



# SMALL WARS JOURNAL

---

smallwarsjournal.com

## A Remembrance of 9/11

by Stephen Phillips

*Americans will never forget 9/11. One U.S. Navy EOD Technician's account of the events at Ground Zero is presented to solemnly recall what happened on that day.*

Five men stood together on the New York subway car as it headed toward the World Trade Center. Any passengers who noticed them would mark their similarities; athletic builds, short haircuts, and each one wearing the exact same black backpack. A first guess might be that they were missionaries, that their bags were filled with Bibles and proselytizing literature. These men were in fact on a mission, not to convert souls, but to protect heads of state. Their packs did not contain religious paraphernalia, but carried tools of the trade for bomb disposal.

The U.S. Secret Service utilizes military Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) Technicians to provide bomb search services. Thus, EOD Techs often wear civilian clothes and carry Department of Defense credentials while assisting the USSS in providing a safe environment for the president, presidential candidates, or visiting heads of state. One of the busiest times for the latter mission is during the U.N. General Assembly when dozens of kings, queens, presidents, and prime ministers descend into New York for two weeks of talks. This event occurs annually in September.

Boatswain's Mate First Class Jim Prewitt and Sonar Technician Surface Second Class James "Billy" Little were two of the five men from EOD Mobile Unit Six heading to World Trade Center Seven (WTC 7) to receive a briefing on their assignments for the U.N. General Assembly. Earlier that morning the pair found a place to eat a big breakfast within walking distance of their hotel. Prewitt was amazed as he watched Little consume platefuls of food. He knew that the two sailors were connected for this mission by design. Though clearly seasoned, Little was the junior of the two. Prewitt, though not yet a chief petty officer, had achieved recognition as a Master EOD Technician. In fact, when Billy Little was a student at Naval School Explosive Ordnance Disposal, Prewitt was one of the instructors. Such an encounter is not uncommon in EOD. In a small, select community, instructors often find themselves serving with former students. This is an extra incentive to ensure everyone who emerges from the curriculum with an EOD "crab" – the breast insignia worn by all EOD Techs - is capable. Thus, while watching Little eat a second helping, not a single concern crossed Prewitt's mind about the two of them working together in the most dangerous of environments. As they headed for the subway forty minutes later, events were unfolding that would thrust them into such an environment – Ground Zero of 9/11.

### *America's Awakening*

Defense pundits point out that the war on terror, the clash of civilizations, began before America realized it. Very quickly they note the USS *Cole* attack, Khobar Towers, or the Marine Barracks bombing in Beirut. Those who delve deep into the jihadist or takfiri history go further

to the beginning of the Egyptian Islamic Brotherhood or even Europe's parceling of the post-World War I Middle East. While the exact beginning may be out of reach, no historian can deny that 9/11 was an awakening that jolted America and the rest of the western world to recognize the conflict. For Prewitt, Little, and the other men of Mobile Unit Six this awakening began as they emerged from the subway into the basement of World Trade Center 1 at 8:50 am on September 11, 2001.

Prewitt was physically and mentally prepared for a terrorist attack. He was one of the few Americans on 9/11 who already knew the acronym "IED." In fact, he practiced IED response hundreds of times in his career covering every possibility from hand entry to simple detonation, or "blow in place." Add to this fact that like all EOD Techs assigned to the U.N. General Assembly, in the weeks and days before the assignment Prewitt mentally prepared for New York. No matter their service or experience level, each Tech likely reviewed the means to search limousines, hotel suites, and restaurants. They thought about shopping sprees, airport arrivals, and media events. All of that preparation, plus the fact that they were already poised for a personal protection mission, meant the Mobile Unit Six Techs "switched on" as they entered the confusion in the basement of WTC 1.

Quickly, it became clear that the police were evacuating the building. People were told to move north and east toward the corner of Vessey and West Broadway. The Techs followed the crowd up and out to street level. Here falling debris turned confusion into chaos. Prewitt looked up and saw WTC 1 had two gaping holes spewing fire and black smoke. It appeared the building suffered a massive explosion. Flashing his credentials, Prewitt asked one of New York's finest if the Techs could help.

"Yeah, help me get this crowd back and away from the towers."

Prewitt looked up to WTC 1 again. Suddenly, a man came out of the dark cloud, arms and legs splayed as he fell to the street below.

Dumfounded, Prewitt said, "That man just jumped!"

The officer started to lose his composure as if Prewitt gave voice to the unspeakable. "Yeah, people started doing that right away."

It was then that Prewitt himself faced the fact that hundreds may have died already and that many more may pass before the days end. He said a quick prayer for the man who jumped, asking God to take the unknown soul to eternal salvation.

Now Prewitt saw there were many hanging onto the outside of the building, scrambling as far as they could from smoke, heat, and fire. He could see some wedging themselves or hanging onto the building as long as their strength would allow, then plummeting after such a valiant effort. Others chose to face their end with a friend or loved one – holding onto one another and jumping together.

A combination of training and shock numbed Prewitt from the scene. He gathered himself emotionally so that he could assist others. Time seemed to start again as he moved east along WTC 2 continuing with the crowd. Reaching the sidewalk, he heard a dull roar. It became louder and louder, the pitch so high that some in the crowd covered their ears. Prewitt noted a look of fear and confusion on every face around him.

The noise was followed by a split second of silence – then a loud explosion as United Airlines Flight 175 crashed into WTC 2.

Although at least seventy four floors below it, the people on the street could feel the heat from the burning fuel. As they saw more debris falling, everyone began to scramble for safety. Large fiery chunks of building and aircraft rained down. One of plane's burning tires flew directly over the sailors' heads. Dispersing with the crowd, the five men were separated. Glass, metal, and concrete the size of beach balls made loud thunks and pops as they hit the street below. Prewitt tried to crawl under a police cruiser, but it was parked too close to the curb. He crouched down low with his back against it, pulling his backpack over his head to help shield it from broken glass. It was in this moment that Jim Prewitt said his second prayer of the day. He asked God to protect him, to put an umbrella over him to shield him so that he could see his family again. This prayer was answered immediately. A sense of calm came over Prewitt with a distinct understanding that he was going to make it through this day, or that God would take him.

People staggered by, many of them injured. A police officer, bleeding from the shoulder, met Prewitt's eyes for a second. He winced with pain, then continued eastward with the other evacuees. Prewitt decided it was wise to stay in place until the material falling from the sky abated.

### ***First Aid***

Now Prewitt searched for Little, regretting that they had violated the number one rule for all Navy divers – never leave your buddy. Still, he was mollified some by his confidence in Little. Prewitt would look for the younger EOD Tech and the other men from EOD Mobile Unit Six throughout the day. They would not be reunited until late into the evening.

Scanning the passers by, Prewitt spied a woman who was bleeding from two vertical cuts on her forehead. It was clearly gushing with each heartbeat. She began to stagger, and then stopped. Training took over, and Prewitt rushed to her aid. He pulled her over next to the police vehicle and began to render first aid.

EOD Techs carry some form of coveralls in case they have time to put them on while searching dirty areas such as trash bins, boiler rooms, or elevator shafts. Prewitt reached into his back and pulled out a new, clean flightsuit. He applied pressure to the woman's wound, stemming the tide of blood. Then he inspected the cuts. They were deep, to the bone. He needed to get her real medical attention and fast.

The young woman, started to panic. She said the buildings were going to fall. Prewitt convinced her to wait a little longer until the debris subsided.

When the falling material let up, Prewitt stood with the woman guided her further eastward to the corner of Vessey and Church Street. There he saw another police cruiser with an officer inside. Like Prewitt, he recognized that she needed to get to a hospital fast.

"Put her in the back! I'll take her to a hospital!" he shouted.

The two men helped the woman into the back of the car. She was calming down a little and she convinced Prewitt that she could hold the makeshift bandage in place.

"She'll be okay! I gotta go!" the cop shouted again.

Prewitt shut the door and watched the cruiser speed off.

Continuing east, Prewitt saw a cordon area was set up at the corner of Vessey and Broadway. Prewitt stepped through the police barrier that marked their security and evacuation perimeter scanning the crowd for Little or the other EOD Techs. Everyone was in a state of shock, still not believing the events unfolding in front of them.

As people in the towers appeared to contemplate jumping someone in the crowd would cry, “No, no don’t do it!” Each time he heard this, Prewitt lowered his gaze. He simply could not handle seeing another person succumbing to the inferno above, ending their life with a horrific descent and impact.

### ***Going back in***

After searching the crowd for several minutes, Prewitt was unable to find Little or the others. He decided to go through the police barricade and again offer assistance. Maybe he would find the other EOD Techs with police and fireman closer to the scene. So once again, he approached the barrier and flashed his credentials.

Closer to the World Trade Center complex, Prewitt encountered another police officer.

“Hey, can I do something to help?”

“I don’t know...but they’ve set up a command center in the building behind the Old Post Office building on the corner of Barclay and West Broadway. You may want to go there.”

Prewitt continued west, then north to 75 Barclay Street. The Old Post Office Building was between it and the main part of the World Trade Center, and it was catty-corner to WTC 7. In the lobby were a variety of policemen in uniform and civilian clothes. The other EOD Techs were not there, and folks were just getting organized, so Prewitt connected with an FBI agent and another plain clothes officer. Cell phones were not working, so the men decided to use one of the two public phones in front of the building. Prewitt thought this was a good idea, especially since Jen, his wife, knew he was to be in WTC 7 at 9:00am that morning.

### ***WTC 2 Falls***

Prewitt waited patiently while his new partners assured their wives that they were safe. Their moment was short-lived. The ground started to shake and a new rumbling sound filled the air. Prewitt moved toward the corner where he could see that WTC 2 was starting to collapse.

“Tower Two is coming down!” he yelled.

Both officers ran, one heading north on West Broadway, the other east on Barclay. Prewitt saw the phones, likely with their concerned spouses on the line, swinging freely on their cables.

Another officer across the street, next to WTC 7 caught Prewitt’s eye. They both realized that waiting for just a few seconds meant they had nowhere to run, so they must try to take cover. The officer ducked behind his cruiser just as the dust enveloped him. Prewitt turned and slipped next to one of the pay phones.

In an instant, a swirling hot cloud covered Prewitt at his small refuge turning it into an oven. Instinct took over yet again and he closed his eyes. Then he realized he was in danger of choking. Prewitt dropped his chin, opened his shirt a little, and placed his nose and mouth under his shirt, using his clothing in an attempt to protect his lungs from the broiling material.

Now the EOD Tech could hear large, heavy objects bouncing and rolling past him. Since the booth only shielded his upper body, it became clear that his legs could be crushed or amputated. In a decision that would seem surreal later, Prewitt lifted his right leg to reduce its exposure and accepted the prospective loss of his left.

About fifteen minutes passed before the cloud dissipated enough for Prewitt to open his eyes and emerge from the phone booth. He rendezvoused with the police officer he saw just before ducking for cover and a few other men who emerged from protection. They waded through a foot of hot, dusty material looking for survivors. Someone noticed that much of the glass in the surrounding buildings was broken. The group decided to stay in the middle of the road as much as possible to avoid any large shards that may give way.

Prewitt also took a moment to look up at WTC 1. It was leaning, and was noticeably twisted from the metal structure losing its integrity. It was clear that the woman Prewitt rescued was right, WTC 1 would soon fall just as WTC 2 did.

## ***Witness***

Turning down Church Street Prewitt noted a line of fire trucks. Next to one of them, five firemen were donning their breathing apparatus and other gear.

World Trade Center Two collapsed. It was clear that World Trade Center One would soon follow, yet these men were prepping to head in.

Prewitt froze for a moment and considered offering to join the firefighters. Before he volunteered for EOD, Prewitt served on Knox class frigates - USS *Valdez* and USS *Capodanno*. Like all sailors, he knew how to operate the equipment the men were carrying, even the self contained breathing apparatus or "SCBA" they wore in toxic or low oxygen environments. Looking back to WTC 1, he intrinsically knew, just as they did, that they would never emerge alive. His EOD side struggled with the part of him that was also a husband and father. Ultimately, he realized that each American who chooses to serve - policemen, firemen, servicemen – each have their own duty. The firemen had their duty, Prewitt had his.

Reaching this conclusion, Prewitt watched as a poignant moment unfolded in front of him. The firemen completed suiting up, looked into one another's eyes – and then without a word, proceeded into Tower One.

Later, Jim Prewitt felt this event laid upon him a different responsibility...a duty that surpassed his own willingness to go into harm's way. Prewitt realized he survived so that he could bear witness to the New York Firemen's bravery and sacrifice.

## ***Covered***

The southern end of Church was impassable because of the dangerous remains of WTC 2 and a thicker cloud of dust and grit that remained in the air. Prewitt decided he should head back north on Church. As he reached Vessey, the EOD Tech realized that the effects of the morning were beginning to wear on him. He was caked in ash and dust, his eyes were irritated, and his breathing labored.

As he stopped to catch his breath, Prewitt noted an FBI agent wearing the iconic blue jacket with "FBI" emblazoned on the back. Prewitt nodded at him, and the agent inquired who he

was. Prewitt showed his credentials again and relayed all of the details of the morning. The agent suggested that the sailor looked like hell and should at least try to get his eyes cleaned out.

Prewitt looked at his reflection in a window. He looked worse than he imagined. In some places literally an inch of powder clung to Prewitt's form.

*I look like I've been in a snowstorm*, he thought.

Just then a rumbling sound filled the air.

"What the hell is that?" the FBI agent asked.

"The other tower is falling!" Prewitt replied.

The agent looked at him as if he were insane, but by now Prewitt knew this sound.

The reverberations increased and the ground began to shake. Everyone ducked into the recesses of nearby buildings. Because he was further away, a wider street, and the northerly breeze, Prewitt did not suffer as much from the WTC 1 coming down. As the air cleared around him he said another quick prayer. Then he moved to head back toward the World Trade Center complex for another round of rescuing the trapped and fallen. One of the FBI Agents stopped him.

"Whoa, not you, buddy."

"Huh?"

"Look, you need first aid. I think you should head to FBI Headquarters."

"Wait," said a second, "Let's do this first. Here buddy, lean your head back a little."

Prewitt did as he was told. The second agent poured bottled water over his face to help clear the dust and material from his eyes. Then he escorted Prewitt to their office a few blocks away. Once there, he took a "whore's bath" and someone gave him a clean shirt. Finally, he was able to make a few phonecalls. First, he reported in to EOD Mobile Unit Six in Charleston, South Carolina. The Det Six shop said he was the last to call in.

"You need to call your wife," the sailor on the other end of the line said, "She's called here twice trying to find out if you checked in."

Prewitt called his wife, Jen, a schoolteacher. As the events unfolded during the day, everyone in her school watched on television. Jen knew that her husband was beginning his Secret Service mission with a meeting at the World Trade Center that morning. She did not know how close he was to the actual events as and demanded to know.

"Where were you!"

"I was not there...it all happened before we got there," Prewitt lied.

Jen knew better.

"You better tell me the truth right now! Do you hear me!" she yelled through tears.

Prewitt relented and told his wife everything he experienced that day.

Returning to his hotel, the EOD Tech took a long, hot shower and changed into clean clothes. Finally, he sat on the edge of his bed, said his last prayers of the day, and released the

emotions he bottled during 9/11. Jim Prewitt wept, knowing countless lives had been lost and that for those that remained, life would never be the same.

The next day, Prewitt was assigned to an EOD team providing assistance for President Bush's now famous, "Bullhorn Speech." For his actions on 9/11, especially performing life-saving first aid for the woman who suffered lacerations from the second plane's impact, Botswain's Mate First Class James Prewitt was awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Medal.

*Stephen Phillips served in the U.S. Navy as an Explosive Ordnance Disposal Technician. He is the author of the award winning novel, **Proximity: A Novel of the Navy's Elite Bomb Squad.***

This is a single article excerpt of material published in [Small Wars Journal](#).

Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2010, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license per our [Terms of Use](#).

No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.

Please consider [supporting Small Wars Journal](#).

