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Judy Forte  
January 29, 2002

Interview conducted by Janet McDonnell  
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NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
SEPTEMBER 11TH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with

JUDY FORTE

Chief Ranger, Southeast Region

Conducted By

JANET A. McDONNELL, Ph.D.

January 29, 2002 Washington, D.C.

## START OF TAPE

- Janet McDonnell: If you would want to start just by identifying yourself on the tape?
- Judy Forte: My name is Judy Forte and I'm the Southeast Regional Chief Ranger located in Atlanta, Georgia.
- Janet McDonnell: Just to start, if you would tell me where you were in September 11th when, how you first learned of the terrorist attacks?
- Judy Forte: Well, on September 11th, at the moment of the attack I was on annual leave taking care of some personal business when I received a phone call from the Chief Ranger at Kennesaw Mountain NMP who informed me that an attack had occurred in New York and he wanted to know if he should close the park. This was just prior to the Pentagon being attacked. I turned on the TV and watched the airplane fly into the Pentagon building.
- Janet McDonnell: Is there an operations center in the regional office that you used to do this?
- Judy Forte: We do not have an "Operation Center" in the regional office. However, we do have procedures in place to handle all emergencies. We have an Emergency Operations Plan and a Continuity of Operations Plan that provides directions and policy for employees to follow. We also have a core staff group that consists of the Regional Director, the Associate Directorates, the Regional Chief Ranger and Emergency Operations personnel that meets periodically and during times of the emergency to provide information and manage the event.
- Janet McDonnell: And at what point were you in communications with the Rangers' Activities up here [in Washington] or with maybe the Type-1 team up here?
- Judy Forte: The next day after the event we received a call from WASO—DOI I believe—for our special event team and a status report on anything happening in the southeast region that they needed to be aware of.
- Judy Forte: The Regional Chief Rangers contacted each other and decided to meet and work together to establish a process to handle service wide emergencies and to set priorities. We eventually evolved into a group later called MRCG, Multi-Regional Chief Ranger Group. As a result, we were better able to respond to the Department's request for law enforcement rangers to be sent to different locations.
- Janet McDonnell: How difficult was that to do?

Judy Forte: To get together?

Janet McDonnell: Not to get together, but first of all to get the information from the parks and then to make those decisions about what resources could be moved elsewhere?

Judy Forte: When we met, we found that there was little information being shared from Washington on the seriousness of our response service wide. However, the Regional Directors were asked by the Department to send rangers out of their parks into Icon parks, DOI dams, and the Main Interior Building to provide security. This was not being managed or coordinated through our Agency but from the Department which caused some confusion. Once we finally got good information from our Agency and DOI and understood what they wanted and what their priorities were we were able to develop a process using the existing Interagency dispatch system to dispatch resources where requested.

Janet McDonnell: And how were the parks responding?

Judy Forte: The parks were, in the Southeast Region.

Janet McDonnell: Was there any reluctance to surrender these resources?

Judy Forte: No, there was a willingness from the parks to do whatever they could to help. The SER Special Event Team was one of the first team who responded. The other regions sent their Special Event Teams as well. Unfortunately, the demand for law enforcement personnel was so great we had to start using other LE rangers in addition to our Special Event Teams.

Judy Forte: We required the parks to develop a minimum-staffing plan that would show their shortfalls if law enforcement rangers were dispatched from their park. We also asked them to provide us with the minimum level of protection needed in their park. We asked them to consider protection of life first and the protection of resources second when developing their plan. Once the superintendents completed this plan and the Regional Director approved it, the parks released all other available law enforcement rangers to meet the service wide request. As a result, we had full adequate participation in the response.

Janet McDonnell: Right. Were you putting any natural or cultural resources at risk?

Judy Forte: Yes, we were putting natural and cultural resources at risk, however, with the proper planning I mentioned before, I feel we were able to minimize the risk. Whenever you take critical protection staff from the park than you are leaving the resources at the park accessible to crime. However, the protection of life is our number one priority and the terrorist attack that

occurred on 9/11 that took the lives of thousands of innocent human beings were more important at this time and whatever we could do to prevent or deter future attack we were determined to do.

Janet McDonnell: And you can plan a little bit easier?

Judy Forte: With the immediate emergency behind us and using the process MRCG put in place we were better able to plan what our needs were and how we could be pro-active instead of reacting to the question "can you release somebody?" Deputation of our rangers is a special designation we can use when we send law enforcement rangers to locations that they do not have the authority to enforce laws such as on Bureau of Reclamation dam sites. We requested deputation of our rangers by the US Marshall services. The Marshall Service deputized some of our Special Event Teams, but we submitted names to have others deputized as well. This will benefit us by increasing the numbers of law enforcement rangers that will be available for dispatch.

Janet McDonnell: So, have you got any answer to that yet?

Judy Forte: We are still waiting to hear from the US Marshall Service on the deputation of the additional names we have sent them. We have also asked the Secretary's office to signed a letter that would do cross designation of all of the bureaus which would allow law enforcement officers to be able to enforce regulations at all areas within the department without the need for deputation.

Janet McDonnell: Other properties outside their individual bureau?

Judy Forte: Yes, but within the department.

Janet McDonnell: Because then they wouldn't need the special kind of designation.

Judy Forte: Correct, they would be able to respond to all units within the Department without the need to have special deputation by the US Marshall Service.

Janet McDonnell: Have you gotten to the point where you feel like your ranger force is really stretched thin in the region?

Judy Forte: Our ranger workforce was stretched thin before September 11th. The need to take staff from a park that is already short on personnel will have an impact on their park's protection and security needs. However, as I mentioned before, we admit we are thin, but the parks are willing to do what they can to help with the security of our national treasures. The question is how long will we be able to do this without impacting the moral of the employee?

Janet McDonnell: So, you don't, do you feel you're near the point where natural or cultural resources in any parks might be jeopardized?

Judy Forte: I have no factual data to date that would show that park's natural and/or cultural resources are being jeopardized and/or impacted in anyway due to the fact that rangers are being detailed away from their parks. However, that does not mean that the resources are not being jeopardized. Simply that there is no one in the park to detect the impact being done to the resources and to report it.

Janet McDonnell: Or that vandalism in some places?

Judy Forte: Yes, or, that vandalism is occurring in the parks as a result of rangers being away on a detailed assignment and not being there to report it. Hopefully, if we are in this for a long period of time, we will be getting that sort of information from the parks that will help us have a true picture of the impact of our response.

Janet McDonnell: Nobody out there to report it.

Judy Forte: The few rangers remaining at the parks are having to double up on their workload, perform overtime and fill in behind the rangers on detail. As a result, many of our trails and backcountry areas and boundaries which are normally patrol are not being patrol because the few rangers remaining in the parks are required to patrol in the most populated areas. Hopefully, when we resume operations as usual—if there is such a thing—there will be limited and hopefully no damage to our resources.

Janet McDonnell: Have you heard any reports from your rangers that might indicate that the way the public views the parks might have changed a little bit? That maybe the parks have become more important to the—this is pretty anecdotal, so I'm not sure that you have had this. But we've heard accounts of people coming to the parks and saying, "I needed to be here. I feel safe here."

Judy Forte: Spiritually—

Janet McDonnell: Right.

Judy Forte: Information of this sort has not been reported to me, however, I can understand why someone would feel that way. Our parks represent the best of America and they remind us how important it is to be a steward of this land. Outside church, I can't think a better place to be than in one of our national parks reflecting on our spiritual being.

Janet McDonnell: Right. And you don't deal with visitation statistics in your function anyway, I would imagine.

Judy Forte: No, I don't deal with visitation statistics. That is done by our planning office.

Janet McDonnell: That's right. Did the event and the aftermath, I guess even more so, has it changed the way you view your job at all?

Judy Forte: Yes, the terrorist attack and the aftermath have changed the way I view my job. In the beginning of my career, I was hired as a park ranger with a vast amount of generalist duties. I performed those duties with the understanding of my role and how I functioned as a law enforcement park ranger for the National Park Service. I viewed my job primarily as a protector and interpreter of the park's natural and cultural resources. My duties included search and rescue, first responder, interpretation, trail worker, firefighter, historian, etc. I pride myself in doing all of those duties because they were all important to the National Park Service mission.

Judy Forte: Times have changed, and post 9/11 seemed like a lifetime ago. I feel more training and focus should be placed on the protection of life and employee safety. Terrorist threats will be with us always and our job as a law enforcement ranger should reflect that and prepare us to give heightened attention to the possibility of another attack occurring at one of our national treasures. The Department and agency has done more recently to provide for more effective and efficient management of the bureau's law enforcement program. One recommendation by the Office of Inspector General Office is to have one central management system of our law enforcement officers for the Department. As a result, the agency has stove piped all special agents into WASO.

Janet McDonnell: And what do you think the impact of that might be?

Judy Forte: Our agency need an investigative staff that can handle long and complicated criminal and internal investigations. The special agents organization reporting to our Washington's office will be good once staffing and funding is there to support such an organization. In the meantime, the regional office and parks will have to be flexible and deal with the change and continue to function in a manner that is least destructive to the workplace.

Judy Forte: Law enforcement rangers other than special agents are the protection and security forces of the parks. It is imperative that they stay focus on the protection of the visitors, and park resources. I feel their supervisory structure should be as close to the resource as possible and should be

supervised by someone who has knowledge and experience in law enforcement.

Janet McDonnell: The benefit as a generalist?

Judy Forte: The generalist in the “old days” was referred to as a ranger who handled and managed a variety of collateral duties. Law enforcement was one of many duties he/she performed but was not considered the only thing they did as some do today. The benefit the agency gained from a generalist ranger was someone who could adapted or deal with crisis at any given time.

Janet McDonnell: Have you seen any changes in just your day-to-day operations, the way you go about your job on a daily basis as a result of this?

Judy Forte: Yes, when I started my job as regional chief ranger, I managed several complicated program areas including concession, fees, interpretation, wildland and structural fire, safety, special park uses, etc. Today, my primarily job consists of managing the region’s law enforcement program and providing emergency services support to southeast parks and service wide with requested. My focus is primarily on emergency services and security which includes working more closely with other law enforcement bureaus and officials.

Janet McDonnell: Interesting.

Judy Forte: And it's because we are in an emergency state of security. Homeland security is what is hot on peoples' minds right now and that's where we are.

END OF TAPE