

Pentagon Attack

Interview with Coneleous Alexander
November 5, 2001

Hunt: This is an interview with Coneleous "Doc" Alexander regarding the September 11 attack on the Pentagon. The interview is taking place in the Navy Annex on November 5, 2001. The interviewer is Dr. Richard Hunt of the OSD Historical Office.

Would you please state your position, for the record.

Alexander: My position here is building manager for operations and maintenance, and as one of my other collateral duties I serve as safety officer for the building.

Hunt: Where were you on September 11 when the attack took place?

Alexander: I was here in my office.

Hunt: When did you become aware of the attack?

Alexander: Immediately. I was scheduled to attend a meeting at the Pentagon to discuss a tabletop exercise for a disaster response for this building. When the plane hit the World Trade Center building I had some concerns, so I postponed going down to the Pentagon and coordinated with DPS to see if they were going to change the threatcon on this building. I sent them an E-mail and their response was no, they were not going to change the threatcon. Therefore I was looking to be prepared for any incident that might occur in this area. While I was on the phone I heard a loud thundering sound and a crash. I jumped up from my desk and Maxwell Garland, my coworker, said that it sounded like something hit the Pentagon building. We went out and looked down the hill. We saw smoke raging out of the side of the Pentagon building.

Hunt: Were other people outside looking also?

Alexander: There were just a few people outside at that time.

Hunt: What happened when you realized that the Pentagon had been hit?

Alexander: We immediately sounded the alarm for this building and started evacuation procedures.

Hunt: In other words, people were being sent home?

Alexander: First, we went around to make sure everyone was out of the building. We received a report from the DPS at the Pentagon ordering us to evacuate but we were already in the process. Everything happened immediately. We moved the people out of the building and completely off of the compound. We also had a report from the FBI that another plane was headed this way, so we were trying to get everyone further and further away from the building.

Hunt: At what point were people told to go home?

Alexander: At no point was anyone told to go home. People were being moved further and further away from the building each time there was an alert about another plane approaching the Pentagon. Some were moved to the Henderson Hall area, others moved as far up as Columbia Pike where the shopping center is. There must have been four or five incidents, and each time everyone was asked to move further away from the building.

Hunt: Was this information communicated to you specifically?

Alexander: Here on the compound it was communicated through DPS through master security. There were also FBI agents on the compound.

Hunt: Were you talking with the FBI agents personally?

Alexander: I was talking on my two-way radio back to Major Reed in master security, who was receiving his information from the Defense Protective Service.

Hunt: At some point did you go over to the Pentagon to help?

Alexander: Yes, once we evacuated this building, and it took us about a half hour to do so, I had some of my personnel go down to the Pentagon to see if we could assist. We got as far as the bridge at Southgate Road and they said they needed water.

Immediately, we came back here and loaded water to take down to the Pentagon. They consumed the water within twenty minutes or so. Then we took the vehicles and used the government credit card and went to the Safeway up the street and bought two truckloads of water and carried it back down to the Pentagon site and around the roadway. We dispensed water to the firefighters and other rescue personnel.

Hunt: There was no water pressure in the Pentagon?

Alexander: I'm not sure. They were outside the Pentagon on the heliport side on the grassy area and the roadway. They had brought people out of the building and were providing medical treatment.

Hunt: So you organized this team, no one asked you to help?

Alexander: Correct. I have worked as a damage control manager in the Pentagon, and that is one of my duties here. All my employees are trained in damage control.

Hunt: Had you had exercises preparing for this sort of thing before?

Alexander: This team here never had exercises. I had them at the Pentagon when I managed those teams there. But most of the personnel here once worked for me at the Pentagon, so they know what the drill is.

Hunt: When you worked at the Pentagon, did you ever envisage this kind of emergency, on this scale?

Alexander: No. In my years working for the federal government at the Pentagon, the worst case scenario we envisioned were fires and civil unrest, with people pouring blood on the building, things like that. Possibly a system blowup or steam pipe bursting, but never an attack on the building. Basically an internal mechanical system disruption.

Hunt: Never that a plane might accidentally crash from National?

Alexander: Everyone felt that the Pentagon was crash proof. Everyone felt that there were missiles around the Pentagon that would shoot anything down that came close. As an operations manager, I always knew there was no such defense around the building. I learned that from working with men who helped build the Pentagon. I worked as a pipe fitter and from there to construction management and building management, and learned from the old guys that the Pentagon is safe, but there is no protection around the building. One thing that showed the light was when the Air Florida plane went down in the Potomac and there was no emergency response and most of the people in the building didn't know the plane went down. So I had a feeling then that maybe there isn't really any defense around the Pentagon. But I didn't give it much thought.

Hunt: Was there other assistance that you provided to the Pentagon?

Alexander: The main thing was water and helping to move equipment and unload trucks with the other rescue groups that came down to the Pentagon. That was our primary function.

Hunt: How quickly did the emergency site become organized? It must have been chaotic when the first group arrived.

Alexander: We secured this building and responded to the Pentagon in 20 minutes to half an hour. Steve Godfrey was the first one down, looking to put together a team. We started from there.

Hunt: When he arrived at the Pentagon, was someone in charge? Or any organization at that point?

Alexander: We didn't go into the Pentagon, there were workers evacuating people from the Pentagon. We worked with the people outside. We felt we were providing enough assistance on the outside.

Hunt: You mentioned the evacuation in this building, was it done in an orderly manner with no panic?

Alexander: No panic at all, but we had concerns with some people who wanted to take their vehicles off the compound. We just had to get the individuals off the compound and as far away as possible. This building evacuation was very orderly, but a concern was where they would go from there. The plan is to get 100 yards away and to certain rally points and stay there.

Hunt: Would their supervisors do head counts when they arrived at these rally points?

Alexander: Each agency has their own emergency evacuation coordinator responsible for a number of people. Our responsibility is to get them out of the building. Those coordinators were responsible for the head count.

Hunt: Did you shut down the building then in case of further attack?

Alexander: After the evacuation, we shut off the gas and steam in the building. We left on the electricity, because the Commandant of the Marine Corps and the Navy were coming back over to try to set up headquarters. When you get eight or nine generals walking into the building you have to let them in. The FBI is standing there telling them, but they are going in anyway. They properly identified themselves and were let in. During the course of the day we went around to the various rallying points and provided people with bottled water.

Hunt: Did you make more than one trip to get water?

Alexander: We got two vans and a truck full from the Safeway. We already had water here as part of our emergency response package. We had about 100 cases of water in the building, some consisting of two gallon bottles and some were one gallon bottles and some were quart bottles. I don't remember the exact number of cases we purchased from the Safeway, but it was three truck loads.

Hunt: Was there other assistance that your people provided down at the Pentagon?

Alexander: On the initial day, other than water, they helped unload equipment, coordinated and passed information between the triages that were set up. On subsequent days we had personnel help with the recovery action.

Hunt: The day the generals came in, was that September 11?

Alexander: Yes.

Hunt: Were you involved in finding space for them?

Alexander: No, they have a command center already set up in the building here. They have a Marine Corps Command Center. The commandant of the Marine Corps is housed in the building. The area hit in the Pentagon was the Secretary of the Navy's,

so basically they had the equipment and communications here in this building that they could continue to operate with.

Hunt: So this was an emergency backup that was in their plans?

Alexander: No, they were in the process of moving into a new section in the Pentagon, but still had the command center here.

Hunt: So it was lucky that they still had equipment here.

Alexander: Yes.

Hunt: On subsequent days, what specifically was the recovery process your people were assisting?

Alexander: Basically cleared personnel were needed to go along with contract personnel to evaluate the building. The fire department took care of recovery of the victims, so basically we provided escort to the Pentagon's efforts.

Hunt: How long did this assistance last?

Alexander: A couple of weeks.

Hunt: Was your office able to carry on any of its normal functions?

Alexander: During the whole time our office continued in operation. We had the Marine Corps command center set up and then set up a remote command center for the Secretary of the Navy here in the building. Along with that we helped set up the office for a command center for the Bureau of Naval Personnel. They brought in some people.

Hunt: How long were your days?

Alexander: My staff and I worked 12 to 16 hour days. After the first few days, we didn't work the full staff the whole time. We tried to work with three-quarters of normal staff and the other quarter would be here late in the evening and night to provide assistance.

Hunt: So someone was here 24 hours a day?

Alexander: We were here about 12 hours, until about midnight. After that everything was quiet. We have operation and maintenance contract personnel and tool mechanics, so if there was a need they could contact one of us and someone could be here within 20 minutes.

Hunt: What changes did this attack bring about in your procedures? Are you going to apply any lessons learned to your plans for future emergencies?

Alexander: I think we handled assistance very well. But looking at an attack on this building, one of the lessons was that we would need water and food. People were standing around in the parking lot with their pocketbooks in the building and no one could go anywhere to get food or medicine. We need to add water and some kind of food to our response package, and to accommodate people who are diabetic or on special medication. For them water would not be enough. Another thing is to add additional vests on coordinators to readily identify them. We have purchased forty additional two-way radios to help agencies to communicate with their personnel. During the attack no one gave the OK to let people go home, so they were prisoners in a sense. This is something that needs to be better coordinated.

Hunt: When your people went to the Pentagon they were basically working for the people over there.

Alexander: Correct. They provided needed help for firefighters or FBI, whatever was requested.

Hunt: Did you make any visits over there?

Alexander: I went down a while about half an hour after it happened and took some photos immediately after the plane hit. You can have this copy.

Hunt: How would you describe what you saw?

Alexander: It was like Beirut.

Hunt: Had you been in Beirut?

Alexander: No, only from pictures, but I served in Vietnam. In terms of the building damage, no one would dream that a plane was in there. It looked like a building in Beirut that a missile had hit. Once all the firefighters and federal agents got there it was unreal. So many rescue and service personnel at one site in such a short time was remarkable. I ask myself how we managed to get over 1,000 federal agents there in less than an hour. ATF, DEA, every federal agency that you could think of, was there, it was like they were all on their day off and just came over. The response was great.

Hunt: So the bureaucratic procedures were pushed aside and everyone responded.

Alexander: Everyone chipped in to do what they could. The odd thing to me was not seeing any military helicopters or planes flying in and out. A couple of minutes after the crash a Park Service helicopter came and flew over the Pentagon the whole time, but there were no jets or helicopters for hours and hours. I've seen a helicopter fly just to bring someone lunch, and for something like this I would expect to see a military helicopter flying.

Hunt: The helipad was not damaged?

Alexander: The tower was damaged, but there was still space to land. That was spooky to me. I came to work in the Pentagon in 1976, and I have been accustomed to see helicopters all day long arriving and departing or flying around. But that particular day there was not even one, not even one from Bolling to see what was going on. I understood later that they restricted the air space around the Pentagon, but it didn't stop the Park Police helicopter from flying.

Hunt: You said the Pentagon looked like a building blown up in Beirut, were there no traces or evidence of an airplane that you could see?

Alexander: In these pictures, you can see small pieces of the airplane around the roadway. From what I understand from my men when the plane came down across Washington Boulevard it supposedly hit a taxicab and took out the highway roadway lights and went into the Pentagon and exploded. All we could see were little pieces, maybe a foot in size, and you had to really look for them. They're were not many. It wasn't like they were scattered everywhere.

Hunt: It's not like a plane wreck where you see large pieces on the ground.

Alexander: Usually you see parts of a wing, or a tailpiece, but there was none of that.

Hunt: Is there anything I haven't asked you that you wish to discuss?

Alexander: No, that's basically what we did. In responding to persons who lost people in the Pentagon I erected that white board down at the bottom of the hill. I did a sketch on the board and had a contractor buy the lumber and erect the board as a symbol.

Hunt: When was this done?

Alexander: We did it that Saturday. It meant a lot to people who put things there to commemorate the event. They had been laying things on the ground.

Hunt: Are there any plans to put something permanent there?

Alexander: I really didn't have the authority to put that board down there. I haven't even asked anyone if that board is OK temporarily, but no one has objected. The foot of the hill was as close to the Pentagon as we could put it. I wanted to show unity and responsiveness and console those who were grieving. Someone said there is some talk of erecting a memorial, but I don't know where.

Hunt: How many people work for you, and I am assuming all of them were involved in the assistance?

Alexander: There were actually ten people that participated in it. On the other side of the office is repairs and alterations and Mr. Harvey is the manager. I'm the building manager for operations and maintenance. As I said earlier, I also serve as safety officer and damage control manager for the compound.

Hunt: How long did it take before things got back to normal? When you no longer had to go help at the Pentagon.

Alexander: I don't consider that not normal, because we are here to maintain as well as support the Pentagon.

Hunt: How long did you continue to support the Pentagon?

Alexander: About two weeks. After that they had enough personnel there.

Hunt: Was there any burnout or stress in the people who work for you?

Alexander: I recognized stress in one of the men and recommended he talk with the trauma group that was set up here. I had set up an office across the hall as a trauma center for the Navy and they sent some doctors and counselors over and had sessions here for people experiencing emotional distress. That was set up for three weeks.

They were open 24 hours a day. They asked my views and opinions, and I told them I would give them space here, and converted our conference room in our training center into an area where they could have walk-in sessions. As far as the other employees, they largely took it OK. They didn't let on, but they seemed to be OK. There is space available for them if they need it. I did not ask who participated. I don't know if they participated or not. I talked to them every day to see if they were OK.

Hunt: I assume there was discussion every day about what they were doing and seeing.

Alexander: Some men who went down got first-hand information about damage on the inside and brought it to us.

Hunt: Was there any good outcome from this dreadful experience?

Alexander: I think the nation as a whole realizes how much we need each other. Being the building manager, I always hold doors for people, and now they even say thank you. And people now greet me that didn't before. You never know in the event of a disaster who will save your life. I think it brought about more unity.

Hunt: Do you want to add anything else?

Alexander: No, that's what happened and what I saw. There are others here who saw it happen. Craig Bryan saw the plane hit the building.

Hunt: He's on my list. My next interview is with John Brady and I have more names on my list. Thank you.