

9/11 Tape Raised Added Questions on Radio Failures

By JIM DWYER and KEVIN FLYNN

or much of the last year, New York City has said the devastating breakdown in fire communications at the World Trade Center was largely caused by the failure of an electronic device in the complex called a repeater, which was designed to boost radio transmissions in high rise buildings.

Now, however, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey's analysis of its 78-minute tape of firefighter communications from Sept. 11 flatly contradicts the city's version of what went wrong. It also raises questions about the thoroughness of the city's investigations into the worst loss of life any fire department has ever experienced — 343 men.

If the Port Authority's position is correct, it raises the possibility that different factors — failure of other equipment, design of communications consoles in the tower lobbies, or a simple mistake made at a moment of high stress — might have accounted for the communications breakdowns. Many firefighters believe those breakdowns contributed to the department's staggering losses.

On the tape, which recorded transmissions as they were passed through the repeater, firefighters in the south tower can be heard speaking over their radios until the building collapses. Practically no communications are recorded from firefighters in the north tower, even though the same repeater served both of the towers.

Before the voices from the south tower are heard, a series of coded tones are captured on the tape, marking the moment that the radio repeater was turned on, a spokesman for the Port Authority said.

In the view of Port Authority officials, those transmissions show beyond any doubt that the repeater worked, contrary to the accounts given in an official study of the emergency response that has been endorsed by Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg and Fire Commissioner Nicholas Scoppetta.

Asked, then, what would account for the communications failures, a spokesman for the Port Authority, Greg Trevor, said, "You will have to put those questions to the Fire Department."

The tape is likely to be remembered as far more than a record of what went wrong. It contains the only permanently preserved voices of firefighters from the tower stairwells, including transmissions from the fire chief who climbed highest into the building. As the firefighters raced up the stairs of the south tower, and right until the final seconds, they can be heard calmly organizing help for injured civilians as high as the 78th floor.

"All right, Tommy," a firefighter from Ladder 15 is heard saying minutes before the collapse, "it's imperative that you try to get down to the lobby command post and get some people up to 40. We got injured people up here on 70. If you make it to the lobby command post, see if they can somehow get elevators past the 40th floor. We got injured people all the way up here."

A spokesman for the Fire Department, Francis X. Gribbon, said yesterday that the department still believed the machinery had failed in some way. "The system was tested in the lobby by two experienced chiefs who came to the conclusion that it was not functioning," he said, referring to the north tower.

That leaves unanswered one of the most stinging of all the questions about fire operations that day. Even though the north tower stood 29 minutes longer than the south tower, at least 121 firefighters did not escape from it. While chiefs in the north tower lobby issued orders to come down, they received no response.

The accounts of witnesses and firefighters who survived suggests that most of the men in the building simply did not know how much trouble they were in. Witnesses said that scores of firefighters, unaware of the peril, were resting on the 19th floor of the north tower during its final minutes. Some firefighters who managed to get out said they had no idea the other building had already fallen, and said that they thought that few of those who perished knew.

In February, even as the department was beginning a study of its Sept. 11 response, fire officials declined invitations to listen to the Port Authority's tape, which was recovered by Port Authority police officers from the rubble.

Not until the tape's existence was reported by The New York Times in July did fire officials decide to listen to it. Mr. Scoppetta has said that his aides did not tell him about the tape.