

“... it is not like us, we Americans, to be suspicious. It is our optimism that prevents us from attributing evil intentions to others; it is our need to protect the rights of everyone that leads us to think the best of people.”

— “Report From Ground Zero” by Dennis Smith

Former NY firefighter details “duty, sacrifice” of Sept. 11

By **MIKE TSICHLIS**

Special to the Post-Dispatch

Sept. 11, 2001. In the sixth-floor stairway of the north tower of the World Trade Center, Officer Dave Lim, a member of the Port Authority of New York police, is caught in the collapse with firefighters from Ladder Co. 6:

“We climb up to the sixth floor, and there the smoke and dust begins to clear, and suddenly there is a little light, and then a big light, and I realize it is the sun. We seem to be on top of the collapse, if that is possible. I say to anyone, “What are the chances we have survived this?”

Chief Picciotto is there, and he answers, “One in a billion, officer,” he says. “One in a billion.”

At times I have to pinch myself. Parts of the recollections in Dennis Smith’s “Report From Ground Zero” read like a Tom Clancy thriller. But then I remember: This really happened. While burned, bloodied and disoriented people were streaming out of the Trade Center towers before they collapsed, firefighters, police and other emergency service professionals were going up, way up. In addition to the nearly 3,000 civilians who died, 403 of these “first responders” would not return.

Smith tells the story of the most horrific terrorist attacks on America through the voices of those who fought to save others. A retired New York firefighter, Smith has made a successful career as a writer by crafting gripping narrative about the exploits of firefighters and emergency service workers. His first success came in 1973, when he wrote the best-selling “Report From Engine Company 82,” about the daily life of one of New York’s busiest firehouses.

The new book’s organization may seem somewhat choppy and occasionally repetitive, but never dull. The first half is a series of testimonials by several dozen firefighters, police officers (NYPD and Port Authority), spouses and others



TIMOTHY A. CLARY/AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE

A New York City firefighter says a prayer for fallen firefighters as he takes a ferry to Liberty Island, across the harbor from the site of the World Trade Center.

whose lives were affected by the tragedy. Lt. Mickey Kross of Engine Co. 16 led his men up into the north tower, taking them as far as the 23rd floor.

It was there that he felt the rumble of the south tower collapsing and was given orders to immediately evacuate. On his way down, he was caught in a stairway when he noticed a “loud, loud noise overhead.” As the north tower came crashing down around him, the beleaguered firefighter lost his helmet and then his mask, and his thoughts quickly went from how he might survive to how he might die.

“I remember that once I started feeling things tapping on me, I said, Well, this is it. It’s over. I was just waiting to die. I remember hoping that it would just be fast. I didn’t want to be lying there hurt, with a broken back or something . . .” Along with other trapped colleagues, Kross eventually was able to crawl out the top of the pile and was soon rescued by fellow firefighters.

Although the narrative avoids excessively graphic depictions, haunting images periodically emerge: the bodies seen at the bottom of elevator pits, people running out of the towers with their skin hanging off, and the incessant banging noise

coming from the dozens of people who jumped from the upper floors and hit the pavement at 120 mph. Battalion Chief Tom Vallebuona, who barely survived the collapse of the second tower, stood among the ruins giving his men orders until one firefighter walked over to him and said, “Chief, you’re standing on a torso.”

The second half of the book, simply titled “Aftermath,” is Smith’s daily journal of events as firefighters, police and excavation crews feverishly worked to rescue their lost comrades and civilians. Like many other retired New York firefighters, the author joined the human bucket chain at ground zero, passing along debris and occasional body parts.

But as the days pass, hope is increasingly overcome by sadness and anger. Long viewed in American culture as tough, working-class heroes, the feelings of firefighters and police spill forth, and Smith captures their emotions well. “You may think we are hard and tough,” says First Deputy Police Commissioner Joe Dunne, “but we bleed and weep just like you.”

But beyond a mere recounting of powerful scenes of destruction, death, survival and camaraderie, “Report from Ground Zero” re-

veals how the sense of family that has pervaded both the police and especially the fire service from their earliest days was reinforced after Sept. 11. Metaphors of the sacred also appear throughout the book, as when Smith refers to the gothic-style remains of the Trade Center facade as the “cathedral walls” and describes how ground zero itself became a kind of hallowed space within the congested cityscape of Lower Manhattan. Smith, a Catholic, devotes a fair amount of narrative to how he and others affected by the tragedy turned to their faith to help cope with their loss.

Finally, Smith spends time reflecting on the impact of the disaster on New York and the nation, and speculates on what might make a fitting memorial to the victims. He also expresses concern, rightly so, over the woeful lack of funding and preparedness of most urban emergency service departments in the event of another major terrorist attack.

“Report From Ground Zero” is a tribute to the men and women who lived and died by the notions of “duty and sacrifice” that define their careers.

Mike Tschlis holds a doctorate in public policy. He is working on a book about the history of firefighting in St. Louis.



“Report From Ground Zero: The Story of the Rescue Efforts at the World Trade Center”

By Dennis Smith
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