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FDNY capt. joins grueling mission for Mideast unity

BY ADAM LISBERG
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

An FDNY captain on a post-9/11 mission of understanding has taken his quest halfway around the globe - trekking across the Sahara on a camel to promote peace in the Middle East.

Daniel Sheridan, 44, is one of 10 people on a 3,400-mile journey from Jerusalem to Tripoli, Libya, sponsored by a German nonprofit group. The group comes bearing an olive tree as a symbol of peace.

Sheridan's companions include a former Iraqi Army captain who was once a body double for one of Saddam Hussein's sons, a Ukrainian soldier who served in Iraq, an Israeli woman whose mother was killed by a suicide bomber and a Palestinian man whose cousin was shot by Israeli troops.

The travelers were chosen to bring differing perspectives to an arduous journey through scorching heat and arid sands. But Sheridan - who lost 343 FDNY brothers on Sept. 11 - said they're getting along better than he expected.

"I'd like to not only find out about them, but let them find out about me," Sheridan said. "I was hoping there'd be a real Bin Laden-type guy here, someone I couldn't communicate with at all. But all these people are so friendly and nice. It's like this is 'conflict lite.'" A devout Irish Catholic who lives with his wife, Jean, and three daughters in Putnam County, Sheridan leaped at the chance to make the trip because it would bring him to Jerusalem. While there, he visited the Western Wall, a historic mosque and the Via Dolorosa in the same morning.

"I can't put into words the flood of emotions I felt," Sheridan wrote in a diary of the trip, where he compared his experiences with those of his Muslim and Jewish

fellow travelers. "That is what is beautiful - we all have our own beliefs and they are respected in the group." Sheridan, who used vacation time and swapped shifts with other Bronx fire captains to make the month-long journey, is an energetic explorer with a deep impulse to help others, said his friend Peter Lazaro.

"He thought it was a great cause, and would be a great thing to do, and was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," Lazaro said. "He's an inspiring guy. I don't know what drives him."

When a firefighter from Guayaquil, Ecuador, came to New York after Sept. 11 to support the FDNY, Sheridan befriended him and later visited him in Ecuador - where the rudimentary firefighting tools he saw shocked him.

So Sheridan started a nonprofit called Mutual Aid Americas, which sends old fire engines, airpacks and other equipment to needy fire departments in South America.

That experience brought him to the attention of Breaking the Ice, a Berlin-based group that tries to build understanding through cross-cultural adventures.

Breaking the Ice sent a group of Palestinians and Israelis on a trek across Antarctica in 2004, and now is sponsoring Sheridan's group as it crosses the Sahara on camels - with a documentary crew in tow and trucks hauling their gear.

"It's just who he is. It's his personality. He wants to help people out," his wife, Jean, said yesterday. "He always was like that, but definitely felt more of it .after Sept. 11."

Jean said when she last heard from her husband, in a satellite phone call from the desert last week, he said the trek has been grueling.

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