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Lieutenant Dave Buckley
May 7, 2002

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INTERVIEW WITH LIEUTENANT DAVE BUCKLEY

CONDUCTED BY

DR. JANET MCDONNELL

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

MAY 7, 2002

START OF TAPE

Janet McDonnell: Maybe to start if you would just briefly explain what your position is here with the Park Police?

Dave Buckley: I'm Lieutenant David Buckley and I'm the station commander of the Staten Island Unit of the New York Field Office. I'm also the, at the time of last September, I was also the commander of the SWAT team for the New York Field Office, which is now the Emergency Service Unit.

Janet McDonnell: I wondered if there was a SWAT team up here. Actually, maybe you could speak, before we talk about September 11th, could you give me a little background on, you said it's now called the Emergency Services Unit?

Dave Buckley: Yes, it's now called the Emergency Service Unit. Actually, at the moment, it for all intents and purposes doesn't exist. Since September 11 of the six people in the unit, five officers and the sergeant, four of the officers have quit to become federal air marshals. So, with the low staffing right now the sergeant and the remaining officer have gone back to patrol, and I've taken back to doing my station commander stuff full time. When we get more people, we'll select the people and reestablish the unit.

Janet McDonnell: What impact has that had? I mean have there been instances since September 11th where you needed this team and it's not there?

Dave Buckley: It's not that we've needed it and it hasn't been there. It's kind of an integral part of the overall protection plan. And we're looking to build it back up again to fill in whatever gaps there are.

Janet McDonnell: Was this SWAT team in operation on September 11th?

Dave Buckley: Yes.

Janet McDonnell: Okay. So maybe that's one area that we can talk to about it. To start if you would just begin by telling me how you first learned about the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, what you were doing, how you found out.

Dave Buckley: On the morning of the 11th we were in the office of Captain Lauro, Sergeant Frank Abbatantuono and I were in the office here. And I think someone called up. I'm not sure whether someone came in or someone called up and told us that a plane had hit one of the towers of the World Trade Center. So, we got in a car and drove to

the overlook by the Verrazano Bridge, because there's a good view of the towers from there. Major Wilkins and his wife were already up there along with a couple of other people. I don't remember who. And you could see the tower smoking and burning. You could see the flames a little bit.

Dave Buckley:

And we were there a couple of minutes, maybe five minutes or so, when somebody said, "Look at that." And you could see coming out from behind Staten Island another airliner, or not another airliner, an airliner. And it was very low, just not very far above the horizon. And it flew from, well, from our perspective behind the island, right up the harbor, and looked like it was, looked almost like it would go up the East River. And the last minute it banked to the left and went right into the south tower. So, it was kind of like watching a bad science fiction movie, you know, where you think, gee, I wonder if I'm really asleep and dreaming all of this or if it's really happening. You could see the flames. You could see the flame when the plane went in and you could see the flames coming out the other side of the tower from where we were. So, and—

Janet McDonnell:

So, what were you thinking at that point?

Dave Buckley:

At that point just really the only thought that went through my head besides that it was very obviously a terrorist attack, that it was very unreal. Then somebody, I think Captain Lauro said, "Let's get going." And at that Sergeant Abbatanuono and I went to get back in the car to drive out to Ellis Island. I called the dispatcher on my cell phone—

Janet McDonnell:

And that was, tell me how that decision was made? That would be the first action, to drive to Ellis Island? What sort of discussions surrounded that?

Dave Buckley:

It wasn't much discussion. We kind of all came to the same conclusion, I think, that Ellis Island, if anything was going to happen further that the Statue of Liberty would be the logical target. If there was going to be another plane or it was going to be another attack of any sort, that the Statue of Liberty would be the logical target.

Janet McDonnell:

And at Ellis Island you would be better positioned to respond?

Dave Buckley:

To respond to anything, yes.

Janet McDonnell:

Okay.

- Dave Buckley: I got on the telephone, called the dispatcher, and told the dispatcher to start calling in the people from the SWAT team. Captain Lauro, I remember, being on the radio and on the telephone giving instructions to other people, Sergeant Abbatanuono also. I guess right before we got back in the car, maybe a minute or so after the plane hit the tower, the sound of the explosion reached us. And then we drove to Ellis Island, the three of us, passing on very obviously everywhere we went there were cars pulled over in New Jersey on the side of the highway and people watching what was going on.
- Dave Buckley: At the point we got to Ellis I guess they had already decided to shut the place down and it was starting to be set up as a triage site for Manhattan. And I just, my people hadn't gotten there yet.
- Janet McDonnell: When you contacted them and directed them to come in, you had indicated that they would, to convene at Ellis Island, is that?
- Dave Buckley: Yes, that they should get to Ellis Island. Most of them couldn't go right to Ellis Island because they had to pick up equipment first, but the idea was they would eventually get there. Most of them couldn't be contacted right away. Most of them saw the news and came in anyway. The one person who couldn't come in was the sergeant who was at Disney World at the time. So, he got trapped in Florida for a few days.
- Janet McDonnell: What role were you envisioning for you SWAT team at that point?
- Dave Buckley: Just as a protection and counter any threat. Obviously, there's nothing to counter if it's an airplane. But there's so many other ways to get to the island and to get to the people on the island from both islands, actually. It's just extra armed people with better armament to prevent anything from happening.
- Janet McDonnell: Did you have difficulty? I understand the landlines were down and communications were somewhat difficult. What was your experience?
- Dave Buckley: Actually, the best communication seemed to be the cell phones. The telephone lines from here were down. The telephone lines at Ellis Island worked. And the ones at Brooklyn, I think, were kind of iffy. The cell phones worked. We usually had to dial a few times to get through the busy signals. The radio was not the best. I mean a lot of people on the radio. And even, we don't have that many people up here, but a lot of them were on the radio giving

instructions. For me it was easier to use my cell phone, because until the SWAT team assembled, I didn't have that many people to give instructions to. I was going there. Lieutenant Waite took over operations here in Staten Island.

Janet McDonnell: I imagine your SWAT team is very well-trained to respond to a variety of emergencies, but nothing like this had ever occurred.

Dave Buckley: Nothing like this ever occurred, and I don't know if anybody could have envisioned responding to this. Two of the guys got caught in Manhattan and ended up helping people off of Manhattan Island, helping them get on the boats to escape Manhattan Island. Two of them were coming in from Staten Island. They stopped and picked up equipment and got to Ellis fairly easily, if not quickly. So, it was actually probably several hours afterwards, after the incident, before we could really get together.

Janet McDonnell: To get them all together.

Dave Buckley: As a cohesive unit.

Janet McDonnell: And then what kind of assignments were you giving them there?

Dave Buckley: They were really, they really at that point, perimeter patrol. Perimeter patrol and we had one or two of them out on perimeter patrol and the rest centrally located to respond to anything that happened. And at that point we kept them on Ellis Island, too. Liberty Island was totally evacuated. And since Ellis was set up as the triage site and Ellis was the place where there were people, we kept them on Ellis Island for that day.

Janet McDonnell: You know, it would be real helpful to me if you could just sort of walk me through those hours a little bit and just describe to me, you know, some of the things that you did and how you got information, and how you, there were a lot of people to take care of and I don't really, other than your role in giving directions to your SWAT team, I don't really know anything else about the role you performed there that day.

Dave Buckley: Other than that, while I was waiting, basically I did what everybody else did. I helped carry litters off of the boats and helped direct people off of the boats to the spots on the island where we had set up for people to be screened for tragic.

Janet McDonnell: Did it go smoothly? Was it a pretty calm scene there that day?

Dave Buckley: Surprisingly, yes. We didn't get, I mean everybody was surprised. There weren't than many injured. It seems like for the most part, either I guess you were dead, or you were alive, and there weren't that many people in between. We had maybe 3 or 4 police officers, and 2 or 3 firemen, and perhaps 1 or 2 businesspeople who came through that required medical attention of one sort or another. I think one of the firemen who came through was pretty badly hurt. Most everybody else was suffering from smoke and dust inhalation. The—but for the first couple of hours after the towers collapsed, it was, you know, it was a fairly steady stream of boats bringing people in. We just helped them get off of the boats. People still covered in dust and still really, you know, they didn't know where they were or what they were doing.

Janet McDonnell: Yes, well how long did this process go on, of people arriving there? By that evening were things winding down and people were being sent on home or to the hospital?

Dave Buckley: I don't even think it was that long. I mean I was probably there for an hour and a half to two hours. And the bulk of the people probably arrived in that time, if not all of them.

Dave Buckley: After that I mean as the boats started slowing down, Captain Lauro asked me to try to figure out who of our people was there, because we had a captain in Brooklyn and a lieutenant out here who obviously, once they had, guys were coming in from everywhere, coming in to work whether they were contacted or not. They heard on the radio that this happened, they drove to work. When the captain in Brooklyn and the lieutenant here had enough people for these areas, they just started putting people in police cars and sending them to Ellis Island figuring that that's where we could really use them. So, we didn't know really who was there. So, it was a matter, I went inside and started making phone calls, you know, who did you send us? Who's working in Brooklyn? Who's working in Staten Island? Who did you send to us? and compiling a list so we could keep track of it.

Janet McDonnell: Well, how, well we'll sort of go beyond September 11th to the days and weeks after. And I'm wondering how the September 11th response has affected your other missions. I mean one big effect seems to be that you don't have your SWAT team anymore. But how has it affected some of the other more routine operations that, whatever those are, other law enforcement missions and day-to-day operations?

- Dave Buckley: Well, it's made everything harder. Just to back up a little bit, after the initial job of getting everybody triaged and moved from Ellis Island, what we did with the SWAT team is we went on the boats with the marine unit to be actually off of Ellis Island and off of Liberty Island, but able to respond quickly to anything that happened in either place. So that we were kind of like between the two.
- Dave Buckley: But as for afterwards, it's just made everything more difficult. Our people are working 12 hours a day, 5-6 days a week, and they have been since September 11th. The security considerations for what we do here, this fort was closed for a couple of months after September 11th only because we have the Coast Guard here and the Defense Contract Management Agency. And they had their security concerns which we had to be aware of as well. So, we had this place shut down into December, I think. We opened up shortly before the Statue of Liberty opened. We reopened the fort to the public.
- Dave Buckley: And in the meantime, we had the New York Marathon starts here. So that was instead of the twenty some odd people that would normally be assigned to the marathon for security, we had 46 officers, plus the New York State Police gave us two canine, two explosive protection dogs, to work the marathon. They came down for three days. They were a big help. They came down for three days and we checked the entire fort, spent two days checking the entire fort along with our canine. And then on the day of the marathon, worked with our canine to screen all of the trucks, and busses, and cars that came to the fort.
- Janet McDonnell: You said this, the route comes through here for the marathon?
- Dave Buckley: This is where the marathon starts.
- Janet McDonnell: I didn't realize that.
- Dave Buckley: Fort Wadsworth. Fort Wadsworth is where everybody gathers. And then at the start of the marathon they take the runners out into the bridge plaza for the Verrazano Bridge, and start the race from there. But we have, in the morning we have 30,000 people, 30,000 plus, because we have the 30,000 runners plus the several thousand staff workers, and food service workers, and communication workers, and everything else that goes along with the marathon.

[tape off]

- Janet McDonnell: How about talking about the effect of the terrorist response and all that's been required for that over the past months on some of your other missions? What about resources in terms of equipment, cars, radios, funding? How have all of those things been affected?
- Dave Buckley: I don't know if I should get into that. I've heard a lot about there's all kinds of money available to purchase the equipment that we need to operate. So far nothing that I've asked for has come through. I know it's all been approved on a local level, but I asked for a lot of equipment for the SWAT team and it's taken long enough to get it, but now I don't need it.
- Janet McDonnell: You need the people.
- Dave Buckley: Now I need people.
- Janet McDonnell: So, tell me a little bit more about the period when your team was on the boats? Just patrolling? What were they encountering? What were they?
- Dave Buckley: For several days they were encountering a lot of spectators. Even with the harbor closed there were a lot of—
- [Interruption. Tape off]
- Janet McDonnell: Were there, have there been new security measures? I don't know how involved this station here is with the Manhattan sites, but, and so this question may or may not be something that you can address, but I'm wondering if there were new added security measures at the Manhattan sites after September 11th? I'd be interested in hearing someone who could talk about those in a very general sense, but I'm not sure if you're the right person to do that.
- Dave Buckley: Probably any of us could talk about it. I mean in general, yes, there's been increased security at every site. Here at Staten Island we have the guards on the gates all of the time now. And during the day the park has these visitor use assistants on the gates whose responsibility is to guide the public, but it's also to call us and tell us if anybody comes through the gate that looks like they don't belong, or they don't have a reason or explanation for being here. You know, they have obviously added screening sites to the parks in lower Manhattan. And we have pretty, fairly elaborate security arrangements set up for the Statue of Liberty.
- Janet McDonnell: I heard that [?] John [?] used, maybe that's not quite the right term.

- Dave Buckley: It includes a lot of things, a lot of things.
- Janet McDonnell: Yes, which requires more officers, too, doesn't it?
- Dave Buckley: Yes, it's a whole layered approach. You put enough layers of security around something, it may not be so obvious all of the time, but the more layers that someone has to get through to get to their target the more difficult it is.
- Janet McDonnell: So, does the Park Police have a presence in the Manhattan sites that it didn't have before? I mean what responsibility? Before September 11th what responsibility had the Park Police had for providing security at the Manhattan sites?
- Dave Buckley: Before September 11th we had no officers in Manhattan at all. Now we have officers in Battery Park, Federal Hall, and patrolling that area.
- Janet McDonnell: And do they coordinate with the law enforcement Rangers in carrying out those missions or how does that work?
- Dave Buckley: In Manhattan there is only one law enforcement Ranger and I'm not sure, but I believe his responsibilities have been moved to other national parks, the Manhattan sites that are not right down nearby ground zero.
- Janet McDonnell: So that's a fairly significant change. That's a pretty large impact on your staff?
- Dave Buckley: Yes, and we've actually been doing, as we get this additional responsibility, like every place else in the Park Service we've been losing people.
- Janet McDonnell: What do you think was the greatest challenge for you and your officers in responding to September 11th?
- Dave Buckley: Resisting the impulse to spend all of our time digging down at where the Trade Towers used to be. There was a lot of - that's where everybody wanted to be. Everybody wanted to be there helping, helping rescue people, helping dig people out, helping find people. There was a decision made that we have a responsibility to the National Park Service and the government and the people who work and live and exist in the areas that we control. And there is still a little time balancing that out. And at some point, eventually, we did go down. We were allowed to go down and help out in Manhattan, which was probably the best thing for

everybody. But yes, that was probably the most difficult thing, was being there but not being there.

Janet McDonnell: Is there anything that you would have done differently? I guess part of my mission is to maybe highlight any lessons learned from this that I can serve feedback to the policy.

Dave Buckley: That I would have done differently? I think I would, me as me, or is there anything the Park Service should have done differently?

Janet McDonnell: Both, both either you based on your years of experience, either you from your personal, professional perspective or that the Park Police should have done differently, or the agency. I mean you can take whatever approach.

Dave Buckley: I think the Park Service as a whole could have, what they could have done differently is they should have listened to us before September 11th, because we've been trying to work on increasing security out there for years. And probably the people to talk to about that would be Sergeant Charlie Guddemi and Lieutenant Chris Bathis.

Janet McDonnell: When you say out there, you mean Ellis or the Statue of Liberty?

Dave Buckley: Ellis and Liberty. It's really kind of an uphill battle sometimes, but.

Janet McDonnell: Do you think that the Park Police have greater visibility within the service now as a result of September 11th?

Dave Buckley: I think absolutely and not just inside the service. I think more visibility all together. I mean I just got a police magazine today that has an article about our new chief, and I've seen magazine articles in all kinds of magazines. One of the superintendents here likes to fly, so he gets a helicopter magazine. There have been two articles on the Park Police since September 11th. There's been quite a bit of press, and it's generally been good.

Janet McDonnell: About the way the public views Park Police. Do you think that's changed?

END OF SIDE A

START OF SIDE B

Dave Buckley: At least temporarily. I think the whole public image of police in general has probably changed, where they're happy to see a little

more, I don't want to say presence, more than presence. They're happy to see extra measures being taken to protect them.

Janet McDonnell: How about the way you view your job. Has that changed at all as a result of September 11th? Not the way other people view the job, but the way you view what you do when you come to work every day?

Dave Buckley: Yes, because I'm a little less satisfied in the job I'm doing now, right now. I'm more interested in rebuilding this Emergency Service Unit and being a little more proactive. Police work in general tends to be kind of reactive. And we'd like to be a little more involved in preventing something from happening. So, yes, my view of the job has changed because I think we need more of this special unit coverage. I mean I'm very much in favor of the increase in the marine unit that we've done. We've put more boats out on the water and put boats at the Statue more often.

Janet McDonnell: How many boats are there?

Dave Buckley: I don't know how much of that I should talk about.

Janet McDonnell: Okay, that's fine.

Dave Buckley: But to have more people out there and able to respond out there with tools to handle a wider variety of situations is more where I want to go.

Janet McDonnell: Who directs the marine units? Are those directed from here?

Dave Buckley: Yes, that would be Lieutenant Lauro, Captain Lauro's brother.

Janet McDonnell: Okay. I just, I was wondering whether there were any changes in the way those, you know, that they operate, too. I mean I imagine everybody is looking at what they can learn from this and how they can maybe organize differently. Well, is there anything that I haven't asked that you think is important to get into the record?

Dave Buckley: I guess the only thing really is that when we went out there, several of us and myself included, I mean I was there for, from September 11th I was at Ellis Island for three days. And probably worked most of the - how many hours are there in three days? 24, 48, 72, most of the 72 hours. I know I slept a little bit and I took a little time to go home for dinner one night, but the rest of the time I was there, and these other guys were there, too. They really put themselves out to make sure that a job got done, the job got done.

Janet McDonnell: So even after the people who, the evacuees were all sent home, you know, an operations center of some sort remained there at Ellis Island and I guess I'm wondering what went on there for three days?

Dave Buckley: They had, well first of all, the people who live on Liberty Island were allowed to go back to their houses, so there were people on Liberty Island. And there are just, our SWAT unit is a very small unit. And in order to provide the protection, they're just, we had to spend long hours.

Janet McDonnell: And you were overseeing operations from there instead of from here at Fort Wadsworth, I guess that's what I'm trying to say.

Dave Buckley: Yes.

Janet McDonnell: Okay, okay. And the coordination that would occur between there and between Ellis, and Major Wilkins, is that how that would work?

Dave Buckley: I don't know.

[tape off]

Janet McDonnell: That pretty much covers what I needed and, you know, I appreciate your taking the time to do this.

Dave Buckley: Not at all.

END OF TAPE