recovery operations. The site was horrific. Lou Alvarez said “it looked like a war zone.” He also found it surreal to be touching pieces of the aircraft that brought down the Twin Towers. Inspector John Russo described the experience “as totally overwhelming.”

Alvarez acknowledged that some of what they found was “morbid.” “Every morning there was a stench of death . . . I had never smelled that, but you knew what it was. Every day it was worse.” During the early weeks at the landfill, he recalls that while he sifted through the debris, “all of a sudden I [would] see a person wearing a protective suit walking with a dog – a German Shepard.” The person in the hazmat suit carried a white plastic bucket. The cadaver dogs would stop when they found human remains, just a small fragment. Everyone in the area would stop working and watch silently out of respect for those who lost their life. “It was very powerful.” A person with a falcon came regularly to the site to clear out the seagulls looking for meal.

Over time the recovery efforts at Fresh Kills became more efficient. Large conveyor belts arrived to help workers sift through smaller debris. Volunteers would line up along the conveyor and remove recognizable materials. They isolated aircraft parts in one area, vehicle parts in another spot, and personal items in another. The work was stressful and hard, but no one complained. As Alvarez explained, “people were tripping over each other to get things done . . . everyone was in it together.”

All of those involved in the recovery effort expressed pride in the New York community at large. At ground zero massage therapists showed up to help take care of the rescue dogs’ feet. The dogs were not accustomed to walking on such debris – concrete, metal, etc. Local restaurants appeared with trucks of food to feed workers. Hardware and big box stores brought equipment. And, counselors showed up to help anyone having a difficult time working in the harsh conditions.

## **Pier 92**

After almost two weeks after September 11, New York's Office of Emergency Management moved the command center to Pier 92. About 100 state and federal agencies moved out of PP1 to the Pier. The FBI moved to a separate location in Chelsea to continue its investigative work. FAA inspectors worked at the pier and at the FBI command center. Work became more routine at Pier 92 – as a daily rhythm took over from the chaos of the first few days after the tragedy. The AFS employees continued to identify aircraft parts, helped search for the black boxes (which were never recovered), and helped check out possible suspects for the law enforcement agencies.

Working long shifts the inspectors had little time to reflect on the sights and sounds around them. They were focused on their tasks. As Russo explained, thankfully the AFS inspectors “were a seasoned outfit,” most had served on accident investigation teams, “so that helped.”

## **Final Thoughts**

For each AFS employee involved, their hearts go out to the victims and families. The NY based inspectors all knew someone who had died in the tragedy – friends and neighbors. Mike Bulzomi couldn't initially contact his brother, a 36-year veteran of the NY Fire Department. Fortunately, his brother was unharmed, but his brother knew and had worked with 75 percent of the firemen who perished.

Mike Daniel still remains amazed that from throughout AFS that so many people wanted to help. He said the AFS employees were “running on adrenaline.” They offered support and help, and did whatever they could. There were “so many people pulling together . . . it makes you feel good,” that so many wanted to help. Joe DiPalmo remembers the outpouring of everyone who wanted to help. He says “reams and reams of people who wanted to help,” from medical doctors, to restaurateurs, heavy equipment operators, to the general public.

John Krepps echoes these sentiments. “We were all in this together, our country was hit pretty hard, and we all stepped up to try to do the right thing. He explains that no one was worried about personal safety. “Everybody without a doubt wanted to help; there was no panic at all.” To this day he marvels at the “incredible amount” of people involved in the recovery effort.

Lou Alvarez is a big Yankee's fan. When he heard there would be an interfaith service at Yankee stadium for the victims and the agencies that participated he made sure his family went. He said it was a very emotional service, as victim's families came with photos of their loved one. He will never forget it.

The men and women of Flight Standards, modest about their work in this time of crisis, remain humble about their accomplishments. Perhaps, John Russo best sums up the attitude of his fellow workers: “We weren't looking for accolades, we did what we had to do.”