

Corps of Engineers had its heroes, too

By Ronald Leir
Journal staff writer

Normally, the 50 men and women assigned to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Caven Point base in Jersey City busy themselves with keeping New York Harbor safe for river traffic by clearing debris and floating timbers but on Sept. 11, 2001, human safety became their paramount concern.

After seeing the Twin Towers' devastation, hastily mustered crews jumped into Corps boats and raced to the shores of Lower Manhattan to offer whatever help they could. Their vessels were pressed into service to remove civilians and, later, to transport supplies of all kinds for the rescue/recovery effort.

For several weeks, Corps personnel kept it up, working lengthy shifts every day with only a few hours to rest. And, last month, the Department of the Army awarded them Superior Civilian Service medals and certificates.

Several Corps employees interviewed recently recalled that the events of last Sept. 11 began with a training class involving the use of cranes, also attended by visiting Corps members from Philadelphia and Wilmington, N.C. At some point, people noticed smoke coming from one of the Twin Towers.

"Then we saw the second plane," deckhand William Fort, 29, of Bayonne, said. "It went right over our heads. We all

ducked down. At the last second, you could hear the (plane's) engines rev up before it hit. The minute the towers fell, we went over. We were walking through buildings that were ripped open, mangled trucks. It was all dark. Six to eight inches of dust piles. It was just like 'Escape From New York.' "

Deck Leader Dan Petrie, 39, of Weehawken, was aboard the Hatton, a Corps survey boat, which was the first ashore.

"The first thing I remember happening, as soon as we'd landed, was a New York police officer cutting through a (pier) fence and handing me a baby. And the mother wasn't on (the boat) until maybe 15 people later. Luckily, I've got three kids of my own so I handled it."

Petrie said the Hatton ended up taking 65 dust-covered people to Ellis Island before heading back to Lower Manhattan for the next in what was to become a never-ending series of round trips, up and down the harbor.

"From Lower Manhattan, out to Governor's Island, it was all smoke," Petrie said.

Liz Finn, 39, of Bayonne, captained the Corps vessel, Gelberman, that first day. When her boat — loaded with first aid kits and rescue equipment — reached the Battery seawall, the first thing Finn saw was New York cops helping people over fences to get to waiting tugs.

"We gave them a bolt-cutter so they could cut the fence," Finn said. "Everybody was cov-

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ered with dust. Everywhere there were abandoned strollers, shoes. There was this big inverted mushroom cloud that spread out to sea. Day became night. Hearing an F-14 fighter jet overhead, my heart jumped a little."

The Gelberman dropped off its passengers to the old Central Railroad Terminal at the northern end of Liberty State Park in

Jersey City, where, Finn said, the Jersey City Fire Department and area hospitals were setting up a staging area and triage center.

A bit later in the day, the Corps boats sailed up the harbor to pick up throngs of trapped civilians steadily moving to Uptown Manhattan locations.

"We'd pull up to a pier and yell, 'Hoboken!' or 'Weehawken!'" Petrie said. In the process, Petrie collected many of his Weehawken neighbors who worked in New York but never saw his wife, who worked in Midtown Manhattan.

"It turned out she saw me as she was passing us on the Horizon, one of those (private) dinner boats, going to New Jersey," Petrie said. He didn't get to see her, though, until three days later, when he got his first rest break.

"But then I came right back and worked through Sunday," he said.

While some Corps workers handled transport details, others, like material handler James Imperial, 57, of Jersey City, stayed ashore to help assemble the vast quantities of supplies arriving at Caven Point for the rescue/recovery enterprise. Everything from water to forklifts — and even booties for dogs trained to sniff out any human remains — were stockpiled for transport to Ground Zero, he said.

"I think it was inhuman to do this (destroy the World Trade Center)," Imperial said. "All those lives we lost."

But, by and large, Corps



Journal photo by Vicky Cheng

MEMBERS OF THE U.S. Army Corps of Engineers based at Caven Point in Jersey City received Superior Civilian Service Awards from the Department of the Army for their work in the aftermath of Sept. 11. From left are Capt. Rich Bulvid, Bill Fort, Patrick Racine, Ricardo Collazo, Dan Petrie, Joseph Meyers, John Wilbur and Liz Finn.

workers said they didn't have much time to ponder the consequences of the attacks. Former Bayonne resident Rich Bulvid, 55, a Vietnam veteran who captained the Corps vessel, Driftmaster, said: "My mind and intention was on getting people off the island. And on helping do whatever we could to combat this terror stuff. It was an insult to the country."

And maintenance supervisor John Wilbur, 52, of Bayonne, said he was concentrating on "just getting the job done — supplying the rescue people with whatever they needed. We worked around the clock for

weeks. It was a hell of a team effort."

As Finn observed, "Our little sleepy base, tucked away behind the Statue of Liberty, became the command center, essentially, for the North Atlantic region."

People will remember their contributions and Petrie has the proof.

"I'll be shopping in the Mill Creek Mall (in Secaucus)," he said, "and someone will tap me on the shoulder and say, 'You took me out of New York on Sept. 11.'" He smiles and goes back to work.

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