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WORLD TRADE CENTER TASK FORCE INTERVIEW

LIEUTENANT WILLIAM WALSH

Interview Date: January 11, 2002

Transcribed by Laurie A. Collins

CHIEF CONGIUSTA: Today is January 11th, 2002. The time is 12:00. This is B.C. Frank Congiusta of the Safety Battalion of the New York City Fire Department. I'm conducting an interview with the following individual.

Please state your name.

LIEUTENANT WALSH: My name is Lieutenant William Walsh. I'm assigned to Ladder Company 1.

CHIEF CONGIUSTA: Of the New York City Fire Department. We're at the quarters of Ladder 1 regarding the events of September 11th, 2001.

Q. Bill, if you would please tell us what happened that day in your own words.

A. Okay. All right. I reported for work about 8:00 that morning to start a 24. We received a run about 8:30 in the morning for a gas leak up at Lispenard Street and Church. We were operating at that box along with Engine 7, Battalion 1 and Ladder Company 8. I believe 55 Engine was there also, maybe Engine 24. I'm not sure.

After about 15 minutes, we conclude our operations there. Lispenard is about one block south of Canal Street. I believe the chief gave the code for a gas leak, 10-40, code 1. All the units were about to go 10-8 when we heard this loud roar. Everybody thought -- or at least to me it sounded as though there was going to be a Con Edison steam explosion. This was about a quarter to 9, I'd say.

So everybody looked up to where they thought they heard the sound coming from, and we saw an American Airlines plane. To me it looked as though it was going treetop level right down West Street. Then he appeared to rise a little bit.

We were under the impression -- he looked like he was going down, but we didn't hear any mechanical difficulty. We couldn't figure out why an American Airlines plane would be so low in downtown Manhattan. We sort of expected him to veer off and go into the Hudson.

But he just rose a little bit, his altitude, leveled off, and he was headed straight for the Trade Center. So just before he got to

the Trade Center, it seemed as though he gained power. We were just watching this airplane on target for the World Trade Center.

All of a sudden, boom, he disappears into the Trade Center. You hear this sickening noise as if two pieces of fiberglass had hit. You hear this loud explosion. He just disappeared into the Trade Center.

You could see a huge fireball come out from where he hit. I guess it was about ten stories high of brown smoke coming out and thousands of pieces of paper being thrown through the other side of the World Trade Center.

So immediately everybody got into the rig. We automatically responded down to the World Trade Center. We went up one block north to Canal Street, made a left, went straight down to West Street. Then we headed south from there. I imagine we got down there in less than two minutes.

So when we had gotten down to the front of One World Trade Center, which happens to be West Street -- that's the main entrance -- what I observed was a lot of ash on the ground, a lot of

paper on the ground, no vehicle traffic whatsoever, no civilians whatsoever. It was like the area was a ghost town. I guess there was pieces of burning debris on the ground. I really couldn't say what it was.

On the way down there, what I heard over the radio was a Battalion 1 chief giving a report that a large plane had hit the World Trade Center. I heard the officer of Engine 10 saying to send every available ambulance to downtown Manhattan because a plane had just hit the Trade Center. Engine 10 would be first due. Ladder 10 is first due. I didn't hear any transmissions from them. Me, Ladder 1, is second truck.

So we had parked the apparatus right in front of the glass overhang on West Street, which is the main entrance to World Trade Center number one. We all gathered our tools, and we headed to through the front door.

Now, the front door is a revolving door. There is a vestibule of about ten feet, let's say, and there's another revolving door. There I noticed two civilians that had more than third degree burns.

They were in pugilistic position. They were black, burnt. Their skin and their clothes were burnt off. They were smoldering, and they were trying to get up. They were just moving around. I had estimated they had less than half a minute left in their lives. So we had just passed them by.

What I observed as I was going through these doors and I got into the lobby of the World Trade Center was that the lobby of the Trade Center didn't appear as though it had any lights.

All of the glass on the first floor that abuts West Street was blown out. The glass in the revolving doors was blown out. All of the glass in the lobby was blown out.

The wall panels on the wall are made of marble. It's about two or three inches thick. They're about ten feet high by ten feet wide. A lot of those were hanging off the wall.

Q. Wait a second.

(Interruption.)

A. What else I observed in the lobby was that -- there's basically two areas of elevators. There's elevators off to the left-hand side which

are really the express elevators. That would be the elevators that's facing north. Then on the right-hand side there's also elevators that are express elevators, and that would be facing south. In the center of these two elevator shafts would be elevators that go to the lower floors. They were blown off the hinges. That's where the service elevator was also.

Q. Were these elevators that went to the upper floors? They weren't side lobby elevators?

A. No, no, I'd say that they went through floors 30 and below.

Q. And they were blown off?

A. They were blown off the hinges, and you could see the shafts. The elevators on the extreme north side and the other express elevator on the extreme south side, they looked intact to me from what I could see, the doors anyway.

So we reported to the lobby command post. Engine 10 was there. Ladder 10 was there. The lobby seemed to fill up with firemen very quickly. I was reporting to the 1st Battalion Chief, which is Chief Pfeifer. At that time he was with the 1st Division Chief, which was Chief

Hayden.

Two of those chiefs were trying to collect information, which was very difficult for them, because as far as I could see the class E system I do not think was working. I can't say for sure, but these chiefs depend upon the information from the class E system, and I don't think that the class E system was working properly.

Normally there are World Trade Center building personnel that come down and they hand you Trade Center radios, which you can stretch the length of the World Trade Center. These people were not around. So as far as I know -- I was there for at least ten minutes -- there were no World Trade Center people to assist these chiefs.

The Division 1 aide, which was Chris Waugh, he was in the lobby. He was setting up the board, the command post board. I remember one time Chief Pfeifer, I made eye contact with him. He was about to tell me something and then he changed his mind quickly and told me to hold on.

We were there for it seemed to me like about ten minutes or so. Then finally the Division 1 aide said to everybody, "Just go up any stairway that you can and handy talky me what stairway you went up."

So I headed for the B stairway. I did not want to deal with elevators. So Ladder 1 --

Q. Were there any elevators working or no? Probably not, I assume.

A. I couldn't tell about the express elevators. The elevators that I mentioned before that were on the extreme north end and the extreme south end, I don't know about those elevators. But I headed for where the service elevator was, which was in the center where the lower floor elevators were, the ones where the doors were blown off them.

So I had known where the B stairway was, and Ladder 1 had opened up the door to the B stairway. Within several seconds we noticed civilians coming down in an orderly fashion and some water coming down the stairs. I assume that this water was either broken standpipes or sprinkler pipes that had gone off.

I had my thermal imaging camera with me, and then I realized that I did not have my search rope. I figured that I didn't need my thermal imaging camera to find fire at this point but I did need my search rope.

I instructed my members to wait in the lobby next to the B stairwell. I went outside to my rig, and I swapped my search rope for the thermal imaging camera. I came back, and we all of us started heading up the stairs.

My OV, which was Steve Olsen -- I don't think you mentioned him before. We'll get into that later.

Q. He was interviewed already, probably.

A. He didn't mention it.

Q. I just have guys that haven't been interviewed. So anybody that was interviewed I don't even know about.

A. He went up ahead of me, which is something I didn't like. But anyway, he's an aggressive firefighter. He went up ahead of us. As we started making our way up the stairs, it was a little bit slow going. You had to pace yourself because you knew you were going up 90

flights of stairs.

This battalion chief had asked us to turn off some sprinkler heads that had activated on the fourth floors and other floors that I can't remember. So we started turning off sprinkler heads.

I believe that we took a rest on maybe floor number seven and then again on floor 12. We made our next stop on floor number 19, which is as high as we had gotten. We were all sweating and debilitated at that point.

Do you want me to get into who I saw?

Q. Yeah, sure. That's good information.

A. I remember seeing the officer from Ladder 5. His name is Lieutenant Warchola. I remember seeing him on the stairs with his company. I remember seeing Captain Jonas of Ladder Company 6. We had passed each other on the stairs. They would take a rest; I would pass them. We would take a rest, and then they would pass us. But those two officers I remember seeing as we passed each other on the stairway.

After turning off some sprinkler heads and sometime waiting for my crew members to

rejoin us, because the pace was very slow going up the stairs because if somebody had stopped ahead of you, whatever floor that was above you, you had to wait until the line had started again. Everything was fairly orderly as far as the civilians descending and the firemen ascending.

I remember a Port Authority chief. He was black, and I believe he had either one or two stars on him. I remember him trying to get together his men on the stairwell and it looked as though there was about four or five of them at the time. I had mentioned that this was the B stairwell.

This happened on about floor number 10 or so. He was trying to regroup his men, and he wanted them off the floor at floor number 10 or 12 or so. I guess he wanted to give them instructions.

Ladder 1 had made its stop at floor number 19, because at floor number 19 you could tell that were soda machines there, candy machines, as soon as you opened up the stairway door and looked inside into the occupancy.

I think the guys were breaking open the

soda machines to take water, juice and cookies from the other vending machines. We were all sweating heavily at this point. A lot of us took off our helmets and masks and turnout coats.

I believe that Ladder 6 had also stopped around that area also on floor number 19. I had to wait for two of my members. I had to wait for Damian Vancleaf, and I had to wait for a member of Ladder Company 10. I believe he was the OV that day.

He was going to be operating with me because, I guess he lost his unit somehow. I guess being the OV he just assumed that he was going to be operating the elevators and it didn't work out that way. Anyway, he was straggler, so he attached himself to me.

So I had to wait for Vancleaf and this OV from Ladder Company 10. They finally joined us at floor number 19. I can't say how long I was there. I believe it was about like 10:00 that I had gotten to that point. We were on I guess you would call it the West Street side of floor number 19. Engine 5 was on the east side, which would be abutting World Trade Center number

2.

I had heard through the Engine 5 officer a mayday, because one of his members believed he was having a heart attack. He said something about chest pains or something. I'm an EMT, so I went over there across the floor on floor number 19. I guess it would be exposure 3 side.

I inquired about this member, but he seemed okay to me. He seemed to make a quick recovery. Maybe it was just a fast chest pain. He was having chest pains. He was okay.

So I tried to gather my members, because they didn't like the progress we were making at this point. They felt as though we should be a little bit higher up.

Lieutenant Fody, who was assigned to Engine 7 -- he's now a captain of Engine Company 6 -- he was working overtime that day in Engine Company 9. He was on the floor with us taking a rest. I think he might have started up the stairs, the same stairwell that we were using. I believe he left about ten minutes before I did, and this was about 10:00 we're talking about.

At this point I think my chauffeur -- I was trying to collect all my members, and I had all of my members, with the exception of Firefighter Olsen, who I knew was on the 22nd floor because I tried to find him through the handy talky and he told me that he was on the 22nd floor. I said, "Wait for me on the 22nd floor. Don't go any further," because I wanted all my members in a group.

So we were about to regroup now, and it must have been about -- I guess it was about 10:15 at this point. My chauffeur, Firefighter O'Neill, he said he had to go to the bathroom. He was looking around the floor for a bathroom. He finally finds one.

We're waiting for him. We must be waiting for about five minutes or so. I guess I was still on the exposure 1 side, the West Street side, in the hallway. I could look to my right and see 19S, and I could look to my left and see 19N, which apparently meant north and south.

About this time, 10:15, 20 after or so, I feel a rumbling of the building. It felt as though -- I got knocked from one side of the

hallway to the other side. It felt like you were in a subway car standing up and the subway car was making a turn and you were getting shifted back and forth. That's the way that it felt.

We later find out that this was World Trade Center number two collapsing. It had hit World Trade Center number one, and I guess it hit the Marriott Hotel. I didn't know this at the time, because we were in the stairwell, which is basically soundproof and no windows. So I didn't know that the second World Trade Center had been hit by the second plane.

All this time I operated on the tactical channel, Channel 1, at this point. I felt as though it was a localized collapse. The lights went out, and the ceiling panels fell down, dust fell down. The emergency lights stayed on.

I could look around and see pieces of debris in the hallway. It didn't seem like much debris in the hallway, but there were pieces of debris in the hallway. I did not have any access to any windows at this point because I was in the hallway. No windows were around us to the

outside. You didn't know what was going on outside.

So I was about to collect my members and start heading --

Q. Did you know the second tower had been hit by a plane?

A. No, no.

So I started collecting my members, and I was about to go up the stairway and I heard maydays to get out of the building. I didn't really know who gave the mayday. It could have been one chief giving it to another chief who was operating on the command channel and that chief might have given it out -- I'm not sure. I just heard, "Get out of the building."

So I collected all my members and informed Firefighter Olsen to get out of the building. He didn't acknowledge me. There was a lot of handy talky traffic going on at the time. Four of my members went down ahead of me, and then I was the next one to go down.

As we were going down the stairs, on the lower floors there were firemen taking rests. I couldn't identify the companies. I assume that

they were Brooklyn units, units that came subsequent to us. They were hanging out on the stairwell and in the occupancy, and they were resting.

I told them, "Didn't you hear the mayday? Get out." They were saying, "Yeah, yeah, we'll be right with you, Lou." They just didn't give it a second thought. They just continued with their rest.

So I made it down to the lobby, and the lobby looked as though it was in the same condition as I had left it as far as the debris all over the lobby. I looked out to West Street, and south of me I could see the rubble of a building. I would later find out it was the rubble of Two World Trade Center that had fallen down.

I decided to head north. I could see like four of my members that had run ahead of me. I was at the glass overhang, and I could hear bodies hitting the glass. As a matter of fact, I could see it, bodies jumping, hitting the glass overhang in front of West Street, which my rig was right in front of that also. There was

debris on my rig. My rig looked smashed at this point. Again, nobody was in the street, and there were no cars in the street.

I got outside of the building. There were bodies falling down, and there was some debris falling down. There was a lot more ash in the street. From the entranceway to the World Trade Center going north, there's a pedestrian overpass, and I wanted to make it there. I think it was about 50 yards up or so. This is going north on West Street now, just before Vesey Street. There's about a 50-yard run.

I just held my breath and just hoped that nothing came down and hit me, and I ran to this pedestrian overpass. There was a fire engine there hooked up to a hydrant, and there was the chauffeur that was there. I didn't really get a good look at the chauffeur or get a good look at the engine company that was there.

I made it to the pedestrian overpass, where I stayed there for a while. I was trying to collect my thoughts, because I couldn't understand what was going on. Then there was this person who had a badge around his neck. He

was in civilian uniform, but I think he had a blue windbreaker that identified some agency that he worked for.

Q. OEM?

A. No idea. He was a black person. He said we were in the collapse zone. I had just assumed he knew more than I did at this point, so I just started walking fast. When I reached Vesey Street, which is only about another 20 yards up or so, I started walking very quickly now, north, up West Street.

I think I was about a block away or so, maybe even less, and I turned around to take a look at the top of the World Trade Center. There was lots of smoke or dust where Two World Trade Center was, but I didn't focus on that. I had no idea that the second World Trade Center had gotten hit. I focused on World Trade Center number one.

The wind was blowing south that day, and you had a clear view of the World Trade Center. I could see where it was heavily on fire. I assumed it was about the 95th floor or so. All of a sudden, it starts coming down.

That put a panic into me.

I just dropped my tools, and I started running north as fast as I could. But then the debris started coming down, and to me it sounded like the roar of a freight train. In the background you could hear beams hitting beam like an erector set falling down.

All the dust and ash had finally hit the ground and started mushrooming the width of West Street and had started going east, and then it started mushrooming towards me. I started running as fast as I could, but I was overtaken by this. I was blown down. I thought that was it for me. I thought that I was dead.

After everything turned black and after several seconds, maybe 10 or 15 or so, I opened up my eyes. I was covered with ash. I could see like little pockets of fire around me. I thought I was in hell or purgatory at that point. I realized that I had survived.

I got up and I continued to run north. I lost all of my equipment. My mask fell off, my helmet and my lights and all of that. So I just ran north, and I ran as far as I believe it was

Harrison Street or around that area, which is about four blocks north or so.

That's where I ran into Captain Tardio of Engine 7. I ran into other members of Engine 7, other members of Ladder 1 that were working. Everybody had survived that was working that day from this house, Engine 7, Ladder 1.

Then Captain Tardio and I believe a member of Engine 6, Billy Green, were walking together. I finally met them. Captain Tardio seemed stressed out because he was under the assumption that he had lost two of his members who were tending the rig.

We got his turnout coat off, his mask, his helmet. I told him I would help him look for these people. I think I had gotten in touch with other members of my company, of Ladder 1. I had either physically seen them or heard them over the handy talky. So I knew all my members had made it.

So Captain Tardio, myself and Firefighter Olsen started to walk south now, and we were going to search for these two members that were missing, Firefighter Spinard, who was

the chauffeur that day, and Firefighter Cassaliggi, who were with them.

Later we would find out that Firefighter Spinard had escaped and Firefighter Cassaliggi was taken to the hospital shortly before number One World Trade Center fell.

So I continued to walk south. I think Firefighter Olsen and Captain Tardio had stopped to get some water, but I kept on walking south. I believe at Vesey Street I ran into Battalion Chief Pfeifer. I asked him if he was okay. He asked me if I was the same. I told him that of the two members that we thought we were missing he said that he had seen Firefighter Spinard. So Firefighter Cassaliggi was just missing at this point.

Chief Pfeifer asked me if I had seen his brother, who was the lieutenant of Engine Company 33. I said I would notify him if I run into him.

Then I ran into Battalion Chief McKavanagh, and he asked me if I was okay, because I was somewhat dazed at this point. I had lost all of my gear. So he told me that

there was a triage station here at Ladder Company 1, Engine 7, I should go back there.

He asked me for my handy talky because he was with Lieutenant Wiebicke, who was assigned to Ladder Company 1, we were coming off duty, and he could use my handy talky. So I gave him my handy talky.

I went down as far as Vesey Street, and it was all a big dust cloud. I heard over other people's handy talkies that there were electrical fires and gas fires. It was just a dangerous situation down there. I felt as though I was insecure at this point.

Q. Understandable.

A. Not in full control of my faculties here.

Then there were other building on fire, we would hear over the handy talky [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED], where I ran into my chauffeur, Firefighter O'Neill. We rested for a while.

I also ran into Lieutenant Bob Rocco.

I believe he's assigned to Ladder Company 9. He came in off duty.

I think I was there until maybe 12:00 or so at Harrison Street and West. Like I said, I was with my chauffeur. I guess the other members of my company had already gone back to quarters. Myself and Firefighter O'Neill went back to quarters. We walked back to quarters. I believe I got back to quarters about 12:30 or so.

I just reconfirmed that the whole house had made it, that the whole house survived. There were numerous off-duty members here. Everything was pretty much under control. It was already set up, this triage center.

There were other firemen that I didn't recognize. They would be taking some of the gear from the company. I guess they were called in from home, didn't have any gear. They knew this firehouse and decided to take whatever gear that they could and head down to the World Trade Center there.

I was impressed -- after this collapse had what happened when I was on my way back, I kept passing by tons of firefighters and EMS

personnel and construction workers and civilians. It reminded me of the minute men, these people that day. They were just helping out. Anyway, that's besides the point.

I had gotten back to quarters about 12:30. I went to the back room and just watched CNN for a while. That's all.

That's about it. Do you have any questions for me?

Q. Yeah, one question I have is when you looked at the north tower when you could see it, was there any indication before it was coming down? Did you see cracks in the side or anything?

A. No, I didn't.

Q. There was no indication that it was going to collapse before it actually started collapsing?

A. No. I believe the hole that I had seen in the World Trade Center -- I don't know if I said this initially, but the hole seemed about three stories high, that this plane had made a three-story hole in the World Trade Center.

The fire seemed to be confined to about

maybe one or two floors.

Q. Really? Is that all?

A. Yeah. I was throughout the whole floor. It was the north side there was heavy fire, and the west side there was heavy fire throughout maybe two floors or so. I couldn't tell what was on the south side or east side because I never got there.

There was never any smoke in the building. I never incurred any smoke in tower one.

Q. I have another question. When you could see the building -- because a lot of people have said they didn't see the building. Could you see what floors people were jumping from or was there smoke coming out of all the floors above the fire?

A. When I had gotten there -- I'm talking about later on.

Q. Later on?

A. Just before it collapsed. Was there smoke coming from all the floors?

Q. Just curiosity.

A. To me it looked as though everything

was confined --

Q. To the two floors?

A. -- to the two floors, to the three floors or so. I've seen pictures of the Trade Center on fire, and right in the middle of this when the two of them were standing. It seemed as though it was heavy smoke throughout the whole upper floors.

But when I had looked at the World Trade Center after I had gotten out of the building, it didn't seem to me that that was the case. Obviously it was, but it didn't seem the case to me. I just remembered seeing two floors of heavy fire from the north side of World Trade Center one and the West side of World Trade Center one. All of a sudden things collapsed one floor, and then within a second or so it just imploded.

Q. Thank God you got out.

A. Maybe I was out of the building maybe three minutes or so and it came down. I don't know how that happened, but it just did.

Q. Is there anything else you want to say?

A. When I was in the B stairwell, one of

the firemen from another company had told me that the second tower was hit with another plane. He said that the Pentagon was hit with another plane, and he also said that the United Nations was hit with another plane.

Well, throughout my experience on the job whenever you get into a heavy fire situation, you always hear these rumors that never turn out to be true. I thought that this was the case, because I had never heard it from anybody else that day that the second World Trade Center was hit, not over the handy talky, nowhere.

I didn't hear anything and of course did not see anything, because the B stairwell didn't have any windows. Whoever I had rescued on the floors, they didn't have access to windows either.

The B stairwell was pretty much soundproof anyway. I didn't know how soundproof it was until I compared it against the Two World Trade Center falling on us. That was just a rumble in the background along with the vibration of the building shaking.

But I thought it was a localized

collapse, and I thought that the Trade Center was a very sturdy building and we wouldn't have to worry about the localized collapse.

Q. Nobody really thought that they would collapse. Thanks a lot, Bill. That was excellent. That was a lot of detail.

A. The kind you guys are looking for.

Q. Yeah, yeah.

CHIEF CONGIUSTA: The time is 12:40, and this concludes the interview.