

REMEMBERING

TEN YEARS AGO, THREE ARMY RESERVE SOLDIERS FROM NEW YORK CITY WERE ABLE TO USE THEIR NEARLY 70 YEARS OF COMBINED MILITARY SERVICE TO OVERCOME THE TRAGIC EVENTS OF SEPT. 11, 2001.

9/11

SINCE THAT DAY, THEY ARE STILL SERVING IN NEW POSITIONS OF LEADERSHIP WHILE ANSWERING THE NATION'S CALL OF SELFLESS SERVICE.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TIMOTHY L. HALE
ARMY RESERVE COMMAND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Left to right: Command Sgt. Maj. Christopher Whitford, Maj. Thomas Sullivan and Sgt. Maj. Vincent Mannion were all directly affected by the attack on the World Trade Center. Whitford lost his brother, firefighter Mark Whitford with Engine 23 in the South Tower. Sullivan, a financial planner, was in Tower 2 when the second plane struck. He helped survivors escape from the tower before it collapsed. Mannion assisted in search and rescue efforts in the days following the attacks. All three men are in the Army Reserve and have deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan.



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION

Engine 23 lies in the debris field of the World Trade Center days after the attack. Firefighter Mark Whitford, brother of Army Reserve Command Sgt. Maj. Christopher Whitford, was inside Tower 2 when it collapsed and did not survive.

CAPT. THOMAS SULLIVAN, MASTER SGT. VINCENT MANNION AND STAFF SGT. CHRISTOPHER WHITFORD WERE UNKNOWN TO EACH OTHER, BUT THE EVENTS OF THAT DAY WOULD INTERTWINE THEIR LIVES TOGETHER.

copy rooms. Things were developing very fast. We were looking at an inferno.”

As the employees filed down the stairwell, it happened. “Somewhere around the 68th floor our building shook tremendously.

“The stairwell doors were opening up from other floors and people screaming that a second plane had hit our tower.”

When they reached the plaza level, the group was redirected to the east side basement exit due to falling debris outside.

“It was a very different picture that I had gotten just an hour and a half before that. This beautiful sky was now filled with smoke. Both buildings engulfed and the whole plaza and surrounding area looked like a war zone.”

He said by this time there were hundreds if not thousands in the streets moving away from the towers. Before they could make it to the Brooklyn Bridge and to safety, both towers collapsed.

He and the others eventually did make it across the river. But the days immediately following the attack didn’t get much better.

There were memorial services for months afterwards. “We lost 104 from our company,” said Sullivan. “Many of these same people were at our wedding, kids’ christenings and vice-versa.”

“It was mind boggling”

Mannion and his NYPD partner didn’t think much of the first radio call of a plane hitting a building. It was the second, more urgent call that got their attention.

“We heard on our police radio to ‘10-2 command’ meaning we had to get back.”

Mannion said that everyone at the station was putting on their uniforms while watching events unfold on the television.



Master Sgt. Vincent Mannion.

Sullivan, who was the aide-de-camp to the commanding general of the 77th Regional Readiness Command, was a financial planner on the 95th floor of the South Tower at the World Trade Center. Mannion, a truck master with the 773rd Transportation Company, and Whitford, who was an intelligence analyst with the 331st Military Intelligence Company, were both plainclothes detectives with the New York Police Department.

“We were looking at an inferno”

When Sullivan reported to work that day he was looking forward to sharing the news that he and his wife were expecting twins.

Sullivan said he and his boss were talking and laughing about the coming births when something caught their attention.

“At the speed and size of the plane that was coming it looked like it was heading right for us,” he said. “It impacted the north tower as best we could figure right above us.”

Sullivan and his boss started clearing the floor.

“My duties (as deputy fire warden for the floor) were to clear cubicles, bathrooms,



Maj. Thomas Sullivan.

“We saw both towers with billowing smoke coming out of them... we saw the first tower come down and we knew that our world as we knew it had pretty much changed.”

Initially, Mannion and many of his fellow officers were assigned duty to protect the tunnels, subways and train stations from further attacks around the clock. Mannion arrived at Ground Zero on the third morning after the attack.

“It was something out of a surreal horror movie. It was mind boggling to see the carnage and destruction,” he said.

“A MONARCH BUTTERFLY...FLEW DIRECTLY INTO MY FACE. I’LL NEVER FORGET IT. THAT’S WHEN I WAS CONVINCED I HAD FOUND MY BROTHER.” — COMMAND SGT. MAJOR CHRISTOPHER WHITFORD

Wanting to help, he and his fellow officers took their place in the ‘bucket brigade’ that had formed to start removing debris and looking for survivors.

“I remember seeing a female hand just lying in the rubble.

That was my first... From then on, for several months later, there wasn’t really, unfortunately, a lot of recovery.”

“I knew he went in with his men”

After coming off his night shift, Whitford, then an Army Reserve Staff Sgt., proceeded to his unit on Staten Island.

“I was having a cup of coffee with my first sergeant when my father called and said, ‘did you see what happened? A plane hit the World Trade Center’. So we turned the T.V. on right before the second plane hit the south tower. I turned to my first sergeant and said, ‘I need to go’. He understood.”

Whitford made his way down to the Staten Island ferry where he joined many firefighters and police officers. “But I was the only one wearing BDU’s. I went to the front of the boat...you could see...the fireball, the smoke, debris and bodies coming off the building.”

Remarkably, Whitford’s cell phone continued to work. He received a phone call from his father that his brother Mark, a fire truck chauffer with Engine 23, had responded.

“I just looked at that fireball and it was just clear that the buildings were not going to be able to sustain that heat for very long,” he said. “So I turned to one of the fireman standing next to me and I asked him, ‘how long before they collapse?’ He never answered me. That’s when I got real nervous and realized that this was going to be bad.”

Before the ferry reached the opposite shore, both towers had collapsed.

Army Reserve Command Sgt. Major Christopher Whitford, a New York City Police Detective, holds a picture of his brother Mark Whitford who died inside Tower 2 when it collapsed. Mark was one of six Army Reserve Soldiers killed in the attack that occurred on Sept. 11.



Whitford linked up with fellow police officers and they proceeded to the scene. Upon arrival, Whitford was faced with a stark image—his brother’s fire truck, sitting amid the debris. “I took a look inside and saw that he wasn’t in his truck. As the chauffer of the truck he didn’t have to go in but Mark wouldn’t have that.

“At that point I did link up with another off duty officer and the two of us resumed our search just trying to find somebody alive. The dust was unbelievable; you could only see an arm’s length

in front of you. Everything was just pulverized.”

Remarkably, Whitford received another cell phone call from his brother’s wife wanting to know if he had found him.

“She said, he told her on the way down to the World Trade Center, ‘If anything happens Chris will find me’.

“She said, ‘find him Chris.’ I said, ‘I will’. I promised her I would find him.”



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION

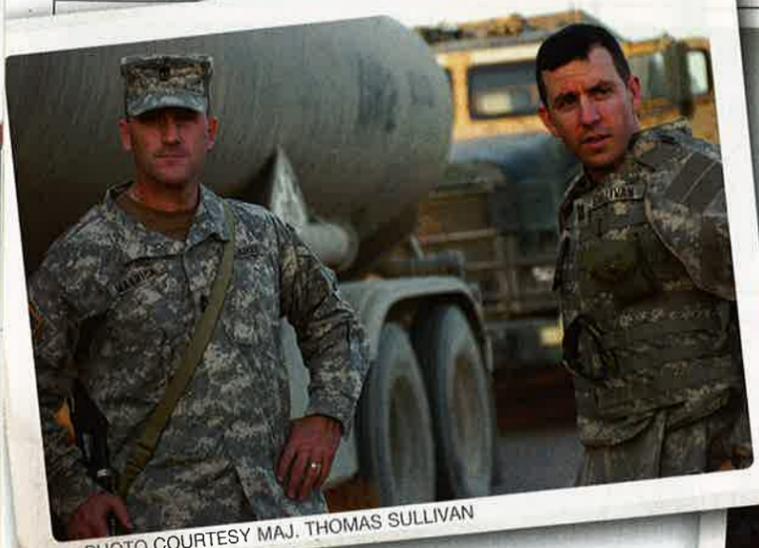


PHOTO COURTESY MAJ. THOMAS SULLIVAN

LEFT: (Left to right) Then 1st Sgt. Vincent Mannion and Cpt. Thomas Sullivan at Q-West in Iraq with the 773rd Transportation Company, an Army Reserve unit made up primarily of Soldiers from the five boroughs of New York City.

BELOW: Staff Sgt. Christopher Whitford forward deployed in support of military operations after the attack on the World Trade Center.



PHOTO COURTESY COMMAND SGT. MAJ. CHRISTOPHER WHITFORD

After breaking off the search in the evening, he went back to Staten Island and filled in the Family on the situation.

He resumed the search in the morning with a fellow NYPD officer.

“On Sept. 12, throughout the whole day we continually went around the whole site. Every firefighter we saw we turned them around. ‘Hey have you seen the guys from 23?’ It was always the same response. They either said ‘no’ or ‘I heard those guys didn’t make it.’”

Amid the dust and debris, Whitford would finally receive a sign.

“We were actually on the Church Street side. You still could only see a couple of feet in front of you at the most.

“A monarch butterfly, a big butterfly, flew directly into my face. I’ll never forget it. I thought about it for a second and I looked up and it was gone.

“That’s when I had a real pit in my heart. That’s when I was convinced I had found my brother.” He shared the story of the butterfly later that evening with his Family.

“For me, that’s one time I will admit I was definitely being selfish and I needed a little payback. I needed to be involved in the War on Terrorism.”

For Mannion, the truck master for the 773rd Transportation Company, the call came in November 2002.

“We landed in Kuwait on Thanksgiving night 2002. We were the first transportation company in theater.”

Because the unit was primarily made up of Soldiers from the five boroughs in New York City, the deployment hit close to home for them.

I HAD ONLY HOPED THAT MY INVOLVEMENT, MY SERVICE WOULD SOMEHOW BRING HONOR TO ALL THOSE THAT WE HAD LOST.”

— MAJ. THOMAS SULLIVAN

Mark Whitford’s remains were recovered from the World Trade Center on April 5, 2002. It was his 31st birthday. He is also one of six Army Reserve Soldiers killed in the attack that occurred on Sept. 11.

Christopher Whitford was serving overseas when they found his brother.

Answering the call

Whitford was the first of the trio to land in Kuwait in November 2001. After losing his brother Mark, he was more than eager to go.

Assigned to C Company, 297th Military Intelligence Battalion, he served as the unmanned aerial vehicle team NCOIC. He would serve both in Kuwait and Afghanistan during his tour.

“We had a lot of civil servants—police officers, fireman, postal workers, sanitation, bus operators, delivery truck drivers, transit authority. We all wanted to just get involved and do something,” he said.

“We had our N.Y. patch on our left shoulder with the Statue of Liberty. I told them, ‘everyone is going to look at you. You’ve got to perform. You’ve got to push. You’ve got to drive harder and faster’ and I think we did.”

His unit provided fuel for the push from Kuwait into Baghdad.

Mannion was the senior enlisted man in charge of the unit’s 92 vehicle, 209 Soldier convoy that crossed the berm at the start of Iraqi Freedom.

But their time in theater wasn’t without a little controversy.

It seemed that a senior noncommissioned officer was a little irate about the ‘graffiti’ on his Soldiers’ helmets.

“I said, ‘with all due respect this is a New York unit and these kids that have this so called graffiti on their helmet...it motivated these Soldiers, they knew a lot of people who died on that day’.

“He said, ‘well O.K.’ and left. We waited for our chance to go back into the box,” he said with a grin.

Sullivan was the last of these men to make it overseas. He was initially mobilized in January 2003 but the unit never deployed.

But, as coincidence would have it, he teamed up with Mannion in 2005-2006 as the command team with the 773rd.

“I believe we complimented each other,” Mannion said. “9/11, Family backgrounds, Irish connections.”

In February 2005, the unit was sent to a large logistical hub known as Q-West where they pushed fuel and other supplies throughout Iraq.

Sullivan said the unit was again made up from Soldiers from the five boroughs as it had been in 2002-2003.

“It was pretty well put together,” Sullivan said. “They were with the initial move in so they had the experience.”

For him, he felt it was his duty to go and serve.

“Being a New York unit and having that connection to September 11th, I had only hoped that my involvement, my service would somehow bring honor to all those that we had lost,” Sullivan said.

10 years later

All three men admitted the events of Sept. 11 had changed them.

For Sullivan, now a Major, he said it has made him “a little more serious. I think it took some of the joy out of my life. You have a life to live and Family to take care of. You have to find happiness somewhere else.”

For Mannion, now a Sgt. Major, Sept. 11 changed him, how he looks at his military job, his civilian law enforcement job and with his interactions with his Family.

“The vigilance level is never going to go where it was prior to 9/11,” he said. “It shouldn’t, it better not, it can’t and it won’t.”

“As good as the bad guys think they are, we’re just a lot better. And we’re going to maintain that.”

For Whitford, now a Command Sgt. Major, time cannot erase the memory of his brother who was lost that day. He carries a photo of Mark in his firefighter gear in his wallet next to his police badge.

“I’ve made it my mission to make sure that something like this never happens again—that we never ever get caught off guard again,” Whitford said.

“I made it my mission that there was a reason that Mark didn’t survive that day and there was a reason I did survive.”



EDITOR’S NOTE: MAJ. THOMAS SULLIVAN WAS AWARDED THE SOLDIERS MEDAL FOR HIS HEROIC ACTIONS ON THE DAY OF THE SEPT. 11 ATTACKS.



9 minutes 11 seconds

STORY AND PHOTO BY SGT. 1ST CLASS ANDY YOSHIMURA, U.S. ARMY CIVIL AFFAIRS & PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS COMMAND (AIRBORNE)

NEW YORK — The mission of Command Sgt. Maj. Michelle Fournier was simple: Fly a U.S. flag over the World Trade Center site in New York City—and then at as many forward operating bases during her Afghanistan deployment—for nine minutes and 11 seconds, in honor of those who perished in the Sept. 11 attacks.

Fournier, the command sergeant major of the 404th Civil Affairs Battalion Regional Training Center-East, said it was a task that held a deep meaning for all the participants. “The intent of taking the flag to Afghanistan was to show that we stand tall as American people here and sharing it with the American and coalition forces overseas,” said Fournier. “We attempted to fly it in as many locations as we could.”

Over the course of 16 months, more than 700 U.S. and coalition service members at 38 locations across Afghanistan participated in the ceremonial raising of the Ground Zero Flag on behalf of requesting members of the New York-New Jersey Port Authority.

One of a command sergeant major’s duties is to keep and safeguard the colors of the unit to which he or she is assigned. “It means a lot to me. Sept. 11 was a very somber day,” said Fournier. “The flag represents the strength of the American people and the strength of the coalition forces. We stand together united against the war on terrorism.”

When the 404th returned to retire the flag to its home at the WTC Ground Zero site, Soldiers and construction crews gathered for a final ceremony before Fournier turned the folded flag over to the WTC site manager. Michael Hurley, the manager of the Port Authority, called it “the most elaborate ceremony that he has seen.”

Port Authority officials are now safeguarding the flag and a collage of photos of every location that participated for its future display at a museum at the Ground Zero location. ★

TOP: Lt. Col. Teresa Wolfgang (right), Commander of the 404th Civil Affairs Battalion, hands the U.S. flag to Sgt. 1st Class Rustin Prentice in preparation to raise it for exactly 9 minutes and 11 seconds at Ground Zero in New York. The flag was flown originally at Ground Zero and was raised for the last time here on July 20, 2011, after visiting more than 30 locations throughout Afghanistan during the 404th’s deployment there.