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NYC Officials Reveal New Glimpse of 9/11

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NEW YORK -- In thousands of pages of oral histories released Friday, firefighters describe in vivid, intimate detail how they rushed to save fleeing civilians from churning smoke and fire before the World Trade Center collapsed in a monstrous cloud of debris and choking dust.

The histories, recorded in the weeks after the Sept. 11 attack, offer some of the most detailed descriptions of the day's horror as seen through the eyes of firefighters who lost 343 of their brethren.

Firefighter Maureen McArdle-Schulman recalled hearing someone yell before the collapses that something was falling from the towers.

"It turned out it was people coming out, and they started coming out one after the other," she said. "We didn't know what it was at first, but then the first body hit and then we knew what it was. ... I was getting sick. I felt like I was intruding on a sacrament. They were choosing to die and I was watching them and shouldn't have been. So me and another guy turned away and looked at a wall and we could still hear them hit."

Emergency medical technician John Felidi recalled that when the south tower fell, "We heard a rumble. I heard the rumble and looked _ in the back of me all I seen was a monstrous _ I can't even describe it. A cloud. Looked like debris, dust."

The 12,000 pages of oral histories were made public along with hours of Fire Department radio transmissions, their release brought on by a lawsuit filed three years ago by The New York Times and long contested by the city.

Some of the material had been released before, and the records released Friday were unlikely to fundamentally change the understanding of the Sept. 11 attack.

Still, the histories offer a poignant catalog of firefighters' still-fresh memories of the towers' horrifying collapse. And the radio transmissions added new texture to the historical record of the day, beginning at 8:46 a.m. with an urgent but calm description of a plane crashing into the World Trade Center.

"The World Trade Center tower Number One is on fire!" one firefighter radioed.

As the depth of the crisis became clear, the voices on the radios thickened with panic.

"Send every available ambulance, everything you got to the World Trade Center," a firefighter calls from Engine 1. "Now!"

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Sept. 11 family members pored over the records Friday, some tearing up at descriptions and sounds of the attack and response. At an office building in midtown Manhattan, a half-dozen family members and two fire officers bent over laptops to examine the material.

Fire Lt. Jerry Reilly, who escaped the trade center, said the transmissions were almost too painful to hear. "I never heard any of this before _ the chaos," he said, his eyes tearing up.

The records shed some new light onto lingering questions and long-standing complaints about the response. Firefighters described faulty communications equipment and some disobeyed orders.

A group of victims' families who have become advocates for reforming building codes and emergency response had eagerly awaited the release of the records in hopes they would challenge the notion that many firefighters in the north tower heard, but chose to ignore, an evacuation message issued after the south tower collapsed.

Some city officials, including former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, have suggested some firefighters ignored the mayday call in acts of personal heroism. But the group of families has sought to lay blame on the city for providing firefighters with faulty radios.

At least one fire lieutenant, Gregg Hansson of Engine 34, said he heard the call to evacuate while he was on the 35th floor of the north tower, and saw his colleagues leaving.

"I heard a mayday given over the command channel to evacuate the building," Hansson said in his oral history. "He started to tell everyone to evacuate, and I did also. I saw all the units get up, everybody got their gear, everybody started for the staircases to evacuate."

Another firefighter who was in the north tower, Paul Bessler, recalled seeing a fellow firefighter going up the stairs as though he was "on a mission."

"Just at that point, my radio came clear as day, 'Imminent collapse. This was a terrorist attack. Evacuate.'"

"We relayed that again, hoping that the brothers would hear it above us, and I remember the look on Andy's face, like apprehension that we were going to leave this building," he continued. The north tower collapsed moments later.

The transcripts reinforce the perception that some firefighters throughout the trade center dropped protocol and simply acted according to their best instincts.

Firefighter Patrick Martin of Engine 229 said that after the south tower had collapsed and before the north tower came down, his lieutenant instructed him to go on a boat taking people to hospitals across the Hudson River.

"I told him I wasn't leaving," Martin said. "We were still missing one guy."

Timothy Burke of Engine 202 said a firefighter from another company had a cell phone, and he and others used it to call their families.

"It seemed pretty bad that everybody was willing to get on the phone and try to call their wives to say

goodbye or say whatever," he said. "Just the faces of people _ you kind of knew that some of us were going to get hurt because it was too too too much going on."

The New York Times and families of Sept. 11 victims sued the city in 2002 to release the records.

The city withheld them, claiming the release would violate firefighters' privacy and jeopardize the prosecution of Zacarias Moussaoui, who ultimately pleaded guilty to conspiring with the Sept. 11 hijackers.

In March, the state's highest court ordered the city to release the oral histories and radio transmissions but said the city could edit out potentially painful and embarrassing portions.

The Fire Department, in a statement, said it hoped the release of the records would not cause firefighters and their families additional pain.

"The Department believes that the materials being released today ... will serve to further confirm the bravery and courage of our members who responded to the World Trade Center," the statement said.

Associated Press Writer Erin McClam contributed to this report.

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