

Job Changed by 9/11

Three Years After, Courts Feel Impact

By REUVEN BLAU

State Court Chief Joseph Baccellieri had reached the 51st floor of the World Trade Center's North Tower on Sept. 11, 2001 when the South Tower collapsed.

"There was nobody higher than us that we knew of," he said, referring to two other Court Academy instructors and three Port Authority cops who were with him in the building's stairwell. "We knew there was a problem, but we didn't know what the problem was. The North Tower began to shake violently ... we started to make our way down."

22 Helped, 3 Died

In all, 22 court officers and supervisory staff ran to the Twin Towers from their posts in lower Manhattan and the nearby training academy to help evacuate the buildings. Captain William "Harry" Thompson and Court Officers Thomas Jurgens and Mitchell Wallace died when the towers collapsed.

In the three years since, one consequence for their surviving colleagues has been radically changed security procedures and training practices for Office of Court Administration personnel.

The state's court system now communicates regularly with various other law-enforcement groups and continues to add new instruction programs for current staff.

"The title of Court Officer since 9/11 has elevated," said Capt. Joseph Civelia. "We get daily updates from all the



JOHN McKILLOP:
'Threat's very real to us.'

other agencies, which never would have happened before."

Mr. Civelia, along with other officers and Court Officer Academy instructors, responded to the Trade Center after watching as the second terrorist-hijacked plane hit the South Tower.

'Knew It Was No Accident'

"At that point we realized that it wasn't just some accident," said Court Sgt. Pat Maiorino. "We were under attack, and we decided we needed to help."

According to Mr. Baccellieri, before the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks OCA mainly handled security matters on its own. "Prior to 9/11, I think even the rank and file in the court system kind of felt like we were in a vac-

(Continued on Page 9)

Courts Reshaped by 9/11

(Continued from Page 1)

uum, we were in this alone," he said. "And what we realized after was that we are not in this autonomously, we have a team."

Court Officers are now assigned to the city's Office of Emergency Management and the Police Department's counter-terrorism task force, Mr. Baccellieri said.

In addition, he noted that officer training now involves counter-terrorism, crowd control tactics, and gang intelligence instruction. Academy instructors also continue to stress "soft skills" such as how to properly deal with the public in a polite and professional manner.

'Rikers and a Party'

Mr. Baccellieri pointed out that when he joined OCA in 1983, the training was 10 days. "The first day was administrative, the last day was a party; one day you went to Rikers Island, and seven days you had some spattering of training," he said.

In contrast, officers in the new State Court Officer Trainee title who will be hired in November will receive an initial 10 weeks of instruction, plus additional training throughout their first two years on the job. After that time, officers who successfully complete the traineeship will be promoted to the Court Officer title.

The counter-terrorism instruction that officers have

received deals with issues such as how to respond to a bio-nuclear attacks and how to cordon off dangerous areas. Officers are also taught to identify and handle a potential suicide bomber and how to properly deal with anthrax and other bomb threats.

Training is constantly changing as new threats arise, Mr. Baccellieri said. Officers may return for additional instruction within a six-month period "because things have changed that dramatically," he noted.

'We Adapted'

"We adapt with the times," added OCA spokesman David Bookstaver. "This was not a lesson learned from afar; this is a lesson learned very close to home within the court family."

According to court instructors and other OCA officials, the recent reclassification plan to broadband the security titles has also made it easier to unify officer training.

One official said that before reclassification, officers throughout the state would receive different training depending on what courts they were assigned to.

Now all officers get the same lessons from one of the agency's 18 full-time instructors, said Mr. Baccellieri, who became Chief Instructor in November 2001.

Senior Court Officers at the Manhattan Supreme Court at 60 Centre St. last week seemed to welcome the additional training, but some maintained that the job hasn't drastically changed.

Added Stress

Court union leaders have contended that officers' additional responsibilities have made the job more difficult since the terrorist attacks.

"There has been stress for everyone since 9/11," said veteran Senior Court Officer Ron Dickerson. "I always thought there would be some element of danger in the job. But I didn't think it would be outside the courthouse."

He added, however, "When it comes time for pay raises and appointing and promoting officers, they just wait around; it's business as usual."

Court instructors said that it has been difficult to unify

the vastly modified training curriculum and to alter the attitude of veteran officers who remain skeptical of the terrorist threat.

'Believe It Won't Happen'

"I think the biggest challenge was to change the mindset that even our own officers had at one time," Mr. Baccellieri said. "A lot of people who have been on the job a long time tend to become complacent and they believe this won't happen to us."

Mr. Baccellieri pointed out that prior to Sept. 11, most people viewed courts as a safe "sanctuary or synagogue." But he has worked to make sure that officers understand that that image has since changed, he said.

"Because the backbone of a civilized society is its court system, it's the pillar of a free society," he said. "Without the court system, you have anarchy. It's a target they want to attack."

Supreme Court Officers' Association President John McKillop agreed. "We always tended to focus outward," he said. "The fact that we lost three of our own certainly brings home the threat we face. It's no longer theoretical, it's very real to us."

Unsung Heroism

Their heroic acts proved that court officers are capable of performing admirably in an extreme situation, Mr. Baccellieri said. "You always hear about firemen and the NYPD, but you don't hear about what court officers did," he said. "The funny thing is that even in our own system, there are people that don't know what people in their own job did."

Mr. Baccellieri pointed out that several Police Officers at the Trade Center confused the white-shirt court officers with police commanders, who wear a similar uniform. They were inspired seeing people they thought were their bosses helping others and running into the buildings, he said proudly. "There was a sea of white shirts," Ms. Maiorino added.

Mr. Baccellieri said he uses his personal experience on Sept. 11 to impress upon officers the importance of safety training. "These skills that we teach, this knowledge that we have, can save life," he said. "And if you think that these things can't happen, they can."

He continued, "And I don't have to say that anymore, because it did happen. No one ever would believe that two of the largest buildings on the planet would be reduced to rubble."