

Two Firefighters Look Back

Forever Changed, But Still Responding

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Sept. 3, 2002 - It was a probationary firefighter's dream. When the call came in just after 8:45 a.m. to Engine Co. 24 in SoHo that there was a fire at the World Trade Center, Robert Byrne, in his tenth week in the field, got posted at the nozzle of the hose on the fire engine that sped to the scene.

"I'm like, wow, I've got the nozzle," recalled Mr. Byrne last week, savoring those moments before the routine fire run transmogrified into a nightmare. "A probie. I've been in the engine two weeks and I've got the nozzle. I couldn't believe it. I was so excited."

'A Truckie All the Way'

Just that morning, Louis Arena, a firefighter in Ladder 5, the sister company where Mr. Byrne had just completed a seven-week rotation, had asked him how he was liking the engine so far.

"I told him, 'I'm not crazy about the engine, we don't do nothing like the truck.' I was a truckie all the way," said Mr. Byrne, a 33-year-old with an antic sense of humor and a manner of speaking in staccato bursts. "He goes, 'Yeah, I like the truck too, but there's nothing like having a nozzle at a fire.'"

Among the first companies to arrive at the Trade Center that morning, the firefighters from Engine 24 and Ladder 5 hauled 70-plus pounds of equipment up to the 35th floor of the north tower, where they paused with two other companies to catch their breath and discuss how to lighten their load for their continuing ascent.

Mr. Byrne bumped into Mr. Arena there. "I go to him and say, 'Louie, nice job. I got the nozzle.' He just shook his head."

When the south tower caved in at 10:03 a.m., a chief ordered everyone on the 35th floor to evacuate. Mr. Byrne and the rest of his engine company would make it out. Mr. Arena, along with 10 other firefighters from Ladder 5, would not.

"Why did we make it out and they didn't?" asked Mr. Byrne.

That question has no easy answer.

Mr. Byrne had made it to the overhang of an adjoining building when the second tower fell 26 minutes later. "I remember the screaming, ahh!, ahh!, like you've never heard it. And then it just shuts," he said, clamping his hand over his open mouth to illustrate the abrupt silence. "Obviously people got killed maybe 20 feet from us. It was so weird. Everything around us was destroyed. It was like we were in this little pocket of resistance."

Marcel Claes, who arrived on the same fire engine as Mr. Byrne, credited his survival to a string of lucky breaks. He had traded shifts with a guy from Ladder 5, which suffered the heavy losses, but was assigned to the engine that morning because it was a man short. "I was lucky that the chief was there to tell us to get out," he continued. "I was lucky because I didn't encounter any obstacles on the way down."

Luck Not Really the Word

He paused reflectively and continued in a quieter voice, "It's hard to imagine that firemen can say they were lucky that day."

In the year since Sept. 11, questions have arisen about the Fire Department's response on that day that took the lives of 343 of its members. Should so many firefighters have rushed downtown? Did the crush of personnel — many operating without the oversight of a chief — increase the department's death toll? Did faulty radios result in scores of firefighters not hearing evacuation orders?

The firefighters themselves decline to point fingers, saying they did the best they could in the face of an incident unlike anything they had ever encountered before and whose tragic ending they had no way of foreseeing.

"A lot of Monday morning quarterbacking has gone on," said Robert McLoughlin, a Captain at Engine Co. 33 who retired in January. "But I believe the vast majority of people would do the exact same thing if they had to do it all over again."

'We're Paid to Go'

On the day after the attacks, Mr. McLoughlin, whose East Village firehouse lost nine men, defended the department's aggressive response in an interview with this newspaper. "Our mind-set is go, go, go, and help, help, help," he said then. "That's our job. That's what we are paid for. That's why people give us this level of respect."

A year later, Mr. McLoughlin stood by his words, with the caveat that firefighters would now be more restrained if they perceived signs of terrorism.

"We're still going to go quickly," he said. "If we stopped to second-guess every incident we came to, there would be a lot more body bags."

Firefighters that day said they arrived at the Trade Center thinking only about the task at hand: extinguishing a fire.

"All the actions that we took were pretty standard," said Mr. Claes. "You go into a high-rise building and the elevators are out, you climb up. Alls I could think about was putting water on the fire because I knew there was fire up there."

A Divergent View

The first official study of the FDNY's operations on Sept. 11 by the consulting firm McKinsey & Company concluded that the department's ability to respond was complicated by the hundreds of off-duty firefighters who converged on lower Manhattan after a citywide recall notice was issued. The overwhelming turnout, the consultants said, made it difficult for commanders at the scene to track the arrival and assignment of personnel.

Mr. Byrne bristles at criticism that firefighters lacked discipline that day. "Those guys were amazing," he said. "To see those guys in action, it made me want to stay in the Fire Department more than ever. They knew something bad was happening, but they didn't care, they went in. They had a job to do."

About the number of firefighters at the scene, Mr. Byrne said, "My personal opinion is because they rushed in off-duty, a lot more people got saved."

Mr. Claes contended that the day's disorder was not the result of gung-ho firefighters too charged up to wait for orders from their commanders. "The building was so large, you couldn't find the chiefs," he said. "It was easy to get sidetracked. Things are happening all around you. It was chaos from the start. You tried to get order, but it was hard."

His remarks circled back again and again to the same conclusion: "Things went wrong, but you can't say anybody did anything wrong."

Bitterness Over Radios

One thing that firefighters do view as unpardonable was the Fire Department's failure to fix radios that it knew were not reliable, particularly in high-rise fires.

"The whole radio thing angered me a lot," said Mr. Byrne. "It's disgusting. Let's put these guys who are in charge of radios in the fire and see how they like it if they have their radios."

Just six months before Sept. 11, the department pulled new digital radios from service after a firefighter's distress call at a Queens fire went unheard by other firefighters.

'They Weren't Tested'

Mr. McLoughlin recalled how he had been able to communicate with a firefighter across the river using the high-tech radios, but not to a fellow a block away. "It became glaringly obvious that the department hadn't tested the radios," he said.

On Sept. 11, the firefighters were carrying their old analog radios, which had not worked properly at the 1993 World Trade Center bombing.

The radio failure on Sept. 11 left in a news vacuum the hundreds of firefighters who entered the north tower before the second plane hit.

"We weren't getting any communication," said Mr. Claes. "I had a radio on. We were getting Maydays from guys having chest pain, stuff like that. But that's about it. We were getting nothing from the lobby. Why wouldn't somebody have said, hey, a plane hit the second tower, I think that we might be under attack here? Even after the south tower's collapse, nobody said anything."

Some Never Heard

Mr. Byrne and Mr. Claes received an evacuation order after the deafening noise that was the south tower's collapse, but they are convinced that scores of firefighters were not as fortunate.

"The lack of evacuation was because of the radios," said Mr. Byrne. "When the south tower came down, you know what we heard on the radio? That there was a collapse on the 66th floor."

Even as he was making a mad dash through the plaza amid white ash and debris as people and objects fell from the sky like deadly missiles, Mr. Byrne didn't have a clue what had happened.

"It didn't occur to me to look at the south tower and say, oh wow, it's gone," he said. "It just didn't click."

The weeks that followed, Mr. Byrne said, were "a big blur of digging and funerals."

Risks 'Worth It'

Not until the third day were firefighters working around the clock at the smoking pile issued proper respiratory equipment. Even so, Mr. Byrne said he had no regrets about his actions. "If we saved one person, it would be all worth it," he said.

Mr. McLoughlin said that he came to the sickening realization that nobody would be pulled out alive by the end of the first week. "There wasn't going to be a miracle cavity that people would come pouring out of like ants from an ant hill," he said. "I didn't have a crystal ball. Maybe it was because I'm older."

Mr. Byrne said that he held out hope as late as November. "I always felt we were going to find somebody," he remarked. "With all the water we pumped in there, maybe they were able to drink some water. The body can sustain itself without food for 60 days. Who knows? An overactive imagination. And I never even found a body part."

As reality set in, the lethargy of depression took hold. Both Mr. Byrne and Mr. Claes have gained more than 15 pounds in the last year.

'At Home More At Work'

For the first six months, Mr. Claes said, he went through the motions of funerals and work, finding solace in the company of other firefighters who shared his grief. "For months, I felt more comfortable at the firehouse than I did at home," he said.

Mr. Byrne said that he shut down in the months following the attacks. "It was a trying time for my marriage," he said. "It wasn't that we were fighting, but I didn't have time for my poor wife. She was going through her own problems."

Although the two firefighters have resumed old routines, the trauma has left its imprint on their psyches.

For Mr. Claes, who is 47, it has taken the form of memory loss. "My memory's shot. I forget a lot of things, a lot of little details," he said. "It's getting better, but for a while there I was like a senile old man. I feel like I aged 20 years in six months."

A Buzz From Above

During the interview, Mr. Byrne suddenly peers up as a helicopter clatters in the night sky above the firehouse. "I still got to look up," he confided. "It's terrible. I'm convinced that there's something going on all the time. I'm paranoid."

Serious health problems have yet to emerge. Mr. McLoughlin said that he was surprised to discover that according to tests, his lung capacity has actually improved since two years ago.

Mr. Byrne said that he expected to contract a serious lung ailment down the road. "If I don't, it would be a miracle," he said. "I was chewing on asbestos for months."

Feeding his anger was the Fire Department's tardiness in decontaminating the vehicles used that day.

Engine Co. 24 was using a loaner rig last week while its engine was finally taken in for cleaning. The firefighters collected a cup full of fibers from the vehicle's air vent just before it was whisked away. "So for the last nine months, I got to inhale more. Me and the brothers. Lucky us," Firefighter Byrne said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

The tragedy hasn't dampened either man's enthusiasm for the job.

'Still Love This Job'

"I still love coming to work," said Mr. Claes. "I don't worry. When the bells go off, I forget about everything and I just think of the next job. I don't dwell on 9/11. It's easy to put it on the back-burner and take care of my responsibilities to my house, my wife, my kids and my job."

Mr. Byrne, whose father and brother are cops, said that he felt fortunate to be a Firefighter. "I love the job," he said. "The guys are dynamite. It's a family." His only misgiving, he said, was the money. "I had a pretty good-paying job at one time," he said. "Now I'm scraping."

Both Mr. Byrne and Mr. Claes are hankering for the return of the firehouse's old rhythms. "You wanted to get back to normal, but it was impossible for a long time because we were getting so many visitors to the firehouse," Mr. Claes said. "But they all meant well."

'The Reverence is Over'

Mr. Byrne said that the public response to firefighters had snapped back to the pre-Sept. 11 days. "All that awe and reverence is over," he said. Now, he said, people — like rubberneckers after a car wreck — want to know if he was working on Sept. 11. "A lot of times, I just tell them no," he said.

The death or retirement of so many top commanders however, has altered the make-up of the Fire Department.

Captain McLoughlin, 50, retired after 21 years to become chief of port security for the U.S. Coast Guard. He said that he had planned on retiring in 2005, when his youngest child is due to graduate from high school, but he put in his papers this year to take advantage of his large overtime earnings, which added \$12,000 to his annual pension allowance.

Mr. McLoughlin expressed bitterness that the Bloomberg administration did not support legislation in Albany that would have enabled firefighters to use their best 12 months in earnings, instead of their final year's salary, as the basis for calculating their pension.

'They Dropped the Ball'

"They make a great show for the public saying they want senior officers," he said. "But when it came down to putting your money where your mouth is and not letting senior people get away, they dropped the ball."

Mr. Byrne, who stayed at Engine Co. 24 as his permanent post, noted that all the men who trained him during his seven-week rotation at Ladder 5 died in the attacks. "I got robbed of that, all my teachers," he said.

The hole is being filled by firefighters like Mr. Claes, who has 12 years on the job. It is, he said, a hard adjustment.

"You felt better when there were more senior guys around," Mr. Claes said. "It was sort of like a security blanket. I'm a senior man now. I hope I can measure up to the guys I had to look up to who are now retired or dead."

The Lost View

The firefighters at Engine 24, just south of Houston St. on 6th Ave., could step out into the street and see the soaring towers to the south.

Like the 11 men lost from Ladder 5, the buildings' absence is palpable.

"I miss the towers," Mr. Claes said. "I couldn't drive past them without looking up and staring at them for a few seconds."

Just as the firehouse is reconstituting itself after the catastrophe, so too the firefighters' thoughts have turned to rebuilding.

"Hopefully, they'll build something that's really going to stand out," said Mr. Claes. "It doesn't have to be big, but it should be something unusual so if you're in the Far Rockaways or in New Jersey, you're going to see a landmark on the skyline where you can say, 'That's where the Trade Center used to be.'"