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U.S. Coast Guard Oral History Program

Attack on America: September 11, 2001 and the U.S. Coast Guard

U.S. COAST GUARD ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
Operation Noble Eagle Documentation Project

Interviewee: Ellen Voorhees, U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary

Materials Officer, Staff Officer Secretary, Division Seven



Interviewer: PAC Peter Capelotti, USCGR
Date of Interview: 19 February 2002

Place: Atlantic Strike Team, Fort Dix, New Jersey

Q: Ms. Voorhees, could you tell me your full name and your rank, and time of service in the Auxiliary?

Ms. Voorhees: My name is Ellen Voorhees. My rank is Staff Officer Secretary with Division Seven of the Coast Guard Auxiliary. I'm also Materials Officer for my flotilla and I've been with the Auxiliary since April of '99.

Q: And you work here with the Atlantic Strike Team on a regular basis?

Ms. Voorhees: I work one day a week and my day is Tuesday. I'm a watchstander and I began in August of 2001.

Q: You began working as a watchstander on Tuesdays in August of 2001?

Ms. Voorhees: As watchstander, on Tuesdays, yes.

Q: So you had one or two or three Tuesdays before "the" Tuesday?

Ms. Voorhees: I think that was about my fourth Tuesday.

Q: Okay, so you just happened to be here on Tuesday 9/11.

Ms. Voorhees: That's correct.

Q: Tell me, if you can remember, is there anything you remember about that morning before where it started to filter in?

Ms. Voorhees: No, it was just an average morning. I was still learning. In fact I still am learning. It was early in the morning. I had taken a few phone calls and was at the desk, and we had a training course going on in this room. We had members from the Pacific and the Gulf Strike Teams, as well as ours, and someone came in and said that a plane had gone into the World Trade Center, and of course, my goodness, what an accident to happen. It happened a couple of times of before. Not the Trade Center, but planes going into buildings in New York.

Q: Was there a sense that this was just an accident at that point I guess?

Ms. Voorhees: Initially I think. But then people said, well it couldn't be an accident, because with all the technology today.

Q: Right.

Ms Voorhees: But it could be.

Q: Did you go somewhere to see this on television?

Ms. Voorhees: I went into the conference room.

Q: Which is?

Ms. Voorhees: Just across the hallway. There was a television on there and they put a television on in here as well; in this classroom. I kind of observed it and then went back to the desk.

Q: Oh, so you went back to the desk before the second plane hit?

Ms. Voorhees: Before the second plane, and then the report came in that the second plane had hit. Of course then I guess we all realized that it wasn't just an accident. It was rather terrifying. At least it was to me, the thought of what might have happened.

Q: Do you remember what your . . . I mean you haven't been here a month. It must have been slightly overwhelming of what the scene was like then. Were people shouting orders about what was going to happen or where they were going to be going, or was it more deliberative?

Ms. Voorhees: It was very controlled. I mean I was amazed at how they came together. I mean we had, as I said, we had people from other parts of the country here for training and they were ready to go to work. I was at the desk and the next thing I know I was taken away from the desk. I guess because I wasn't that knowledgeable with calling in and everybody activating people. So they put me to work in the back in the supply room and I was just putting together clothing for those that needed clothing; that didn't have the proper gear with them, and then I also worked on putting case files together.

Q: I guess there was no time . . . let me ask this. How long did people allow themselves to watch this unfolding event before they sort of snapped to and said that they were going to be there and probably respond to this?

Ms. Voorhees: I don't know the actual timeframe, but I noted that the class went on for a while and then I think the curiosity and the concern . . . finally they cancelled the class and people just waited to be activated and help where they could. Then about two o'clock in the afternoon I was relieved of duty and told to go home because the base had been closed down.

Q: Okay.

Ms Voorhees: I said I would stay if they wanted me to, but they did prefer that I leave. I guess being a civilian it was better that I wasn't there.

Q: When did you come back again?

Ms. Voorhees: I didn't come back until the following week because the base, in fact had been closed down. But I came in and I spent two days here, and it was a lot different then because everyone was gone. It was so quiet.

Q: Were you following the progress of the team here as you were following the event in general?

Ms. Voorhees: Yes. Of course coming in every Tuesday I would see who was where and at what site, but I didn't have too much knowledge of what was going on. I mean because I was just new at the game.

Q: In the days and weeks that followed were there reports; news reports and so forth, where you could see what was going on, or follow the progress of the Strike Team as they were doing what they were doing?

Ms. Voorhees: Well I watched the news constantly and they didn't say too much about the Strike Team. I guess they stay undercover and were put behind the scenes.

Q: That's the impression I get, yes.

Ms. Voorhees: But every once in a while I'd see something and I'd say, oh, I work with them. I know the people. But I was impressed at how quickly the people became mobilized.

Q: What was your sense of how this might affect the country?

Ms. Voorhees: I was frightened. I was a little girl when Pearl Harbor happened and I don't recall it too much, but I know how frightened everyone was. I was concerned. I have family; children and grandchildren. It's just not knowing what the extent of this would be or where there might be another attack.

Q: Right.

Ms. Voorhees: I was frightened, but I thought, there's nothing we could do about it. We just have to accept it and try to fight it.

Q: Was it some reassurance that you were contributing at least by being here and helping out?

Ms. Voorhees: I felt so, yeah. I was able to do some part in helping out, even if just relieving people here.

Q: What other kinds of things have you done in the Auxiliary before you came here?

Ms. Voorhees: I've done some instructing. I'm a vessel examiner.

Q: Oh yeah? Where do you . . . ?

Ms. Voorhees: I'm with the Forked River Flotilla in New Jersey, and as I said before, Division Seven. In fact, one of my highlights was I . . . another woman in my flotilla and I were on patrol for the OpSail 2000.

Q: Oh, yes.

Ms. Voorhees: We were on patrol in Philadelphia. It was nice.

Q: Inspecting the tall boats.

Ms. Voorhees: Yes, keeping them in control.

Q: Is there anything that you can recall or share about the Anthrax response? Was that considered a part of the same thing; the same attacks?

Ms. Voorhees: It was. I really hadn't thought much about that until the post office in Hamilton Township was affected, because I used to live in Trenton.

Q: Is that right? So you know where that post office is?

Ms. Voorhees: Well I lived just a few miles from that post office. In fact that's the one I used to go to all the time. I was concerned about people that I knew in the area and it was sort of a sense of unknown.

Q: If there's anything that you could think of to say to someone who might be in your position in the future; new on the job, when something like this happens, what would it be?

Ms. Voorhees: Don't panic. Keep your head on your shoulders. Observe what's going on and help out where you can.

Q: Great. Well thank you very much. This is wonderful.

Ms. Voorhees: Well thank you.

Q: One last question. What is your sense, in that regard, about having this with you each day in terms of what your view of how this Strike Team works, because they seem, just from the outside, to be more or less constantly at work at one thing or another? This event was obviously bigger than most, if not all of them. What's your overall impression of this unit?

Ms. Voorhees: I think they're very, very professional, well prepared and always being prepared; ready. It sounds like a boy scout; always prepared. I didn't mean it to sound that way. But they go to training or they're working on equipment to make sure it's in top shape. So I think they're just ready when an incident happens; that they're going to be able to respond to it.

Q: So your sense of this unit is that if something happens they're as ready as they can be?

Ms. Voorhees: I have the utmost confidence in them. I really do.

Q: Great. Well thank you very much

END OF INTERVIEW

