

Former FDNY firefighter recalls 9/11 devastation

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William “Bill” Groneman spent 24 years, five months and four days on the Fire Department of the city of New York, and during that time, witnessed the day that was New York’s darkest to date: Sept. 11, 2001.

“My father was on FDNY before me. He started in 1953,” he said. “I grew up in New York in the firefighting community.”

Groneman, a former captain with Engine Company 308, Battalion 51, Division 13, was just shy of 24 years in the service when the infamous terrorist attack happened. He was off duty when the first tower was struck by an aircraft on 9/11.

“I was at Jones Beach in Long Island. I was jogging along the boardwalk and, on the horizon, I noticed what looked like a mushroom cloud,” Groneman said, adding that he didn’t at first realize what he was seeing. “I had seen it within the minute, if not the second, of the first plane hitting it.”

Then, he heard a transmission from a woman’s portable radio.

“I heard the intensity in the news reporter’s voice, and I only caught five words; ‘disaster,’ ‘Mayor Guiliani’ and ‘thousands dead.’”

Groneman ran back to his car to head back into the city.

“My mind was telling me it was probably a big disaster on the subway, but, at worst case scenario, that was hundreds dead, not thousands,” he said.

He stopped at home briefly on the way to switch vehicles and check in with his wife before driving into the city.

FDNY made a total personnel recall. All 16,000 uniformed members, including ladder, rescue and engine companies, were called in to handle the incident.

“State troopers had blocked off the highway. Officers and firefighters were holding up IDs and baseball caps with department (insignia) in order to get past,” he said. “After we got through, we flew down the highway at 90 miles per hour.”

Groneman had no idea what to expect ahead of him.

“I didn’t feel fear. There was no time. My overriding emotion was to get into the firehouse to be with the guys,” Groneman said. “As far as I knew, we were under attack, and the attack was still going on. We could be putting out fires anywhere across New York.”

Groneman was stationed in Queens.



Bill Groneman

Bill Groneman, former captain with FDNY Engine Company 308, was among the 16,000 members of the department who responded to the fall of the Twin Towers on 9/11.

“I saw the guys gathered around the house watch desk. By that time, both towers had collapsed,” he said. “I thought, ‘This is Pearl Harbor. This is just like Pearl Harbor.’”

INTO DISASTER

The firefighters recalled to duty gathered in a staging area at Cunningham Park before being bused onto Manhattan Island. Then, wearing their fire gear and with what tools they could carry, they walked a quarter of a mile to the north side of the World Trade Center.

His group never made it as far as the World Trade Center.

“All of a sudden, out of the dust and smoke, came this crowd of officers and firefighters yelling, ‘Run! Run!’ They thought building seven was about to collapse,” he said.

The group went to a command post on Broadway, where they spent the next several hours waiting to be assigned a task. Just before midnight, Groneman and the six others from his company were assigned to relieve a Brooklyn engine company.

Near the World Trade Center site, the dust and smoke was so thick, it was difficult to see anything, Groneman said, including his brother, who worked as a court clerk on Broadway and was most likely within 100 feet of him the entire day.

Three out of seven of the buildings of the World Trade Center had collapsed, including the subterranean train and subway stations and shopping center.

Not long after the assignment, Groneman heard a call for fire extinguishers at the pit, which was the fallout area on the WTC campus.

“A civilian led us to a fire extinguisher at McDonald’s and took it from there,” he said.

As the company neared the pit, “you had to watch every step you took. It was all just rubble and steel beams,” he said.

In the pit underneath the rubble, two Port Authority police officers were trapped.

“We were 100 yards from where it was. We formed a sort of bucket brigade to get supplies down there,” Groneman said. “After midnight, we finally got the guys out. We passed them up and out of the pit on stretchers. I believe they were the last two people taken out of the rubble alive.”

It was some time before he truly took in the magnitude of the wreckage, Groneman said.

“I didn’t get perspective until at night, when I went up onto the rubble. You’re just in it — you experience it in your own area.”

Those who couldn’t be saved weren’t the priority after the fall of the towers.

“I didn’t dwell much on it too much. It was more like wondering,” he said. “By the next day, there was a whole list of firefighters missing. These were guys I had worked with all my years in the department.”

Whenever a New York firefighter was found and confirmed dead, dispatchers would tap out Alarm 5 on the radio and announce the name.

“Usually, you prayed that you didn’t know the name,” Groneman said. “After 9/11, you prayed that you did, because it would be some closure.”

THE MONTHS AFTER

Things were in disarray for months, Groneman said.

“There were certain fire companies that were almost completely wiped out,” he said. “The rest of the city had to cover those stations.”

It took a year to clean up the site of the World Trade Center.

“When I first saw it, I thought there’s no way it would take less than two,” Groneman said.

The effects of the disaster are still being felt today by those who inhaled smoke and dust in the weeks following.

“There are people still dying from it today. There are 137 people they are going to add to the list of casualties who died of related illnesses,” he said.

The emotional repercussions will continue to be felt, as well. Groneman has returned to New York City for the second, fifth, 10th and 15th anniversaries of the disaster. He said the 20th may be his last time.

Retired and with his children grown, he now lives in Kerrville with his wife and has authored several books. One, “September 11: A Memoir,” he dedicated to the “brothers and sisters of FDNY. Especially the 343.”