



Self-Sacrifice in a Firehouse on 9/11

Handout A: Narrative

BACKGROUND

In 1973, the World Trade Center (WTC) opened. Its twin towers reached over 1,300 feet in the air in the heart of the Wall Street financial district.

On the morning of September 11, 2001, nineteen members of al Qaeda boarded four jetliners in Boston (American 11 and United 175), Washington, D.C. (American 77), and Newark (United 93). After passing through security, the terrorists boarded the respective planes and took their seats near the front of the planes. Upon reaching cruising altitude, they used mace, knives, and box cutters to force their way into the cockpits where they killed the pilots and took control of the aircraft. They proceeded to crash Flight 11 into the north tower of the World Trade Center in New York at 8:46 a.m. and Flight 175 into the south tower at 9:03 a.m., instantly killing everyone on board the planes and hundreds of people in the buildings.

The terrorists who hijacked Flight 77 turned the airplane around and purposefully flew the plane into the Pentagon at 9:37 a.m. Finally, Flight 93 was hijacked and headed back towards Washington, D.C. Passengers used phones to call loved ones and discovered that other planes were being crashed into national landmarks. There were only 33 passengers on board Flight 93, but they heroically decided to sacrifice themselves by rushing the cockpit and assaulting the terrorists to take back the flight and prevent a further mass killing.

At 10:02 a.m., the plane was only 20 minutes from Washington, D.C. Just as the passengers were about to take control of the aircraft, it is believed that the terrorists piloting the flight chose to forcibly crash the plane. It exploded into the ground in an empty field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania at 580 miles per hour. While all this was happening, members of the American military, firefighters, police officers, and medical personnel were dispatched in all these locations to save every life possible regardless of the danger.

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At 8:00 a.m., Tuesday, September 11, 2001, the Engine 40, Ladder 35 firehouse located on Sixty-Sixth and Amsterdam Streets in the Upper West Side of Manhattan was busy with the morning's shift change. The new shift of firefighters was already arriving, chatting with a few of the guys having their coffee on the sidewalk under the beautiful azure sky. The crew from the previous twenty-four hours was wrapping up their various chores.

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Kevin Shea enjoyed making fresh pots of morning coffee for the others, and was lingering a bit after he was relieved from his shift. Chris Lynch, on the other hand, was a bit more eager to get home and rushed out to catch a train at Penn Station. Twenty-eight-year veteran Captain Frank Callahan was the senior officer that morning and provided leadership for the rest of the men.

When the first plane hit the north tower of the World Trade Center at 8:46 a.m., all of the firefighters quickly gathered around the station television to watch the coverage. After the second plane hit the south tower at 9:03 a.m., they put on their gear and departed the firehouse at 9:08 a.m. Fireman Vincent Morello was supposed to go off duty, but demanded to join the team. The captain refused, but Morello forced his way onto the engine as it was a man short.

Thirteen 40/35 firefighters in two rigs raced for the World Trade Center with the purpose of doing everything they could to save the lives of anyone in and around the towers. Captain Callahan called his wife before they left and articulated the feelings of all the firemen, stating, "It's really, really bad down there. We've just gotten the ticket [the call] and we're on our way."

As the twin towers came into view, the men of 40/35 noted the enormous gaping holes in the skyscrapers and the incredible amount of smoke and flame pouring out of the buildings from the burning jet fuel. Their ride was unusually quiet as they recognized the danger they faced. As they approached the buildings, they saw the falling debris raining down from above. They also witnessed the horror of trapped people jumping from the burning buildings and hitting the ground. Vehicles had been set on fire by falling debris.

The scene on the ground once they parked their trucks and assembled their heavy equipment was one of complete chaos. There were problems with the command structure, communications, and conflicting reports and orders. The magnitude of the disaster was simply impossible to comprehend. Their instincts as firefighters kicked in, and they knew what to do even before Captain Callahan gave them orders. They went into the buildings and started climbing the stairs to help people leave the buildings safely, put out the fires, and save the lives of those trapped. With each man carrying several dozen pounds of gear on his backs, they immediately set off for the south tower of the complex.

More than a thousand first responders courageously helped thousands of people out of the towers and away to safety. They did not give much thought to their own safety as they went into the burning buildings; they were too busy meeting the needs of the people they met. On September 11, 2001, they faced the greatest test of their willingness to sacrifice themselves for the good of others.

Suddenly, at 9:59 a.m. the melting steel in the superstructure of the south tower collapsed and set off a chain reaction as the weight of the top floors pancaked onto lower floors. The massive skyscraper collapsed into a pile of rubble weighing millions of tons, presumably

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killing everyone still trapped in the building or who had been on the ground directly underneath it. Clouds of debris shot out in every direction, filling the surrounding streets.

Every firefighter from 40/35 was killed in that instant except Kevin Shea, who had been videotaping the historic event for a training video. He raced to get out of the building and was blown away from the tower by the concussive force of the blast. A news photographer found him unconscious after stumbling over him in the darkness of the thick cloud of dust. He found a weak pulse just as a Brooklyn firefighter, Richie Nogan, came across them and bent to help. Shea was covered in bruises and had a broken neck along with other indeterminate injuries.

Shea unselfishly thought only of his brothers in 40/35 and repeatedly asked whether they were alive before he slipped into unconsciousness again. Meanwhile, the off-duty firefighters of 40/35, including the five on the golf trip, raced to Ground Zero. They reached the site of the tragedy any way they could and joined the rescue efforts searching for survivors as soon as they arrived. One firefighter from the trip, Mike Kotula, made his way back to the firehouse around midnight and unselfishly appointed himself to man the phones with the unwelcome task of receiving calls from loved ones desperately looking for news. Kotula stayed at the phone without relief through Sunday morning with little sleep.

Chris Lynch found out about the attack when he reached home. He gobbled down a sandwich and headed back to the city. At Ground Zero, Lynch finally found another 40/35 firefighter helping in the effort and asked him, "Have you seen anything of our guys?" The firefighter responded softly, "They're all dead." Lynch was shocked and thought, "Are you crazy? That just can't be. Nothing like that's ever happened before. If it's bad, maybe we lose one or two men. So, it can't be, things like that don't happen. You have to be wrong. "

In an unprecedented disaster, the 40/35 firehouse had lost twelve men, who left behind wives, children, siblings, and friends. On that fateful day, the Fire Department of New York lost 343 firefighters, all of whom sacrificed themselves so that others might live.