



Ground Zero, as seen from the 20th floor of 1 Liberty Plaza, is now the site of construction of the Freedom Tower, a memorial honoring those who died on 9/11 at the World Trade Center.

An Auxiliarist's Very Personal Journey...

Inside 'Ground Zero'

Not even a cold, overcast day could dampen the spirits of a U. S. Coast Guard Auxiliarist and two active-duty Coasties who set out on an adventure in New York City that none of them would ever forget.

The trio consisted of PS3 Brian Shajari, a bagpiper from USCG Marine Safety Unit Port Arthur (Texas); SN Haley Shackelford, a bass drummer assigned to USCG Sector Philadelphia; and, me, Steve Mehal, a bass drummer and member of Flotilla 7-16 D9WR (Richfield, Ohio).

This trio, all members of the U.S. Coast Guard Pipe Band Inc., was in New York to march and play in this year's St. Patrick's Day Parade.

[Ed's Note: The 60-member, non-profit pipe band is not an official part of the Coast Guard, but is recognized by the USCG as an "affiliated" organization.]

The three of us got together the day

after the parade for such Big Apple tourist activities as riding the subway and visiting key sights, such as the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island.

What we did not know, as we set out that day, was that fate – or, perhaps, something grander – had something else in store for us.

It all began as we strolled up Lower Manhattan's Church Street, when we came upon a large but empty, fenced-in area. We suddenly realized that we were standing on the hallowed sidewalks of Ground Zero.

After touring the display honoring 9/11 survivors and families of those who died in the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center (WTC), we proceeded to a public observation area. We took some pictures and, as we were turning to leave, a con-

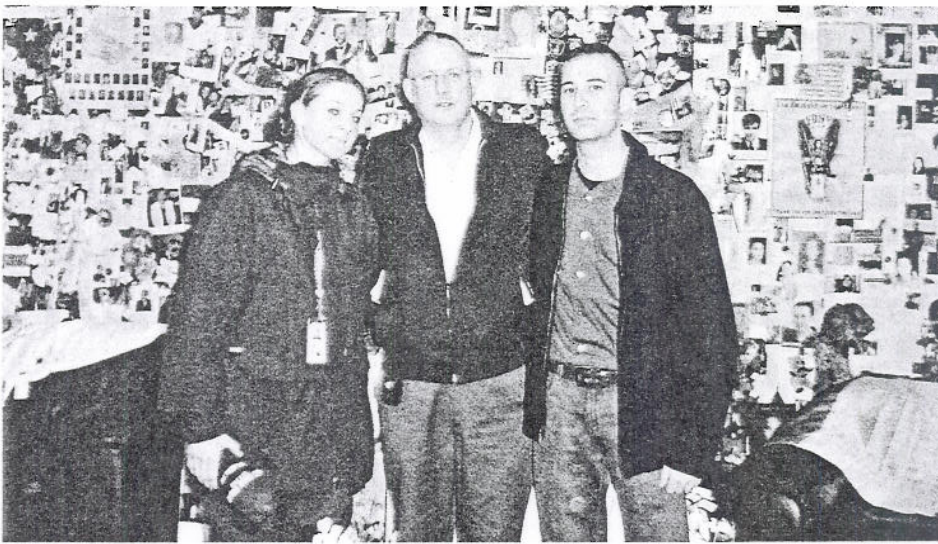
**Story & Photos by
STEVEN S. MEHAL**
SO-PA 7 D9ER

struction worker asked whether we were connected with the military.

Learning that we were, the worker asked whether we were interested in going "inside" Ground Zero for a better look from an area restricted to family members of the fallen and service men and women in uniform. Not even police or fire personnel are permitted beyond the security gate to this area.

We walked out onto a platform housing six trailers. We could walk around the platform, but not enter the trailers. They are reserved for visiting members of families with a relative who died in the attack.

The person showing us around asked if we would pay tribute to those who died in the WTC on 9/11 by presenting arms to the National Ensign flying over the trailer area.



SN Haley Shackelford, Steve Mehal, SO-PA 7 D9ER; and, PS3 Brian Shajari share the moment inside The Family Room, home to over 3,000 mementos and memories devoted to those who perished at the World Trade Center on 9/11.



Diane Horning (kneeling, center), founder of World Trade Center Families for Proper Burial, gathers in The Family Trailer at Ground Zero with SN Haley Shackelford (kneeling, left), and Bill Healy (kneeling, right); and behind them, an unidentified family friend; Lillian Tetreault; and, Auxiliarist Steve Mehal.

How could we refuse?

To have represented the Coast Guard by doing this on such hallowed ground was almost overwhelming. When we finished and started taking pictures of the site, our "guide" informed us that a family member had arrived and invited us to join her in one of the trailers. Doing so is permitted, provided the visitor is escorted by a family member.

Again, how could we say no?

It turned out that our host was none other than Diane Horning, founder of World Trade Center Families for Proper Burial. Her 26-year-old son, Matt, who worked on the WTC North Tower's 95th floor, died in the attack – one of 295 Marsh & McLennan Insurance Company employees who perished there on that day.

As she spoke to us, her eyes filled with tears. Seven years later, the pain was still as intense as the day it happened. She is a beautiful person, who spoke of her son as only a loving mother could. She asked us as many questions as we asked her.

She asked our Haley to describe her two children. I stood frozen as the mom-to-mom discussion unfolded.

Haley later told me: "I was showing Diane photos of my children when the pain from one mother to another became so real for me. We were staring at a picture of her son. Then, I looked into my kids' eyes in the photo, having been away from them for five days while on-duty, and it hit me like a ton of bricks

"All at once, I became hungry to see, touch and feel [my children] as I felt this woman before me would give anything to see, touch, feel and share just one more precious moment with her son. For me,

mother-to-mother became hero-to-hero."

There was a knock on the door and more survivor-family members entered, including Lillian Tetreault, who lost her daughter, Renée, on 9/11. Lillian was accompanied by her nephew, Bill Healy.

As we listened to the tales that made these people true American heroes, we truly felt like family.

Lillian then invited us to join them in visiting a memorial on the 20th floor of 1 Liberty Plaza, which overlooks Ground Zero. We followed intently as the din of the cranes, jackhammers and other construction equipment faded, replaced by the noise of a busy New York City street.



SN Haley Shackelford salutes the National Ensign during the pipe band trio's visit to Ground Zero.

On the building's 20th floor, we came upon a sign stating simply that we were at The Family Room. Opening the door, we saw a sight that made our hearts simply break – a large office suite packed with over 3,000 photos, flowers and letters to the 9/11-deceased.

Lillian and the others left us there to be alone with the tributes to the many loved ones. I cannot describe the feeling we got being there. There were others in that room, but we could see no one. We all felt it. It was life-changing.

We held on to each other, cried and wrote our own letters to the loved ones there. We left mementos at a photo of a Coast Guard Reservist who had died in the conflagration. It was very overwhelming, to say the least.

We made our way out to the busy street, heading back to our hotel on Staten Island. We hardly spoke a word the whole trip back. We were mesmerized by what had just happened to us. We had had the chance to go and do what few, if any, military representatives had ever have done before. It was an awesome privilege that we will never forget.

As important as they are to this country's history and its future, the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island just didn't seem all that intriguing to us at that point. They will have to wait for another visit. 🇺🇸