



## Searching at Ground Zero

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By Steven Tharrat, MD, MPVM

**A physician from Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) team CA-TF7 describes the destruction at the World Trade Center, and the frustrating search underground and on "the pile."**

I've always dreaded early morning pages. From the "breakfast hits" of my internship to the "crisis that can't wait" in intensive care, there is almost never good news in pages that come as night is dissolving into dawn. September 11 was no exception. The page came at 0550 and said simply, "There has been a terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York - No further details."

Television provided "the further details." The shock of seeing the fire burning through Tower 2 and a plane hitting Tower 1 led to my next thought - "This is September, Sacramento is first out of California for USAR this month. I'm going to New York."

The initial hours of activation remain a blur in my memory. Many details needed to be coordinated, and the general shock and disbelief of the magnitude of the terrorist event left no one with an entire view of the deployment activities. Many members of the team who are not deployed assist in preparing the team to "get out the door." I concentrated on packing my personal gear into the cache; checking my personal safety equipment, and ensuring that the team's medical and transport packs were available and correctly packed. My initial medical intelligence efforts focused on attempting to determine if any radiological, chemical or biological agents were dispersed as part of the attack. This information was vital to initial operational constraints on the team.

The team departed Sacramento at 1415 for Travis AFB. The initial plan was to take a military C5 galaxy transport to March AFB in Southern California to pick up CA-1 and CA-6 (Los Angeles City and Riverside teams). By the time we reached Travis, it was determined we would fly directly to McGuire AFB in New Jersey and the southern California teams would take other planes. We departed Travis at 1815.

The trip out was very quiet. Most of us were studying our field operations guides, the detailed checklist of our job assignments for each phase of the deployment, and reviewing the general job assignments of the other positions. We were also preparing ourselves for the emotional impact of the mission.

The gravity of the situation hit home for me when the pilot came on the intercom. He said he and the crew were honored to be flying us east, that according to air traffic control we were one of only two planes flying over the United States at that time, and that we would have a fighter escort across the country. We arrived at McGuire AFB at 0315 local time.

Later that day we entered New York. We could see the dust and smoke plume from Manhattan 30 miles away. We arrived at our staging center, the Jacob Javits Convention Center, about 26 blocks away from the World Trade Center, and set up our base of operations. The team divided into two shifts for 24-hour operations and we began what would become 20-hour days. Two other task forces were already on site at the WTC; we

would commence operations the following morning.

Our initial assignment was to the West Broadway Street sector paired with Maryland USAR TF-1 - a sector that included WTC Buildings 6 and 7. We set up our forward base of operations in a parking garage and got our first look at the site.

The sheer immensity of the destruction was amazing. Pictures and video cannot capture the scale of the devastation. It was similar to seeing the Grand Canyon in person after seeing it on TV. The smoke and dust gave everything a black and white cast, like an Ansel Adams photograph. My initial thought was WWII films of the firebombing of Dresden - twisted steel and thick concrete dust was everywhere.

Then we saw the faces; New York firefighters and police officers - beyond grief, walking almost in a psychotic trance. They were focused on digging in the rubble, not with the adrenalin-fed rush of a rescue attempt, but the slow, methodical "one block at a time" excavation of their brothers and sisters. Emotionally drained but just on the edge.

Conversation with them brought out stories of near death told in a very matter of fact tone mixed with spontaneous releases of grief. The fire and police services are a close family; this was overwhelmingly evident at the site. The support we provided to them would be our team's "live saves" - not any trapped victims.

The initial emotions of the team included more frustration than grief. The mission of a USAR team is to support the local emergency response - not take over the emergency. We worked "for" the New York Fire Department (NYFD). The devastating loss of the senior command of NYFD, especially the special operations and USAR command, deprived the fire department of the very people who knew best how to immediately integrate USAR teams into the response. Developing this integration and trust, coupled with the logistical difficulties in moving and supporting over 500 USAR team members and the lack of immediate rescue missions, produced many frustrations. The medical, search and logistics sections had things to do from the start of the deployment; the rescue missions would come later.

Our team was assigned to enter the subterranean areas below Buildings 5 and 6 and Tower 1. Moving with the search teams below grade was a surrealistic experience. Crushed and collapsed wreckage, some twisted into hauntingly beautiful shapes like an abstract sculpture thrust into darkness, was everywhere. In places there were fire hoses, equipment drops and evidence of an organized rescue response - but no victims. Finally breaching into the subway and parking area revealed no victims, no bodies. Everyone had successfully evacuated these areas before the towers collapsed. We continued our strange, coded "tagging" on walls with orange paint that told the story: "CA-TF7 was here, area searched, no victims, no bodies, moving on..."

On September 14 the rain started. I realized the probability of finding anyone alive was rapidly diminishing. We didn't talk about this, of course, but you could read it in the eyes of the team.

The WTC site was experienced with all five senses. The visual range of sheer destruction, the smells from the pile, the continuous sounds of heavy equipment, the gritty taste and "feel" of the air with its concentration of dust and smoke - all contributed to the physical and emotional impact of the response.

Later we were tasked to "clear", with three other task forces and NYFD, the Merrill Lynch World Financial Building. The 44-story building needed every door opened, every room searched. Our team was assigned 12 floors. There is nothing like forcing over 300 doors with entry tools to dissolve any residual frustration. Again, no one found, moving on...

The dogs played a vital role. Anna, Dusty, Arley and Bishop, together with their handlers, searched the rubble for the scent of a survivor or the mark of a victim. The dogs also provided a decompressive release for our team and the other rescue workers; their

unconditional love and receptiveness to a pet or a hug provided needed emotional stabilization. They were also inveterate "media magnets" throughout the deployment and provided brief moments of levity for the team.

Upon our arrival at Javits Center, Ben Shiffrin and I had conferred about how to ensure the maximum quality of sleep for the team. We were very concerned about the potential for injuries from sleep deprivation. Sleeping areas had been set up next to the rescue equipment. Light, noise, backup horns and equipment movement would occur 24 hours a day. Half the team needed to flip sleep/wake cycles for night operations and the entire team was on Eastern Daylight Time. Average sleep time for the team was 4 to 6 hours and the medical, logistics and team commanders were getting less. It was obvious that fatigue would set in rapidly.

We concluded that the benefits of a short-acting hypnotic would outweigh the risks of post-dosing sedation. We decided to make zolpidem (Ambien) available to the team. Ben immediately obtained a "donation" of 250 10 mg tablets from Saint Vincent's Hospital. Our team's experience with zolpidem was excellent; team members reported uninterrupted, dreamless sleep and only one member experienced approximately 30 minutes of mental fogging on one day post dose.

By the end of the deployment, approximately two-thirds of the team were requesting the medication for sleep. We had no on site injuries during the deployment, and the medical team was being referred to as "the candy men."

With the clearing of Buildings 6 and 7, our team was shifted on September 17 to the Church Street sector, and we were able to actually get out onto "the pile" to search in its voids. We never referred to the area as "ground zero" - we didn't even hear that term until we were demobilized.

The view from the pile was also unbelievable. Think of the South Dakota badlands transformed into steel. The pile undulated with depressions and "hillets" of twisted, burned steel extending to the horizon in all directions and developed its own topography and landmarks. Heat from underground fires radiated into the sky, giving a shimmering, mirage-like quality to some areas. The largest pieces of concrete in the pile were 4 inches across. Nothing identifiable as a computer, furniture, glass or carpet could be seen.

The sheer energy expended when these buildings came down made it clear that we would find no live victims. At the request of NYFD we marked the location of bodies; they would recover and escort the remains from the pile. We continued our searching and tagging with orange paint, now supplemented with the "cut here" lines and weight calculations placed on steel by our heavy rigging specialists. They marked the cut points for ironworkers and the lift points for heavy crane operators.

A three-dimensional perspective was vital to team safety on the pile. We had to constantly assess the space above our heads to avoid "widow makers" (and widower makers) - large pieces of steel and concrete. Ensuring stable footing was also important. A seemingly stable piece of metal could cover a 45-foot void. Safety was a team effort. We had to watch out for one another, and accounted for everyone no less frequently than every 15 minutes when on the pile. Engineers placed transits on all the buildings and monitored them every three minutes for changes. We listened for the three horn blasts that would signal an emergency evacuation of the pile. You never moved anywhere without identifying an evacuation route and a safe haven in the event of further shifting of the rubble.

The last day on the pile was one of diminishing assignments. I took time to circumnavigate the WTC plaza. The perspective from the other two sectors made me realize that despite the immensity of the devastation I had experienced, "I still hadn't seen it all."

The team was not completely prepared for the outpouring of support from the community

upon our return. We actually knew less than anyone about events after September 11; we had had little contact with any media, little downtime that was not spent eating, showering or sleeping, and were so mission focused that we had not had time to assimilate the implications of the events that had transformed America. The feeling was that we had done our job and represented all Californians who could not get onto the pile. The progressively increasing intensity of support as we approached Sacramento made our buses as silent as upon our departure, this time with awe at the magnitude of the thanks we received.

This deployment was a true "life defining event" for me. I appreciate more the fragility of life and the need to continually express my affection for, and professional respect to, those in my life. I acquired another family, my fellow team members and those NYFD and NYPD members we worked with.

Our successes were measured much more broadly and more fundamentally than in the number of rescues we made. We were simply one manifestation of the dedication, teamwork and determination that exists throughout the United States and that was displayed in the aftermath of September 11, 2001.



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