

# Hobbs police, fire officials reflect on heroism, tragedy

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Nobody yet knows exactly how many people died in Tuesday's terrorist attacks, but one striking statistic will be the staggering number of dead among the rescuers.

While the casualty figures will most certainly continue to rise and fall as more bodies are discovered and more missing people turn up in hospitals or simply report in after some delay, the number of firefighters who died in Tuesday's attack appears to be more than 200 and possibly as many as 300.

According to the National Fire Data Center, a division of FEMA's U.S. Fire Administration, the worst year for firefighter deaths occurred in 1978 when 171 firefighters lost their lives in the United States. Tuesday's attack may have killed more firefighters in one day than

have died in the last two years combined — 102 died in 2000, and 112 died in 1999.

And to put things in scale, the number of firefighters who died Tuesday was probably two or three times Hobbs' entire department of 78 firemen.

"It's a sad day to be a firefighter in America," said Capt. Mike Ravennelle of the Hobbs Fire Department. "It's a real solemn attitude here this morning. ... There aren't words that can describe it."

Ravennelle said, however, that their deaths demonstrated their professionalism. When a disaster strikes, those in the civilian world have the option to run away and hide, but a police officer or a firefighter doesn't.

"Those guys knew they were in a place they should have been, but when it comes time to rescue somebody ... you're just in there trying to get people out. That's

what these guys do," Ravennelle said.

Hobbs Police Chief Tony Knott echoed Ravennelle's statements about the duties of those who assume the responsibilities of a firefighter or police officer.

"If you watch the images on TV, you'll see all the civilians running away, and these policemen and firemen are running toward the scene, putting their own lives in peril," Knott said. "If you're an insurance salesman, you have the choice not to go. But if you are a policeman, you have taken an oath that you will agree to put yourself in harm's way."

While the number of police officers believed to have died has been revised up to nearly 100 by one estimate and then down to 78 according to another in the last 24 hours, one thing is certain — many of them paid the ultimate price our society expects of their profession.

As the chaos and confusion in New York gives way to order, a few more of the missing firefighters and police officers may be discovered alive, but the number of casualties will still be staggering.

"It just goes beyond description," Knott said. "Nearly 100 police officers in one fell swoop is just amazing."

Fully staffed, the Hobbs Police Department consists of a mere 90 souls.

Knott said in an entire year, on average, about 100-150 police officers die in the line of duty in the entire United States.

One victim of Tuesday's tragedy was well known to people in the Hobbs Police Department. Flight attendant Al Marchand, who had recently retired from law enforcement in Alamogordo after 20 years of service, was aboard United Airlines flight 175 which plunged into the World Trade Center.

"We all knew him," Knott said. "(And) I can't help but believe he put up a valiant fight against those people, knowing him like we know him."

Maj. Donnie Smith of the Hobbs Police Department and Marchand went through the New Mexico Law Enforcement Academy together in 1980. Smith, who had that as a cadet Marchand was a room next to Marchand's, said known for his marksmanship.

Smith said Marchand won several awards for marksmanship at the academy and over the years as a police officer.

"If he would have had his old pistol with him, it would have been a different story. There's no doubt about it," Smith said.

Smith said he saw Marchand as recently as November, and "we kind of talked old times a little bit."

He also has another connection

to the World Trade Center tragedy. Smith visited the building in 1998 for a law enforcement convention and has a photo of himself and a group of friends atop the tower looking down from the observation deck.

"It's just incredible to think that the entire building is gone," Smith said, "because it really was just a massive structure."

While he tried to remain positive, Knott said he fears for a friend he went to the FBI National Academy with.

"I went to the FBI National Academy with four New York City police officers, and one of them is on a very specialized team," Knott said. "When the WTC was bombed the first time (in 1993), he was the first rescue officer there, and I just have a very sick feeling in my stomach he was killed yesterday because his team would have been the first in."