

The National 9/11 Pentagon Memorial in Washington, D.C.



The Flight 93 National Memorial in Shanksville, Pennsylvania



A memorial to the heroes of 9/11 at Ground Zero



# Reflections on 9/11

## LAPD OFFICERS LOOK BACK ON THE DAY THAT CHANGED AMERICA

by Rebecca Kendall

It was a morning like no other. As Angelinos were waking up to the relative calm of their city, the people of New York, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania — and the whole country for that matter — were in the midst of a crisis that no one could have predicted.

On September 11, 2001, two airplanes crashed into the Twin Towers of New York City's World Trade Center, another into the Pentagon and another, which had intended to target either the White House or the Capitol Building, went down in a field in rural Pennsylvania.

As the world watched the horror unfold and tried to make sense of the chaos and confusion, it soon became clear that America was witnessing the worst act of terrorism ever experienced on U.S. soil. The planes were directed to slam into the heart of America's political and economic centers and to paralyze the nation's sense of security. The attacks left some 3,000 innocent lives lost, including 343 firefighters, 60 police officers from New York City and the Port Authority and eight private emergency medical technicians and paramedics.

Mainstream accounts of these events often tell the stories of those who died and those who were left to go on without their friends, families and colleagues, but there are countless untold tales of those who traveled to New York, Washington, D.C., and

Pennsylvania to help restore dignity and hope. These include members of the LAPD family, many of whom went to Ground Zero.

Within days of the attacks, the Los Angeles Police Protective League and the Los Angeles Police Memorial Foundation made arrangements to send three teams of 10 LAPD officers, chaplains and volunteer support counselors to New York City to work with the New York Police Department and the New York Port Authority.

With their East Coast brothers and sisters in blue facing such devastation and destruction, several LAPD officers answered the call for help. Each of them used personal time to contribute.

Ten years later, the memories of their experiences remain vivid, and their reflections from the time they spent at Ground Zero are colored with pain, camaraderie and hope.

Ofcr. Debra Dickerson, Air Support Division, was among them. She, like most, remembers watching the horror unfold on television in the early morning hours of September 11, 2001. As she watched the second plane hit the Twin Towers, she had no idea that within a few weeks she would be standing right in the middle of the turmoil.

"Without hesitation, I signed on," says Dickerson, who left with Capt. Ken Hillman, Ofcr. Francine Briscoe, Det. Moses Castillo, Ofcr. Randy Michaelson, Ofcr. James Ray, Chaplains David Bowser and Michael

McCullough and Family Support Group members Ann Brunzell and Elaine Wicks on October 2, 2001, for a five-day critical incident response.

"Our first day at Ground Zero was nothing less than life-changing," says Dickerson. "To see the devastation up close was more than my senses could take in. The dust in the air, the noises of the construction equipment, the smell of obliterated buildings — it was almost overwhelming."

The group was tasked with counseling officers from the various police agencies who had lost friends, co-workers and loved ones, and to help support them in the beginning of a very long recovery. Dickerson spoke with hundreds of officers, firefighters, Ground Zero workers and citizens of New York, and prayed with many of them. "I listened as they told me their stories from that September morning — stories that many of them had never been able to tell anyone before, but they somehow felt safe sharing them with me."

While at Ground Zero, there were a number of times when an eerie quiet came over the site and they knew that the remains of someone's loved one had been found. "Whenever a firefighter or police officer was found, their remains were draped with an American flag," she says, "and we all stood at attention as the rescuers transported the bodies to the makeshift morgue. It was a calm and quiet that was actually deafening."



Ofcr. Debra Dickerson picked up this piece of glass from a sea of ash and dust that remained at Ground Zero during her time there in October 2001. Ten years later, it serves as a reminder of those lost and those she met on her journey.

She says there were many tears shed during those five days, but there was also a sense that those who survived knew that there were people who cared for them and were dedicated to helping them through this time of sorrow.

“It may not have been a large gesture, often it was just a smile and a hug or a sticker from Air Support Division that made an officer, even if for just a moment, take notice and realize that there were so many people there for them. I remember being welcomed with open arms, hugs, thank yous and admiration. I returned to Los Angeles on October 7, 2001, and knew that my life, as well as so many others’, would never be the same.”

Father Mike McCullough, an LAPD chaplain, says that the LAPD presence made a huge impact on the officers and firefighters at Ground Zero.

“Officers responded from all over the country, but when New York officers saw LAPD there was a special big-city bond,” says McCullough, who counseled an estimated 600 officers and firefighters during his time there. “It was something that was very special. It was our joy to bring them peace for even a few moments.”

McCullough keeps a thick navy blue binder filled with photos, letters, poems and articles he authored during this time as a tribute to the people, the landscapes and the power of the human spirit to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Putting his thoughts on paper allowed him to express his feelings and purge his psyche of all the negative images that surrounded him.

“This experience was the most moving incident of my 38 years in law enforcement ministry,” says McCullough.



“The Firefighter Guardian Angel” was a Community of Angels art project that was displayed in Los Angeles in spring 2001.

In addition to the groups that were sent by the League and the Memorial Foundation, a number of LAPD officers and retirees also contributed to the cleanup.

Sgt. Frank Banelos was vacationing in Boston when the attacks happened. In fact, he had flown into Logan Airport, the airport at which the planes were hijacked, on September 10. He had already made plans to visit New York City, but instead of visiting the city as a tourist, he went to serve and protect. “I just felt the urge to help in some way. Not only as a patriotic duty, but I felt compelled to help in any way due to the first responders that were killed and still possibly alive in the rubble.”

Banelos was assigned to guard a supply depot in midtown Manhattan, where police and fire crews went to get supplies for workers who were at Ground Zero.

“I remember several things going through my head,” says Banelos of those days. “First was the fact that this happened on American soil. I was bewildered by that thought. I felt vulnerable. The second was the overwhelming sense of unity. Not only of the country, but in talking to the NYPD officers. It seemed like every officer I spoke to knew of an officer or a family member who was killed in the towers when they went down.”

He says it’s important to remember the feelings of that day and to remain vigilant and not take life for granted. “I am glad I volunteered. I met so many NYPD officers, and they were all impressed to see that cops from as far away as L.A. had come to help. A lot of them shook my hand and said thank you.”

Ofcr. Tom Halowell (ret.) learned of the attacks while he and his wife, Sharron, were listening to the radio on their way to take their car into the shop. “Our first reaction was ‘Why are they flying so low over New York?’” recalls Halowell, who has lived in Tulsa since 1993. “When the second plane hit, we realized it was an attack.” The couple returned home and called their local Red Cross office, where they’d served as volunteers since 1993, to find out how they could help. They were asked to start packing their bags and to be on standby. Within an hour, the Red Cross called and asked them to come to their office to answer phone calls. They were sent to Washington, D.C., on September 20 for training, and the next day they landed in New York, where they worked at a center alongside representatives from New York Fire and Police, Social Security, the FBI, Salvation Army and other assistance organizations. They worked with families of the deceased and attended to some of their financial needs, including payments for memorial services, mortgages and other monthly bills



Members of the LAPD in front of the Port Authority command post. In front, the late Chaplain David Bowser, left, and Ofcr. Debra Dickerson. In back, from left, an unidentified officer from the Port Authority, Capt. Ken Hillman, Ofcr. Randy Michaelson, Det. Moses Castillo, Ofcr. Francine Briscoe, Ofcr. James Ray (ret.) and Chaplain Michael McCullough.



Sgts. Ted Mallet and Jeff Hamilton standing with NYPD and Port Authority officers at a Southeast Area inspection

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This cake was presented to NYPD and Port Authority officers at the Southeast Area inspection in October 2001.



The Pentagon was hit following the attacks on the Twin Towers.



LAPD Team #1, front row, from left, Ray Babbie, USMC ret; Sgt. Todd Cataldi and John Knox, LAFD; and an unidentified USMC retiree. Back row, from left, Major Fischer, National Guard; Capt. Carpenter, from the Ontario Fire Department; Ofcr. Art Greci (ret.); and Sgt. Fred Tredy (ret.).



Capt. Patrick Findley (ret.), left; Sgt. Steve Ulrich (ret.), third from left; and Det. Ramona Findley, third from right, stand with three NYPD officers in what was left of the parking structure from the second tower of the World Trade Center.

and expenses. The Halowells were there for three weeks in 2001 and returned in January 2002 to volunteer for another three weeks. Halowell worked security on his second trip, and was at Ground Zero several times.

“Every day we were there, we thought about our family and how we would have reacted if we had lost someone in our family in the towers,” says Halowell, adding that this was the most difficult assignment out of the 32 natural disasters the couple had worked during their years with the Red Cross. “We were amazed by the help and donations that came from the American people. This was an experience that we will never forget, and we hope it never happens again. Working a disaster always gave us an attitude adjustment. It made us appreciate our family and what we had.”

Lt. Vincent Neglia was on day duty on September 11, 2001, and followed the news of the events from his home and from his assignment at Parker Center. He says his mind and eyes raced through the televised images, which sparked memories of his time growing up in Brooklyn, New York, right across the river from the World Trade Center. “I could remember being able to see the towers above the rooflines in my neighborhood.”

His attention soon turned to contacting friends and family in New York to make sure everyone was safe. “As the morning progressed, all brothers, sisters and parents were accounted for, except for one brother-in-law,” says Neglia. “He was in the process of making his way to the Twin Towers that morning to make a business presentation.” Thankfully, his brother-in-law didn’t make it to the towers after becoming trapped in the subway tunnel. “We were all made acutely aware of the fact that thousands of people perished in the collapse of the towers. Many were forced to choose their death between a free-fall crash to the surface of the Earth versus a fiery burn. Yes, America was indeed under attack.”

He continued to watch the coverage in the days and

weeks that followed. In DP 13 of that year, he took his regularly scheduled trip back to New York, but there was nothing ordinary about this homecoming.

After making arrangements with some of his family members in law enforcement on the East Coast, Neglia suited up to support the cleanup efforts by helping to clear debris that was created by the collapse of the towers.

“The cleanup involved a massive deployment of heavy construction equipment dedicated to the site,” says Neglia, who supported the efforts of the hand-sifting operation which brought debris from Ground Zero to Staten Island, where it was sorted. “Truckload after truckload of twisted, charred, burnt and melted remains were slowly and continuously loaded onto trucks and removed from the site. The trucks would then transport their loads to barges on the East River that would move the ‘building soup’ over to a landfill on Staten Island. This is an area of New York that is much like the vast, vacant land in the foothills above Los Angeles. Heavy construction equipment moved the debris off the barges and to the Staten Island landfill. Once at the refuse site, the debris was funneled through city trash-sifting equipment. Most of the items of evidentiary value were identified during the process. However, the sifting process was further refined to a hand search of the debris.”

Neglia adds, “I stood alongside the most fatigued partners I had ever encountered and proudly did my share of raking.”

While members of the LAPD family were lending a hand in the East, a group of officers in Los Angeles wanted to lend a different kind of moral support to officers in New York who had lost so much and suffered such a tremendous loss.

Less than a month after 9/11, Southeast Area Division Sgts. Jeff Hamilton and Ted Mallet contacted the New York Port Authority and the New York Police Department and invited them to select two officers from the Port Authority and two from NYPD to be their honored guests.



A small memorial to those who died on 9/11

“Southeast Area provided airfare, hotel accommodations and basically an all-expenses-paid trip to L.A. to be our guests,” says Hamilton, who now works at Harbor Area.

“During the week of their visit, Southeast Area was having its formal divisional inspection, and the officers joined the inspection as honored guests. This was a day many Southeast Area officers will never forget because of the stories these honored officers shared and the brotherhood we felt that day,” Hamilton says, adding that members of the public also attended the inspection. “As it concluded, there was not a dry eye in the house during the singing of ‘America the Beautiful.’”

After the inspection, Southeast Area was contacted by officers from Robbery-Homicide, Harbor and Hollywood divisions and some LAPPL directors, who, at their own personal expense, took the four New York officers to various Southland attractions. In addition, Metro Division presented the officers with a check for the NYPD Widows’ Fund.

As we look back on that dark day in American history, we must never forget those who were taken. “It’s sometimes a bit disheartening to see how quickly our society can forget the realities of such a short time ago,” says Neglia.

Do you have personal stories or reflections about 9/11 that you’d like to share? Go to [LAPD.com/blog](http://LAPD.com/blog) and tell us your story. ❖