

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

Event: Richard Ohlsen, Program Specialist, Federal Emergency Management Agency

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Location: FEMA Headquarters, 26 Federal Plaza, 13th floor, New York, NY 10278

Participants - Non-Commission: Richard Ohlsen, FEMA

Participants - Commission: Jim Miller, Mark Bittinger

On March 16, 2004 Richard Ohlsen was interviewed concerning his activities and observations as an employee of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) focusing on the September 11, 2001 World Trade Center disaster rescue and recovery mission.

Ohlsen said on September 11, 2001, most of the senior managers for FEMA Region 11 (NY) were out of the office either attending conferences or on leave. When the first plane hit the World Trade Center (WTC) most of the people in the NY office felt the building shake. At first everyone believed it was caused by the workmen who were on the floor above the office and were working on asbestos removal projects. He said his mother called him and told him a plane had flown into the WTC. He said you could see the WTC from Director Mike Dabney's office. He said he was in Dabney's office and witnessed the second plane fly into WTC 2.

Ohlsen said communications almost instantly became a problem and compromised the ability of the Regional Operations Center (ROC) to operate. Dabney who was the senior FEMA manager in the office requested Ohlsen to go to the WTC 7, where New York City Office of Emergency Management (OEM) was located. WTC 7 was several blocks south of the FEMA office and could easily be walked. Since FEMA could not communicate with NY OEM it was up to Ohlsen to act as an on site liaisons with OEM. He said they later found out that the OEM center had been evacuated. Ohlsen said they could not find a radio that worked or a satellite phone for him to take with him. This delayed his departure from the office and he was just leaving when WTC 2 collapsed.

The collapse at the WTC altered Ohlsen's plans to go to OEM. He said instead he headed to 1 Police Plaza (1 PP) since he knew that at one time this was an operations

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center for the NYPD. He said he had a problem entering the area because the police did not recognize his FEMA identification as being official. He said Inspector Jay Kopstein happened by and brought him up to the control center. At the time Police Commissioner Kerick was already in the center. While most communications were out, there was a phone line available which Ohlsen used to make a collect call to FEMA headquarters in DC. He said he did not have a phone card called a GAT which would have made the call a priority. He had to connect through the normal collect call procedures even though it was a national emergency. When he did get through he learned that Region 1 (Maynard MA) had been designated as ROC for Region 2 and all request should go through Region 1.

Ohlsen advised the first problem he was able to resolve was a request to open the equipment cache maintained by the FDNY. This cache was maintained for Urban Search and Rescue (USR) team 1 which was comprised of mostly NY fire and some police personnel. Most of USR 1 had either been lost in the collapse or were on site with their NY units. Ohlsen said he could not believe that with all the needs at that time the FDNY was resisting open the cache, which contained personal protective gear and search and rescue equipment. He indicated that would not open the sealed cache because no one from the federal government had authorized the use of this gear. He said he told them to open the cache and use the equipment.

Ohlsen advised there were two problems encountered in the initial stages of the operation at the command center. First this was a police command center and not the city OEM operation. Request submitted by him were denied since they did not follow the FEMA protocol of having requests received from local authorities through the state to FEMA. He also indicated this center was not acting in concert with the NY City OEM and the requests he was processing for the most part were duplicate requests.

According to Ohlsen an even bigger problem was the response to the police control center of unauthorized military personnel who were not part of the coordinated military structure.

He said there was a two star admiral from the Naval Reserves who started issuing commands to have naval vessels patrol the harbors. There was also a Marine Reserve Colonel who ordered a Communications Battalion into the city to set up a communication system. These officers were not part of the joint military/ FEMA response plan. Ohlsen said the only authorized military present at the time was Army Reserve Colonel Maul, who was part of the joint response plan. Colonel Maul was onsite and was in contact with the designated military coordination commander Colonel Connors, who was responding from Camp Drum. The commanders who arrived and started issuing orders were confusing an already chaotic situation. Colonel Maul and Ohlsen had to ask the unauthorized military personnel to leave the command center.

The initial stages of the rescue efforts developed a number of weakness based on what Ohlsen deemed a lack of knowledge by first responder and local authorities on what FEMA has available to aid and assist local disaster efforts. He provided the example of the NY Chief of Detectives telling him not to activate the Mortuary Teams believing

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these teams consisted only of morticians. Ohlsen said when the Chief found out these teams had forensic scientist, DNA specialist, forensic dentist and doctors, in addition to other specialist NY welcomed the activation of these teams.

Another example of problems faced by FEMA was that their credentials were not recognized by many of the different police personnel providing security at the site. This made it difficult for FEMA representatives to move about the site. First, the credentials do not carry any authorizing signature or statute citation on them. Since most of the police did not recognize these id's as valid there were occasions when entry to the site was denied. He also indicated later in the recovery process FEMA issued over 2000 identifications to employees and contractors. This caused additional problems. He said FEMA still needs to address the problems of credentials.

The biggest problem faced by FEMA and the over all rescue efforts according to Ohlsen was there was no way to communicate. He said repeaters on the WTC were destroyed which disrupted radio reception and cellular and hard line services were out. He said later he found out the ESF 2 National Communications System could have addressed the problem with satellite phones and point to point contacts. He said at the time he was unaware of the capabilities of a FEMA element. Ohlsen said this highlights a problem that has not been resolved. He said some FEMA personnel do not realize what resources are available to resolve problems. If FEMA personnel do not completely understand what is available how can local and state entities make informed requests, Ohlsen asked?

Based on his experiences at the WTC rescue and recovery process, Ohlsen said he is a strong supporter of the Unified Operations Command. He said in NY the FDNY, NYPD and even OEM operations acted independently of each other. He said when the mission and goal are the same there is no reason for this duplicity of effort. He found it to be counter productive. It was his opinion all federal, state and local entities should work in coordination and support of each other. The best way to accomplish this is the development of a joint or unified command structure. This approach allows for realizing short and long term planning and goals. It allows everyone to have input and can reduce duplicate efforts.