



‘No one really knew what was going to happen’

Ranger Barry Sullivan: An interview with historian Hannah Nyala West

ANPR's oral history project preserves personal memories of shared public events. Interviewed at the Ranger Rendezvous in 2012, Barry Sullivan traced a career that began in 1976 as a seasonal ranger at Edison National Historic Site and ended in 2010 as superintendent of Gateway National Recreation Area. On Sept. 11, 2001, he was the deputy superintendent in charge of operations at Fire Island National Seashore in New York. Join us as we talk.

The plane struck the World Trade Center around a quarter to 10, if I recall correctly. We could see a slight cloud of smoke from Manhattan from where we were—it was a clear day. I had worked at Gateway and was very familiar with New York City. I knew the layouts. I knew what the park police and the park ranger staff had at Gateway and at the Statue of Liberty. I knew what their resources were. I was still in law enforcement at the time, and I knew, because I had been an incident commander in several large events, what they would be going through in those first couple hours.

We had two 41-foot oceangoing patrol boats, actually converted Coast Guard boats,

at Fire Island. I called the commander of the U.S. Park Police, who I knew pretty well, and said, “Major, I’m sure you don’t even know—no one knows—what’s going on, but I would voluntarily send our two 41-foot patrol boats down with a full ranger staff to help protect the Statue of Liberty, if you felt that they would be of benefit.” He thanked me profusely, said he wasn’t sure what they would do with them, but it would take about an hour and a half for the boats to get there. So by noon that day, I had ordered our boats with a staff of about six on each to New York City, and they were immediately sent to secure the perimeter of the Statue of Liberty.

It was a very interesting day. No one—no one really knew what was going to happen.

Several of the folks from the Long Island area where we lived lost their lives that day. Several [of my children’s] friends lost parents that day. It was a very emotional day for Long Island. In the coming weeks and months, we were sending all of our rangers in uniforms to funerals of firefighters and law enforcement. There were so many funerals out there on the same day that there literally weren’t enough uniformed people to properly pay respect.

Nyala West: How did you see things shift after 9/11?

Sullivan: Prior to that event, our protection program was focused on protecting the resource from fire or poaching. We were looking at protecting visitors from a criminal element that might come in. We never looked at the National Park Service as being the potential object of a terrorist attack. When we started to look at the resources of our nation, six of the top 10 targets in the United States were national parks. And we managers started to realize that things had to change particularly quickly.

The Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, for example... Our previous protection program there was if someone was smoking marijuana out in front, we dealt with it. We weren’t thinking about a terrorist car bomb coming into the Liberty Bell and trying to blow the Liberty Bell up. We weren’t prepared for it. So we started to look at ways to defend these iconic sites. The Statue of Liberty was shut down, for example, till we could figure out a strategy.

We started to look at Gateway National Recreation Area vis-à-vis New York City. How could we use park resources for emergency response? Floyd Bennett Field was used as a Red Cross shelter for emergency response helicopters, for instance. We started to work with the New York City Office of Emergency Management to [understand] how park assets could augment New York City in the event of any future attacks.

So 9/11 really did have a profound effect. We started to look at the protection responsibility of the Park Service in a much broader, much bigger way than we had prior to that day. 🚁

Barry T. Sullivan is retired and lives in New Jersey. Hannah Nyala West is a historian, ethnographer, and consultant for oral history and tribal oral traditions projects. She teaches at the University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point.

The oral history project is financed by the Rick Gale Memorial Fund. Many remember Rick, one of the founders of ANPR and a long-serving president, as a moving force of the organization. With his passing in 2009, ANPR established a memorial fund, which his family and the board agreed to use for the oral history project. The audio recordings and transcriptions will be archived at the Harpers Ferry Center in West Virginia.

You can continue Rick’s legacy with a tax-deductible donation. This will help pay for transcription services for these important interviews. Please visit www.anpr.org/donate.htm.