

EMS

THE LIFE OF YOUR JOB

DEVIN KERINS



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I'm standing on the pier at Exchange Place looking out across the Hudson River at a New York City skyline that now seems naked. Exactly one year since the Towers fell, and I still have yet to get used to the skyline without them.

The 9-11 Memorial Committee has organized an emotional ceremony to commemorate the day that forever changed our lives. My partner and I stand in the crowd with people from all walks of life and listen to the speeches, poems, and songs that those gathered have written.

The Committee has arranged for one white dove to be released into the air for each resident of Jersey City who died in the attack. I well up with tears as they read off the names and a police officer plays *Taps* on a bugle. Then, the moment they have been building up to, the Committee releases the birds into the air.

Something has gone wrong. Only half of the birds are able to fly. The rest plunge into the Hudson River. Of those that could fly, most carelessly defecate on the Parking Authority personnel who have gathered, arousing a loud cheer from the attendees. I watch in disbelief as a rouge bird

flies directly at my partner and me. At the last moment, the dove banks to the left and flies into the side of the office building we are standing next to. I watch as he slides down the glass and remains motionless.

“Dude,” my partner says, “I think he’s dead.”

Right on cue, the bird scrambles to his feet. I raise my hands in triumph and exclaim, “He’s okay!” The people around me cheer again.

As I spend the next half-hour fishing doves out the Hudson River, one thought keeps creeping into my mind – *It must be me!* Even at such a somber occasion, I still attract the strange and unusual.

September 11th, 2001 will forever be, in my mind, the day the world found out why emergency service personnel do their jobs. The world saw images of heroic firefighters and police officers rushing into the World Trade Center to save lives. The world saw images of EMTs and paramedics rendering care to an overwhelming number of patients. And for the first time that I can recall, we were looked upon as heroes, as people to look up to.

Little children began to see “ordinary,” hardworking individuals as something to aspire to be, instead of just looking up to sports figures. At an event stand a few months later, a group of kids asked me for my autograph.

People saw the reason for our job. We rush in when everyone else rushes out. We, a select few number of people, have dedicated ourselves to risking our lives so that others may live. It’s not an easy job, and it’s certainly not for everyone.

The turnover rate for EMTs and paramedics is high. Many only stay for a few short years – using the job as a springboard to get ahead in other fields. Some go on to become doctors or nurses or other higher paying positions within the medical field. Others use the teamwork and leadership skills they learned on the job to go on to

completely unrelated fields. It seems that only a small number make a career out of it. I've been doing this for almost ten years. At age 26, I am often looked upon as a "dinosaur." I feel like one when I tell newer guys who are older than I am how we did things when I started. "Back in my day..."

There are any number of reasons why EMTs burn out quickly: the ever present-fear of being sued, the stress of dealing with management, health care reforms, and a variety of other restrictions that constantly hinder us from doing the job the way we wish we could. Add to that the stress of knowing that you'll most likely come home late from every shift, if you come home at all.

Why would anyone want to stay in such a stressful and dangerous job? The answer to that becomes clear to me a few hours after the morning's 9-11 ceremonies.

The Committee has also planned to have a free concert in Liberty State Park. We've been called in to stand by at the event, which is expected to attract thousands, as well as celebrities and politicians of all sorts. In accordance with the way the day seems to be going, nothing is going right for the concert people. To top things off, the wind has picked up and is threatening to blow the stage over. They cancel the concert, but the EMTs are stuck in the park until the stage is taken apart.

With nothing to do and left up to our own devices, we have to amuse ourselves. Conversation starts up with gossip and making fun of each other. Occasionally someone throws in a "war" story, which is then countered by another person trying to outdo the other. I look up from the mindless banter in time to see someone slip a sandwich unnoticed into the lapel of the current speaker's jacket. We try not to laugh and see how long he'll go without noticing the sandwich on his shoulder.

This carries on into the evening. We watch the sun set behind the Statue of Liberty together. Then, beneath the stars,

our conversation turns to a tearful remembrance of friends lost in the attacks. The tears don't last as long as they used to, and for the first time in a year, we agree that we've begun to feel "normal" again.

Though things will never be the same, we have learned to lean on each other in hard times. EMS has always been a tight community, but following the attacks, we've become even closer. It's that camaraderie that allows us to go to work everyday with a smile on our faces. It's what allows us to tease each other relentlessly without hurting feelings. It's what forms bonds between partners that make us almost as strong as brothers. It's what creates memories like these that will stay with us for a lifetime and keeps us coming back for more.