# WORLD TRADE CENTER TASK FORCE INTERVIEW CHIEF ALBERT TURI

Interview Date: October 23, 2001

Transcribed by Nancy Francis

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MR. McCOURT: The date is October 23rd,

2001. The time is 1445 hours. My name is Tom McCourt,

New York City Fire Department. Currently I'm with

Assistant Commissioner James Drury and we are in the

process of conducting an interview with Deputy

Assistant Chief of Safety Albert Turi.

- Q. Can you just identify yourself, please?
- A. Yes. DAC Al Turi, Chief of Safety.
- Q. Chief at this time, you know the subject matter that we're here on, September 11th, and we would just ask you if you could tell us what you saw, heard and did that day starting with when you first found out that a plane had hit a tower at the World Trade Center.
  - A. Okay. I'll start right at the beginning.

At approximately maybe about twenty of 9:00, quarter to 9:00, we're sitting in the Command Center, Chiefs Barbara, Callan and Cassano, and heard a large thud, which I thought at the time was somebody dropping a case of books on the floor above us, and I made a little joke that I'd better go up and take a look; somebody may have gotten hurt. What that thud was as it turned out to be was the impact of the first aircraft hitting the north tower.

About 30 seconds later, a report came over the radio of a plane hitting the Trade Center, and I'm not sure if that initial report said a plane or a propane explosion, but they said the entire side of the Trade Center was on fire. Chief Callan immediately got up. He was the citywide on duty and he left the office immediately. I continued listening to the radio for a few more seconds and it was pretty obvious that something catastrophic had happened.

So I left the Command Center with the intent of responding and I saw Donald Burns coming down the hallway and he stated that a plane had just hit the Trade Center. My aide was on vacation, so I grabbed Lieutenant Chiafari, who was assigned to Safety Command, and we went down to the garage and we were responding.

At some point when I was going over the Brooklyn Bridge, I could clearly see the tower and I started counting what I thought was how many floors were involved in the fire, and from that vantage point I thought we had somewhere between six and eight floors of fire, floor areas that I would consider to be fully involved in fire, and I said to Joe, Joe, this is no accident. It's a clear day. No one could hit this

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thing by accident. This is something intentional.

- Q. And Joe, chief, is --
- A. Joe Chiafari. He's a lieutenant that works here. Then I further stated that we do not have the capability to put that many floors of fire out. I knew right from the start that there was no way this Fire Department could extinguish six or eight floors of fire fully involved in a high-rise building. It's just not possible because we don't have the means to do it.

So we were responding in. We parked the car on the corner of Fulton and Church. It was on the extreme east side of the Trade Center. I got out of the car, Joe got out, went to the trunk, and I was starting to don my bunker gear. I was putting on my pants and boots when I heard something similar to the sound of a jet aircraft taking off, and when I looked up I saw the impact of the second plane hitting the south tower and immediately an enormous fireball erupted that actually masked the entire upper half of the building and part of the north tower. It was so enormous that even from that great distance I could feel the radiant heat on my face. Within seconds we had to turn and run east on Fulton because debris was falling actually where we parked the car, even at that

great of a distance, and there were it seemed like hundreds of people in the street running in every direction.

I ran about 50 yards and my hearing was telling me that the debris has stopped falling. I turned around to assess the situation, and the fireball had pretty much dissipated, and what I actually thought at that time, and mistakenly so, was it's not as bad as it looks; most of the fuel was expended on the exterior of the building. That's what I originally thought.

So we ran back to the car and laying right in back of my car was a large object which I thought was probably part of one of the aircraft turbines. It was laying about ten feet away from the car and it was still on fire, smoking and fire. I finished putting on my gear and Lieutenant Chiafari put on his gear, actually he put on my aide's gear, and we walked north on Church. As we were walking, I could see multiple jumpers jumping from Tower 1. I'm going to guess about probably ten. We turned left on Vesey and we headed towards West Street.

We got to West Street and I looked back up and now I could see the other part of the tower, more or less the north and west side, people jumping on that

side, and I decided to enter the lobby of Tower 1, and I was pretty much looking up most of the time. I didn't want to be killed by someone falling on top of me.

We entered the lobby and I saw Commissioner
Von Essen, Commissioner Fitzpatrick was in there, Bill
Feehan, Joe Callan and Pete Hayden. Those are the
people I immediately recognized. I went over to the
Commissioner and informed him that the second plane had
hit the south tower. He already knew that. I then
said, you know, this is an absolute terrorist attack.
They had already surmised that. I said you'd better
put in a full recall. We're going to need all the help
we can get. And we briefly discussed the recall.

- Q. For the record, chief, would you explain what a recall is?
- A. A full recall would mean we would call in every off-duty firefighter.

Then we briefly discussed how we would accomplish this and I suggested staging areas like Shea Stadium, Penn Station, Grand Central, where we could get large numbers of people and move them down by subway, because there wouldn't be a need for apparatus; it would be a need for manpower for relief purposes.

Then I went over to talk to Chiefs Callan and Hayden, who were the incident commanders, Chief Callan being the incident commander, Chief Hayden being the deputy chief in the 1st Division who had responded, and I stated to them that there is no possible way that we could extinguish this fire, and they were certainly in agreement with that, and that it should strictly be an evacuation procedure and to get as many people out of the building as quickly as we can, and I remember being extremely concerned that we would have a lot of our people up in the building and a third aircraft would then strike it. I was deathly afraid of another inbound aircraft coming in and hitting the building while our people were up in the stairwells.

Then there was a brief discussion about, since we had two towers going, that the lobby of Tower 1 would not be a good place for a main incident command post. I didn't know at that time that Chief Ganci and Cassano were already setting up something on the median of West Street. So I told them that I would go across on West Street and find a suitable place. As I left the building, I heard a body hit about 15 feet from me, but I never turned around and looked.

When I hit the median on West Street, the

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command post was there. It was in the process of being moved fully across West Street. I went across West Street. They had just set it up on I believe the building is 2 World Financial Center.

- Q. Let me stop you there for a second, chief.

  When you were in the lobby of 1 World Trade,

  can you describe the interior and the condition of the

  lobby?
- A. Yes. I was surprised that all the glass was mostly out. I wasn't sure how it got out. I didn't think we took it out. I just assumed that it was the vibration of the aircraft hitting it. And I did notice some pieces of marble that looked like it was dislodged from the core area.
- Q. Can you describe how many civilians you might have seen at that point?
- A. I can talk about that because that surprised me. There were very few civilians, very few, which just led me to believe they had already left, the people that could get out on their own, or they were exiting another way out I couldn't see. But usually during a high-rise fire, and I've been to 20 of them in my career, there's usually so many civilians in the lobby that it becomes a problem, and that was notably

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absent.

- Q. Just for the record, again, this command post inside the lobby faced out on what street; West Street?
- A. Well, it's the lobby command post and it was closest to West Street. That's where the fire command station is for that building. That's where the lobby command post was being established.
- Q. Was there any discussion at that point in time, before we get back to your story, with anybody or any of the personnel that worked in the World Trade

  Center about the condition of elevators, whether they were working or not?
- A. Not to my knowledge. I'm sure it was done. I mean, in fact, I know it was done because I've seen the video, but not when I was in there, and I really wasn't concerned about it at that point.
- Q. Did you later find out whether they were operational or not?
- A. I believe they were not operational. That's what I believe.
- Q. Okay. So you left off before I interrupted you about the command post now being moved over to 2 World Financial Center.
  - A. When I reached there, let me see who was

there that I remember. Let's refer to these notes. (Pause.)

A. When I got there, the people that I remember being there were Chief Ganci and Chief Cassano, and there were other personnel who I just don't remember who they were. And I said to them that even this place was not a safe position for it.

So I looked about 20 feet to my north and there was a ramp going to an underground garage and I told them to move it to that ramp for fear that flying glass would scale hundreds of feet and we would at least have a place to duck in and get away from it if it should happen, and that was done immediately. We did that immediately. And then I had a brief discussion with Chief Ganci and I told him that, Pete, we're going to lose some people here. It's inevitable. It's too tremendous. We're probably going to lose some people.

Then we were trying to establish communications with both towers trying to figure out what commanders were in what tower. We were trying to set up the command board to place units, where we had assigned them or who had been previously assigned before we got there, and the handie-talkie

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communications were very poor at best.

- Q. Just stopping for a second, chief, when you said that to Chief Ganci, did he respond in any way?
- A. He just nodded in agreement. We were looking at two large bodies of fires that neither of us in our 33-year careers had ever seen anything that enormous. So it's pretty much, you know, I thought we would lose a company or two possibly. I didn't think we would come out of this unscathed at all. It was just too enormous.

So we were trying to identify the companies and place them, we were trying to get units on the proper radio. We had chosen different frequencies for different buildings. We were not very successful contacting all the units or all the commanders.

- ${\tt Q.}$  Do you know over what frequency you operated on?
- A. No. And I started writing this all down on a clipboard, which I later lost, so unfortunately I don't have that record.

I knew that without communications there could be absolutely nothing that could have been done safely there because in every fatal fire that I've looked at where firemen have lost their lives,

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communications always plays some part in it, either a lack of or missed communications. It always plays a part in a firefighting fatality and I was really concerned about getting the proper communications network set up. And here is where I probably lose a little bit of my sense of time. I'm not sure how long we were trying to do that. I'm going to guess 15 minutes or so.

- Q. Had you seen Chief Burns or Chief Downey at all up to this point?
  - A. No.
  - Q. What about Father Judge?
- A. I hadn't seen him. He was probably in the lobby when I was in there, but I don't recall seeing him.

And I thought to myself that, based on other high-rise fires that had burned out of control, that we would probably have some type of localized collapse up on the upper floors, especially in the core area of the building, which I mistakenly thought was block construction. After further investigation, of course, after the fact, it wasn't block construction. The elevator cores were encased in sheetrock actually.

Q. For the record, would you tell us what block

construction is?

A. Yes. Block is usually like a four-inch cement block that's laid and that's what encloses elevator shafts. In the construction of the Trade Center, due to the high speed and the travel distance of the elevators, they used a sheetrock construction over steel so there was more give for the wind forces created by the elevators. They felt that it would probably have knocked the block over. So I thought we would be pretty good for about three hours. Three hours is usually what the fire walls are rated for in high-rise construction. It's usually a three-hour rating. We didn't have any indications of any structural stability at that time.

Then Steve Mosiello, Chief Ganci's executive assistant, came over to the command post and he said we're getting reports from OEM that the buildings are not structurally sound, and of course that got our attention really quick, and Pete said, well, who are we getting these reports from? And then Steve brought an EMT person over to the command post who was I think sent as a runner to tell us this and Chief Ganci questioned him, where are we getting these reports?

And his answer was something, you know, we're not sure,

OEM is just reporting this.

And within ten seconds of that conversation,

I was writing on my clipboard -- can I use foul
language on this?

- Q. Absolutely. That conversation, by the way, took place in the ramp driveway leading into the garage?
- A. That is correct; right at the ramp. The ramp was still on the exterior. We were not in the garage.

  Maybe 20 feet from the opening of the garage.

The next thing I heard was Pete say what the fuck is this? And as my eyes traveled up the building, and I was looking at the south tower, somewhere about halfway up, my initial reaction was there was a secondary explosion, and the entire floor area, a ring right around the building blew out. I later realized that the building had started to collapse already and this was the air being compressed and that is the floor that let go. And as my eyes traveled further up the building, I realized that this building was collapsing and I turned around and most everybody was ahead of me running for the garage, and I remember thinking I looked at this thing a little bit too long and I might not make this garage. But I did.

And I got about 20 feet down the ramp into the garage, I'm going to estimate 15 to 20 feet, when all the dust from debris blew into the garage like it was a hurricane force wind and I ducked into some small alcove. Most of the remainder of the people were in the garage deeper than I was because I was still on the ramp. I could feel the incline. And you could hear heavy objects falling outside and I said to myself, well, if this building doesn't collapse around me, we'll probably survive this. Then the dust got so thick and it became so black at one time I thought, wow, 33 years under some terrible conditions and I'm going to smother in dust and die. I didn't like that thought.

When I stopped hearing objects hitting the sidewalk, I knew where I was, I could still feel the incline of the ramp, I decided to exit the way I had come in, and it was so dark, I could hear other voices around me, there was also other people coming out that same way, but it was so pitch black that I did not know I was outside of the garage until I walked into a tree on the sidewalk, and I actually felt good about that. At least I knew I was outside. I was extremely concerned that falling debris would block my exit out

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that way and then I would have to go back into the garage and find another way out.

- Q. Let me stop you for a moment, chief.

  How long do you think the debris was coming
  down for, guesstimating?
  - A. I'm going to guesstimate like a minute.
- Q. And when you went back out, can you describe the type of debris you were walking around or over?
- A. I stepped over stuff, I was tripping on stuff, I stepped over probably some pieces of steel, and I just waited until the dust lifted so I could see what the hell happened. I mean, I knew what happened. I just wanted to see how bad it really was.
- Q. Was there anybody else with you at that time or within close proximity?
- A. There were people but I don't know who. I could hear voices but I could not see. I couldn't see my hand in front of my face.
- Q. And the debris went all the way up the driveway ramp?
- A. Oh, yes. And I've got to regress a minute because I forgot something.

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through my mind was, my God, we just lost 250 men.
That's something I'll never forget.

So I think I stayed out in the front for about I'm going to guess five, ten minutes tops, as the dust lifted, and Chief Ganci came around the corner.

He had gotten out through a stairwell in the garage.

And we regrouped at my position where the original command post was and I said, Pete, that building just collapsed. Get everybody out of the north tower. A collapse is imminent. If it happened there, it's going to happen here. We've got to get everybody out.

I heard him give that order over the handie-talkie. But not mine. Mine had ceased to work. Maybe it had dust in it or whatever happened. My handie-talkie was no longer working. I heard him verbally issue that order more than once. I could not hear if it was received or it was acknowledged.

And there were a lot of people mulling around in the street, people who were in shock.

- Q. Firefighters, not civilians?
- A. EMS personnel, firefighters and some civilians.
  - Q. Let me backtrack for a second.

    Chief Feehan, do you know if he ran into the

garage with Chief Ganci and was he back out on the street with Chief Ganci?

A. You know, I don't remember. I don't remember that. My main concern at this point was to move all the people that were milling around in front of Tower 1 somewhere else. I was still very, very concerned that there would be another aircraft coming in and it would hit one of the other tall buildings, and I remember looking up West Street thinking that I've got to move everybody almost up to Chambers Street because there were no high-rise buildings taller than about six stories there. I was looking for a place to stage a triage.

And I ran to the middle of West Street and I was screaming at people to move, move up north, move up north, and I saw an ESU vehicle, Emergency Services truck, and I saw Chief Garcia standing up there on West and Vesey and I asked him, Louie, look in that truck, see if you can find me a bullhorn, which he did. He gave me a bullhorn and I was screaming over the bullhorn for people to move three blocks north of my position. And Chief Ganci had been a little bit north at that point of that crossover that eventually collapsed with the collapsing Tower 1 and I thought he

was coming towards where I was and I kept screaming over the bullhorn. I believe it was somewhat effective. There were people now listening to it and starting to move, and I saw a battalion chief coming up who was evacuating the area that I just was trying to get evacuated. I gave him the bullhorn and said continue this. Get everybody out of here. They've got to get three blocks north.

And I started walking south on West Street to find out where Chief Ganci went when I heard this enormous roar. It was the same roar I heard when the south tower collapsed and I knew that this was collapsing. I didn't even look at it this time. I turned around and I started running north on West Street. I probably ran a half a block before the dust was so choking that, if I continued to run, I thought I would die, and I laid on the ground and put my coat over my face. And there was a young firefighter next to me who said we're going to die here, we're going to die, I can't breathe, and I remember saying to him I just went through this 20 minutes ago. You're not going to die. Just calm down. We're going to wait here for ten minutes, whatever it takes, and we'll be fine. We're not dead yet. I could hear pieces of

metal falling in the area but nothing really close that concerned me.

Then within about five minutes I pretty much peeked out of my coat and realized we could get up and move a little further north, which we did. Then I remember seeing firefighters coming from the Chambers Street area towards me and I saw Chief Nardone, who I know personally from the 9th Battalion, who was arriving on the scene, and I requested that he set up a staging and triage area up towards Chambers Street and to separate all the people that were coming out of the area versus the fresh troops who were coming in and to hold them all there; don't let anybody in. Then I saw Chief Fischler, who I also know personally, and asked him to assist Chief Nardone with that task.

Then I saw Commissioner Fitzpatrick and we were trying to get all the fresh troops on one side of West Street, all the walking wounded on the other side, and then my eyes were so irritated that I just couldn't see out of them anymore. I sat down on the median and someone brought me a bottle of water and I was trying to flush my eyes out. Then I talked to some news media people at that time. I'm not even sure what I told them. But I did talk to some news media.

Once my eyesight got a little bit better, I returned south on West Street to approximately Vesey, and I can't remember exactly who I saw there, but I knew that Chief Ganci was most likely dead because I had seen him going a little bit south after I had left him. The next thing I remember clearly is that I thought I might be the only staff chief left alive. I didn't see Chief Cassano. I thought Chief Ganci was dead. I had no idea where Chief Barbara or Chief Burns were, although I assumed they were in the south tower and I assumed that they were dead. I did not know Chief Callan made it out of the north tower. I thought he was probably dead.

- Q. Chief Nigro?
- A. I did not see Chief Nigro at all. I don't even remember seeing Chief Nigro when I first got there.
- Q. Stepping back for a second, chief, when the command post was set up in front of 2 World Financial and after the first collapse and as you were coming back down the street even after the second collapse, can you describe what was in the street on West Street in terms of rigs, ambulances?
  - A. Well, I'll tell you the truth. I can't

remember. I mean, it was just horrible. At some point after that -- I can't remember exactly when I met Chief Cruthers. I think it was probably very shortly after at that point. Chief Cruthers had made his way to West and Vesey and I saw Chief Nigro come in at that point from somewhere and my impression was that Dan was pretty much in shock, and I remember saying to Chief Cruthers, Frank, you're going to have to take charge of this. I don't think either of us are in any condition to do anything right now. And he acknowledged that fact and he then became the commander at that point.

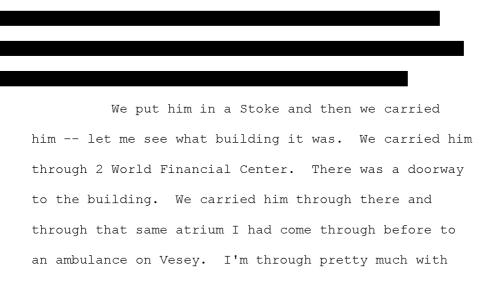
Then I asked for two volunteer companies to come with me. I was going to go try and find Chief Ganci where I last saw him. Two companies came with me and we were poking around in the rubble, stepping over, climbing up. I looked up at the top of I guess at that point it was 3 World Financial Center just north of the Winter Garden and I saw large pieces of brickwork and building flapping, so I abandoned that search. I could not put those men in danger.

- Q. How many men are we talking about at that point?
- A. I had about twelve men with me from two companies. So I abandoned that. I said this is too

dangerous. I can't get anybody hurt looking for one person. So I returned to the command post that Frank Cruthers had set up, asked him what I could do for him. This probably took a half an hour I'm thinking, somewhere around there, and at that time he said to me if I could find my way to the south end of Vesey Street, because the north bridge had collapsed in the street and you couldn't pass, if I could get down to the other end and take command of that sector.

So probably I went through the building at 3
World Financial Center, went through part of the atrium
that was still standing of the Winter Garden, went
around back by the river and came out somewhere I
believe on Liberty Street, and Chief Visconti had
responded. He was pretty much running a search
operation with about five or six companies looking for
victims. I made my way over to Chief Visconti and I
actually told him that, Nick, I'm going to assume
command here, but mentally I'm not in the best shape to
do that and I would appreciate it if he would continue
operating and taking charge and just keep me informed
of the status reports.

About 15 minutes later, there were a group of firefighters searching the pile who yelled over that



Then I saw Steve Mosiello and told him, I remember saying to him, Steve, I told you I wouldn't leave here without Pete. He's in the ambulance dead.

that.

So Steve and I took it on our own and got ahold of a high-ranking police official and we got a car to take us out to Pete's house to notify his wife. And that's what we did. We went out, notified his wife, and I got a police vehicle to take me back to my home in Queens and I took a hot shower, change of clothes.

Chief Nigro, who does not live too far from me, he lives about a half a mile from me or a mile, I got ahold of him on the telephone. He told me he was home also and I said I'm going to go back but I don't have a car, you know, don't worry about it, I'm going back as soon as I just clean up, he picked me up and we went back to the site.

- Q. What time was this about, chief; daylight?
- A. No, it was dark. I'm going to guess it was 9:00 o'clock at night.
- Q. Had you heard anything about First Deputy Commissioner Feehan at this point?
- A. No. My memory is vague and I almost swear that I saw Bill with Pete pretty much on the north side of that bridge and, again, my handie-talkie was dead

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and I could see Pete on the handie-talkie and he started heading south and I think Commissioner Feehan was with him at that point. Later on I think what happened is there were probably dozens of Maydays transmitted and I'm sure that he was going back to address some of these, what he thought he could do, you know, when the second tower collapsed.

- Q. When did you find out that he was missing or had been killed?
- A. Well, after I started trying to set up that staging area, that triage area, you know, I was asking people, have you heard from him, have you heard from him. I saw Steve. He couldn't raise him. And I knew from where he was heading, unless it's a miracle, he was crushed down there. I pretty much knew at that point; in my heart I knew that I'm never going to see him again.
- Q. Describe the debris you saw when you finally got down to Liberty Street in attempting to do the rescue with the other squad.
- A. I guess the debris was steel and dust. Steel and dust, in some spots two stories hight, in most spots ten feet high covering the entire West Street.
  - Q. West Street entirely covered?

- A. Rigs buried. I don't even remember seeing rigs. I remember seeing a crushed rig on the north side of the bridge, but I don't know what rig it was, and the debris was equally high there. I remember saying to myself this is not a survivable collapse, that any survivors that survived I can probably see. I didn't think there would be anybody else. Fortunately for five or six of our people, I was wrong and people were rescued out of a stairwell sometime later.
  - Q. You're referring to Ladder 6?
- A. Yes, Ladder 6 and the 11th Battalion, Richie Picciotto, Jay Jonas. I didn't think there would be any survivors.

When we went back, Chief Nigro and myself, we pretty much just kept walking around the area looking in disbelief, looking at the operations that were going on, and then we came back here. I think we were here about 4:00 o'clock in the morning. We sat down and started making some notes so I would remember some things. There were some priorities that I thought what we had to do. That had already happened. I mean, priority? I thought the Department, at that time, I mean, we've got to man the units. We've got to provide coverage for the city. That's what was really

important at that time. I didn't think this was going to be the end of it by any means.

I tried to lay down about 5:00 in the morning for about an hour. I couldn't sleep. Pretty much the rest of that day is a blur. I don't know what the hell I was doing.

ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER DRURY: I think this would be an appropriate point to end this interview then, chief. I want to thank you very much.

The interview was concluded at 1527 hours.