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'Some things there aren't words to describe'

Paul Seldes of Vero Beach, a volunteer at the pistol competition, will never forget the horror of 9/11.

By Scott Lieber staff writer
June 25, 2004

SEBASTIAN — There are two things he won't talk about.

One is names. Out of respect and out of confidentiality. In his story, everyone is anonymous.

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The other is Ground Zero.

"Some things," he says, "there aren't words to describe."

Other things he doesn't talk about because he can't. When something like that happens, the senses shut down and instinct takes over.

"It was chaos," he says. "It was an incident no one really trained for. It was something no one expected. It was something nobody anticipated."

On Thursday, Paul Seldes of Vero Beach volunteered as a range officer at the pistol competition for the Police and Fire Games. On September 11, 2001, he witnessed the attacks and volunteered where the former World Trade Center buildings stood.

He worked as a senior executive, not a police or fire officer. Right at 8:46 a.m. on that day, Seldes sat in the driver's seat of his car two blocks from the World Trade Center buildings, driving two co-workers from out of town to meet a client. They were working on incorporating police lines into private ambulances. Redirecting signals. Making service quicker. That sort of thing.



ALEX BOERNER staff photographer

Paul Seldes, left, inspects a target with Bill Warren, right, of Miami-Dade Fire & Rescue, after the final round of the Combat event Thursday morning at the Indian River Shooting Range during the 2004 Florida Police & Fire Games.

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About five minutes later, the first plane hit.

"What the (heck) is that?" one man yelled. Seldes saw the plane connect, fireballing through the building.

The force lifted the car off the ground. Debris erupted. A meteor-like chunk fell four feet from the car.

"Some people were ducking for cover," he says. "I saw some people just standing there dumbstruck."

Seldes, though, slammed his gas pedal and jerked the wheel to the right, spinning to a stop and aiding those hurt on the street.

As Seldes worked, debris continued falling. He wrote his name and social security number on his arm. There was a warning system in place to notify workers of additional danger, but he realized it was too poor to seriously protect him.

Seldes forgets how long he worked that day. All night, at least. A few weeks of search and rescue. Many more of clean up.

Two things, though, burn in his memory.

First was the family center. Families poured in there to report missing relatives, among other things. After Seldes dropped his co-workers off at JFK Airport (they drove immediately home), he returned, put on a hard hat and went to work, pulling bodies from the rubble and clearing debris.

While in the family center, he remembered one woman. She held leaflets with pictures of her missing daughter, handing one to Seldes.

"Please," she said, "save her."

"I never did, though," he says. "I never found a survivor."

Another woman at the family center left an impression, too. Whenever Seldes went there, he always saw her helping. She fed people. Gave them blankets. Hydrated them.

"Every time I come here, I see you," Seldes finally said to her.

As the two continued talking, Seldes found out she lost her husband and three other family members in the crash.

"I know they're gone already," she said. "This is the least I can do to help."

Seldes felt the same way. He worked until site commanders sent him home.

"It was surreal," he says. "It looked like a bad science fiction movie with good special effects. It was like every time I'd go back, I'd think I was seeing it for the first time. It was that surreal."

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Formal operations of clean up ended in May 2002. One month later, Seldes and his family moved south.

"That's why I came down here," Seldes says. "I had to get away from it."

Now, he works for Celeriti, also a training company, in Vero Beach. On Thursday, Seldes donned a blue shirt, the back of which was plastered with an American flag. Under the flag, it read: "9/11 Never Forget."

Paul Seldes never will.

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