

Neal Flomenbaum, MD  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



# First Responders: The Never-Ending Challenge

Each June, on the day that we welcome new residents to our emergency medicine residency program at NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital, we pause in front of a memorial near the East River entrance that honors our EMTs who perished at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. I would like to share with you some adapted parts of the remarks I make on that occasion.

On the morning of June 15, 1904, a steamship carrying more than 1,300 passengers—mostly women and children—departed from a pier about 3 miles south of here for a day trip to Long Island. Only minutes after beginning its journey, at a point close to where we are standing, the ship burst into flames. Without a safe place to beach the vessel, the captain proceeded at full speed until he found a soft landing near the Bronx. The lifeboats were inoperable, and the cork life preservers had long since rotted away, so passengers who were still alive began leaping from the burning boat—some dying of burns, some drowning, while others succumbed to smoke inhalation. Men on shore who were the first responders of their day—with no training in rescue operations—dove into the water

to try to save them. Though largely forgotten, on that day, 1,021 people perished in what was the single deadliest tragedy in New York City history, until September 11, 2001.

Almost 100 years later, an even greater loss of human life occurred when two planes were deliberately crashed into the twin towers of the World Trade Center. Nine EMS crews from this hospital joined thousands of their fellow first responders at the scene. Ten patients with burns covering 80% to 100% of their bodies were transported directly from the site to our ED and burn center, while seven more burn patients were transferred from other hospitals. Twelve patients were treated and admitted for trauma and other problems, and 87 patients were treated and released from our ED. Though eight of our nine responding EMS vehicles were demolished by the falling towers, most of the crews survived. EMTs Fairben and Santoro died under WTC 2 when it collapsed on them as they were rescuing people in the lobby. Among the almost 2,700 people who died that day were over 400 first responders who had rushed to help at that scene of death and destruction.

Two tragic episodes separated by almost 100 years remind us that

there will always be unimaginable hardships and challenges to overcome and test the mettle of those of us who have chosen to place ourselves on the front lines of medical care. Our prehospital care colleagues expose themselves daily to personal risk in fulfilling their mission and are the first responders to injury and illness, while we as emergency physicians and nurses, in turn, are the first responders to the first responders....

At this point, I was planning to write that though these remarks were composed for young emergency physicians training in New York City, they apply to all EPs, regardless of where they train and practice. However, before I could do so, I read a first-person account by Kevin Kikta, DO, who was on duty in the ED at St. John's Medical Center in Joplin, Missouri, on May 22, 2011, when both were struck by a category EF5 tornado. Dr. Kikta makes this point far better than I could have hoped to, and you can read his story at [www.mercy.net/joplin/stories-of-mercy/45-seconds](http://www.mercy.net/joplin/stories-of-mercy/45-seconds).

Welcome to the never-ending challenge of rescuing and treating the sick, the injured, and the incapacitated. **EM**