

EDITORIAL



I DON'T make any apology for including the article from Brenda Berkman. It sets out in great detail how a women firefighter who was not on duty at the time feels about what happened, about the shock, about the horror, losing

firefighters on her squad and also how she and the rest of her squad coped with it all in the first few days after it happened.

There are also several reports about what the women of the National Women's Committee have been doing, I know it's all a bit out of date but it's good to see we're not slacking, and finally just a few words on our industrial action and return to work.

There have obviously been differing views on the outcome, but this is a time when we must all pull together and not go off in different directions. The future of this Union depends on each and every one of us. I was proud to be a part of it during the period of industrial action and I am proud to be a part of it now.

Janette Ferguson

REPORT FROM GROUND ZERO

There was no World The air was like you a desert, but it was

Linda Willing, Associate Editor of US-based WFS (Women in the Fire Service) Publications, tells the story of one female firefighter and September 11

AT THE beginning of 11 September 2001 was a beautiful day in New York City. The sky was clear and blue, the sun was warm, and the first hint of fall was in the air.

Brenda Berkman, lieutenant of the Ladder Co. 12 in midtown Manhattan, had the day off. It was primary election day in New York and she and her partner Pam were getting ready to do some morning campaign work.

"Then we got a phone call from Pam's mother in Kentucky asking, 'Are you all right?' She said a plane had just crashed into the World Trade Center. That's how we found out.

"I immediately went and put on parts of my dress uniform, which was all I had at home. My initial idea was 'If planes have hit the World Trade Center, they're going to need extra people. I'll go into headquarters and see if they need anything there.'" The headquarters of the Fire Department of New York (FDNY) is located in Brooklyn, the borough where Brenda and Pam live.

Transportation in the city had already begun to shut down. Brenda took off running and walking towards Fire Headquarters. On the way, she passed her old fire station. She went in and learned that all off-duty Firefighters had been recalled. She started scrounging work duty clothes – a shirt from one person, a pair of shorts from another. She took the truck captain's spare gear. The regular crew from the station had already been deployed to the scene, so the additional firefighters got a police van from the station next door, gathered what tools they could find and headed into Manhattan over the Brooklyn Bridge.

The scene at the bridge was startling. An enormous column of black smoke was rising from lower Manhattan, blowing towards Brooklyn. One side of the bridge had been cleared to accommodate emergency traffic, and the other was "wall to wall people, all covered in dust, walking across toward

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Trade Center. The towers had just fallen. were in a dust storm, like you were in concrete and glass dust, everywhere

Brooklyn". As the firefighters entered Manhattan, they found everything was covered in a thick layer of dust. "This was at least half a mile before we got to the site."

"I had originally thought we would be climbing the stairs in the World Trade Center. And I had the crew bring their shoes, so we wouldn't have to climb in our bunker boots". Brenda said. But as they looked toward the point of impact, they were shocked at what they saw. "There was no World Trade Center. The towers had just fallen. The air was like you were in a dust storm, like you were in the desert, but it was concrete and glass dust, everywhere". The firefighters put on the gear they had managed to scrounge up, and headed to the command post.

"There was nothing there".

Even from the perspective of the command post, several blocks from the where the towers had stood, the scene was horrific. Fire trucks had been destroyed by falling debris. Firefighters and officers were trying to link up to form crews. And the dust was everywhere. "It was like night". Brenda said.

The street was ankle-deep in dust, and there were vehicles everywhere, but just a few people wandering around. We were right on the edge of Ground Zero, and there was nothing there. No buildings. No Twin Towers. Nothing.

"You couldn't see more than a block down Broadway, and there was an enormous amount of paper, flying everywhere".

Brenda and her crew were sent first to the structure fire on Liberty and Church, across the street from the Trade Center. They passed some other crews who were trying to rig a water supply to fight fire in a couple of the smaller (six to eight storey) buildings that are part of the Trade Center complex. "The street was ankle-deep in dust, and there were vehicles everywhere, but just a few people wandering around. We were right on the edge of Ground Zero, and there was nothing there. No buildings. No Twin Towers. Nothing".

After being ordered back because of the fear that yet

another building was about to collapse (7 World Trade Center, 40+ storeys). Brenda and her crew went to find other firefighters who might have some tools or a radio. They still did not know the fate of so many of their colleagues, "but we could only guess. The fact that the towers were gone. And that every inch of downtown was covered in concrete dust".

Brenda and her crew continued over to West Street and found "another scene out of hell. There had been walkways between the World Trade Center and the Works Finance Center, a couple of storeys up in the air and a storey and a half high. A lot of rigs had parked under them to protect the rigs, because of the people jumping and the debris falling. Then the walkways came down on the rigs".

When they got within sight of the West Side Highway, they saw it had become a huge rubble field. They ran into firefighters from Brenda's station in midtown who told her what had happened to other members of that company. Now we were beginning to hear about missing members. The engine company escaped – that's the only way I can put it. They were in a collapse. They were next to people who didn't make it".

Firefighters from her firehouse had been sent in to search the Marriott Hotel, which was connected to the World Trade Center Towers, after the first tower collapsed. Crews were leaving the building when a mayday call was heard. Ladder 12's officer and two firefighters went back to answer the mayday call, while the other three members of Ladder 12 helped civilians to safety. At that point, the second tower went. The firefighters and the civilians made it out, but the other three members from Ladder 12 have not been found.

That afternoon, 7 World Trade Center came down. "We had cleared an enormous collapse zone for that, and it still wasn't big enough. When the thing came down, the rubble and the dust came across the West Side Highway, over and past the rubble from the towers that was there. We had to run".

Later in the day, Brenda and other firefighters were assigned to do a surface search of the rubble pile. There were still fires everywhere, and firefighting was difficult. About 40 pieces of fire apparatus had been lost, and the water supply was interrupted, because so many hydrants had been destroyed. Fire

REPORT FROM GROUND ZERO

boats offshore supplied water to the tower ladders. Falling debris was still a major hazard. There were no lights set up. “A huge depression set in as people realised the magnitude of what we were facing. Early on, people saw that there was nothing there”. She repeated it: “Nothing there”.

Although there was initially still hope that living people would be found – in the underground train and subway stations, in an underground shopping mall, maybe even in stairwells – that hope began to fade. Only a few people did survive and were rescued that first day. “One of the guys I’ve worked with was trapped until about one in the afternoon, and he crawled out with just a scratch on his nose. But as you looked at the scene, it was like your worst science-fiction nightmare movie. “Escape from New York” only a hundred times worse. Fires burning everywhere, heavy smoke, a tremendous amount of glop in the air, big piles of rubble. We couldn’t even get around the rubble, so they just sent us home”.

Brenda left the scene about 8pm that first night. She went back to the firehouse in Brooklyn to return her borrowed gear, and discovered the person who’s gear she was wearing was missing at the scene. She went home, only to get up early the next morning to return to work.

She reached her midtown firehouse by subway, but from there they were faced with the problem of how to get to the site, they had no rig, they were missing firefighters and they had many off-shift people reporting in. Organisation was a challenge. The crews were put on a bus and got caught in traffic en-route to the disaster site. “People were losing it. The firefighters really wanted to get down there. They had friends missing – people were really angry”. Organisation at the scene became a major issue, especially since among the missing and dead were the chief of the department, the operations chief, the deputy commissioner, and many other senior officers. In addition, Father Mychal Judge, the FDNY’s chaplain, had been killed the first day.

DAY TWO – The evacuation begins

On the second day, excavations began. Although some cranes were on the scene, most of the digging was by hand, still in the hope of finding survivors. The rubble piles “went up about 20 feet, then went down three storeys, then went up about seven storeys, and on the other side of that they said the pit was about ten storeys down. “Thousands of workers were at the scene. “There were people from everywhere. Retired guys. People freelancing. People came to the firehouse and grabbed other people’s gear and took off with it”.

Working conditions at the site were extremely hazardous. It was very hot and smoky from fires that continued to burn, and rescuers were working on unstable rubble that consisted mostly of jagged metal and rebar. Dust from pulverised building materials was everywhere. Injuries amongst the rescuers were a constant threat. While moving a piece of metal, Brenda got her hand and arm sliced open, but like others at the scene, she returned to work after being bandaged by a paramedic who was working nearby.



Workers on the rubble pile lost all sense of time. “When we were down there for 12 hours, it seemed like we were down there for two hours. “The only way you could tell the time was when you just got so exhausted you couldn’t stand up any more”. When we climbed to the top of the seven storey rubble pile, it took us about six hours to get up there, because we were working our way up a line of people who were lining a ladder as a sort of handrail. If you fell off the ladders which were the pathway up, you’d land God knows where—all cut to pieces, or maybe in one of the voids. So people were stationed every couple of feet.

“We were calling for tools, and you’d have to shout the request down the line. It was about half a mile back and then a runner would be sent to the tool area. “Things were passed up and down the line in large white drywall buckets”. “We’d call for water and bottled water would come by. Every once in a while, food would come by. We were eating cold hot dogs out of these buckets, sandwiches made by prisoners upstate”. From the top of the pile, bodies were passed back down.

Brenda spent half the second day at Ground Zero, and then returned to the firehouse. By this time, crews had been put on a two platoon system working 24-hour shifts. (The FDNY normally works 9 and 15 hours shifts). At one in the morning, her crew was called back to the site, to dig with hand tools and buckets under the lights. They stayed until shift change later that morning.

When crews rotated off duty at Ground Zero and came back to the firehouse, life was very different from normal. Because of the doubling up of shifts, the houses were crowded. “People were all over the firehouse. Guys were sleeping in the

Brenda Berkman broke the FDNY's sex barrier in 1982, entering the Service after taking legal action. Brenda suffering repeated harassment early on in her career. Despite her efforts, the battle for equality in the Service has hardly begun. Currently 92 per cent of New York's firefighters are white men. Only one woman is among the more than 600 new recruits hired since 11 September. The city's commission for equal opportunities in employment chided FDNY management for resisting diversification in 2001, but suspended efforts for force compliance after the terrorist attacks.

basement, in the TV room – guys were everywhere. I put a mattress in my bathroom – that's where I ended up sleeping. The only thing you could do when you were off was sleep”.

The mood in the firehouse varied. Some of the men there had just escaped with their lives. Some people were angry. All were worried about their friends. Brenda said “I was crying a lot. But we were laughing too. We started making jokes almost immediately about some of the guys. This one guy that I work with, he's famous for his bad jokes. So we were saying that all the people that were trapped with him were begging, “please rescue us, get us away from this guy, he's got terrible jokes. ‘One moment, you'd be laughing about something hoping for the best, and the next moment you'd be really wacked out. “Brenda spoke of the need for counselling for all the firefighters, but particularly for those who had been with other firefighters who were now missing. They had been with their brothers, and the next moment, they were alive and the other guys were missing. That's a heavy burden, and there's a lot of survivor guilt involved.

Brenda commented on noticeable changes within the community. She joked, “you wouldn't have recognised New York. Everyone is so kind. It's unbelievable. She went on to recall, we were coming back the second night, and it was late and dark and people were lining the West Side Highway and they're cheering for us and clapping for us as we're riding along. Community members immediately started bringing things to the firehouse – food, personal items such as socks, tooth-brushes, bandages – stuff we really needed. Neighbours left flowers and posters of appreciation.

Looking to the future

Even as the search continued at the site, the funerals had begun. “There's eight a day” Brenda says grimly. But hopes of finding even identifiable body parts are fading. “There's no concrete there,” Brenda said. “You'd expect that there would be enormous pieces of concrete. They are just tiny chunks. The rebar has been stripped clean. It's just pieces of twisted metal,

packed down dust and paper, and rubbish, and that's it. There is no glass – not a piece of glass, and the World Trade Center Towers were 20 per cent glass. Everything was just pulverised.

“Normally, a line of duty funeral in New York brings 5,000 people or more. But today I went to a funeral of a guy who was very senior and well known, so a lot of people would have made an extra effort to be there, and maybe there were a couple of hundred people. But it can't be helped. People are stretched to their limits. They're trying to go to the wakes, go to the memorial services, meet the families, take care of the members who are suffering some drastic emotional aftermath of these things. And go home once in a while.

Will things ever return to “normal” for the FDNY? In the near future, the department is just struggling to cope with the loss of so many members, replacement of critical equipment, changing work shifts, and the loss of experienced leaders. The department promoted 168 people in the first week after September 11, to ranks ranging from lieutenant to deputy chief. “We have guys whose first day of work was Tuesday the 11th”, Brenda said. “Welcome to the Fire Service”.

“Right now, we have more people missing and confirmed dead in the FDNY than many departments have in total personnel. Up until September 11, we had lost somewhere over 700 members in the line of duty, in the entire history of the New York City Fire Department. We lost almost half that number in one day. There are firefighters I don't know if they'll ever come back to the firehouse. And then there are guys who may start to have after effects later on, when they fully realise these guys are not coming back, when we start doing the 300 funerals”.

“Nobody is back to normal emotionally. There's no way. I wish there was some way I could do what I have to do in the firehouse and still have time to contribute to the bigger picture. But we're just overwhelmed. I just can't tell you how many of my close friends in the job are gone”.

Brenda has one message that was most important to her, even as our interview began. She said, “as traumatic as this has been and horrible in so many ways, one good thing has come out of it is that I didn't have to die to find out how many people care about me. It has really been overwhelming, the love and concern that has been directed from women and men from all over the country. And I just want everyone to know how much I appreciate it, since it's going to be impossible for me to write or call all of these people who have sent messages, literally from all over the world.

In closing, Brenda remembered something from the first day on the scene. “We were walking by 7 World Trade Center, and we were looking through this enormous smoke and dust cloud. There was this little bright light, and it suddenly struck me – that's the sun. But you're looking at it where you could never, ever see the sun, because the towers would block it”. It is hoped in the aftermath of the terrible loss of human life in New York on 11 September, and especially the overwhelming losses suffered by the FDNY, that one day the sun will truly shine again for the city and its rescue workers.