



A Firefighter's Story

Grades 9-12

9/11 Lesson Plans

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A Firefighter's Story

Unit IV- 9/11: A Contemporary Case Study

Grade Level Range: 9-12

Time: 45-60 minutes

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As you prepare to teach this lesson, be sensitive to the topic and how it may affect students, at any age. Even if a student was very young or not born yet, they may know about the events of the day from their families.

1. Ask if any students or their family members know people who were directly or indirectly affected by the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.
2. Give students the option of observing or not participating at all, if they wish.
3. Allow students to talk about their personal connection to 9/11 if they want to.
4. Indicate to the entire class that talking about 9/11 and thinking about the events of that day may cause people to experience different kinds of emotions. This is not unusual.
5. Encourage students to tell their families about the lesson.
6. Remember to be aware of your own reactions or thoughts.

Objective

At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able to:

1. Examine the events of 9/11 through the eyes of a firefighter, police officer or other uniformed individuals or civilians.
2. Analyze other first responder accounts of the events of 9/11 and determine if these were acts of heroism or people 'doing their job.'

Key Terms

- hero
- "the pile"
- "the city"

Materials

Story interview of Long Branch, New Jersey firefighter, Thomas H. McGlennon, III

After Tragedy, a Tribute to Recovery from New York Times

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/09/books/09keeg.html?scp=1&sq=after%20tragedy,%20a%20tribute%20to%20recovery&st=cse>

102 Minutes from New York Times

<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/05/26/nyregion/102-minutes-last-words-at-the-trade-center-fighting-to-live-as-the-towers-die.html?pagewanted=all>

Activities/Procedures

- A. The teacher should introduce the topic of 9/11 to the class.
- B. Assign students A Firefighter's Story: September 11-12, 2001 as a class or homework assignment or have students identify other "heroes" uniformed or civilian persons.
- C. Review the critical thinking questions with students. Discuss any insights the students express.
- D. Students may research other stories by first responders and share their findings with the class.
- E. Students should be asked to define 'hero'. Then, present the definition from a dictionary.
- F. Class Discussion Question on other first responders- Are people like Tom McGlennon heroes or were they just doing their jobs?

Evidence for Understanding

Class discussions on stories of other first responders and their hero status:

- Are people like Tom McGlennon heroes or were they just doing their jobs?
- Are first responders 'heroic' on days such as 9/11 or every day?
- Did you notice common elements in the actions of firefighters, NYC police officers, Port Authority officers, soldiers and civilians on 9/11 and immediately afterward?
- Define hero in your own words.

Extension Activities: Taking Action and Giving Service

1. Read or view more stories about other firemen on 9/11:

The documentary 9/11: The Filmmakers' Commemorative Edition, is a film shot by two brothers, Jules and Gedeon Naudet;
<http://dvd.ign.com/articles/369/369671p1.html>

Washington Post, The brave who battled fire at the Pentagon;
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/2008/jun/22/the-brave-who-battled-fire-at-the-pentagon/>

ABC News Report, 9/11 First Responders Gravely Ill;
<http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/story?id=2409716&page=1>

Time Magazine, 9/11: Still Killing, slideshow;
http://www.time.com/time/photoessays/2006/first_responders/

2. Examine the list of victims who were killed on 9/11,
<http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2001/memorial/lists/by-name/index.html>

Statistics about the impact of 9/11 on people and New York City one year later,
<http://nymag.com/news/articles/wtc/1year/numbers.htm>

3. Students can contact their local fire house to volunteer – make a meal, groceries, etc?

- Many townships have volunteer ambulance corps, find out how to become involved.
- Participate in a fundraising drive to raise funds for community emergency services.

4. Read about H.E.A.R.T., the organization created by Bill Keegan <http://www.heart911.org>

Closure, by retired Lt. Bill Keegan is a comprehensive report on his experience at the 'pile' as the night supervisor for the PAPD. Teachers should note that it goes into some detail about the recovery of human remains, which was the main goal of the PAPD.

Acknowledgments

This lesson plan was provided by The 4 Action Initiative, a joint project of Families of September 11, the New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education and Liberty Science Center. The 4 Action Initiative curriculum includes seven units of lessons in multiple subject areas for grades K-12. In September 2010, the lesson plans will be released to New Jersey educators through the New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education. The 4 Action Initiative will make the entire curriculum nationwide. For tips on how to approach the teaching of sensitive subjects, please visit us at <https://sites.google.com/site/the4actioninitiative/>.

A Firefighter's Story: September 11-12, 2001

By Jill McCracken

"What?" said Tom McGlennon as he listened with the phone to his ear, disbelief ringing from the syllable he'd uttered, his face stricken as he considered what he had just been told.

"A plane hit the World Trade Center? You got to be kidding me?"

Tom quickly ran up the narrow staircase at the West End Firehouse in Long Branch. Three generations of his family had served the City of Long Branch in that firehouse; Thomas H. McGlennon, Sr. had joined the department back in 1925; his son, Thomas H. McGlennon, Jr. in 1959, and now, on September 11, 2001, Thomas H. McGlennon, III was on duty.

He reached for the TV, flipping it on. Early reports indicated erroneously that a small twin-engine plane had flown into the North Tower. In the course of a few minutes, the phone rang over and over, while several firefighters, all off-duty, joined him at the firehouse. They knew the scanner at West End could pick up New York City emergency frequencies. Occasionally, on a slow evening, it was customary for the firemen to listen to what was happening in The City, just 45 miles away. At West End, they'd be able to hear what was going on.

Sitting around the scanner, they were transfixed, listening to what the companies, the fire units, were doing in Manhattan and Brooklyn.

Tom recalled these moments, "Looking at the up-close pictures on the news, we could tell that something larger than a Piper (small plane) had hit the Trade Center. We thought it might have been a C-130, one of those big military cargo planes that lost stabilization or something, and nose-dived down. But it definitely wasn't a small plane."

By now, more firemen had joined the group, huddling around the scanner, listening to New York City firemen.

Within minutes, the second tower, the South Tower, was hit by United Airlines Flight 175.

"The second one hit--all of the media were there, and caught it. http://web03.bestplaces.net/city/LongBranch_NJ.gif

We knew right off the bat what was going on- it was a full airliner that hit the South Tower. And now the fire departments just went crazy" said Tom.

Any doubts about the origins of the disaster were banished; New York City was under attack.

"We're watching and listening. We know the protocols of what a normal fire department would do. Whether a building is five stories tall or one hundred stories, there is protocol that is followed," explained Tom McGlennon.

"Now, firemen are going to be assigned to go up, check the floors for injured or trapped people, and evacuate them. There are others whose duty is to head to the fire floor to begin putting the fire out. Given the structure of the building, they weren't necessarily worried about collapse. That's why so many firemen were put into the building."

Hit first, the North Tower was struck by American Airline Flight 11 between the 92-98th floors. The South Tower had been hit by the second plane between the 78-84th floors. Because it was hit at a lower level than the North Tower, the South Tower would collapse first, at 9:59 am. Its jagged gashes and burning aviation fuel compromised its ability to carry the greater weight load, causing greater stress and a quicker collapse.

Tom paused recalling the moment when the South Tower collapsed.

"There were seven of us by now, the off-duty guys all gathering around. When we saw the first collapse, we knew. We'd hear Manhattan on the scanner, we knew where they were. The tower came down, and all you hear is:

'Manhattan to Field Command'

'Manhattan to Command Post'

'Manhattan to Chief Ganci'

Manhattan to this, Manhattan to that....and you aren't hearing any response."

The eerie silence lasted an eternity. Listening intently, Tom heard them slowly starting to come back on line.

"There were 'maydays' from all over the place. You hear guys saying 'I'm trapped...My crew is trapped...This is ladder 217, we're trapped'. You're hearing all this stuff, all these maydays...and we're just thinking, oh my God, what is going on?"

In Manhattan, the FDNY had established an incident command post in the lobby of the North Tower. However, due to falling debris and safety concerns, it was moved to a spot located at West Street and Vesey Street, near the North Tower. After the second collapse, when the North Tower came down, it took out this command post.

Tom paused as he recounted his memories of those moments- the second collapse and the silent radio. "There was nothing. It wiped out the entire staff of the FDNY. There was absolutely no communication with anybody for a full four or five minutes. You've got all the Manhattan dispatchers calling to anyone in Special Operations and no one answered. There is no officer who has radio communications; there is no one there who had communications, no one."

After five minutes of dispatchers desperately trying to contact anyone, one Battalion Chief in Brooklyn was the only one on the Manhattan frequency who was able to say 'I'm in route'. The rest were either running from the collapse or they were dead. Most had, in fact, been killed in the second collapse.

It would later be learned that Peter J. Ganci, Jr., chief of the New York City Fire Department, was the highest ranking fire official to die on September 11, 2001.

Tom had several good friends on the job in New York City. One of them, Mike Cioffi, who was off-duty on September 11, 2001, telephoned to tell Tom he was going in. In due course, four or five of the off-duty firemen nodded grimly, and headed to New York City, gear in hand. They were going in too.

Tom explained, "We just felt compelled to 'do' something. There were so many guys who just had the same mind set. Minutes after the building collapsed there were people showing up, calling on the phone. We just had to do something; that's why we went up there. We just had to."

Heading to the 'Pile'

Tom McGlennon finished his 24-hour shift in West End Firehouse. Then, together with 15 other Long Branch firefighters, grabbed their gear and headed toward the ferry. The 'Waterway Taxi' was the only viable way into New York City from New Jersey at the time. The ferry was being used for conveying supplies to the World Trade Center site as well as evacuating people who were injured from southern Manhattan.

Before leaving the dock, Tom and his brother firemen helped to load a big shipment of water and supplies on the ferry. It would be used by the first responders, who were already at work at the pile of rubble that once was the World Trade Center complex.

They could already see the thick dust that rose over the city. Normally, this ferry docks at South Street, however, since Battery Park was closer, only about 3 or 4 blocks from the World Trade Center site, it was heading there.

"We tied up and took off I don't know how many cases of water and supplies. And then we started walking toward the Trade Center."

Not certain what they faced, Tom and his men slipped into professional-mode, grimly bracing for what was coming. As they got closer, he noticed tents were set up for rehab, for the firemen and police.

As they reached the massive, smoking, burning pile of rubble, the ruins of the WTC, Tom quickly found a New York City Division Chief.

Tom explained, "I said that we're 16 guys on the job from New Jersey. We have our own radios, frequency, and cell phones; and I handed him the list of our cell numbers." The chief accepted their offer of help.

"Do you have any idea where you want us?" Tom asked him.

He said, "Come through here."

The Long Branch firemen were led over to One World Financial Center, a big building across the street from where the Twin Towers had stood.

"One World Financial's windows had been blown out...and I think there was a gym on the first floor. You just couldn't get in to the Pile (the large debris field where the WTC once stood) any other way. So, we had to pass through a building and exit through broken windows to get to the site" Tom said shaking his head; it was still unbelievable.

The FDNY Division Chief split the 16 firemen into two groups of eight.

Tom explained that the two groups "literally worked different sides of the Pile, maybe 100 feet apart from each other on the rubble. We were on top of where the Marriott Hotel (at WTC 3) had been."

"At that point we went to work. We had our masks, just surgical masks, to filter the air because it was really bad. What was amazing was the paper. Only paper; no big items, none. You'd think in huge buildings like that, with thousands of computers, desks, chairs...you'd think you'd find a hard drive. But, no, there was nothing. Pieces of concrete, pieces of metal, yes; but nothing else but paper and dust. It was all just pulverized into the dust."

When asked what was going through his mind, seeing all this devastation, knowing it was a terrorist attack, and how he managed to focus, Tom replied in a serious tone, "Standing there working 'The Pile' was no different from arriving at a fire here. You're focused where you are, and on what you are doing. There was no jerking around, no discussion...we had a job to do. So we did it. We really didn't talk about what was going on and what we were doing until we were on the boat going home. Even then, it was very somber."

Hand-over Hand

Immediately after the towers fell, thousands of firefighters, police officers, search-and-rescue dogs and their handlers, construction workers, and volunteers headed to Ground Zero to look for survivors. Time was of the essence. It was not

known how many people were trapped alive under the rubble. Firefighters and other rescue workers had to search with care through the unstable wreckage for “voids”, air pockets where they might find people who hadn't escaped from the collapsing buildings. To be cautious, no heavy equipment was utilized in the first days of searching.

Additionally, huge fires burned in the middle of the pile, the heat intense, and the smoke thick and choking. They would continue to burn for months. Jagged, sharp pieces of iron and steel were extended beyond where the eye could see. The danger of stepping and falling 30 or 40 feet into a void was real. It was so dangerous that many first responders wrote their names and phone numbers on their forearms, in case they fell or were crushed. In May 2002, the cleanup officially ended. More than 108,000 truckloads -- 1.8 million tons -- of rubble were taken to a Staten Island landfill by the workers.

Tom described what it was like working the Pile:

“It was all just manual labor, moving metal, moving it to a place that was cleared, hand-to-hand. For example, people in the front were digging out a high beam, which was a fairly heavy piece of steel. They'd pass it to the next guy, and so on down the line. When those in front got tired, they'd go to the back of the line, with everyone else moving up. It was pretty effective.”

The scene remained a flurry of activity with adrenaline pumping. The sounds of helicopters, construction equipment and portable generators filled the air. Working a dozen hours or longer under these conditions, hoping to find someone alive, with the rescue window closing every second required tremendous determination and grit. Yet, the most difficult moment came about so simply, as Tom recalled.

“When you are on a pile of rubble, there aren't too many things that are soft; it's all metal and concrete. We're walking through this area, and my foot went down. And then my buddy's foot went down, and I said 'What's that?' We moved a few things and dug down a bit, and saw the Members Only jacket. We'd found a body.”

In a more reverent voice, Tom continued, “When that happened, everything stopped on the Pile. You call the people over. And there is a moment of silence for the person. The EMT people came over, and FDNY'd dig out around it, and escort it out by bucket brigade-style. It had to be this way because it was so difficult to walk off the Pile. People were in line, and hand-over-hand, we handed over the body to those who took it to the morgue.”

Frightening moments came when word came that the Deutsche Bank, which had been damaged after being blasted by the avalanche of debris, ash, and dust that spread to engulf it from the WTC, might collapse.

Given the order to evacuate, Tom recalled “that it was pretty surreal. Here we were, the next day, and the signal came to evacuate immediately! And it passes down to everybody because they were afraid the bank's going to collapse. So, everything that they did yesterday? -- We're doing today! And, we went right back out through One World Financial's broken window and into Battery Park. We enter buildings or emergency incidents knowing full well the risks.” said Tom.

Tom and the other Long Branch firefighters worked “the Pile” for approximately 12 hours with a break or two in between. During this time, the other group of eight Long Branch firemen discovered the body of a woman with nail polish. The dignified moment of silence occurred, as it would occur again and again as the days turned into weeks and then months.

Going home

After 12 hours, coming off a 24-hour shift the previous day, the LBFD members decided to head home. This led to one of the most surprising moments of the day at the site where the Twin Towers once stood.

"We're walking to South Street to catch the ferry back; it's a few blocks on the other side of the island. We turned the corner and right there in front of us is the front landing gear of one of the planes. Nothing was cordoned off, no security, no caution tape...plane parts were just there. They just landed there. Come around a corner making a right...and there it was- unbelievable. And, no one had any pictures left in our camera. Remember, this is before cameras in our cell phones. We just stood there, scratching our heads, saying "Can you believe this?"

"Now, this wasn't the next block over, this was three or four full blocks away from the WTC. And here was the landing gear. We were wondering if we should report it. Why wasn't this carted out and tagged already? But we realized that we couldn't be the first one's to see this, someone had to have reported it already, so we just kept on walking."

Later, the landing gear was shown to be part of American Airline Flight 11.

The ferry ride home proved reflective, as the firemen let themselves think about what they'd seen and done.

Tom summed it up simply, "I hope that we contributed."

On the third day, ten more firefighters from Long Branch made the journey to the Pile. With security improving at Ground Zero, New York City officials stopped outside assistance the next day.

It would be learned that 343 FDNY firefighters and paramedics who responded to the attacks on September 11, 2001 lost their lives that day, and countless others were injured.

Tom McGlennon lost two of his good friends in the FDNY that day; Andrew Fredericks from Squad 18 and Raymond Downey, Battalion Chief Special Operations. He attended their funerals among the many he would attend.

Critical Thinking Questions for A Firefighter's Story

1. Why do you think the firemen flock to West End firehouse, Long Branch, N.J. on September 11, 2001?
2. Why did Tom McGlennon and the other 15 firemen decide they had to go to NYC? Explain.
3. React to Tom McGlennon's description of the scanner traffic as the South and North Towers collapsed.
4. What was the Pile? How did they work to clear sections in their search for survivors?
5. What happened when a victim was discovered in the rubble?
6. What discovery surprised the firemen on their way back to the ferry at South Street?