

Delaying - Emergency Shelter

Friday, September 14, 2001

Part 1

This morning, I heard that that four thousand FBI agents, three thousand support personnel, and four hundred forensic lab technicians are “on the case.” I wonder who coordinates them and what they are not doing this week that they were doing last week.

I didn't know where I was going when I set out at 8:00 am. It was pouring. On Tuesday morning, the 11th, I realized that downtown would not be a good fit for me—too many police. On Wednesday, I brought fifty or sixty pounds of supplies for work at Ground Zero to a staging area at the Chelsea Piers. The canvas bags of respirators, tools and other equipment was more than I could safely carry on my old bike. But yesterday, along with a lot of other people, I wanted to do more, something more concrete.

I dug out my American Red Cross helmet, technically a “bump cap, as close as I had to the hard hat—required for work at Ground Zero. It was dark as I turned west and zig-zagged northward on my bike, hoping to find a way to be helpful. The rain felt more right than the brilliant blue skies of the last few days. My shiny plastic helmet, emblazoned with a crisp red cross, shed the torrents of water perfectly.

Something felt wrong as I rode downhill on West 33rd Street; my bike seemed to be disintegrating beneath me. I turned uphill on Tenth Avenue; the pedals spun but no longer propelled me. The steel frame had snapped at the bottom bracket; my trusted steed was suddenly useless. A sign of some sort? Of all the precarious moments I've spent tearing between cars and buses, it was this morning, while I was going slowly with few cars around, that the bike fell apart.

I left it locked to a No Parking sign and continued on foot toward the Javits Convention Center. A young man approached; no one else was anywhere around. He asked where he could buy a hard hat, clearly assuming I was wearing one. Surprisingly, I couldn't answer, though I

knew all the hardware stores and lumberyards in the area. “Nowhere close by,” I said, after a pause. My words were washed away by the driving rain.

Approaching the enormous dark glass convention center, I could see people in a variety of rain gear—from five-dollar yellow coats, to garbage bags and real rain suits in an assortment of colors. A few hundred people crammed together in the rain is not a normal sight—at least not in America. They all wanted to help.

Seeing there was little for me to do, I found a uniformed person and asked if he knew of a Red Cross station nearby. He didn’t. No one seemed to know much. Still hoping to learn something, I followed an exterior stairway toward a lower entrance to the late 1970s, shoebox-shaped building. Once closer to the human stockyard, the view down into the waiting crowd reminded me of a black and white photograph I had seen in a museum. In it, women with woven wicker baskets appeared to squeeze between a mass of idle men, passing out food. In today’s scene, it was apples and oranges being distributed from white plastic bags. Breakfast, perhaps. Given the early hour and the fact that no one else was arriving to join, it seemed probable that all these people had come yesterday or possibly the day before.

I wondered if a few people were called to work downtown now and then, like they are from the gatherings of undocumented construction workers who wait in parking lots, hoping that bosses in pick-up trucks will select them. Most of the people in the crowd below me wore hard hats; it appeared that they had heard or read the same reports I had stating that anyone who wanted to help needed to bring their own equipment.

A dull energy swelled from the slow-motion swarm of mostly men. The mass displayed an oddly choreographed movement, likely resulting from the occasional shifting of their weight from one leg to another. How long had they been there, waiting without even the space to sit on the wet pavement?

Having given up on this venue, I walked up a ramp back toward street level. Before reaching Eleventh Avenue, I passed a State Trooper wearing a brown uniform with a broad-brimmed hat. He was fully protected by a cheap transparent raincoat. It included a fitted clear hat cover which reminded me of the thin plastic rain bonnets women in the 1950s and 60s carried in their purses. Enthusiastically, the trooper called out, “Red Cross!” and held out his hand to shake mine, as though to thank me for my good work. It was both sweet and sad. Both of us were just symbols: me with my white hat dating back to the 1970s, him with his typical daily uniform, stationed in the rain, doing nothing.

It was not yet 9:00 am. My bulging backpack held a tool belt, a hammer, a holster, a few wrecking bars, a tarp, water, masks, gloves, and some first aid supplies. I decided to head to the Red Cross Headquarters, which I knew was just north of Lincoln Center. I've done work for the American Red Cross in the past, at the scenes of floods and hurricanes in Pennsylvania and Mississippi, and I worked in one of the four huge American resettlement camps (in the US) after the fall of Saigon in 1975. Despite my previous involvement, I had never set foot in my local chapter. Still, I guessed that someone there would know something; they'd dealt with all kinds of unexpected difficult situations before.

At 42nd Street and Tenth Avenue, I stepped out of the rain into a coffee shop. Water poured off me like a bad leak from upstairs. I ordered tea and a fried egg on a roll to go. I ate outside in the partially protected doorway of a closed video rental store while waiting for an uptown bus. Just as I finished eating, a half-full bus arrived. The driver waved me in. "No charge."

The rain had tapered by the time we reached 67th Street. I unzipped my jacket to let my official-looking Red Cross shirt show. Crisp black metal letters reading "A-R-C" were pinned near the lower pointed edge of its deep blue collar. An embroidered "Disaster Service" patch was sewn just above my heart. It had been a long time since I had worn this shirt. It fit perfectly.

Looking as official as possible, I walked up the broad outdoor steps and into the low building. The uniform worked; I got right through the guard station, even though I didn't have proper ARC identification. While talking with the strong and clearly overworked woman at the card table desk, people without prior affiliation and experience were being turned back. I was told I could attend a training session starting at noon, more than two hours away—an eternity, for my day. I asked what I could do in the meantime. She said, "Go down to the loading dock and help unload supplies." She must have assumed I knew how to get there.

After quite a few (hopefully discrete) wrong turns, I made it to the dark subterranean loading area, a space that was likely a garage in normal times. The amount of loading and unloading work that needed to be done could easily have been accomplished by half a dozen people, but there were another twenty or thirty more standing around, waiting. Unlike some paid employees, the volunteers all appeared ready and anxious to do something.

It barely took a second to see that I wasn't needed. I surveyed the scene for other possibilities and spotted a woman coming out of a small trailer. Lean and fit, she moved around like a caged animal as she talked into a cell phone, perhaps she needed privacy. She knew the

underground territory well and traced its small perimeter. Based on nothing more than how she moved, I decided she had significant responsibility. While she talked, I stayed in range, circling, fearing she would hang up and immediately disappear into one of the many off-limits zones. It was a delicate balance not to be stalking her. When the call ended, I quickly caught her attention.

“Is there anything useful for me to do?” I asked.

Noting my outfit, she replied, “Have you ever managed a shelter?”

“Yes.” Thinking of my stints in Pennsylvania after Hurricane Agnes.

She reached for her phone as I began to worry about what I had just said. I had done numerous jobs for the Red Cross, but had I actually “managed” a shelter? If I had, it would have been more than thirty years ago. I tried to figure out how to ask what was involved without blowing my cover, but nothing came to mind. I didn’t want to jeopardize my first lead.

In less than five minutes, she found a driver to take me somewhere. Slipping into the back seat, I overheard the driver call her Amber. She handed me the phone number for “mass care” in case I had a problem and wished me good luck as she closed the car door.

Although Amber told the driver of the 1980s American Red Cross station wagon what shelter to take me to, I never got its name or address. Apparently, I was going to replace a person who had been at work nearly thirty-six hours. Normal shelter shifts are eight or, at most, twelve hours. The driver’s radio crackled with incomprehensible information. Both of us were quiet; I was busy taking in the landscape.

South of 14th Street, we cruised through an area that had been shut tight to most citizens since Tuesday. Being there at that moment was thrilling in a way I never could have imagined. Everything had shifted in the city and much more so downtown. Block after block was deserted. Checkpoints appeared at seemingly random locations. This recently public part of town had become an occupied zone.

We slowed, but didn’t fully stop, at our first checkpoint; we were waved through. Quite a few police loitered behind the blue wooden barricade. Our white car with red crosses on both sides was a powerful symbol, even if the crosses were just held on with magnets.

The checkpoints became progressively more excruciating and difficult to get through. Apparently, in zones like this, laminated IDs are supposed to be worn around your neck. Amber probably assumed I had an ID, and I realized that it was likely a mistake not to have gotten one before leaving headquarters. It was certainly a mistake not to have written down the name of the shelter we were heading to.

Nothing was moving except for an occasional emergency or military vehicle. The armed checkpoint guardians, whose faces I couldn't see from the back seat, wanted to know about me. The driver seems to have had acceptable clearance. When pressed, I showed my drivers' license as ID, but it was clearly not what they were looking for.

These were not routine encounters; the guards had only been at their posts for one or two days—at most. Who was making the rules they were following? The last foreign attack on the US mainland was long before anyone's great great great grandparents were alive.

It had become clear that my driver did not know where we were or where we were going. Asking our protectors for directions was of no use since none of them knew the area. As we got closer to the smoking pile, the area felt increasingly like a war zone. Nearly everyone was armed. I didn't know where I was, but clearly far from anything I could have imagined a half hour ago in the dark garage.

Intuition, luck, or a dead-end caused us to turn east, and, for no reason I could explain, we encountered our most severe interrogation as we were exiting the secure zone. The well-armed military man in charge of that checkpoint had little patience for the likes of us in our non-armored wagon with worn-out shocks. Rather than feigning importance, I shrunk into the back seat like a small child who has done something wrong. After a while, he peered in at me. He did not say a word. Then, maybe in sheer frustration, he let us go. Or perhaps we were let through because the driver had become more adept in his frontman role.

It didn't dawn on me that the driver, whose face I never saw might be new to this job. Instead, I was thinking about what was ahead for me and what had I gotten myself into. Barely four minutes after exiting the secure zone, we reached the shelter: a public school in Chinatown.

James Boorstein

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