

From Ground Zero to coalition building

CANADA'S DIPLOMATS GEAR UP

It was just before 9:00 A.M. on September 11 when Serge Paquette glanced at one of the many television monitors in the Operations Centre of Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade in Ottawa. Like millions of others around the world, he was dumbstruck by what he saw.

When the second airliner hit New York's World Trade Center 20 minutes later, the Deputy Director for Emergency Services knew he was about to face his biggest crisis.

International disasters that affect Canadians abroad—usually natural

disasters such as hurricanes or earthquakes—are dealt with routinely by Mr. Paquette's emergency services staff. The Consular Affairs Bureau is accustomed to coordinating evacuations and repatriations, and contacting friends and relatives of those involved. But nothing so unexpected and destructive as this had ever happened before.

By 10:00 A.M., Mr. Paquette was in the first of many task force meetings on handling the crisis. By midday, all Canadian embassies and high commissions were ordered into emergency 24-hour-service mode.

The top priority was to help citizens affected by the tragedy. Teams worked around the clock answering telephone calls from distressed friends and family, locating those lost at Ground Zero (the attack site in New York), and assisting Canadians abroad who had been grounded by the ban on air travel.

On the first day, the 15 telephone lines in the Operations Centre received 5500 calls. Over the course of the next two weeks, a total of 24 000 calls were dealt with.

"The fundamental reason for our existence is the well-being of Canadians when they're out of the country," says Gar Pardy, Director General of Consular Services. "On September 11, the safety of Canadians was our one objective. Everything else stopped."

Ground Zero

In New York, the lion's share of the work fell to the staff at the Canadian Consulate General. Their immediate task was to find out whether Canadians had been on any of the hijacked planes or in the World Trade Center.

On any given day, up to 200 000 Canadians may be in New York City, working, shopping or visiting tourist sites like the Statue of Liberty or the World Trade Center. Consulate staff feared that Canadians could well be among the 5000 missing. In addition, many Canadian citizens who lived in the

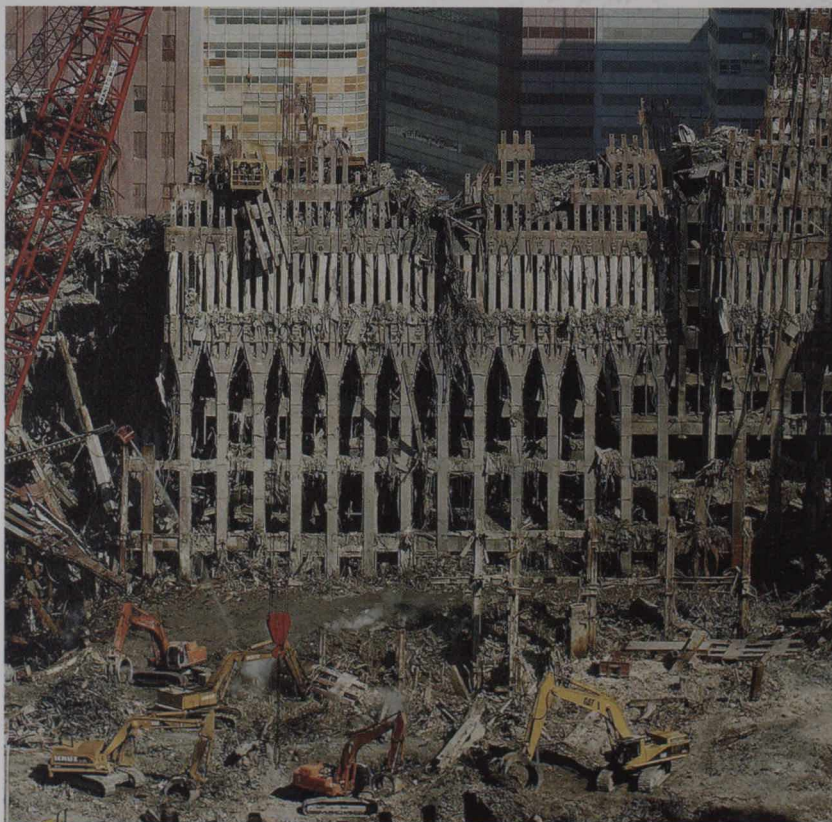


photo: CANAPRESS

The ruins of the World Trade Center in New York