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Sergeant Bernard Stasulli
December 10, 2001

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INTERVIEW WITH SERGEANT BERNARD STASULLI
PARK POLICE AVIATION UNIT

CONDUCTED BY
DR. JANET MCDONNELL
DECEMBER 10, 2001

START OF TAPE

Janet McDonnell: This is Janet McDonnell. It's December 10, 2001, and I'm here with Sergeant Stasulli. We're here to talk about the Park Police Aviation Unit's response to the September 11 attacks. Maybe just to start, if you would tell me a little bit about what your role is here with the Park Police?

Bernard Stasulli: I have a rather unique role in the aviation unit because I'm one of two members who are not trained as a pilot and not trained as a paramedic. That's the station commander, Lieutenant Cholak and myself. We're the only two persons who aren't pilots or trained paramedics. My role, I'm the assistant commander and I assist the commander in his duties and when he's not here, I fill in as the commander of the unit.

Janet McDonnell: So, what does that involve? Tell me a little bit about it.

Bernard Stasulli: It involves mostly administrative stuff, making decisions when you need a commander to make a decision. All of the paperwork that comes out of this unit usually passes either my desk or the Lieutenant's desk before it leaves the unit and goes elsewhere.

Janet McDonnell: So that includes staffing assignments?

Bernard Stasulli: It does include staffing assignments, that's correct. It includes keeping an eye out on the budget, procurement of property and services, just your usual administrative stuff. I guess you could classify that as typical.

Janet McDonnell: Okay. Well, let's go to September 11 and maybe if you would just begin by telling me how you first learned of the terrorist attacks, where you were, what you were doing, that kind of thing?

Bernard Stasulli: It's very strange. I do recall on that particular morning I was in our electric golf cart, and I was driving out to where our fuel trucks were, which is located about maybe 75 yards from our hangar. And I noticed, well, I was checking the amount of fuel in one of the fuel trucks and there was a radio on the golf cart. I remember hearing something about the World Trade Center, the plane striking the World Trade Center. So, I came back in and most of the crews were out cleaning the hangar area, the deck area, they were getting it cleaned up. And I remember saying something about the World Trade Center getting struck by a plane.

Bernard Stasulli: Well, we all came inside, and we put the TV on to see what was going on. And as they were talking about a plane, the news media were talking about a plane striking the World Trade Center, I would say within about five minutes of us initially starting to watch this program, that's when the second plane hit the World Trade Center. And I do recall when that struck,

then we had a conversation amongst ourselves that more than likely this was some type of attack not just a plane going off course and accidentally hitting the Trade Center.

Bernard Stasulli: I remember some of us were saying, "Gee, we should get ready," because this is the prime area of Washington, D.C. for an attack. I don't know why; I just had this feeling that something was going to happen in this area. It couldn't have been 20-30 minutes after that, is when we got our first indication that there was an incident at the Pentagon.

Janet McDonnell: Did that come over the radio?

Bernard Stasulli: I heard it over our police radio. It sounded like some officers were stating that they thought they'd seen an airplane go down within the area of the Pentagon. As soon as we heard that, we immediately were running out to the two aircraft that we had sitting that were operational at the time. As we went out there, one of the officers apparently received a phone call from our crash phone line from the Reagan tower telling us that an aircraft had gone down in the area of the Pentagon.

Janet McDonnell: What's a crash phone line?

Bernard Stasulli: We have a direct line to the Reagan traffic control tower, so if there's ever a plane in distress, any incidents over at the airport, we can lift, and we'll be over there in a very short period of time.

Bernard Stasulli: Well, as soon as we heard that there was in fact a crash over at the Pentagon, one of the other officers, and I'm not sure who it was, received a message. I'm not sure where it came from, whether it was the fire department at the Pentagon, the tower, but I remember hearing something about there were multiple casualties, something in the number of maybe 15 seriously injured people who had to be evacuated, MEDEVAC'D right away.

Bernard Stasulli: The crew from Eagle One, which was consisting of I believe Ron Galey, John Marsh, and John Dillon, immediately launched Eagle One, which is a Bell 412 helicopter. The rest of us were getting Eagle Two ready, which is the same type of helicopter, but we were installing a mass casualty kit which would afford us the opportunity of transporting four injured persons rather than the normal two.

Bernard Stasulli: Eventually, we lifted and went over to the Pentagon. We were probably about, I'm going to just take a guess, maybe about 3-5 minutes getting off the ground after Eagle One had left, so they were there first. Even before we lifted you could look from out on our flight line area you could see the heavy smoke coming from towards the Pentagon. You can't see the

Pentagon from here, but you could certainly see the directions. So, Eagle One had informed us that in fact there was an area of destruction at the Pentagon. They had not landed by the time we left. As we were en route over there, I believe we were going to be the first MEDEVAC helicopter and Eagle One was going to stay airborne to keep control of the airways.

- Bernard Stasulli: Shortly after we arrived and we landed, several of the occupants in our helicopter had taken some medical equipment and ran towards the building.
- Janet McDonnell: Who else was in your helicopter?
- Bernard Stasulli: In our helicopter, I hope my memory is good. The pilot of our helicopter was Sergeant Keith Bohn. We had a Sergeant Ken Burchell, Lieutenant Philip Cholak, who's the station commander, was in there. And then I believe we had either one or two medical personnel from a group called USUHS. Have you been explained what they are?
- Janet McDonnell: Well, no, but not the acronym. What does the acronym stand for?
- Bernard Stasulli: Well, that's an excellent question. It has something - they're military doctors or medical people. It's a university, Army university hospital medical training facility. I'm not...
- Janet McDonnell: Okay.
- Bernard Stasulli: You'd have to ask Ken Burchell.
- Janet McDonnell: So, you obviously, it was not your typical crew?
- Bernard Stasulli: Not at all. We had, our typical crews are either a two or three-person crew. In this particular case, we had six people in this. So once we got over there, I remember, I believe it was Ken Burchell and Lieutenant Cholak, they had exited the aircraft with the two medical personnel that we have and they went over to the area where you could see the smoke and the damage.
- Bernard Stasulli: I stayed with the aircraft. I stayed outside of the aircraft. My responsibility during that particular moment was to secure the landing zone and to protect the aircraft from people, vehicles, or anything else that jeopardized that aircraft. At some point in time, I remember hearing the tower over at Ronald Reagan Airport calling Eagle One, which was still airborne over top of us, and telling Eagle One that the tower personnel are evacuating the tower because the smoke from this incident, the wind was carrying it over towards the tower and somehow it was getting into their, you could hear them when they were talking, kind of coughing and choking a little

bit. So, they had to abandon the tower and they turned the control of the Reagan Airport air space over to Eagle One. Fortunately, a short time after that, all air traffic was diverted from the Washington area, so it didn't place a great burden on Eagle One as far as controlling all of the commercial aircraft.

Bernard Stasulli: While we were on the ground, I can remember two patients being brought over to our aircraft and they were both loaded into the aircraft, which was Eagle Two. Eagle Two eventually left and transported the two patients to MEDSTAR, which is over at the Washington Hospital Center. Eagle One came down and landed, getting ready to transport whatever patients they needed to transport. And as they were sitting there, I remember there was another radio transmission that there was an unidentified, I'm not sure if I know the exact words, unidentified and unauthorized aircraft that was headed towards the Pentagon, which was about forty miles out. And of course, having great knowledge of what happened over at the World Trade Center, I think there was a lot of concern for, here comes a second aircraft coming over.

Bernard Stasulli: So, Eagle One left that area and repositioned to a safe area. Unfortunately, they left me. So, I was still securing the landing zone. And fortunately, there was no, aircraft that was the supposed to be unidentified and unauthorized apparently was a friendly aircraft. It didn't pose any threat to us. But we kept that area clear, and a short time after that, I recall hearing that there were no other persons needing to be air MEDEVAC'D out of there. That all of the people that needed to be MEDEVAC'D were going to be taken in ambulances. And the only thing that we could assume is being as a possible threat from another aircraft, rather than keeping the patients there at the scene and getting them into the aircraft, they just wanted to get them out of there as quickly as possible.

Janet McDonnell: So, describe the scene when you arrived?

Bernard Stasulli: Well, when we first got there and we first set down, I'm not sure, I'm going to say timeline after the initial impact of the aircraft, I would say it was no longer than 15 minutes when we got there, probably within 10-15 minutes, I would think. What I recall most about the scene was right at the initial impact area - it didn't look that bad as far as what you would now see after everything caved in. I mean the walls hadn't caved in. And we were kind of looking like, gee, what kind of aircraft could do this, thinking maybe it was a small commuter aircraft or something. There was a great deal of smoke and a lot of fire. And there were a lot of people coming from the building out towards where our aircraft was, to I guess cross the road to get into a safe area. That was one of our big concerns. One of my responsibilities was to make sure nobody came close to the aircraft.

- Janet McDonnell: And describe to me again exactly where you had landed?
- Bernard Stasulli: I don't know the names of the roads. We landed on a roadway surface. I'm thinking it was just southwest of the Pentagon and we were probably about 150 yards, maybe 200 yards, from the building, itself, and we were right adjacent to the impact area.
- Janet McDonnell: Maybe on [Highway] 110 there?
- Bernard Stasulli: That's what I heard some of the people say, 110. And they're much more familiar with Virginia than I am.
- Janet McDonnell: So, were there any particular challenges in responding from your perspective?
- Bernard Stasulli: From my perspective, not at all. And one other thing, the people and I would there were hundreds of people that were leaving from the Pentagon, coming towards the helicopter, most of them were a safe distance away. But there were some that were coming, if nobody was there to stop them would have come quite close. And our major concern is the tail rotor on the aircraft. It's probably the number one hazard area on helicopters. Fortunately, our helicopter sits on skids. It's a fairly large helicopter. The rotor blades are usually high enough where they wouldn't come into contact with a person. But the tail rotor, very possible that could come into contact with someone.
- Bernard Stasulli: Most of the people were a safe enough distance away. Most of them looked to me like they were, had all of their faculties working for them. There were a few people that were in somewhat of a daze that I had to basically stand there and ask them to go back a little farther down that way. But other than that, to me, the thing that I recall and impressed me a lot is that everybody was going about their business. It wasn't like panic city. It wasn't like maybe what you'd see in the movies. Everybody was pretty much focusing on the job.
- Janet McDonnell: So how did this compare to some of the other responses you've been involved in?
- Bernard Stasulli: Well, from the responses that I've been involved in, from our standpoint, I guess we do enough training. Everybody just went out, got in. It's almost like we're creatures of habit. Unfortunately, sometimes that's good, sometimes that's bad. But in our line of work, law enforcement work, I think it's good because you don't have enough time to think. You just grab, get in, put things together, and off you go.

- Janet McDonnell: Right. Is there anything that you would have done differently? Is there anything that you learned from this operation that you'd maybe apply to another emergency in the future?
- Bernard Stasulli: I can't see any way we could have improved what we did. Fortunately, or unfortunately, once we got there, we were really prepared to transport as many people as needed. Plus, I was prepared to do whatever they wanted me to do. Of course, it's easy to say now, but I thoroughly had the thoughts when I was heading over there that I was going to be running into the building trying to pull some people out. But it just didn't happen to be that way for me for that day. There were plenty of people there.
- Bernard Stasulli: One thing I'll say about the people from the Pentagon. They were lined up right by the building, right where all the damage was, and there were plenty of them. They were going in and coming out. They had plenty of help there. Unlike if this incident had happened in a non-military building, things may have been a little bit different, although I probably shouldn't say that. These people are just trained.
- Janet McDonnell: Part of that was the training is what I was going to say, right. How about coordination on the scene? Did that work pretty well? Of course, you were with the helicopter then.
- Bernard Stasulli: Well, right. But there is a major area from my perspective for the Park Police. Once I get out of the aircraft, once anybody gets out of the aircraft, we have no contact with the people inside of the aircraft which is a very problematic area that I can see, and I brought this to the attention of my boss, bosses up the line. It's just a matter of money, which unfortunately rules the Park Police, to get the proper equipment.
- Bernard Stasulli: I do remember constantly having to go back to the pilot, because he kept motioning me and giving me hand signals, which I'd never seen before, and I had to go back to him. And I've got my helmet on, and he's got his helmet on. The aircraft was running. My wife swears I'm deaf in one ear anyhow. And I just had a difficult time listening to him and finding out. He was probably telling me they were getting ready to move the helicopter to get it to a safe place and I had no clue what he said. So, when he took off, I'm still standing there. Unfortunately, after about 30 minutes, realizing they weren't coming back for me. So, I had to search for the aircraft.
- Janet McDonnell: So, both helicopters took off?
- Bernard Stasulli: One was out of the area doing a MEDEVAC. Eagle Two was on its way doing a MEDEVAC when Eagle One landed, and that's when the word came down about repositioning to a safer spot.

- Janet McDonnell: So, you were really securing the area for both of them, for both of the helicopters?
- Bernard Stasulli: Right. We just had one large area for landing either helicopter coming in. We could have landed both there if we needed.
- Janet McDonnell: Sure, sure. Well, would you tell me about some of the other missions after the immediate response at the Pentagon? Did you continue to fly with Eagle Two for some of these other missions?
- Bernard Stasulli: I did not. Usually my responsibility isn't so much to be part of the crew. I'm really not trained in certain areas as a crew member, but unfortunately, I like to lend my hand and get involved as much as I can. I wish this would have been in a younger stage of my life, but I'll do the best I can. And most of the missions afterwards, we had three officer crews and usually had a Secret Service agent on board. So, four people in the helicopters is about all you need. You can get comfortable. You can do as much work as you need. When you start putting more people in, sometimes people can get in your way of doing your job. So, for me, most of my time was spent basically here at the hangar.
- Janet McDonnell: But did that role, because there was no third crew [member] and extra staff, I mean did your role become a little more complicated in those first couple of weeks afterwards?
- Bernard Stasulli: No, my role certainly wasn't more complicated.
- Janet McDonnell: I mean your role as an administrator?
- Bernard Stasulli: No, it didn't become. We have different contingency plans when we have three-man crews, two-man crews. Normally, up until that time, we had generally been using two people crews. We always wanted to go to a three people crew, but it's kind of difficult. We have to work longer hours. There's a lot more involved. But because of this incident, three people crews really are the ideal, because you have a pilot, who has to fly the aircraft, you have something like a co-pilot who's working on the radios. Unless you've been in the aircraft, there's so many things to do. The co-pilot or we call him a paramedic rescue technician. And one of the major benefits of the third person is he can do a, we have -
- END OF SIDE A
- START OF SIDE B
- Janet McDonnell: You were talking about the down link.

- Bernard Stasulli: Yes, and that was very important for us in this particular incident is to get as much on tape as we can. We can talk about it, but it sure is nice to see it. I'm sure in your line of work seeing a picture is worth a million words.
- Janet McDonnell: Yes. So, any general thoughts in terms of what you learned from this operation from your perspective?
- Bernard Stasulli: It's not so much what we learned.
- Janet McDonnell: What about resources? Were we adequately resourced? Do you want to talk about that for a couple of minutes?
- Bernard Stasulli: Well, as far as resources, for me, I go back to the difference between a two-person crew and a three-person crew. As far as our resources, I think I learned, and I think we all learned, that certainly three individuals in that aircraft are much more efficient than two individuals. And up until that time, we've always had two. We would never fly with one person, but two or three people make the job a lot easier and a lot more efficient.
- Bernard Stasulli: I think one of the resources that we did learn is our videotape equipment, we were using tapes that were, I want to say maybe 30 minute tapes and we had to end up going to a 120 minute tape, because in the aircraft, the tape compartment is outside of the aircraft so once you run out of tape, you can't hang out the side and stick a longer, because guys were coming back in and they were anxious to see what they were taping, and we'd get to a good part and all of sudden no more tape. So that was a big thing that we learned out of this, so we've since changed our tapes to I think they're two-hour tapes, 120-minute tapes, because up until that time most of our missions were very short in duration.
- Bernard Stasulli: This particular incident and missions that we flew after that. We did a lot of security after that, where we had the FBI and Secret Service agents flying over the Pentagon. We did a lot more security flights in the city than we would normally do, checking all of the bridges and monuments, memorials, museums. So.
- Janet McDonnell: It's nice to have the longer tapes for that in particular I would imagine, yes. Is there anything that I haven't asked about that you would want to get on tape to get into the historical record? Has it changed the way you view your job at all?
- Bernard Stasulli: No, not at all. It's, I guess it's unfortunate in our line of work, it's just the same every day, whether there's an unfortunate incident or if there are no incidents at all. I mean it's just - I sound kind of cold. But the one thing that I could see is all of the people here, and there are 16 people here and a

lot of times we have your typical disagreements. We call it “the firehouse mentality.” We're here more than we are at our own homes. We have our little disagreements, but when it comes down to it, everybody, it was a fine-tuned machine. I can really say that. I was very proud of everybody.

Janet McDonnell: Okay. Well, I appreciate your taking the time to talk to me.

Bernard Stasulli: Okay.

END OF TAPE