

Pentagon Attack

Interview with John Brady
November 5, 2001

Hunt: This interview is taking place on 5 November 2001 in the Butler building. Richard Hunt is representing the OSD Historical Office. Please state your name and position for the record.

Brady: My name is John Milton Brady, Jr. I am employed with the Department of Defense Safety Office as a Safety Technician Investigator.

Hunt: Where were you when the attack occurred, on September 11?

Brady: When the attack occurred I had just walked back into the office in 5E320, our new office, and had moved towards my computer. I noticed a message on my e-mail system telling about the incident in New York. I noticed that when I got to the bottom of the message it indicated we were not going to change the Threatcon here at the Building. I thought that strange. I was going to sit down, but something told me to stand up. The next thing I knew the building was shaking. I moved around from my cubicle to look out my window and saw flames coming out of the top of the Building. All at once I noticed white particles like snow flying around in my office. Mr. Hilliard, the safety manager, stated that there had been an explosion and we should leave the office. We left and went down into the hallway and tried to work our way out of the Building towards the inner courtyard. As we were going down the hall, I noticed that all the lights were on in the 3rd Corridor. I couldn't figure what was going on. As we approached the 3rd and 4th ring on the fifth floor, at the escalator, I turned and looked down the 4th Corridor and saw smoke billowing up through the hallway. I started down

the 4th Corridor but realized I couldn't go down too far because people were running up. One lady slipped and fell and I reached down to help her up and then noticed that the floors were slippery. I managed to get back to the escalator and we got people out down the escalator. Before going down to the 4th floor I noticed a black gentleman in blue pants and a white shirt and he had a key in his hand. He put a key into the side wall, which unlocked what I believe are called the fire doors. He started pulling the fire doors shut going to the 3rd Corridor. I told him there were people down there in the 3rd Corridor and not to shut the doors because people were trying to get out. I had to go back to him because he was sealing off the corridor and I told him no, just leave the door cracked. I managed to get back to the 4th Corridor and found dazed people still coming up that corridor, wondering what was going on. A lieutenant colonel was coming out of the hallway and he had his t-shirt off. His shirt was jet black. He was trying to put his t-shirt around his nose and mouth. I grabbed him and got him out of the Building and took his flashlight. Once I had the people off the 5th floor, Third Corridor, I went down to the 4th floor, where I ran into Mr. [Roy] Hilliard. The people on the 4th floor in the 4th Corridor were panicking. They didn't know which way to go. I managed to take the flashlight and go into the hallway and stood there, using the flashlight as a beacon and calling to the people to come towards me and they started doing that. I got out one lady on the 4th floor, Naval personnel. She was dazed and I reached down to get her. She came up to the escalator.

Hunt: You reached down. Was she on the floor?

Brady: Yes, because the smoke was coming down the hallway. I had never seen smoke like it before. From my training classes I knew that the black smoke was mixed

with oil, but I didn't know where the oil was coming from. We got the people out of there. Going down to the 3rd level, Mr. Hilliard said he had to get an ambulance rescue squad unit to help. So Roy left me and went to the inner courtyard to find the fire services and bring them into the center courtyard to assist us at the entrance. We got down to the 3rd floor. There were people everywhere on the 3rd floor, and they just didn't know what they were going to do. I just stood there for a while to get myself together to decide what I was going to do. Finally, I got myself in gear and started moving the people toward me. I met Officer Brennan of the Defense Protective Service. Brennan and I were police officers together before my coming here. We managed to get the people out and went down to the 1st floor. At that level we were exiting the Building and we heard that there were some people in the A&E drive section from the center courtyard. We went back into the Building, the floors were very slippery with water or something, and we were sliding around. We managed to get to A&E drive. At the A&E drive there were a bunch of service personnel working in mud and water because it was a construction site. There was a hole in the side of the Building with smoke billowing out of it. At that hole, guys were crawling into the Building one at a time getting people and handing people back. As they did that, we took the people to safety through the Building to the A&E drive to medical personnel.

Hunt: Some were able to walk?

Brady: Yes, but they were disoriented because of inhaling so much smoke. Another lady was brought to me with a laceration on her forehead. She didn't know where she was. You could tell she was in a daze, but I managed to walk her out through the Building into the inner courtyard and then came back through the Building through the

fire back into the area where we were. Officer Brennan stayed with me. The whole time we were in there together. We were trying to reach more folks. We were going back into the side of the Building to get people out. I believe it was the Army personnel section we were in at that point. I think a window had blown out and people were going in through the window and grabbing the people, calling out for them, and bringing them back. Smoke was getting very thick in there. At that point communications came over the radio stating that there was a second plane coming in. Most of the military people there heard that conversation and they panicked, going every which way because they thought a plane was coming in. I looked at Brennan and said I could not leave these people in the Building, and he stayed with me. Luckily, there was no aircraft coming in and we were able to drag more people out. There were two windows above us and they exploded and blew completely out. Fire was billowing out, glass was falling out on top of us and we had to make a decision. I told Donald that we had to go. We couldn't do anymore. He kept saying we couldn't leave the people. I told him that we would get cooked if we didn't go.

Hunt: Did you have any protective gear?

Brady: No. All I had on was a shirt. I was using the outer garment around my face to breathe. There was some water from the fire sprinkler and I was soaking the material around my face. I don't know what was in the water, but it was cool. When we left, we felt guilty. Donald went someplace, and when he caught up with me later he was still very upset, saying you left those people in there. I told him that I had a decision to make, being the safety officer, and I made it. Afterwards I ran into Mr. John Irby, the Federal Facilities Director, and informed him that we had gotten people out of the

Building but had to leave some behind, and explained the conditions in the Building. And that was it. That evening I went home and took a shower not knowing what my face looked like. When I saw myself in the mirror I realized I had been burned over my face. I went to the hospital and they kept me for a few hours putting antibiotics in me, because of the chemicals I had been breathing. My body was breaking out, and I had first and second degree burns on my face. Everybody was worried about my face. To this day I don't know how I got burnt.

Hunt: Do you have any idea of how many people you helped to get out?

Brady: I know that on the 4th floor there were at least four people. On the first level I don't know because we were like an assembly line. We were just grabbing people, whoever they were. If we could reach in and grab them and pull them back out, we did. Officer Brennan and I were just shuffling people back and forth. We would take turns going into the smoke and coming back out and moving the people around. I would say something like maybe four all total. I don't know if one man got out, because he slipped and fell and I remember pulling a hand and when I got to the door and the fresh air I let go. I heard Donald say let's go back and I didn't look down. We then went back to help some more. It was a bad situation. The funny thing about it I think I did better dealing with this from my training in Vietnam in trying to keep people calm. After seeing death and destruction in the jungle, I hate to say it, but I think it prepared me for what I was looking at when I was bringing the people out.

Hunt: How long do you estimate you were there?

Brady: Going back and forth into the burning Building, I would say roughly 35-40 minutes, taking into account going down from the 5th floor to the 1st floor and stopping

there, walking into the interior where the personnel section was, and bringing some of those folks out.

Hunt: Had the Building actually collapsed at that point?

Brady: We didn't know until afterwards. When it was over, we looked at it and we had been right underneath where the fuel was running out of the aircraft. We didn't know that. I knew in looking at the smoke and by what I was smelling that we were close to fuel, but I didn't know until what I was told later that the aircraft had come in and flipped. When the windows blew out on the 2nd floor level, just above us, that was evidently where the fuel was congregating and with the heat it took all those windows out. We were right down below it.

Hunt: So you had no choice, you really had to leave.

Brady: I think it was just that we, Donald, Roy and I, did what we had to do, we couldn't think about it. The situation came up and we had to move in and take command and do what we had to do. We are not heroes; we just did our job.

Hunt: Were you involved on September 12th and other days?

Brady: Yes, I had to go to the heliport area. A general who was in charge of the Army personnel was trying to enter the Building to save his people. I was trying to keep him calm at the heliport, because he was ticked off at the way things were going there. He was trying to get the security people and the fire department people to let him into the Building. He kept saying it was his staff in there and he wanted to get to them. He was about to get arrested when I stepped in and told him I was the safety officer for DoD and I said to him that I was not letting him in. About that time, when the fire department opened the door on the heliport side, there was an explosion and I told the general he

would have been dead and so would have been all the people following him. Let the fire department do what they have to do and we'll stay out here. He broke down and cried. He was a two-star. There were two others there, a one-star, and a colonel at that one spot. It was hard to see. You don't see a general crying every day.

Hunt: This was out at the heliport? This was in the morning of September 11th?

Brady: I would say around 10:30 or 11:00 a.m. We had shifted our location because we couldn't do any more at Corridors 3 and 4. Donald and I went out through South Parking to the heliport side. That's when the magnitude of this hit me, when I saw it from the outside. From the inside, I was thinking that a propane tank had exploded somewhere and was trying to remember who I had signed a burn permit. When people told us what was going on and we got outside and saw the hole in the Pentagon, I got angry. Then we saw the people and the fire trucks and there was no water on the Building, and it hit us that it was oil fire and they were waiting for foam trucks to come in. We set up a line to keep personnel from going into the crash area and told military men at the site that it was a crime scene and everything was evidence that could not be touched. You had to keep the people back. The hardest thing was crowd control, because people wanted to get into the Building to get their buddies out. That is understandable, with all the emotion there.

Hunt: So it was a challenging job keeping away from the Building?

Brady: Yes, folks wanted to go in. Like the general, he turned around, his stars shining, and hollered out, "Everybody in the Army: who will go with me into this Building?" That's all it took, everyone was coming up. I had to make the decision to keep him from moving and killing those people.

Hunt: He didn't try to push you out of the way?

Brady: He did, but I had a bit more weight on him, and the DPS men saw me and knew I was in a situation. Donald was moving closer to me and I said we can't let these people in the Building. He got some more people and we started a line.

Hunt: Were you wearing something that identified you?

Brady: I had on an orange flight vest I borrowed from the Arlington County Fire Department battalion commander. I wanted people to identify me as being a part of the safety team. We didn't have our jackets because we left them upstairs. Some of it had to be destroyed. Our old office, on the fifth corridor side, was totally destroyed. We had gone from one place to another; and if we had stayed to get our gear out we would have been in there.

Hunt: That was close.

Brady: The 5h Corridor was destroyed and we were right up against a firewall. We were very lucky. We would have been trapped.

Hunt: Are there any lessons learned from this in terms of preparing for or reacting to this type of situation?

Brady: The only thing is that the people that are charged with those doors should not have been sealing people in. Those people could have gotten out. Fighting them and trying to keep my mind set on getting them out took time from bringing some out. In some aircraft we used to have track lights. When the aircraft lights went off the track lights would come on. When there is smoke, people are down low and if they are crawling and they hit a fire door they have to spend time to figure out which way to go and they can't see. I think there should be a system on the sides of the hallways on the

floor indicating the way out. So that when the lights go out they would be able to see a strobe lighting system every foot or three along the hallway even if they are down low and follow that beam to an exit. Every so many lights one should be red, and the rest of them white. They would move along in the safe direction.

Instead of having all these fire drills, which I was held to as safety officer here in the daytime, they should have been run at night. It gets too commonplace and people get comfortable with them. They should be done after 10:00 p.m. too. You run tests over and over and then when the real thing happens they don't respond. They get into a mindset that this is just a test.

Hunt: I was working at the Pulaski building in 1990 and there was a fire there. Before the fire they had so many false alarms, that the day of the actual fire most people just walked out thinking it was another drill.

Brady: Quite a few people I was talking to asked me if it was another test. One commander came up to me and asked if it was a drill, and I said, "No, do you see the smoke coming down the hallway?" And he was walking into the 5th Corridor when I stopped him. The Pentagon is a big Building, but we have to use some common sense, we are dealing with people's lives. We can't take things for granted. Each floor should have a room at the end close to the escalators with some sort of respiratory protection gear. Each corridor should have a team and if something should happen the team should go to the respiratory room and stand by until they are told what the problem is. There is a group here in the Pentagon that should be first responders. The Defense Protective Service should be a first responder, because they are a law enforcement organization, but they should not be involved in fire and rescue. Their primary function

should be to fall back and set up a perimeter line, a safety net. The people trained in fire response, recovery, and such, should be the ones going in without so much chaos. Basically the problem was that with the shock people didn't know how to respond, because we never worked tabletops with this type of disaster. When you are dealing with the smoke factor, they need to come in and turn the fans off. They have to have respiratory protection on. They can't be eating smoke. The electricians have to drop power lines, and have to come inside sooner or later. They need respiratory protection. The fans helped perpetuate the fire, and I think that's why there is so much damage here. So I think strobe lighting, and fire responder area rooms with suits and respirators would be expensive but necessary.

Hunt: They went for the expensive windows, which seemed to work, didn't they?

Brady: They worked. The fire department couldn't easily break in, but those windows kept the damage down. They did work. If the fire department had broken in from the outside they would have created an oxygen barrier. It would allow air to come in, but also perpetuate the fire, so they were smothering it. The old windows were blowing left and right. I told my wife the good Lord must look after fools. I was a fool. I realized now that the steel casing could have come out at any time and hit me or Donald. The glass could have put my eyes out, because we had no protection. We were very lucky. She said it was not my time to go. I guess she's right.

Hunt: Do you want to add anything else?

Brady: I think overall we did a very good job. The Defense contractors should be applauded for a lot of innovations they put into that area that saved the rest of the Building from going down. The people here in the Pentagon need more training in

respiratory protection. This is a city without a fire department, so we have to use the people here in-house to be our fire department and our first responders until the powers that be see that we need a fire department here or can contain it until the Arlington County Fire Department can get here. We need two or three trained people per wing so that when the alarm goes off the people respond to those areas. Radio communication needs to be a premium here, not with some of those announcements that couldn't be heard from two feet away. Donald's radio was the only one we had. It was working, but my brand new one wasn't. That's about it.

Hunt: You are not involved with the reconstruction or the rebuilding?

Brady: To a degree we are. Confined space permits, entry to certain areas, will go through us, we have to authorize that. We check out individuals' credentials--have they been trained in lifesaving techniques, do they know how to detect and read low-lying gas levels in the area, asbestos and lead testing. It needs to be a more coordinated effort, because at the time we had military doing one thing and we were doing something else, finding at the last minute we didn't have results. We are working with the anthrax now, and we should have been involved with that from the beginning. Now we are playing catch-up to everybody. We just need more training for the individuals here that could be put in harm's way, and testing of the alarm systems should be done after midnight. You have a skeleton crew here then. The day shift get tired of leaving their offices during drills, and it would cut down some of the redundancy. Then I think we would have a good chance to survive if this kind of thing should happen again.

Hunt: Thank you very much.