

Pentagon Attack

Interview with Kathleen Brassell and John Harris
November 1, 2001

Rochester: This is an interview on November 1, 2001 with Kathleen Brassell and John Harris at the Pentagon. Kathleen Brassell is the director of the Graphics and Presentation Branch of the Washington Headquarters Services. The interviewers are Drs. Stuart Rochester and Roger Trask, of the OSD Historical Office.

Kathy, what were you doing immediately before the aircraft crashed into the Pentagon on September 11. Were you on site at the time, and if so, how close to the site were you, and what were you thinking at the time?

Brassell: I was actually not on site. I was getting some keys made for some new display cabinets, which were going to go into Wedge 1. I heard on the radio that something had hit or blown up at the Pentagon and I called in within a matter of seconds. I was on the cell phone talking to the office. They were still unaware of what had really happened, and I told them I had heard on the radio that a plane had hit the Building and they all needed to get out right then. There was confusion in the office. Afterward they said they had heard and felt that something had happened but nothing had been heard over the speaker system at that time. A good ten minutes passed before they heard the notice to evacuate.

Trask: Ten minutes after the crash?

Brassell: Yes. I had already heard it on the radio. The people in the office were concerned because two of our employees were over on the other side of the Building in the OSD conference center, 1E801, and had not been contacted. I used my cell phone

to page to get in touch with those two, but the cell phone service was lost by that time due to heavy use.

Rochester: Did those two employees get out okay?

Brassell: Yes, they actually ended up walking around the Building and meeting in South Parking, but not in our designated meeting area, which was too close to the Building, but at the other end of South Parking, Lane 9.

Rochester: So you did have some prearranged plan in case of emergency?

Brassell: Yes. We had actually used it several times. There was a fire in the Building a couple of months before, and we have had drills. Our evacuation plan has always worked well.

Rochester: John, you were on site at the time, did you feel anything here in the Graphics office, and were you notified by Kathy's call, or by other things that were happening?

Harris: I was not on site, I was at a training program in Rosslyn. The Executive Leadership Development Program (ELDP) was meeting for its first orientation of a two-day program. We had some high-level DoD personnel there welcoming us into the program, and they wanted no disruption, so we had our beepers off. As the morning progressed, we went into the introductory phase of the class, where the people there stand up and introduce themselves. One of the gentlemen, who happens to be with our WHS organization, Mike Copeland, is an antiterrorist expert, and he stood up and introduced himself and explained his mission. The instructor of the course, who was a senior trainer, asked him if people could be protected against airplanes flying into the World Trade Center. Copeland said it was a highly unlikely scenario, but there was more than likely nothing that could be done. Then the question was what if it happened twice? And he said if it was done twice in a span of time they would have to react. Then the

question was what if it happened to the Pentagon, and there was a pause. We all thought it was part of the exercise of the introduction. They went on to continue interviewing people and then the major instructor of the course walked forward and said that those events did just happen. They then continued the interview process. I stood up and asked if it was part of the scenario or the training. They said it really had happened less than 15 minutes before and they were going to make some decisions shortly. Mike Copeland, the security agent, and I jumped up and left the room to call back to our offices. The class was disintegrating and we went out into the vestibule where there was a television to see the events. Mike and I decided to go back to the Pentagon to offer assistance. We walked toward my vehicle, and the sidewalks and streets were crowded. We asked what route we could take to the Pentagon and we were told to walk. We went to a phone to call the Defense Protective Service (DPS), and the land lines were down because of heavy usage. The cell phones were overwhelmed. We decided to get back to the Pentagon. We ate a quick lunch while waiting for the road to open up, and hopped into the car to get back. The State Police stopped us but then we continued on. Mike had DPS credentials, which got us over there.

Rochester: Did your office suffer any damage?

Harris: We had some smoke effects, but no real operational damage.

Rochester: Did anyone come back that same day to work?

Brassell: John came back to coordinate some graphic needs for DPS and Public Affairs.

Rochester: John, who did you contact and how did things get coordinated as to what they expected of Graphics?

Harris: Our previous discussions confirmed that we should support Public Affairs and the secretary as best we could. I sought out Glenn Flood, of Public Affairs, and as we got

closer to the Pentagon perimeter I asked where to go to get to the secretary's office. The command center had been set up at the gas station up here. We eventually got to the gas station, after switching cars several times, and Admiral Quigley was hosting press conferences along with Glenn Flood and a host of DoD people. I identified myself to Glenn and asked him what he needed. He asked me to think about it. All of a sudden my cell phone rang and one of our framing contractors asked me how I was and if he could do anything. I asked him to relay messages to Kathy, telling her where I was, and another contractor who could support us. There was a telephone relay going at that point.

Rochester: I know that by the next day you had produced a diagram of the damage in terms of water and structural damage, how did that come about? Did you do that work here, or in another part of the Building?

Brassell: One of the first things we did Tuesday night (September 11) was to call everyone in the office and establish a 24-hour shift schedule. The deputy was on the early morning shift, first thing Wednesday morning. We had a hard time getting into our office because the 2nd Corridor was where the tape and the military police were set up. We had to get special permission from the police and the Building Manager's Office to get into our office, but none of our neighbors were allowed in here. The Building Manager's Office had already come down and identified where the structural, fire, smoke and water damage were at that point. Meanwhile, things were still on fire, and those charts changed frequently over the next several days. We called them our initial damage assessment charts. We basically built those from evacuation maps that we had, identifying by each floor where the damage was. Those were used in the press briefings and such right away. Other maps we were immediately tasked with were the Pentagon

reservation maps, so they could get a handle on the roadway structure so that the police could get an idea of where everybody was--the FBI, the Secret Service--identifying important people and their location. We created maps to help them keep track of that.

Rochester: Is there anything else you want to add about your recollection of that day before you returned to business as usual, even though your business was undoubtedly mostly devoted to a follow-up of September 11? Was there anything else of note about the events of that day, in terms of others you talked to or that you witnessed?

Brassell: As far as within our office, from talking to people I noticed differences in personalities. Some thought at first it was a joke, then a complete accident. They even doubted the legitimacy of the Building actually being hit. A couple of people had to be convinced to leave since they didn't see, hear, or smell anything right away. I think there was a bit of delay on the emergency notification system, telling people to evacuate. I recall someone saying that a police officer had come in and actually told them to leave. They were in the hallway before they started to hear the announcements.

Rochester: We have heard mixed reports about whether the alarm system was working or not. Do you have any sense of whether the alarm went off in your office?

Brassell: It wasn't until they were in the hall that they heard it. We have speakers in our office. Because they are set up on zones, I would hope that the areas close to the attack were getting notification first and then the others followed. It's not always wise to evacuate the entire Building outside at once; they can do sheltering in place, where they move people within the Building to another area of the Building. As those decisions were being made, there was a bit of a delay in telling everyone in the Building they would have to leave.

Rochester: It's been almost two months, now, since the incident. Are you yet getting back to your normal assignments, or are you still spending a lot of time on September 11th-related work?

Brassell: I and two or three others in the office are still spending 50 to 75 percent of our time on September 11th events. Included in that is the October 11th memorial service. We are still working on activities related to September 11.

Rochester: What was your involvement in the memorial service?

Brassell: To start closer to September 11th, our only customers for about three weeks were Public Affairs, the Building Manager's Office, and the Defense Protective Service. We were working 24-hour shifts and many people were spending the night here on mats and cots, putting in long hours. We also picked up the role of supporting the Family Assistance Center at the Sheraton Hotel. First we made signs to help the arriving families find the chaplains and the casualty assistance officers and show them where to get assistance with the benefits and official paperwork. There were rooms set aside for different associations, such as Social Security. They had twice daily briefings on the status of what was going on at the Pentagon. We were supporting them with signs, maps, and area charts for the families. We would actually show where the different agencies, such as DIA, Army, and the Navy Operations Center, were in the Building, so they could see for themselves where the damage was in relation to each agency.

Rochester: Were you interacting directly with the public on this? Were you still being tasked over the normal organizational channels, or were you dealing with the FBI, or other officials?

Brassell: We had many customers that we don't normally support. The Family Assistance Center, being run by USD (Personnel and Readiness), would normally be our

customers. They could come to us with requests. The FBI, Secret Service, and different intelligence agencies, would come to us. We tried to channel a lot of the information because many of the charts weren't releasable. We were waiting for the secretary to do the briefing and then they would release them through Public Affairs channels. We had to be careful with what we provided each customer. Even though they had credentials, they had to coordinate their requirements through the DPS. In a pinch, if they needed something, we would do it right away.

Rochester: Did you get into any damage assessment of the graphic displays or exhibits that were in the damaged parts of the Building, and are you aware of what was lost and what is salvageable?

Brassell: We weren't worried about that then, but in the last week we have started researching that, since it didn't affect people or classified information. I know there were some exhibits lost; the Navy lost one, and the Army had a corridor lost. We had some empty display cases we had assigned to agencies, that were lost. We had not moved any exhibits into Wedge 1. There were some empty cases for which we had modified plans, but nothing had yet been put into them. We have some exhibits that sustained a bit of damage but can be cleaned up--a Native American and a Hispanic American exhibit. In addition to some early-on support to some agencies with the Family Assistance Center, we also worked on biographies being published in the Washington Post of missing and dead. They wanted a display of these on the bulletin board. We were recreating the files, getting pictures, researching other publications, and working directly with the casualty assistance officers to see if the Washington Post had what the families wanted on the board. After a week or two the families provided us with photos and biographies to put on the board of all of the missing, including those on the plane.

Then they started putting ribbons on the board for those who were actually confirmed dead. In the end, we recreated those exhibits here in the Pentagon. There are four up right now, a temporary display for those lost. We are in the process of working on a permanent exhibit.

Rochester: Is there discussion yet with respect to that or anything else about a permanent memorial?

Brassell: There will be two permanent memorials. One will be within the Building, that we were tasked by Doc Cooke to create. It will be dedicated on May 4 of next year. That exhibit will be moved to its permanent location at the Wedge 1 Corridor 4 entrance after the renovation. You have to have access to the Building to see this exhibit, so the Corps of Engineers and WHS were also tasked to put a permanent public memorial somewhere on the Pentagon reservation or another public place. We will be involved in that at some level. There has been talk of putting it on top of the Remote Delivery Facility (RDF), but there is limited access to that by the general public.

Rochester: Are things getting back to normal, aside from the continuing extra workload related to the events? In terms of personnel, are people more relaxed or still nervous or concerned about the vulnerability of the Pentagon or other buildings?

Brassell: I haven't picked up on worry or concern. I think that relates to our role after the attack. Everyone in our office knows how valuable our role is and we didn't have time to get overwhelmed with the media and the emotion of these events. We were either working or sleeping. If something happens, we know that we have a role to play in the office and others will need us again. I don't think anyone is worried that we may be the ones hit next. We are close to the 2nd Corridor entrance, and to the edge of the Building, and to any biological threat that might come in. People can get very close to this

entrance before they are screened. The military police are down at the end of the corridor, but visitors can get all the way to this entrance before they are stopped.

Rochester: Are there any lessons learned from the standpoint of your organization in terms of an evacuation plan, or anything else? Have things changed organizationally or procedurally?

Brassell: We've had a minor change in where to meet in an emergency, but our continuity of operations plan was and is in place. We were always under the assumption that we would be able to get back into our location. We realize now that if we can't get back into the office we need to have other plans. We have good contractors supporting us about this, for future use. We have sent a lot of our graphics and files on CDs to our graphics contractors so we could go to their sites if necessary. We have important files stored here and nowhere else. They are all backed up here. We have aerial shots and evacuation maps at several sites now, in case we have to go off-site. As things progressed, we found out from the Protocol office about the memorial service scheduled for October 11 and were tasked with the graphic support, including the exhibit, the art for the lapel pin, and programs to be handed out. We worked closely with the Army television group to make sure the names were correct. We learned that just because a government agency gives you a list of names of missing people do not assume they are spelled correctly. Every single list we got had mistakes. Many had the SSN associated with the names, and from working with the families, it ended up that the Graphics office had the most up-to-date list.

Rochester: How did you ascertain the correct spelling?

Brassell: We contacted the families for names, initials, spelling, even the ranks and branch of service of the military victims. The pictures from the newspaper were so bad

that I collected all the SSNs and went to the DoD pass office. I worked with Mr. Jones there and had pictures printed out from their DoD passes. At that time they were the best ones available for some of the people.

Trask: I would like to ask each of you how this has affected you personally. Has it had any lasting effect on how you feel about the Building, or your work?

Brassell: For me, personally, I am torn between the desire to stay here, or be home with my children. I ended up spending much more time here, but as soon as I was able I took a week and a half off. Right now I keep my regular hours and spend time with my family. I always kept to that schedule. I am not afraid of being here, I think we served a valuable role after the attack. We need to be here, and keep ourselves some distance from the tragedy.

Harris: My parents are from the depression era, and I speak often to them about Pearl Harbor. I never fully comprehended the impact of that on their lives and their generation. As I came out of the conference area and saw the streets filled with fire and rescue equipment and so on, three fighter jets flew over the treetops toward Washington, and it was a very sobering moment. I will remember that. The positive thing about it was that the recovery operations center was in South Parking, and we had the opportunity to talk to the folks. One woman asked me what I do here. I told her and I also asked her, in turn, why she was here. She said she had seen what happened on TV, left her kids with her sister, borrowed a car and \$100, and came to volunteer her services to the Red Cross. I thought that was moving.

Rochester: Anything else you want to add? If not, thank you very much.