MONTEL WILLIAMS SHOW INTERVIEW OF BC RICHARD PICCIOTTO

INTERVIEW OF BATTALION CHIEF RICHARD PICCIOTTO ON SEPTEMBER 17, 2001

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Today we're going to dedicate our show to all those who worked so hard to help the many victims, the survivors of the attack on America. Our country should be proud because we have so many heroes among us, and I'm just in awe of the fact that I have the opportunity to sit beside a true, true hero. First please welcome at home the battalion chief from the 11th Battalion in New York City, Mr. Rich Picciotto.

These people at home that are looking right now, Rich, they see the dark glasses. You were originally up in your battalion headquarters? Where were you at?

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: I arrived way after the second plane hit, but we rushed down just real quick.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: You were sitting in your office and someone came in and said to you, Rich, you need to look at this.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Yes, turn on the TV, a plane hit the World Trade Center.

there.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: And as a firefighter, and you've been a firefighter for what, 28 years? CHIEF PICCIOTTO: 28 years, yes.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: So in 28 years, immediately your wheels start spinning, correct?

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: My wheels are spinning super. I was one of the first firefighters at the initial World Trade Center bombing. I was there and I knew the building and I felt I had to be

MONTEL WILLIAMS: What did it look like when you hit the bottom of the two of the taller buildings in the world? You pull up. What did you see?

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: I rushed into the lobby. I see the commander, a chief higher than me, he's going insane. He's overloaded. So there's companies waiting to be -- you know, what do we need? What do we need? We don't just run in. It looks like we run in, but it is a command structure. And I get a couple companies to the side, I go to the chief in charge, what do you need? And he tells me what he needs. I take my companies and we go.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: And when you say you go, you started running up those steps?

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Not running. We start going. You have to realize, every fireman -- I have a light load because I'm a chief. I just have my bunker gear, my tank, a flashlight and a bullhorn, which is the first time I ever carried that bullhorn. It saved countless lives. The firemen have that plus an extra tank, hose, tools. I'm carrying, I don't know, approximately 50, 60 pounds. They're carrying an additional 30, 40 pounds on top of that. So we're going up the stairwell. We're not running up the stairwell. And at this point we're going up and people are coming down.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: People are coming down and, of course, you're trying to orchestrate that

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Right. And that's where the bullhorn came in handy.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: You made it up to the 21st, 22nd floor, correct?

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: That was my initial assignment, people trapped on the 21st and 25th floor.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: I'm going to do this. I have to take a break, but before I take a break,

there were some things that we talked about before the show.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Right.

traffic flow.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: We want to talk about a couple of them. Let's do one right now and we'll take a break and we'll come back. You wanted to make sure everybody out there was aware of what?

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Okay. A couple things that I want people to know. This is a massive tragedy for the Fire Department, for everybody, for the Fire Department in particular because we've been hit so hard. The formal organization that we usually use to take care of our members is not there, they're overloaded, the informal network also, the members in the firehouse helping their fellows in need is not there. Some firehouses are wiped out. The ones that are not wiped out, they're working, they're digging through the rubble.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: So many firefighters in New York City have been lost that there aren't enough people to go around and see and counsel the wives and the families and there are a lot of people out there right now and it's not because -- just out of necessity, they're just not getting services that they need.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Right, exactly. We're relying on family and friends, go to these wives, stay with them, even though they say -- some of them are in denial. I've been visiting some of them. They're in denial. Oh, I know my husband is safe. I was in the building when it came down. As far as I know, there were eleven survivors out of both buildings. I'm one of them. We were trapped four hours. So I'm going to these people saying, yes, there is hope, but the hope is very slim.

What I need is just neighbors and friends who know these people, there's millions of volunteers and they would all go, but these wives and these families don't need strangers; they need support from neighbors. There's no support from the formal Fire Department, there's no formal support, very little, excuse me, very little support formally and very little support, especially the heavy-hit houses. It's very little support because the houses are decimated, the firehouses, and the people that are not missing are down there looking for the people that are missing.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: I'm with you.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Thank you.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Again, Rich, you and your team, you commanded the guys, you got up to the 21st floor of Building 1, you started getting people to move. Just tell me what you saw when you hit 21.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Okay. Basically, my initial assignment was 21st, 25th floor, there's people trapped in need. We got up there. There are already other firefighters there. Once our initial assignment was done, I told the command post that this is okay and I'm going further up.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: You made it up to what, about the 35th, 36th?

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Somewhere in the 30s. When I talk about floors and when I talk about time

sequences, they're guesstimations.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Of course.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: I'm up in approximately Tower 1 somewhere in the 30s and this rumbling starts happening. By this time all civilians – civilians stopped coming down when I hit about the 16th floor, 20th floor. Again, that's guesstimations. They were already mostly down. So the ones above that were just firemen, you know, cops, emergency workers, mostly firemen.

We hear this noise and everyone just freezes, and it's a rumbling, a sustained rumbling. I've heard many people describe it different ways. To me it was indescribable, you know, it was the first time anyone heard this noise.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: 50, 60 trains coming at the same time.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Yes.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: The noise of ten tornadoes.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: And I go into the hallway. Everyone freezes and we're trying to -- what is this? The building is shaking. Now, this is the building that's not falling down. This was the other building.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Building 1 is shaking.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Building 1 is shaking. Building 2 was falling. We don't realize that.

Sustained. You tell me how long it took that building to fall.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: I'd say 30 seconds.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: That's my guesstimation, 30, 40 seconds. And then it stops and there's an eerie silence because, like I said, we're all firemen up there and we're professionals and everyone is waiting. So it's an eerie silence. The radios stop. We have different channels. They stop and everyone is, you know, what was that?

MONTEL WILLIAMS: And you're thinking immediately, my God, we just lost a command center. CHIEF PICCIOTTO: No. I didn't realize that the building came down. I didn't know what that was. I'm thinking maybe elevators broke loose and elevators are falling through the -- you know, different things are crossing my mind. Maybe elevators. Maybe another plane hit. Maybe there was a collapse up above and it's just a partial collapse.

So I'm calling on the radio to try to find out what happened. Finally I get a response. The tower went down. That still doesn't compute to me. The tower went down. Was it a water tower? The radio towers? Because I can't see. And then someone says the building went down, the whole building. Now the people around me, the firefighters are looking at me and, you know, what are we going to do? So I'm trying to call the command post, I'm calling, I'm calling. I'm getting no response. No response. Everyone is looking at me. You know, at this point, if I said keep on going up, we're professionals, they're going to do what I tell them, keep on going up.

Then I'm thinking, when I know the building came down, no one is listening to me, possibly there I is no one to give me directions. They may be wiped out. Like I said, basically there's no civilians left in my building because I reached them about the 16th floor. I figured by this time they're out. So the only people in building Tower 1 now are firemen.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: And everybody in the floors above --

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Are firemen. Our first priority is to save life. We define life into two priorities, civilian life first, and then, second, firefighters' lives. I have to save firefighters' lives also. I'm getting no response. So I take it upon myself to call for an evacuation. I have that bullhorn. I call on the radios, we're evacuating, we're getting out, drop your tools, drop your masks, drop everything, get out, get out, get out. My thinking was either -- I thought a bomb hit the other building and brought it down, and if there's a bomb in that one, there's a bomb in this one. At that point what I'm thinking of is this building is going to come down also, the second building, so I call for the evacuation. The evacuation, you know, it's an orderly evacuation. It's not --

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Chaotic.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: It's not chaotic. We're professionals. We're filtering up the building, everything stops, and now we slowly are filtering down the building because no one comes on the command channel to tell me otherwise.

As we're going down, now I'm hearing someone from the command post that is a voice I recognize, who ordered this evacuation? What's going on? Who's in charge? And I'm saying to myself I did the wrong thing here. So it's amazing. They give the order from the command post stand by.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Meaning stop the evacuation?

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Stop the evacuation. I relay that order, and amazing as that is, these firemen, I can't say enough, we basically stop. Everyone is waiting to find out what we're going to do. Car 4 Charlie, who I think I know who that chief is, says -- time span I don't know -- continue the evacuation. This is less than a minute this whole thing happens, probably less than 30 seconds. And so the evacuation continues and now we're going down.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Rich, you had just gone and yelled up each one of the stairwells and you're hollering, and I've got to ask this question. There's so many people who have wondered this. When you looked up into those stairwells, could you see?

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: No.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: You couldn't see? It was all filled with smoke?

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: No. I'm in the first building. The fire is above us. The first building that I'm in, I don't know, approximately the 90th floor that the plane hit. There's smoke filtering down, but I'm only on the 30th floor. We're treating burn victims that were there coming down, people coming down with their clothes burnt off, and we're removing these people. Some people are treating them and some people are going up. Sometimes you have to look at the bigger picture, you know, you have someone hurt but you have to literally almost step over them to get to hundreds of people hurt and hundreds of people alive.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Right. And these are just real raw, just realtime decisions.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Yes.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Okay.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Basically, we're evacuating. We're going down. We get down approximately somewhere in the teens, 15, I don't know what floor, everything stops. Again, it's mostly firemen, you know, a few stragglers but mostly firemen. It stops. So I have the bullhorn, you know, what's happening? Keep on going. What's going on?

What happened was the two -- it's hard to describe. There's three stairways. The two stairways A and C are facing the south tower that came down. When the debris came down, it went all over, it went into the lobby, filled those stairways up. So people could get down but they couldn't get down --

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Into the lobby.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: -- into the lobby. So all of a sudden we started backing up in the stairways. A and C are clogged. I know the building layout. I checked the B stairway and the B stairway is clear. So now, again, this bullhorn was amazing, I'm using that and I'm directing everyone to the B stairway. We're going down floor by floor, hitting every floor, until we get to one floor that all of a sudden I look at an office and there's a bunch of people sitting there. You know, what are these people doing here? I tell them we've got to get out of here.

What it was, was these people were the last people in the building. They were mostly -- well, they were wheelchairs, infirm, walkers. They were real slow getting down. Everyone else got down except them and the people helping them. There was approximately, I don't know, ten, twelve infirm people and, I don't know, 50 people helping them.

So I have a lot of firemen there. I tell the people who were helping them, you leave. Go.

You have to remember that everything is clogged with firemen leaving now. Pull everyone to the side, get these people out. The firemen part the way, we're letting the people that could walk, go,

you get out, directed them to the B stairway. Then we take the wheelchairs because they're relatively easy, just roll them right out. It's the people with the walkers, the people very slow, very large, they're the people that we're having a bit of a problem with. I'm trying to get chairs, you know, put them in a chair. I'm running all over the place. So these people are walking with their walkers and chairs and I tell the firemen grab them, pick them up and grab them. And that's what we're doing. You can't carry them down -- again, I say the 12th floor. It could have been the 10th floor. I don't know what floor this was, but we're carrying them down slowly. We're getting these people out. Guys are relieving each other, you know, carrying them down a landing, a half a landing, then you take over, and then this other team goes back, and we're moving them, we're moving them. I basically have two teams on every person and everyone else I say go, you know, get the firemen out, we don't need 300 people doing this, we need eight people per person, four people carrying and another four. So everyone else I push out.

We had this one woman, I found out later her name because I was trapped with her for a few hours, Josephine. She was a big lady, a big African-American lady. We couldn't get a chair for her. All we could find were these little steno chairs with no arms, you know, nothing that we could sit her on and pick up. So she's taking up the rear, but we're having a slow enough time and guys are helping her. I'm basically taking up the rear and I get down to -- again, I don't know what floor. I tell people 7, you know. I know it was no lower than 5. It was higher than 5, but I say 7. I don't know what floor. And then that noise, that first-time-in-history-anyone-heard-that noise and I said it was a very unique noise? It starts.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: You started hearing it again?

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: So I hear it again. Our tower is coming down. Our tower was shaking before.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: The entire building was shaking.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: The building is shaking and, again, I was on whatever floor I was on, 7th floor.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Were you in the middle of the floor or were you in the stairwell?

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: We were in the stairwell. Everyone was in the stairwell. We were in stairwell B and that's the only stairwell that could be used because A and C were clogged, and by this time everyone is filtering. It's just the tail end of the people that I got to. I mean, there were people above that probably never heard it, still were fighting this fire.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: And that rumble got louder.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Louder. The rumble got louder and, as you see it, you know, I don't know, I know what I felt, I know what I saw, but I knew it was coming and I knew I was dead and I just said, please, God, please make it quick, you know, I want to die fast.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Because that building collapsed with you and a lot of other people in it.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Yes.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: And miraculously, Rich, you sit here after being buried for four and a half hours.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Well, yes. And it was miraculous, yes.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: You know, I think half of my viewers at home, as I just said it to you right before we came up, I don't know what I would have done. I would have been out there trying to get people out, but if I had been in that stairwell and the next thing you know I started hearing that rumbling again, I don't know. The 7th floor? I might have figured out someplace to go jump. But then again, I don't know if the jumping would have done you any good.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: There's no place to jump.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: There is no place to jump.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: It happened so quick.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: So it did happen so quick? So it happened so quick, next thing, you hear that noise, and then did something hit you in the head?

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Yes, something hit me in the head, knocked my helmet off, knocked me down, knocked my helmet off, and I tell people -- the word I'll use is I was annoyed. I was super annoyed. Because I wanted to be dead. I just wanted to be dead. I knew I was going to be dead. I just wanted it to happen.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: When you woke up?

steps.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Even before that, I got up and then the landing I was on just gave and then I fell and that's the last thing I remember until I'm just laying in debris and black.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: And you must have fallen at least five stories, possibly four to five stories.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Later on I found out I was on the 3rd floor, where the third floor was.

There's no more stairwells. We're in the stairwells, but there's no stairs. There's rubble. Again, I try to just -- you know, I land on 3. I was anywhere from 5 to 7 when it happened. We were bringing up the rear, our company was with this woman, like I said, her name was Josephine. They grabbed her, we grabbed her, I mean, we tried to just beat it, trying to run out, you know, run down five stairways, seven flights, before I was hit. But literally I got hit, got banged, we got

MONTEL WILLIAMS: And you woke up on the ground and you realized my arms are here, my legs are here, I can feel them, it's okay, I'm here. Then what?

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: I really don't even know if I was knocked out. I think I was just stunned momentarily type of thing. I don't know. I'm coming to and it's black. I lost my light. I lost my bullhorn, I lost my helmet, and I'm just coming to, and a short period of time -- like I said, time sequences just...

Next thing I remember anyway, it's black. I say is anyone else here? Is there anyone else here? And in a short time, yeah. Almost like I can't see them but I know that he's -- I'm not buried. I'm covered, but I'm not buried. I'm covered with debris all over. So yeah, yeah, I'm here, too, and then there's another voice and then like two voices below me initially and then a

voice above me. So we're all just getting our wits about us and, you know, anyone have a light?

A lot of firemen, thank God, you know, a lot of guys carry their lights in straps around themselves.

One guy had a light. So he turned the light on and it's dusty and tremendous -- like if you saw that dust, we're in it. Talk about ground zero? That's it.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: But, Rich, I hear you talk and I know exactly how you did this. Now, having been with you for an hour, you didn't wake up and say I'm entombed, you didn't wake up and say, you know, holy you-know-what expletive.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Yes, I did.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Good. But then after you did that, it was still back on the case.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Yes.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Where are the men? Who is alive? Who is here? Did you try to use a radio and call --

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Yes, yes. Well, initially we tried to find out who was there, find out what tools, lights, you know, who's here, and then we started calling. We started calling. Nothing. No response at all. I know what happened. I knew the first tower went down. I knew the second tower went down.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: And you knew you were in the one that went down.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Yes.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: At this moment does it hit you, okay, wait a minute, I'm on the third floor and 107 stories are on top of me; there's 107 stories around me?

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Montel, about two months ago, just a real quick story, two months ago three firefighters in Queens from Rescue 4 were in a building that collapsed. They were in a two-story building. They were alive in the basement. We had radio contact. I don't know if you remember, but they had the funerals. Harry Ford. They were in a two-story building that collapsed and we couldn't get to them in time. We just couldn't get to them. Because it's a hand operation, brick by brick. Even though I'm safe in the darkness, I know that there's 100 stories, 105 stories above

me. I don't want to sound like a pessimist, but there's no way anyone is going to get to us. My prayer wasn't answered for a quick death.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: I'm sorry, Rich. So you're entombed and during that period of time that you're there, you're calling through, nobody is answering. It is dark. It is smoking. There's a ray of light coming in.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Not yet.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Not yet?

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: I wish. I wish.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Tell us about it. How many people did you end up totally --

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: We were in a void. That's what we call it, a void, you know, just a pocket, everything is falling and there's a little pocket. We're not all together, but we're in a little void.

Eleven of us I believe it was. Amazingly, one whole company, Ladder 6, which I didn't know this

at the time because they were above me. I couldn't even see them, although I could talk to them.

Below me there was an officer from 16 and a fireman from Engine 39. Also, there was Josephine, the woman I told you about, and there was a Port Authority cop. I believe his name was David Lim. Some of us can see each other, some of us can't, but we're in this basically 2nd

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Just a little area where people kind of --

story to 4th story -- it's not open. There's rubble, debris all over.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Right. Exactly. And then we're trying to find out who's there. Basically, the people in our void were banged around, separated shoulders, concussions, but no life-threatening injuries. There's people below us that we can't get to. I mean, there is rubble, we just can't get to them.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: You're still thinking about getting to people and you're stuck in a void.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: There's people hurt. There's people in trouble below us.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: And you were hurt, Rich. You could barely see, right? Why don't we explain the fact that your corneas were scratched, burned, and you were still trying to figure out

you need to save.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Excuse me just for a minute. It's 28 years, you know, people call us heroes and it's always like we're doing our job, we're doing our job. And we are doing our job, but I'll tell you, every single fireman is a hero.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Absolutely.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: I mean, police officers, everybody there.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Absolutely. And maybe you don't want to accept the title --

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: I mean, we are doing our job.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: — but accept our thank you. Accept the fact that there are guys like you that are doing this because there's a lot of other people out here who don't want to. Let's move a little forward. So you're in here in this abyss. Again. You're trying to call out, nobody is answering, walkies aren't working. Did you actually think that maybe the command center, which was right outside the building, or very close, could have been completely decimated?

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Oh, of course. Of course. Of course. Basically, it had to be, and in effect it was. Our Chief of Department Ganci, you go through the list, Father Judge, I didn't know it at the time, but they were all wiped out. I mean, our whole command structure was wiped out. And the people that weren't and all the people that were injured outside, and there were a lot of people hurt and injured and killed outside, the people that weren't are helping the people that were. So no one is listening to the handie-talkie. That's our radios. No one is listening to them.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: But, again, you're sitting there, you're inside this abyss, and did you not think, okay, let's marshal troops? How do we get out of this?

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Exactly. Exactly.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: But then my next question would be how do we get out of this? I'm sitting under 110 stories worth of what must be rubble. If I pull one rock --

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Exactly.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: -- there's a void that actually could be filled.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Exactly. What I said once everyone started getting it, I told everyone,

because we didn't see anyone, I said everyone don't move, stay where you are, just stay there,

don't move because exactly what you said; a secondary collapse could have wiped us out in a

second. Look around.

Look. Like I said before, we found a light and then we found another light. So look around, look

around. Then you start taking your bearings. By me there was nothing. When we're doing the

roll call -- I called a roll call, trying to find out who was there. 6 Truck, like I said before, is intact,

the whole company. You know, who's here? Who's here? So two floors above me, or when I

say two, I don't see them, but I hear a voice. A very, very good friend of mine, we studied

together, Jay Jonas, he's the captain of 6 Truck. He was promoted yesterday. It's not a

battlefield commission. He was on the list waiting to be promoted. I don't know if you saw the

promotions.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Sure.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: He was promoted yesterday.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: You heard him?

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: I hear his voice. Jay, it's me. Now we're having a conversation. Stay

where you are. Look around. Let me know what you have up there. Because he's up. I

have a light now and I look down and there's a couple of guys down there. I don't even know.

Did I mention with the radios that I heard the guys? I don't know what I said, what I didn't say.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Originally you said the walkies didn't work. So you now they started

working in close proximity?

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Okay. I'll get to that in a second.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Sure.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Our first thing is we're calling, we're getting no one. There's a door down there. I can see a door. It's intact. There's rubble, I don't know, a foot, 18 inches high, but it's movable rubble. So I tell the guys let's move that, let's force that door, maybe it's a way out.

We get a tool from up above and we start working on this door. I tell them to stay there. I climbed down to them and we work on this door. We get the door open and it's just nothing. It's just, when I say nothing, it's everything, you know, it's all rubble, debris. We're not getting out that way. So I call up to Jay, Jay, any way out up by you? He says I don't think so. He looks around. There is nothing. So we're in here for a long haul. When I hit one channel, I'm hearing a voice calling Maydays also and he's hurt. I think I said that.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Yes.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: So every time I'm going through and I hit that channel, I'm trying to calm him down because I know he's not good and just every time I hit that channel I talk to him for a minute, calm down, don't call anymore, we'll call. He wants me to come get him. It's impossible for me to come get him. But I don't want him talking.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Right.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: He's confirmed. He's one of the confirmed. They recovered his body. I don't want to say the name.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Sure. Because you just couldn't get to him.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: So I'm doing the Maydays and finally at one point someone answers me, but then it goes away. I don't hear him. About a half hour later I'm going again through channels and another voice answers me. The Fire Department is a very small community, especially the chiefs' rank. Every chief just about knows every other chief. A guy answers me, 12th Battalion, the upper east side. I recognize the voice. It's a guy I consider a friend of mine, a good friend now, Mark Foran.

Mark, this is Richie. We're down here. We're trapped. I give him all the particulars. And I hear him talking to someone else who I also know but I can't hear him responding, so I'm hearing a

one-way conversation, and I hear Mark talking and he says I got a company, Ladder 43. He tells Pat McNally, Pat, I got 43. I'm going to get Richie. And I could hear the determination in his voice, you know, they know we're here and they're coming for us.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Right there you must have --

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: It was reassuring, but also my mind is racing a thousand miles a minute. I also know there's 105 stories on top of us. I said even if they get right on top of us...

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Weeks.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: You know, they're not going to get to us.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Please welcome back the battalion chief of Battalion 11, the 11th Battalion of New York City's Fire Department, Mr. Rich Picciotto, to the show.

You know, yesterday, when we finished talking, and I think now all of America is sitting on pins and needles waiting to hear how come you're sitting here? A couple hours buried under 105 stories. Did it flash at you that maybe your wish you had of going quickly --

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Yes. Without a doubt. I'm thinking it's just physically impossible to get to us. Even though we're alive, it's physically impossible to get to us. One of my best friends, a guy I know for years, Jay Jonas, we still haven't seen each other, but we're in voice contact and he has his whole company up there. You know, a little bit, I see a couple of his guys, but I don't see him yet. But we're in voice contact and we're examining our options. We didn't have many options, but we're looking, you know, what could we do? What could we do?

And we could do nothing except call on the radio, and I contacted again, or he contacted me, Mark Foran, battalion chief, and he was coming to get us. And two hours, two and a half hours, I'm laying on my back, I can't look up because of the lights, but I'm laying on my back and it's black, because we're trying to conserve, and all of a sudden, I think it's an optical illusion, I see a little bit of light. I think I'm hallucinating and I yell to Jay, Jay, do you see that? And we're all going through the same thing. So all of a sudden, yeah, yeah. So I say what is it? And as we're looking at it, we're just staring at it, it's getting brighter and brighter.

What it was, was a small opening, but all that dust, that big cloud of dust that everyone sees, that hung there, and the smoke because the buildings were on fire. There was a small opening, but the dust and the dirt and the smoke was obscuring it. It was black for hours. But now all of a sudden --

MONTEL WILLIAMS: It starts to clear.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: -- the light shines. I mean, this is like a movie, but it's the truth. I say, Jay, you know, I call to Jay, Jay, do you think you could get to that? And his guys are banged up. But now I'm yelling to Mark, Mark, I can see light. I can see light. I'm shining my light out. The World Trade Center is a 16-acre complex. During the middle of the day, I'm shining a flashlight out a window. No one is going to see that. But my mind is going. I say great. Ten hours from now it's going to be dark, or eight hours, whatever, it's going to be. I don't know what time it is. It's going to be dark and then they'll see that light. So we're saved, you know, it's just a matter of time, but they're going to get to us.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: So, Rich, the light is shining through, you've notified people on the outside that you were at least seeing light, so they are probably feeling a little bit better and thinking that, okay, we have men down, but there has got to be a way to get to them, or what did they say to you?

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: I'm notifying one person. A lot of people aren't hearing this. So I start climbing up, and when I get to that light, I get out that and then it opens up to a lot. I mean, I'm looking out on the rubble field. I'm looking out at a big area, almost the size of a football field, and, hallelujah, we're out of here. I mean, I got hurt people, you know. So I called Jay up, Jay, get up here, you've got to get up here, you know, we're out. We're out.

We're out, but if you looked at it, it just looks like a pile of rubble. There's piles of rubble all over the place. We're just a pile of rubble, but we're in this pile, you know, there's piles all over the place. From the bottom of the rubble field, we're about, you know, it's a guesstimate, 30, 40 feet high. So now I bring my siren up again, my bullhorn, Mark, I'm out. Listen to this. Listen. So he hears it. I said come get us.

Fifteen minutes later, no one is there. Over an hour, hour and a half later, we're in contact and, I

mean, I could see an area, like I said, the size of a football field.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: And nobody comes.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: And not a single person.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: When do they finally get to you?

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Mark and 43 Truck go through I don't know if it was 5 or 7 World Trade

Center, a building that also partially collapsed but was burning. Now, there's no lines on this

building, nothing to put the fire out, but they're coming through the building to get to us.

Finally, on the other side of the rubble field, I see one guy and, you know, I'm ecstatic.

But I climbed down. It takes a long time and I eventually get to the rubble field. Like I said, the

building that they came through is on fire. They're getting called back. You've got to get back

now or we're not going to get through. The guys go. A few minutes later they come back. We

can't get back that way. The way they came they can't get back.

The expression out of the frying pan into the fire? That building, the fire is intensifying. We're

out in the open but acrid smoke is hitting us.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Heat.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Burning my eyes. The doctor told me that there's burns like peppered,

there's little holes burnt into the cornea. He says it's going to be fine; it's just a matter of time.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Your wife is here. Debbie, come up here.

We're going to welcome Debbie to the show. You can have my seat. Have my seat. This is

Debbie Picciotto, who is Rich's wife. Guys, give it up.

(Applause.)

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Debbie, this entire time this is happening, you know this man.

DEBBIE PICCIOTTO: Yes.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: So you know he's going to be one of the guys that went running down

there as soon as he found out something was wrong.

DEBBIE PICCIOTTO: Actually, there's got to be something wrong with me. After 28 years of him being on the Fire Department, I have like this block and I don't think of him fighting fires. I don't know whether it's a protective mechanism or what. I think of him going in and being with his men and they're all friends, and I'm worried about my daughter, who goes to Pace down there. I don't worry about him. I think that he's not going to be there for a while. I didn't think that he would be there that soon. So I didn't know that he was trapped.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Did you try to call him?

DEBBIE PICCIOTTO: No.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: So during that whole four hour period of time --

DEBBIE PICCIOTTO: I kept saying to myself --

MONTEL WILLIAMS: You're calling your daughter.

DEBBIE PICCIOTTO: I was trying to call her. I said he must be very busy. He's directing people. I don't expect to hear from him. And she called me and said daddy's down there, and I said, no, Lisa. He's very busy. That's why he hasn't called us. You know, daddy's fine. But he wasn't.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: I would say I know you guys already recognize him as the hero that he is, do you not?

DEBBIE PICCIOTTO: He's unbelievable. I hadn't been able to really listen to the story start to finish until about five days afterwards because I just kept getting up and leaving. I couldn't believe what he went through. He's definitely an unbelievable hero.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Please welcome Rich's family, his wife Debbie and his children, Lisa and Steven, to the show. Lisa, you contacted your dad, right, or how did that happen?

LISA PICCIOTTO: No. What happened was I go to Pace University, so I was down there, too, and one of my roommates, her father is also a fireman. She heard from her father and I didn't hear from my father. So I was just waiting and I was evacuated and I was put on a boat to Staten Island. So I was in Staten Island. So I didn't hear.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: But for you, just like your mom, I mean, he's a battalion chief. You probably thought in the back of your mind, well, he's just busy, he's just busy, or did you think there was something wrong?

LISA PICCIOTTO: There was no doubt in my mind that he was there. I didn't know to the extent that he was there, but I knew he was there. And to be perfectly honest, I thought he was the first guy there because that's just the personality that he is.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: So, therefore, when you saw the image of that building coming down, what did you think?

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Not the image.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: You were there and saw it.

LISA PICCIOTTO: I was there.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: She saw the second plane hit and saw both buildings come down live.

LISA PICCIOTTO: Right. I think that my scariest thing is when I saw on the news they said

200-plus firemen are missing. That's when I just lost it.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Is that when it hit you too, Steven.

STEVEN PICCIOTTO: Well, I got sent home from school and I didn't know what was going on, and my mom was at work. So we were all in different places, none of us were together, and I was the first to find out everything. Someone came to the door and said that your father is out and he's okay and he didn't know anything else. So I was like, well, what do you mean, he's out? He's out of what? What happened? And he's like, well, I don't know the story. And this is at like 3:30, 3:45, and he's been trapped since 9:00 o'clock. So we knew nothing for that long. And I got a phone call from Mrs. Jonas and she told me the whole story.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: That's Jay, the guy I was with.

STEVEN PICCIOTTO: She told me the whole story, and then I called my mom at work and I told

her.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: That's when you first found out about it?

DEBBIE PICCIOTTO: That's when I lost it.

STEVEN PICCIOTTO: That's when she first found out.

LISA PICCIOTTO: So I'm on Staten Island and I still don't know because I'm taking the ferry

over.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: You've got to ask her what she did before she went because I'm very proud

of her.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: What did you do before you went out of Staten Island?

LISA PICCIOTTO: Well, the thing is, before we were able to get out of Staten Island, we were so antsy, we had to do something. So my roommates and I, we wanted to go donate blood, but the line was just phenomenal already and downtown was being totally evacuated, so they kind of turned us away and that's when we were pushed on the ferry boats.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: You went ahead and donated blood later.

LISA PICCIOTTO: Yes.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Absolutely. It is a miracle that he is here, but I would venture to say America now realizes the hero that he was and is. I think, Rich, just your coming up out of that hole is what inspired so many people to keep working so hard because they realized there is a survivor, somebody survived, and I would say that's the double piece to your being a hero because there are people down there working so hard.

DEBBIE PICCIOTTO: So hard.

MONTEL WILLIAMS: Just because they saw you.

CHIEF PICCIOTTO: Yes. And I went to visit, you know, I lost guys in my company, I lost guys, I can't go to work because of my eyes, so I had to do something. So I'm going to visit these wives and all the wives out there, I'm trying to give them hope, you know, I survived, but realistically, you know, at this point, you know, there's still hope, there's hope, but I want people to be realistic that it's very slim. But you have to help these wives now. They need help.