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Sergeant Clyde E. Soloman
May 8, 2002

Interview conducted by Janet McDonnell
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Harpers Ferry Center
PO Box 50
Harpers Ferry, WV 25425
HFC_Archivist@nps.gov

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

SEPTEMBER 11th ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH SGT. CLYDE E. SOLOMAN, USPP

Conducted by Janet A. McDonnell, Ph.D.

MAY 8, 2002

START OF TAPE

Janet McDonnell: It's May 8th, I'm Janet McDonnell and I'm here with Sgt. Clyde Solomon of the U.S. Park Police. We're here to talk about Sgt. Solomon's response to the September 11th attacks. I understand that you responded at Federal Hall that day. I would appreciate it if you could just walk me through the day.

Clyde Soloman: Okay, early that morning I was taking my kids to school - actually I dropped them off to school - and I was unaware of what was going on. I called the job to inquire about something and they told me that they were real busy and I said, "What's going on?" They said, "Turn on the TV" so I turn on the TV and I saw that the World Trade Center was on fire. So, I call the job back and I asked them if they need me to come to work so they said "Yes." I responded to work. At the time - I can't tell you right now, it might have been ten o'clock. So, upon my responding they told me to respond to Manhattan, Federal Hall.

Clyde Soloman: So, I got the police van, me and another officer, we responded. On our way there, I mean we just - smoke, all over the place. And being that we had an emergency vehicle, there was a lot of off-duty firemen and police officers that was following us 'cause we was en route to Manhattan. So, when I responded to Federal Hall, I mean, Manhattan was smoke filled, people in a panic, everybody's in a frenzy.

Janet McDonnell: How difficult was it to drive in?

Clyde Soloman: Well, being that it was a van, we pretty much had a little clearance through the smoke. It was difficult but we managed to get through. So, when I got into Federal Hall, everybody was just running. In Manhattan, there was vendors just had abandoned their carts, people were just running, all you saw debris on the ground - like something out of a war. Got into Federal Hall, there was people screaming, yelling, they were sick. People just didn't know what was going on.

Clyde Soloman: So, first thing I did, I tried to get people calmed down and I separated people that needed immediate medical attention from people that were just scared. So the people that needed immediate medical attention, we brought them to a different level of Federal Hall because downstairs, where we were it was smoke, filth, so upstairs on the second floor it was pretty more comfortable, they had air conditioning up there. So, we brought everybody up there -

asthmatics, people that were pregnant - and first thing we did we tried to get them medical attention.

Janet McDonnell:

How did you go about doing that?

Clyde Soloman:

We went out and sought out ambulances, they had triages set up in certain areas like the Federal Exchange, and we escorted them there. Went out and tried to get people food - a lot of people were scared 'cause they didn't know what was going on. We calmed people down, we got them water and after a couple hours they had settled down. And the sick people, we had found ambulances that was going back and forth trying to locate people that was sick. So basically, we got all the injured, sick, and pregnant, and we took care of them. So, the only people left at Federal Hall were people that were just standing around that were trying to walk over the Brooklyn Bridge, and employees. So after we send everybody on their way, we responded to Ground Zero, which it is known now, and actually, we was taking firemen, taking police officers, first aid - anybody that needed help, we was there to provide assistance.

Janet McDonnell:

Tell me a little bit more about Federal Hall. How difficult was it to go out and find these ambulances and find food? Were you on foot doing that?

Clyde Soloman:

Well, we had the van, it was myself and another officer, Cobaj, so I told him to try to locate medical attention, so he took the van while I was outside on foot. I did have some type of mask on and was trying to locate masks for some people who were trying to walk to the Brooklyn Bridge. So, basically, I was out on foot, trying to find, they had - the venders left water behind. So, I said "Well, might as well make use of it," people were thirsty, they was hungry, so I made the decision. I said "Well, might as well use it" so I brought it inside. People were thankful that we had gotten them water. People were filthy, they needed the water to wash their face, something to drink - pretty much to calm them down.

Clyde Soloman:

So, Officer Cobaj, he located different areas that were setting up and treating people, you know for the asthmatics, or people that were pregnant, and ambulances brought them to local hospitals. So, after we made sure everyone at Federal Hall was okay, employees, and we went around Ground Zero to see who need our help and different agencies needed supplies moved to different areas.

Clyde Soloman:

Firemen needed to get closer to the building, so we brought them closer because we had - actually we probably had the only

emergency vehicle in the area with a light bar. So basically, that's what we did. And later on, we went down to the areas, we were helping with digging, if anybody needed anything, we was there to provide assistance, so whatever was necessary we did.

Janet McDonnell: So, you were interacting with the staff there at Federal Hall, I presume?

Clyde Soloman: Yes, yes.

Janet McDonnell: Can you describe to me what the scene was, was it pretty well organized, pretty calm? I imagine a number of people must have been fairly traumatized.

Clyde Soloman: Well, inside, like I said, everybody was in a frenzy, everybody was running around, and basically that's what our job description is, to respond to these things, try to get things organized. So, with the help of an officer, we calmed people down, separated people that were scared, people worried about their pregnancy, breathing in whatever was in the air, the ashes, the fire. So, we basically reassured them that they was okay and calmed everybody down, you know. And whoever had any expertise - I think there was a doctor there - so he pretty much reassured people that they were okay.

Clyde Soloman: But even thinking about it today it's unbelievable that this happened, especially that night when we saw the World Trade Center, you know, ka-pows - you know, it was like, pretty shocking. But I was just doing my job, I don't think I'm a hero or anything like that, I'm just here to do whatever I could do.

Janet McDonnell: So, there were the, you two officers, and then how many park staff, do you think? Where there enough people to meet the needs? There were what, two hundred and I forget how many people took refuge there.

Clyde Soloman: I really couldn't tell you the numbers, but with the help of the park rangers, they provided first aid kits, little areas where to sit down, I guess they provided comfort for people seeking refuge there.

Janet McDonnell: And then you stayed around the rest of the afternoon and the evening?

Clyde Soloman: Stayed there 'til maybe 9, 10 o'clock at night.

Janet McDonnell: Sounds like a fairly traumatic day.

- Clyde Soloman: Well, when everybody's running from the area, we're running back into the area.
- Janet McDonnell: Do you just fall back on your training? Is that what you do in a case like that?
- Clyde Soloman: Well I think you go with your, well, yeah, training takes over but I mean, I guess everybody that's in this line of work, they're humanitarians, else they wouldn't be in this type of work - I guess whatever I could do I wanted to do. It's just the training I had helped in the situation.
- Janet McDonnell: It sounds like there was some gratification in being able to help.
- Clyde Soloman: Yeah, definitely, when people say, "Thank You," makes it worthwhile. Whatever I can do to comfort, help make a person feel at ease or everything's gonna be okay - that's what I did.
- Janet McDonnell: Do you view your job any differently now as a result of September 11th?
- Clyde Soloman: I'm glad that I was part of, well, yeah. I take it with more of a sense of pride now because they could easily have said "You know what, we're not going to get involved" but, the job said, "hey, we have to respond so go ahead and do it." I think I carry a little bit more pride about the badge now than I did before.
- Janet McDonnell: What were some of the biggest challenges that day?
- Clyde Soloman: Um—just trying to calm people down, reassuring them that everything is okay.
- Janet McDonnell: Did you stay at Federal Hall until the last people were out of there, the park staff? How long did that take for the evacuees to all be either sent across the bridge home or -
- Clyde Soloman: It took—I would say by maybe 3 o'clock everybody was gone, including staff I'm sure everybody had to get home, wanted to get home to their families, so pretty much everyone stayed around until about 3 o'clock.
- Janet McDonnell: So, you felt comfortable leaving at that point and going out and seeing what else you could do?

- Clyde Soloman: The hard part also was when you have children and it's twofold. I was worried about my kids because all you heard was bombs were found in schools. So, I was trying to find out if my kids were okay and trying to hide the fact I was worried about my kids. But I couldn't let the people see that I was worried because then maybe they would lose confidence in me. "Hey, look at this guy, he's more worried than we are." So, I had to hide that, but I was really concerned about my kids too in addition to showing the people at Federal Hall that everything was under control, everything would be okay.
- Janet McDonnell: Yeah, there was a lot of confusion that day, it was hard to get good information.
- Clyde Soloman: All day long you listen to the radio also and oh - there's bombs, we thought every school was being blown up. They're saying "Oh, there's a report of a bomb here, a bomb there, we have to evacuate the schools." It's like "Oh my God" it was very chaotic that day, very chaotic.
- Janet McDonnell: So, what stands - is there a moment or person or some actions you took - is there something that stands out in your mind in particular from that day?
- Clyde Soloman: Well, it's not, it wasn't positive, it was seeing—being there and seeing the World Trade Center—seeing everybody pull together as one and trying to do whatever it took to get the job done. Whatever was necessary to be done, pulling together and working as one unit. Nobody was saying "Oh, why do I have to do that?" everybody "Whatever you need me to do"—that's what people was doing. And if a person needed me to drive them somewhere, "Just hop in, we'll do it." If they needed me to bring water somewhere, "Whatever you need, I'll do it." So just seeing everybody work together that day for a common cause.
- Janet McDonnell: It's a historic moment in time. Is there anything more you want to say about it? It must have been very powerfully emotional, and you seem very calm about this.
- Clyde Soloman: You know, I was a part of this, it was—one time I was just reviewing my life how I went, I experienced this, I witnessed the bombing at the Olympics, you know, I was a kid when Kennedy got assassinated, the Vietnam War and I was just saying "Wow, what I've experienced in my lifetime" and now this, you know—I just hope somebody remembers "Hey, Sergeant Solomon did

whatever he could do to help out the day of Sept. 11th." I would have given my life to save somebody or get the job done.

Janet McDonnell: Did you actually see the Tower collapse, or did you arrive at the Hall after that?

Clyde Soloman: I think the second tower was on fire at the time, and I was there when it collapsed.

Janet McDonnell: And I understand that the staff at Federal Hall were outside directing people to come in, is that accurate? I mean people who were fleeing -

Clyde Soloman: Well, when I responded to Federal Hall, everybody was inside the building.

Janet McDonnell: They were already in there, okay. Great.

Clyde Soloman: And yeah, I guess there was people trickling in but basically everybody had sought refuge by the time I got there.

Janet McDonnell: And you were able to find - you mentioned you had a doctor there -

Clyde Soloman: Well, we had made announcements. "Is anybody-?" You try to, you know, amongst people - we couldn't do it ourselves. We need the help of everybody. Somebody had a soothing voice, to calm people down. You know, bring somebody upstairs. You know, a woman who's pregnant and somebody had a child, they know what they're going through, try to settle them down. So, we tried to get everybody to pitch in.

Janet McDonnell: Is there a woman who you actually transported to an ambulance that was a few blocks away?

Clyde Soloman: Yeah, there was a pregnant woman and at first, she said she was okay and then she got nauseous, so we took her to the hospital.

Janet McDonnell: But you actually carried her to an ambulance?

Clyde Soloman: Well, it was Officer Cobaj that did that. I told him to do what he had to do, and I did what I had to do.

Janet McDonnell: It's very difficult for me to imagine what that site at that moment in time must have been like.

Clyde Soloman: Well, when we thought about it later - at that time you realize what's going on, but you don't have time to let fear trouble you. You have to do what you have to do. And I was glad I was able to maintain my composure and help people in their time of need.

Janet McDonnell: Is there anything you would have done differently.

Clyde Soloman: I don't know, probably not.

Janet McDonnell: Just responding as things happened moment to moment.

Clyde Soloman: Actually, I wanted to be down here every day, but I realized that I needed a break, give other officers - I didn't want to be that selfish, "Oh I want to be there every day." I mean everybody wants to, at that time, contribute some way and I couldn't be selfish.

Janet McDonnell: You mean digging at ground zero?

Clyde Soloman: Yeah.

Janet McDonnell: And as I understand it, it wasn't until later that the park police were allowed to go in there and do that. Or is that-

Clyde Soloman: True.

Janet McDonnell: Enough said. Well, I really wanted to capture your story. Is there anything-

Clyde Soloman: I just still find it unbelievable that this happened, and I go to Ground Zero quite often to see it now and that day of September, I didn't ever think that it would look like it does now. Even when I was digging, you stood there on the bucket brigade and you just looked-unbelievable, I can't believe this happened. But to see even with the bucket brigade different agencies just helping, everybody helping each other. You get tired you sit down. People couldn't be more friendly. And it was really nice to see people come together, put their differences aside, and say "Look, let's just operate as one, not individuals, but one group. To get the job done."

Janet McDonnell: A lot of pride of that. I'm going to end it here. It's a powerful story.

END OF TAPE