NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

JOHN PERRY

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before the towers collapsed. Pearson said Perry was a picture of nobility. He was in the lobby of the World Trade Center's North Tower, helping a woman fleeing the disaster. She was having trouble breathing.

"That's when, all of a sudden, we heard the rumble," Pearson said. "First thing, the lights flickered. A roar. And then it was like a tornado went through. It goes completely black like midnight. This is when I lost contact with John."

The South Tower had fallen, its debris piling up and smashing against the base of its twin.

Pearson was in a state of shock. He couldn't see anything, including Perry, and all he could think about was getting out. From somewhere, he said, a light appeared. Dazed and acting on instinct, he made his way toward the light and escaped.

"I still question how I got out and he didn't," Pearson said. "Actually, I wouldn't mind if someone hypnotized me so I could see the last images in my mind before things went fuzzy."

The irony of Perry's sacrifice was that he had been turning in his retirement papers at police headquarters when the attack occurred. How someone who was willing to die for the city was at the point of leaving the force is a tale that shows how hard it is to pigeonhole Perry.

He attended New York University School of Law, earning his degree in 1989 with John F. Kennedy Jr. His mother, Patricia Perry, said John did not befriend Kennedy immediately because he wanted to avoid seeming like an opportunist. But eventually, the two fell in with each other and they had a fine time. Perry's friends and family said the cop — 6 feet 4 inches, dark and handsome — held his own with the ladies when he and Kennedy hit the town.

"John was the sweetest guy, and the girls loved him. The man was a true gentleman," said Dr. Douglas King, a friend of Perry's.

As a cop, Perry came into contact with droves of people, including Stanley Kaplan, an agent who shepherded him through numerous acting jobs. He appeared in the Al Pacino film "Devil's Advocate" and served as an extra numerous times in the daytime drama "One Life to Live."

After working in the Central Park Precinct and in Midtown as a transit officer, Perry was assigned to the police department's advocate's office, where he served as a prosecutor in disciplinary hearings for wayward cops. Most of his 10 years on the force were spent there, working as a lawyer but also wearing a badge. He loved it.

Like most cops, however, money was an issue for Perry. He was a frugal guy, going so far as to join a program where he lived cheaply in a two-bedroom apartment in the Amsterdam Houses near Lincoln Center. But he wasn't cheap.

Arnold Wachtal, a friend, said Perry did pro bono legal work for many people, including Kaplan, and that his second bedroom was often occupied — rent-free — by friends. Once, Wachtal said, he and Perry met an old buddy on the street whom they hadn't seen in years. The man said he was out of a job, whereupon Perry opened his wallet and took out $50.

"Perry said, 'You're not working now. This is a present from me,'" Wachtal recalled. "I used to tell him to stop loaning his money out, because he didn't have much."

Perry heard that police officers were being given $100,000 for a year's work with the peacekeeping mission in Kosovo, Yugoslavia. Again seeing an opportunity for change, he took a leave of absence from the police department and headed for boot camp in Virginia.

He had a lot to recommend him for the mission. One of his quirks was that he was almost always teaching himself a new language, often using tapes, listening to them while he drove around town. He spoke French and Spanish, Portuguese, a bit of Swedish and was making progress with Russian and Albanian.

"One of the Puerto Rican women who worked for Norman Siegel said he spoke Spanish better than she did," his mother said.

Last year, Perry left New York thinking that, at 38, he'd be older than his colleagues in Virginia and, with his experience, a bit bored with his training. Instead, he discovered he was younger than everyone else. What's more, he told his mother, the other trainees had a "yahoo" attitude about their venture. He realized he'd made a mistake and came home.

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