

9/11: Composure in tragedy despite knowing the dead

Publisher's note: *This is one in a 12-part series running from Sept. 1-12 about how Lake Tahoe is tied to 9/11.*

By Lorenzo Gigliotti

During a recent interview a reporter noted a lithograph depicting the flag raising at the site of the World Trade Center following the events of Sept. 11, 2001, which led to a discussion of what I was doing on that fateful day, after which I agreed to write a brief column recounting my memory of that day in our nation's history.

Sept. 11, 2001, I was in my third year as fire chief for the city of Grandview, a first ring suburb of Kansas City, Mo. I arrived at my office in Fire Station 1 at about 6am, and like most mornings parked behind the station and walked through the apparatus bays to the administrative wing of the building. As I was headed to my office to change into workout wear, I found the oncoming and off-going crews glued to the television set which was in the space set aside for physical fitness. Earlier that morning, at 7:59am Eastern time, American Airlines Flight 11, a Boeing 767, crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center.

I recall thinking what a tragic accident.



From Sept.

1-12, Lake
Tahoe News is
looking at
9/11.

However, within about two minutes, a second aircraft, United Airlines Flight 175, another fully-fueled Boeing 767, crashed into the South Tower of the World Trade Center.

I recall being shocked, thinking that this was an intentional act and that we were under some sort of attack.

I contacted my boss, the city administrator, at home to discuss what had occurred. This led to a full day of meetings discussing our preparedness and security levels, not only as a small city within the Kansas City metropolitan area, but the security and preparedness level for the metro area as a whole.

Asked by the reporter if I knew anyone who perished that fateful day, it caused me to recall an experience I had 13 years beforehand.

In June 1988, I found myself standing in a long line waiting to check in at the registration desk, having just departed the bus which delivered 40 of us, fire service professionals from around the country, from the Baltimore/Washington International Airport to the campus of the National Fire Academy to enjoy the next two weeks of coursework in executive development. The National Fire Academy is contained within the National Emergency Training Center that is located on the site that was the Saint John's College for women located in Emmitsburg, Md.



Lorenzo
Gigliotti

Before the campus was remodeled in the late 1980s, students were housed in communal dorms with anywhere from two to seven students sharing large dorm rooms; bathrooms were located in the halls; and meals were served in the “chow” hall which was and still is centrally located on the campus.

At 11 this particular evening, I completed the check-in process and was assigned a room in “C” dorm where I found myself in a double occupancy room with a gentleman from the New York Fire Department. I got to know this gentleman over the next two weeks. His name was Peter Ganci, and he was, at that time a captain with the fire department of New York. Peter’s career progressed to his appointment as the “Chief of the Department” which is the highest uniformed rank with the New York Fire Department. Chief Ganci was among the 343 firefighters killed during the terrorist attacks on the United States on Sept. 11, 2001.

I have been known to use the catch phrases like “the world is a small place” or “the fire service is a small fraternity,” but little did I know how small until I recalled this chain of events that certainly changed my life.

Lest we forget – 343.

Lorenzo Gigliotti served as the fire chief for South Lake Tahoe from January 2005 to September 2011.