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WORLD TRADE CENTER TASK FORCE INTERVIEW

FIREFIGHTER EDWARD CACHIA

Interview Date: December 6, 2001

Transcribed by Laurie A. Collins

CHIEF KENAHAN: Today's date is December 6th, 2001. The time is 2 p.m. This is Battalion Chief Dennis Kenahan of the New York City Fire Department, Safety Division. I'm conducting an interview with Ed Cachia of Engine 53.

Q. Please state your recollections for September 11th.

A. As far as that particular day, we were in the firehouse cleaning the kitchen, and a member had come in from the house watch and said put on Channel 7, whatever channel it was. He said a plane hit tower one of the World Trade Center, the north tower.

We all ran into the kitchen. Everybody regrouped in the kitchen. We were watching the news, and they had helicopters in the air immediately with the footage. We were discussing more than likely we're going to go down there, this is going to be a big fire.

We all witnessed the second plane hitting the south tower, and with that everybody got kind of psyched up and said we're definitely going to be going down there now, it's definitely

some kind of terrorist act and everybody be safe. Everybody is very concerned.

With that the tone alarm went off, and 53 Engine was called down to the north tower. 43 Truck remained in quarters. As we got on the rig, everybody double-checked their equipment, checked the flashlights and all that.

We headed down. We had a very good chauffeur who went through the park and got us down there pretty quick. I believe we pulled up somewhere on West Street a couple blocks before the towers, the north tower. With that I remember seeing 22 parked in front of us, 13 Truck. They must have gone ahead of us.

We walked towards a command post which was set up by an underground garage across from tower two. There was a chief on both sides of this garage, the entrance and the exit. One was the truck, which was on the southern side. On the northern side of the garage were the engine companies. We were waiting there for our assignments. I believe as we were there a couple companies were assigned into the building. I remember seeing 13 Truck to our right.

Then the jumpers started to take effect as far as everybody's concentration and thoughts. There was a tremendous amount of people jumping from the top floors, and the sound and the vision of it kind of broke everybody's concentration. So with that I remember losing sight or record of 13 Truck, which I believe they soon went in after.

We moved to the top of the hill. I don't remember what companies were in front of us, but we worked our way up to the top of the hill. We were with 44 Engine, I believe. We were about to get our assignment to go into the building, and I remember Chief Ganci on the radio yelling, "There's another plane in the air. I don't want anybody to go into the towers. Everybody stay put."

Then I remember him desperately trying to get information: Is the military going to send a plane up to intercept the plane? He told the chiefs again, "Make sure no companies go in right now. There's another plane up in the air. We don't know what's going on."

With that I remember a chief coming

over to us saying, "53, 44, do me a favor, before you get your assignment, before you go anywhere near this building, I want you to move a couple of rigs so we can get some ambulances in here."

So now that broke up our company. I remember standing there with my officer, Lieutenant Bob Dorritie, and the other members of the company -- Danny Schofield, Louis Giaconelli, Michael Catalano -- went to move some rigs.

As I'm standing with my officer, the people are continuing to jump. Ganci is still on the radio trying desperately to get some information concerning this third plane in the air.

As my officer and I were looking at the south tower, it just gave. It actually gave at a lower floor, not the floor where the plane hit, because we originally had thought there was like an internal detonation explosives because it went in succession, boom, boom, boom, boom, and then the tower came down.

With that everybody was just stunned for a second or two, looking at the tower coming down. Then everybody started to turn towards the

garage. That was it. We were just kind of blown into the garage with all the dust and the debris and material from the building. It came up rapidly right up the street.

As I remember turning, if you were out in the street somewhat, a good amount out in the street, you were kind of blown down the street, where we were kind of forced into the garage. We were very fortunate. There were several companies.

We were encapsulated in this garage for quite some time, maybe 15 minutes or so. You couldn't see. You couldn't breathe. You couldn't even hear because all the residue and material was in your ears and your nose and your mouth.

Then as a few minutes went by, you heard some voices. It was dead silence at first. Just different emotions: How are we going to get out of here? I can't see. I can't breathe. My chest. It was still completely black. You couldn't see an inch in front of your face.

Then I remember an officer saying, "I've got a wall. I've got a wall. I'm going to

hit the wall with the halogen. Follow the sound of the halogen. Come towards me. I've got a wall. We'll get out of here."

As I was on the floor -- I was very fortunate. I landed towards the incline of the garage. I was probably one of the last ones to get into the garage. I felt the incline with my left hand, and I had my light. I remember screaming, "I'm at the entrance. Follow my light." I was telling everybody, "Just follow this light, because this is the way out."

I remember another officer yelling, "How do you know that's the way out? I've got a wall. Come towards the wall." So there was a lot of different emotions and different things going on in everybody's mind at the time.

I started to kind of go up the hill myself, pointing the flashlight towards everybody in the garage, and came across like little tree limbs. At that point you still couldn't see. It was completely blacked out. I knew this was definitely the way to go. Some guys followed me out.

That was it. I remember hearing the

chief's voice. Maybe this is like 15 minutes or so, maybe going a little towards 20 minutes, a little under 20 minutes, everybody kind of followed their way toward the incline of the garage.

The chief said, "We're going to regroup." It started to lighten up just a little bit. It was still kind of dark out but lightened up enough where you saw other people's faces. The chief said, "We have to regroup in another area."

With that guys were asking each other, "How are you doing? Are you all right?" This and that. Guys were starting to regroup little by little. It's still dark out but light enough to see people now where we were standing. People were still jumping from tower two because you could hear the bodies hitting the ground.

Then another chief came over and said, "We have to regroup, but I want everybody to go back into the garage. We're going to have a lifeline set up, and we're going to come out the back of the garage. It's safer." The other chief had said, "We'll walk along West Street and



we'll regroup around the other end of the building."

So with that I remember my officer grabbed me by the shoulder and said we're going to go back through the garage. It's going to be safer. I remember him yelling out to a few other people too we'll go through the garage, it's a lot safer, because at this point in time it's still kind of dark out. People were still jumping. There still was a little confusion as to what was down the block from the collapse.

So a few guys regrouped on top of the garage and I believe started to walk along West Street on the outside. I walked back into the underground garage with my officer and several other guys. There was a lifeline set up, and we came out the rear of this building -- I don't know what building it was -- by the marina.

At that point in time, everybody got out the rear, and my officer and I, Bob Dorritie, was standing there. There was the chief that initiated the entire removal. My officer said to the chief, "Chief, I'm missing a couple of guys. I don't know where they are."

At that point in time, myself, Louis Giaconelli and my officer were the three left standing there with the chief. The chief said, "Send one of your guys back into the building. Maybe they're in the building somewhere. And you two guys stay out here in case they do come out." So I stood there with my officer, and we sent Giaconelli back into the building.

At that point in time, we're looking up at the north tower. I remember my officer saying, "I have a feeling this one is going to come down too." Just as he said that, that tower came down it looked like at the point of impact. We actually witnessed both towers coming down visually. We happened to be looking at that particular time. With that, the tower came down.

We ran towards the marina to seek shelter, and all the debris came over the building we were behind. We were kind of buried a second time with light debris, my officer being ahead of me by the boats, and I just didn't quite make it that far. I just hit the ground and hoped for the best.

You could hear the steel beams coming

down. They flew everywhere. That was it. There's another point in time you couldn't see, couldn't breathe, for at least another ten minutes or so.

I remember finally getting in touch with my officer, calling his name out. It took quite some time, and he had said he couldn't speak because of all the residue in his mouth. I had my mask with me at the time, and I had it on. That was it.

After that we were hoping for the best with Louis Giaconelli who went into the building to look for the other members who were in another place. They moved the rigs and took shelter in the Winter Garden, I believe, at the time of the collapse. We were hoping that he was going to be all right. He had walked out of the building at that time, so we knew he was all right.

So what we did was we walked by the water to regroup in another area, which I don't exactly recollect. We were explaining to the chief we're missing a couple guys. He said, "A lot of guys took refuge in the Winter Garden, which was next door. Let's get some confirmation

before we do anything, but everybody stay here."

Later on we did hook up with the members that we were missing. My officer was extremely concerned and very upset about that. He pursued it wholeheartedly. They regrouped with us.

At that point in time, they were trying to organize some kind of search for the missing members that were caught in the collapse. I remember walking towards tower two, basically back towards the front of the garage where we regrouped to leave the area. We wound up back in that area.

I remember seeing Chief Visconti very visibly upset, standing on a pile of rubble. It must have been a story or two high in that area. He was explaining that we're going to create a line. We're all going to walk across the rubble as wide as we can, and we're going to search every little nook and cranny and hole or cabin, whatever we can find. Where there's a space, you're going to look for the brothers that might have got caught in the collapse.

At that point in time, we did that,

this being maybe half an hour from the point in time of actually leaving that marina area, maybe half an hour after that. I remember several guys came across a fireman's body here, a fireman's body there, a helmet. You saw the back of someone's bunker gear, his legs, a rig twisted under the rubble. Basically that was it.

There wasn't the equipment at the time to dig anybody out, because of the twisted steel. So we put markers for the bodies. They would try and get as deep as possible and close to a body to see if there was a pulse. If there was a confirmation that this person didn't make it, they would mark off the area and we would continue forward, hopefully to find someone that was still alive.

We did that for some time. The inhalation of the dust and the initial collapse just was overwhelming. You were just choking and coughing on your own phlegm and this and that. So we did that maybe 45 minutes or an hour or so.

Then my company and I, we regrouped in another area just to get a breather, because at that particular time more and more firemen were

coming in. My officer said, "Look, we've got to really just take a break here. We're really overloading ourselves here," because he saw our condition. We were kind of waning at that point in time from exhaustion.

So that was it. We went back to another staging area. We regrouped. We replenished water. Basically that was the last thing I remember, we regrouped. At that point in time, other members from our company met us at that area, and they were going off into the area to search also.

I myself personally had my eyes encrusted with the cement and lime dust. The second I stopped working, I couldn't even keep my eyes open. So my officer said, "Look, we've got to get you to see the eye doctor right away," because my eyes were bloodshot red and I couldn't even keep them open at that point, knowing that this was it, we're going to take a break, more guys are coming in.

Then I remember it was a little while after that we all went to the triage center, and everybody was getting treated for eye injuries.

Then they said they felt that we had cornea damage so we should go right to a hospital.

So my officer and myself, I think Mike Catalano and Louis Giaconelli went to Cornell. That was it. That was it for us. We were examined.

Q. Thank you very much.

CHIEF KENAHAN: This concludes the interview. The time now is 2:16.