

## Interview with Christopher Combs

Welch: This interview with Christopher Combs is taking place on July 11, 2005, in the FBI offices in Crystal City, Arlington, Virginia. Interviewers are Alfred Goldberg, Diane Putney, and Rebecca Welch. We'd like to start by asking you to describe your job with the FBI.

Combs: On 9/11 I was an SA, special agent, on the National Capital Response Squad. Currently I am a GS-15 unit chief of operations for the Terrorist Screening Center, which is an FBI-led, multi-agency organization. We consolidated all the terrorist watch lists into one list and we maintain, update, and distribute that list.

Welch: Where were you and what happened on September 11, 2001, that put you on the scene?

Combs: From 1999 through 2003 I was a member of an FBI counter-terrorism team in the Washington Field Office called the National Capital Response Squad. That squad encompassed all the FBI's rapid response units and counter-terrorism response units that were within the Washington Field Office. It consisted of the evidence team, the SWAT team, and the weapons of mass destruction or HAZMAT team. My role on that squad was the weapons of mass destruction coordinator. In particular, one of my jobs was the FBI's liaison to the fire service. It was my job to go out and cross-train with all the fire departments on counter-terrorism situations.

Goldberg: Which fire departments?

Combs: The DC Fire Department and all the fire departments in Northern Virginia, to include the Arlington County Fire Department that handles the Pentagon.

Goldberg: Arlington and which others?

Combs: Alexandria, Arlington, Fairfax, Loudoun County, Prince William County, Fort Belvoir, Quantico.

Goldberg: On September 11, where were you and when did you learn about the attack?

Combs: That morning the FBI had sponsored a training session for all the local fire department rescue teams. We were at the DC Fire Academy, in Southeast Washington DC by the Blue Plains treatment plant. The Arlington Fire Department, the DC Fire Department, Alexandria, and the Airports Authority Fire Department were there. A team from the DC police was also there conducting training. We had just started the training when we heard about the attack on New York City.

Goldberg: How about the Pentagon?

Combs: When New York City happened I received a page from the FBI saying New York had been hit, to be ready for immediate deployment to New York. So I left and was heading back to the DC Field Office, which is downtown at Judiciary Square.

Goldberg: That's where you were stationed at the time, not here in Virginia?

Combs: Yes, I was stationed there. I stopped at my house on Capitol Hill on the way to the office to grab my "go" bags so I could deploy to New York immediately if need be. As I left my house in my FBI car, we monitor the DC police frequencies and I heard an officer come in with a priority message. When the message is priority, all other traffic stops. The unit came in with an announcement, and the cop said very distinctly that he didn't know what had happened but the Pentagon had just exploded. That's how I initially found out.

Goldberg: Do you know what time that was?

Combs: Right when the plane hit the building. Within seconds.

Goldberg: Where was he calling from? An Arlington policeman, presumably?

Combs: No, he was a DC cop. We only monitor the DC police.

Putney: Those words are in your brain as the very words he used?

Combs: Yes, no question. I was on Capitol Hill so I immediately put on the lights and sirens and started driving to 295 to get over to the Pentagon. I radioed back to the FBI Washington Field Office that I had just gotten this report and was responding and would let them know what the assessment was. As soon as I pulled up on 295, which is elevated in DC, I could see the smoke. I called into the Washington Field Office with my own priority and confirmed that the Pentagon had had some kind of explosion. We didn't know what it was but I requested that my squad, the National Capital Response Squad, respond, and that they deploy the Joint Terrorist Attack Force, another multi-agency squad of probably twenty-seven different agencies. It is another of our counter-terrorism response teams. Traffic was already getting heavy getting from DC to Virginia. It happened quickly because everyone could see, and cars were pulling over. Just as I got into bad traffic two motorcycle police officers merged on, so I jumped behind them and got over to Virginia.

Goldberg: Did they know you were FBI?

Combs: No, I was in an unmarked vehicle. But I had a Crown Victoria with all kinds of lights and sirens, and they were moving traffic out of the way pretty well. Not long after I crossed the bridge you couldn't get over. Within minutes the vast majority of the National Capital Response Squad could not get to the Pentagon, the traffic was so bad.

Welch: The response team is exclusively automobile, no helicopters?

Combs: Not that we owned. There were FBI helicopters in the area that we have access to, but with the scope of what happened they had priority missions above us.

Goldberg: When do you estimate getting to the Pentagon? 

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Combs: I got there six minutes after the plane hit.

Goldberg: What did you do when you got there?

Combs: We had been at the Pentagon all the time doing drills and cross-training with them, so luckily I got off at the right exit, but as I was driving in there were so many people coming out that I just left the car in a parking lane, grabbed my gear, and ran the rest of the way.

Goldberg: On which side of the building did you leave your car?

Combs: I took the exit for South Parking, so it was in one of the rows there. I grabbed my FBI bulletproof vest because we didn't know if there would be secondary attacks, put it on, grabbed my FBI radio, a bag, and some other gear.

Welch: People were coming out all around you?

Combs: Yes, there were hundreds, thousands, of people coming out as I was trying to run in.

Goldberg: You went there on your own initiative?

Combs: That was my job.

Goldberg: But you weren't ordered to go, you made the decision to go.

Combs: As a member of my squad, if there is a terrorist attack our job is to go.

Goldberg: Who was there when you arrived?

Combs: I was the first FBI person on scene. When I got there I reported to the Arlington Fire Department command post. They were already there.

Putney: What were you heading for?

Combs: I couldn't see the impact site from where I was. Our training, our standard operating procedure, is when we get to an event to go to the command post immediately. So I was looking for where it was.

Goldberg: You went around the building to get to the site from South Parking?

Combs: Right. The command post was set up parallel to the side where the plane hit the building. The reason I knew it was the command post was that in the fire department the command post is usually a big Suburban that the chief uses. We've done so many drills that we know what to look for, so very quickly I could determine what was the command post.

Goldberg: If you came into South Parking you had to go across and turn right to get to the west side where the site was. It probably took you a couple minutes to do that?

Combs: Again, I was at the command post six minutes after the plane hit.

Goldberg: How do you know that?

Combs: We talked to the fire chief when we got there.

Goldberg: When did the fire chief get there?

Combs: He didn't beat me by much, because I can remember him opening up the back of his Suburban to get the command post operational.

Putney: Is this Schwartz?

Combs: Yes.

Welch: What did you do then?

Combs: I knew his title was deputy chief in charge of operations, so I went up to him and let him know I was there and asked him the situation. At that point I did not know it

was a plane, I thought it was a truck bomb. I asked him what he wanted the FBI to do, and he asked me what my intel was. I gave him what I knew at the time; he knew about New York. I said I should have an intel report for him momentarily. I began to assess the scene, because I set up command for the FBI with the fire chief. It was my job to figure what FBI assets were needed on scene right then and call back to our Field Office to ask for those assets.

Welch: Obviously your phone was working, although some weren't.

Combs: The phones went down. I couldn't tell you when I realized that. But everything for us is on an FBI radio that is encrypted, so all my communications back to the Field Office would have been on my FBI radio. I gave them a quick update as to the situation, and we got different reports as to what kind of plane it was. At first it was a small plane, a turbo-prop plane. Actually, the turbo-props that land at National come over that way, so it made sense to me that one of the small planes went down. Even at the beginning I wondered if that had happened because it was right on the flight path.

Goldberg: Where did these reports come from?

Combs: Various people on scene. By that time we had witnesses. People that had actually seen it were there and we determined that it was a large, full-sized aircraft. We relayed all that information back, and that's when I found that a lot of guys on my squad could not get to the Pentagon because traffic was so bad they could not get out of DC. But people were showing up, FBI resources were starting to show up rather quickly.

Goldberg: What kind of resources?

Combs: Members of our evidence response team.

Goldberg: Where did they come from?

Combs: Agents in Virginia who had various business—interviews or just getting to work—were able to drive to the scene.

Goldberg: About how many were able to get there, and about when?

Combs: They arrived relatively quickly.

Goldberg: Do you mean a few minutes?

Combs: Yes. The first thing we did was to set up command for the FBI. One of the evidence response team leaders, Tom O'Conner, showed up. I met with him and put him in charge of the evidence recovery operations, to set it up and report to me. A lot of members from the joint terrorism task force were there very quickly. Everybody on our squad knows that when you get to the scene you go to command post because that's where we give out the orders.

Goldberg: How long did you remain in charge of the scene for the FBI?

Combs: Probably the first couple of hours. A supervisor showed up about an hour and a half later. He outranked me but he wasn't a terrorism expert and didn't know the team players like I did. He and I worked together running the scene.

Goldberg: He came from DC? What is his name?

Combs: I don't know where he came from. His name is John Kerr. Then in the late afternoon the FBI was finally able to get an assistant special agent in charge, a GS-15. His name is Bob Blecksmith.

Welch: Until then two of you were serving as overall coordinators?

Combs: Kerr wasn't there until about an hour later. I was the person in charge of all FBI operations at first.

Putney: You were in charge because you got there first and were head of one of the teams and no one came with higher rank until an hour or two later?

Combs: It was my job on the squad. In DC we went to probably five or so suspicious packages a day—anthrax letters with the fake white powder. Whenever we went to those my job was to set up command, so I had done this hundreds of times before. I just did my job. On our squad we all have roles—you're the bomb tech, you're an evidence guy. I was the command-and-control guy.

Goldberg: You set it up as a crime scene?

Combs: We realized right away it was a crime scene. A crime scene in an event that large when there are still people in harm's way is different than how we set up a normal crime scene when the event is over. There's a big difference in how we do operations.

We started up our crime scene operations immediately on the exterior. One thing we have found in major terrorist events is that there is a lot of evidence outside the building, and we find that we lose a lot of that evidence either by souvenir takers—people take things and run away, as unfortunate as that sounds—and by the hundreds of vehicles driving in and destroying the evidence. At the Pentagon we tried to start collecting evidence outside the life safety area as soon as possible and start moving into the building as soon as we could without getting in the way of rescue efforts.

Goldberg: That took time, didn't it?

Combs: Not much time. We were collecting evidence within the first thirty minutes.

Welch: You and the fire chief already knew what parts you would play, and the fire fighters and search-and-rescue people deferred to you?

Combs: It's a partnership. When we get to the scene we establish a unified command. I was there as the FBI commander; Chief Schwartz was there as the fire commander. The head of the Pentagon police, the DPS, John Jester was there. I knew him very well. I believe there was also a captain from the Arlington police, but I couldn't tell you his name. The four of us got together and from training together we all knew what our individual roles were.

Goldberg: The fireman is the incident commander. What does that mean?

Combs: He is the final arbiter, the one in charge. There is a command team, we each do what we have to do, but if there is a conflict the incident commander is the one who decides. He remained in command for the first seventeen days. Although it's a terrorist attack on government property, the fire chief remains as the incident commander during the first phase of an incident, which is the rescue phase.

Goldberg: The firemen were there for seventeen days?

Combs: They were there longer than that but they were in control for seventeen days. The fire chief is in command because in the first phase of a terrorism event, the rescue phase, the fire department has those resources. They rescue people and put fires out.

Goldberg: There were warnings of incoming aircraft. You received an initial one.

Combs: I can give you a time line, because we are jumping all over the place, out of time sequence.

Goldberg: We can follow the sequence pretty well. What has been a problem for us to understand was the matter of warnings of incoming planes. Did you get word of the incoming plane before or after the building collapsed?

Combs: After. The collapse was thirty-seven or thirty-nine minutes after the plane hit.

Goldberg: How do you determine that?

Combs: From the fire department's time logs. The fire department keeps very good records and they told me it was thirty-seven minutes. I rely on their numbers.

Putney: You saw the collapse?

Combs: No. You couldn't see it from where we were standing, but we heard it.

Goldberg: It took place over a few seconds or minutes, presumably.

Combs: Seconds.

Goldberg: It didn't go just like that.

Combs: Yes, it did. It was a structural collapse of the building. The fire department very quickly saw that a structural failure was starting to occur, so they had a team there watching. Probably under five minutes before it collapsed they said, "This building's coming down."

Goldberg: The smoke had cleared enough for them to see?

Combs: Yes. The fire chief issued the evacuation order at the command post and I transmitted it over the FBI radio, and so did Jester and the Arlington police.

Goldberg: From where did you get the warning of the incoming plane?

Combs: After the collapse, I can't tell you the time. I received a call on my FBI radio from the FBI's Washington Field Office that FAA was tracking a hijacked airliner.

Goldberg: The FAA had notified your office?

Combs: Yes. The way that works, when there is a major terrorism event, at FBI headquarters is a huge command post called the SIOP, Strategic Information Operations Center. They have reps there from all the government agencies. There was an FAA rep in the SIOP who saw what was going on. They have connectivity to

the FBI Field Office which then has connectivity to me through the radio. The Field Office called me and said there was a confirmed hijacked airliner, it was on track to DC, and was twenty minutes flight time out. They said we had twenty minutes.

Goldberg: You notified Schwartz and he decided on the evacuation?

Combs: I told him we had a confirmed hijacked airliner coming in. We looked at each other and he asked if I was absolutely positive. I said yes, then we got everybody out. The reason we decided to do the evacuation was purely based on seeing that in New York two planes had hit the same target. So we assumed that both planes were coming to the Pentagon. Before we evacuated we looked around and decided the safest places were under the overpasses on the highways. We sent everyone there. We relocated the command post underneath one of the overpasses, where the ramp comes down into South Parking from Washington Boulevard. That's where we relocated command and issued the evacuation order.

Goldberg: Were there people still in the building at the time you issued the evacuation order?

Combs: Yes, of course. The first order was to evacuate in twenty minutes.

Goldberg: What do you mean?

Combs: The plane had a twenty minute flight time coming in. I kept receiving updates from the Washington Field Office every five minutes as to expected arrival. The last call I got was a four-minute warning. What happened was, when the plane crashed they thought it had gone below radar and turned off its transponders, so they calculated from there. They didn't know it had crashed. That's where that time frame comes from. So we evacuated everybody to underneath the overpasses.

Putney: Where was the SIOP Center located?

Combs: At FBI headquarters.

Putney: There was an FAA rep there originating this information?

Combs: Yes. The person conveying this information to me was Jim Rice. He can tell you exactly where that information was coming from. I believe it was from the FAA rep in the SIOP, but it could have been from a contact with the airport.

Goldberg: There were some additional warnings of aircraft, too, weren't there?

Combs: Yes, much later in the day.

Welch: About that first one, at some point you learned of the crash. When did you decide to go back to work?

Combs: About ten minutes after the plane should have been there. After we passed zero hour I called back to ask what was going on. They gave me up until zero hour and then I called every few minutes to ask if we could get back to work. It was about ten minutes after that they said it was a confirmed crash at Camp David and we were good to go.

Goldberg: So the evacuation was for at least twenty to twenty-five minutes?

Combs: Right. We gave the initial order about twenty minutes out but it took a good ten minutes to get all the first responders out of there. Even at five minutes out I was one of the last ones to leave the command post area. There were still a number of people there, first responders, but not a lot.

Goldberg: Do you think that evacuation, which could have lasted as much as half an hour, possibly delayed getting the fire under control?

Combs: It certainly was thirty minutes that we weren't fighting the fire, but the fire was so out of control. You have to make a calculated decision. You can't put all your first responders at that much risk. A conscious decision was made that by evacuating we were to give up on the fire fight for a while, versus what might happen if we didn't evacuate and another plane showed up.

Goldberg: When did you get the warning about a second plane?

Combs: It was much later in the afternoon.

Goldberg: What did you do at that point?

Combs: At that point I was not with the fire chief. He got a call from his op center that an unauthorized aircraft had entered the air space, so he evacuated. We weren't with him so we didn't know why. The problem was that the airport called the Arlington command center and then called the chief. They didn't know it was a friendly aircraft. They didn't alert me to it because the FBI and the rest of the government knew it was friendly. There was confusion because at that point in time the chief and I had been separated. I had gone to another duty so he couldn't look at me and know for sure what was going on. That is in the after-action report.

Goldberg: Was there an evacuation then?

Combs: Yes.

Goldberg: You have no idea how long that lasted?

Combs: No, I wasn't on scene when that happened.

Goldberg: Where were you?

Combs: After the initial evacuation a decision was made to relocate the command post to safer territory. We moved it to the Virginia State Police barracks on the hill overlooking the Pentagon, across from the Navy Annex.

Welch: After that first evacuation you moved there?

Combs: A while after that, maybe a half hour, a decision was made, not by us, to move unified command up to the Virginia Police barracks where they had phones and electricity.

Goldberg: Was the fire chief there too?

Combs: He did not move because he stayed with his troops.

Welch: So everybody but the fire department moved up to the barracks?

Combs: Right. In hindsight, we never should have moved.

Welch: Why not?

Combs: Because every time you move command post you lose people. Everyone will not get the word and some will not follow. Right or wrong, everyone wants to be as close to the building as they can. Although we moved and were safer, with full access to the barracks and its amenities, others should have moved with us that didn't have the discipline to do so and stayed with the building.

Goldberg: This was a very unusual scene for you. Had there ever been anything this big before?

Combs: A scene is a scene. If you are a professional with training it makes no difference.

Goldberg: With thousands of people in a huge area you can't expect that they would have the same command-and-control that you have at a very small scene.

Combs: I disagree. No matter the size of the scene, you have a plan and SOPs.

Goldberg: You said a lot of people didn't get word.

Combs: If you train, you have rules you are supposed to follow.

Goldberg: Who was in charge by 2:00 in the afternoon? Was Kerr still in charge?

Combs: We were working together. When the command post moved up to the police barracks, Mr. Kerr stayed back to try and manage the FBI people that were showing up. I went with command to run command.

Goldberg: What time did you do that?

Combs: Probably forty-five minutes after the first evacuation.

Welch: Did being in a different location from the fire department interfere with your coordination?

Combs: At the worker bee level our people were down there with the fire department, so that was working. What didn't work was the command-and-control. When I was with Chief Schwartz we were trading information back and forth immediately. Now that was not going on and it didn't work. We realized that and corrected it by me going back down there to be with the fire chief.

Goldberg: Wasn't someone else with him?

Combs: Not dedicated to him like I was. He was grabbing guys and asking questions, but he didn't have his right-hand man from the FBI standing next to him at all times.

Goldberg: What were the FBI people doing?

Combs: Our main objective at that point in time was the collection of evidence outside the Pentagon, and witness interviews to figure out exactly what happened so we could factually say, "This is what occurred."

Goldberg: Did they pick up parts of the plane, for instance?

Combs: Yes.

Welch: At some point after the command moved up to the barracks, you reverted to being the fire liaison and went back down with the fire department?

Combs: I went up to the barracks with many other agencies to have this unified command, to figure out what was going on and coordinate FBI resources coming in. The fire chief stayed at the scene to coordinate his efforts to put the fire out. I rejoined him at 6:00 that night when we met in the briefing room with the secretary of defense when we had an all-agency meeting.

Welch: Did you remain with the fire chief for the rest of the time?

Combs: The next day I went to the Joint Operations Center set up at Fort Myer. The chief moved up there as well to run part of his operations. Then the decision was made that he needed to be down at the building with his troops and I would go down with him.

Goldberg: To go back to the 11<sup>th</sup>, what were the other police on the scene doing?

Combs: Arlington police and the Pentagon police were busy trying to secure the scene, the boundaries of the Pentagon, for protection and traffic management. Virginia State Police shut down 395. Most of them were trying to control the highway system.

Goldberg: What military were on the scene? Was there a military representative at the unified command?

Combs: DPS was there immediately, with Jester. As far as real uniformed military, they were not there in the initial hours. They did become a full member of the unified command.

Goldberg: Did you have any arrangements with the DPS people?

Combs: We had cross-trained with them a hundred times.

Goldberg: They were part of the unified command?

Combs: That's correct. In fact, we utilized their SWAT team almost immediately to form a secure boundary around the unified command to make sure we wouldn't have a secondary attack against it.

Welch: Explain how the FBI set up the Joint Operations Center and how it differed from the Joint Information Center.

Combs: They are two separate entities. The Joint Operations Center, or JOC, is primarily the federal command post for a major event. For a major terrorism event the FBI is required to set up a JOC and all the responding federal agencies go there, and we invite the local and state. The idea is that this JOC is to coordinate and facilitate assistance from the federal level to the local. Also, most importantly to the FBI, the JOC is where we are going to run our investigation of the event. Depending on where we are in the country, there are JOCs pre-built. We had one built at Fort Myer at their O Club, with wires in the ceiling ready to go. When 9/11 happened that place had already been scouted and was partly built out to use as a JOC. We decided that day that it would be the JOC we would set up. The JOC was operational at 6:00 a.m. on the 12<sup>th</sup> and remained the JOC for the duration of the event. The JOC was up and operational for twenty-four to thirty days.

Welch: What is the Joint Information Center?

Combs: The purpose of a JIC is to work with the media. All the media reps of all the agencies involved collect at the JIC and form a common media message and interface with the public media. A JIC was not established for the Pentagon event. All the plans

say that the JIC will be established inside the JOC. But on 9/11, because of the scope of the event, a decision was made at the attorney general/secretary of defense level. The attorney general did not want a JIC at each location on the federal side giving out comments that would not correlate. He decided that all comments about the investigation of 9/11 would come from the attorney general's office. The secretary of defense did not want anyone releasing information on casualties or deaths other than his office. So a deal was struck where all investigative issues would be discussed at the attorney general's office and all casualties at the Pentagon would be discussed by the sec's office. So we never set up a federal JIC. It left the locals in the lurch because they always look to the JIC, and there wasn't one. It ended up that the locals gave their own press releases from the gas station by the Pentagon, and that became where all the media interface was. The locals were giving conferences all the time. The FBI did not take part because of the arrangement with the attorney general.

Putney: That 6:00 p.m. meeting in the building was a big organizational meeting and everybody sent reps there. Who was in charge of that meeting and was it effective in unifying the whole effort?

Combs: Very effective. The purpose of the meeting was that there were so many agencies at the Pentagon, and many had never responded to anything like this. Many were not response agencies, but they showed up. Chief Schwartz decided to have a meeting to get everybody together to explain how things were going to work. We met in the press secretary's office conference room. We huddled before the meeting and decided that out of the unified command team the Arlington Fire Department would have the incident commander, Chief Schwartz. The FBI, DPS, Arlington police, and

FEMA were there because we were bringing in a lot of the search-and-rescue teams. At the meeting Chief Schwartz stood up with all of us behind him and announced that he was the incident commander. That's why we were there, to show that we all concurred. He described the unified command team. The system we operate under is called the ICS, the incident command system. Most first responders know it, about ninety percent of the fire departments in America operate under the ICS system. Less with the law enforcement, maybe fifty to sixty percent. We described this to people who had never worked under it.

Welch: This meeting was just for first responders?

Combs: Correct.

Goldberg: Was there a Defense representative there?

Combs: General Jackson was there as the head of the Military District of Washington. They were part of the command team.

Putney: It was a smoky building. You had to find a way to get in.

Combs: Right. There was still smoke in the building; you could see it and smell it. The lights were on in that room. Schwartz described the system. Then I stood up and explained what the Joint Operations Center was and how we were going to set it up. We wanted everyone to be there, and it would be operational the next morning. I reaffirmed that the fire chief was the incident commander. We reminded everyone that it was a crime scene, to keep that in mind. It was a quick meeting, about half an hour.

Putney: Is it a crime to take a piece of an airplane at a site like this?

Combs: Certainly taking what could be evidence would be regarded very unfavorably. This was a little different. We knew the plane hit the building.

Goldberg: Did you have any armed FBI people on the scene?

Combs: Every FBI agent is armed.

Goldberg: There was talk about putting snipers on buildings.

Combs: Yes, we did that.

Goldberg: In Pentagon City?

Combs: Crystal City, Pentagon City, all around the Pentagon, we put up SWAT teams and snipers because we were concerned about secondary attacks.

Goldberg: How soon after the attack did you do that?

Combs: Immediately after the "all clear" was given about the hijacked airplane I grabbed a DPS guy—their SWAT team was there—and said I wanted the SWAT team to surround the unified command. We had learned from studying with the Israelis that oftentimes after an attack the terrorists knew there would be a command post, and they would run a suicide bomber into the middle of the command post. So we had the SWAT team surround that immediately. Next I wanted every tactical team in the area to harden the perimeter. We put snipers up on the buildings to make sure that if a Rider truck came crashing through they could take it out. I don't know how long it took to get those security levels up, but those orders were issued right after the "all clear" from the first plane.

Welch: Was the FBI or the Secret Service responsible for putting a badge system in place for access to the scene?

Combs: There are a couple aspects to that. At first the DPS was able to get wristbands. The fire department immediately requested 6,000 feet of chain link fence from the American Red Cross. I think that showed up that night or the next day. DPS

was checking IDs—drivers' licenses and badges from the agencies—and they'd give people a band. But they ran out of bands right away and we realized we needed a system. The FBI's badging system had already been deployed to New York, so I decided, because we'd cross-trained with the Secret Service, to bring them in to do badging. They came over with their system and ran that part of it for us. That's when we went to the badges. Originally there was one color. Then we realized that with a driver's license and a badge from their agency, people could get a credential to get into the Pentagon scene. They issued 8000 badges, and they came to us and said there were too many people and we were losing control. They had lists of everybody who had gotten badges, and we took the lists to the fire and military people to figure out who really needed badges.

Goldberg: Was that the next day?

Combs: It was several days later. We had started that by either the second or third day. By Thursday we realized we had a problem, there were too many badges and we started going through the lists. We evacuated the Pentagon scene on Wednesday or Thursday because the FBI felt there was a credible threat of a secondary attack. We had some intelligence about a truck bomb or something. We evacuated the scene and as they came back through a checkpoint we had an FBI agent, a firefighter, and a military guy checking badges to see if people really needed badges and trying to figure out who was who. There, we took badges away. Some people misrepresented themselves and didn't need badges. So that was the first time we really began to cull the list. Later on, sometime after Friday, we realized that even though some needed to get into the perimeter, they didn't need to get into the building where the destruction

was. So we set up an inner perimeter and went over the list again. If someone had reason to be in the inner perimeter he got a red badge, as opposed to the original badge that was orange.

Goldberg: How many days were you on the scene?

Combs: Seventeen days.

Goldberg: Did you have different FBI supervisors during that time?

Combs: No. We set up our command-and-control system and on Friday when I was back on scene with Schwartz I was the FBI rep at unified command. There was an FBI special agent in charge, our no. 1, who was in charge of the Pentagon scene, and I reported to him. Every day it was the same people. Everybody went to twelve hour shifts, so every day there were the same people. For the duration of the Pentagon I reported to our SAC, Art Eberhart.

Welch: About the badges, you had PenRen and unofficial people who were coming in to bring supplies to shore up the building, etc., who were not first responders but needed to be there.

Combs: PenRen crane operators were needed there, so they got badges. Then as we realized that we needed to cull the people that needed to be in the first perimeter but not in the building, we created the second badge, the red badge, to get into the building. The guys delivering diesel fuel to the generators didn't need to get into the building and would get orange ones, whereas I had a red one, being on the evidence team. That's a process we learned and built out. By far the biggest challenge we had was to get the security badging system up and running.

Goldberg: You set up a place for evidence to be brought, didn't you?

Combs: We set up two different places. One area was specific for airplane pieces. Whenever there is a plane crash, the FBI works very closely with the NTSB, the National Transportation Safety Board. Again, we cross-train with them all the time. Airplane crashes are very particular problems. Every piece of the airplane is evidence. There was a separate area just for those pieces. Then we had an evidence control area for all traditional FBI evidence. That went someplace else to be catalogued and some was taken to the lab. They were next to each other on the lawn by the helipad, but separate.

Welch: Who was overseeing the collection of human remains and how they were treated?

Combs: We set up another command at the morgue, a temporary morgue set up in the mail facility. There was an agent in charge of the morgue operations, Tara Bloesch. She was fantastic. She had been a mortician in Philadelphia before she joined the FBI. She is no longer with the FBI, but she was then in charge of morgue operations for the FBI. She was just an agent, but the Bureau is very cognizant of who has subject matter expertise. Everyone has their area and is to report to the SAC. In the military, rank is everything, but with us it's more who is expert in an area. The Bureau is hesitant to talk about particulars about remains because of sensitivities. I don't even talk about morgue operations in my presentation.

Goldberg: Who prepared the graphic depiction of where remains were found?

Combs: That would have been done by our evidence response teams. We have a special unit down at Quantico.

Goldberg: They missed a few.

Combs: I find that hard to believe.

Goldberg: They missed showing them. They don't add up.

Combs: If that's an error, it needs to be rectified.

Goldberg: At least one died in hospital, and it's possible one died outside.

Combs: When we find remains we can't always identify where they were in the building, so the remains that we identify may not relate to a map.

Welch: After an event such as this, do you normally assign agents to the families?

Combs: Yes, Victim Witness Assistance, it's called. There was a victim witness coordinator assigned to every family.

Goldberg: A different agent for each family?

Combs: I believe so.

Welch: Later, could you give me the name of the person who ran that?

Combs: I got the message from SAC Rollins that you were going to be calling, so I imagine this is a Bureau-supported project?

Goldberg: As far as we know. I talked with the FBI historian who apparently talked with Rollins.

Combs: Just wanted to be sure, before I give up everyone's name. Jim Rice and John Perren were supervisors, SSAs. Perren and Jimmy were equals. Jim Rice was the supervisor of the squad I was on, but those two squads were so close that John Perren gave me orders all the time. Art Eberhart was the special agent in charge of the Pentagon scene, the SAC. Number two was Bob Blecksmith, the assistant special agent in charge. He was there on the scene the whole time. Bob Blecksmith showed

up to relieve me when I was at the command post that moved to the Virginia State Police.

Goldberg: Did the FBI produce any after-action reports on this?

Combs: We spent a lot of time on the Arlington Fire Department after-action report. We devoted serious resources to it. Independent of that, I don't know. I would ask Mr. Rollins or Mr. Eberhart.

Welch: So the time line you mentioned can be found in the after-action report?

Combs: Right. We submitted everything we had to the authors of that document, and they eventually came up with the Arlington Fire Department report. I rely on it.

Goldberg: Did the FBI release any photographs to the public?

Combs: We have thousands of photographs. I don't know what has been released to the public.

Goldberg: Was the FBI talking to the news media during this period?

Combs: I can tell you that the FBI at the Pentagon scene did not do a lot of talking to the media. We left that to the locals.

Putney: To go back to the beginning, when you got to the scene did you talk to someone who saw the aircraft go in?

Combs: At some point somebody came up to me and said it was a full-sized commercial jet. I learned that very quickly once I was at the command post. My impression when I arrived was a truck bomb, or a small plane, turbo-prop. Within five or ten minutes I gathered it was a full-sized commercial airplane.

Putney: Your squad was concerned with weapons of mass destruction. Were you concerned that there might be chemicals on that plane?

Combs: To my mind that wasn't an issue. That was not the most effective delivery method to be used for that. I know that we checked with people on scene just to make sure, but I was never seriously concerned about it.

Putney: Was the FBI also doing checks with others inside the building?

Combs: We were not initially doing checks. In those first couple of hours there were other elements doing those checks. We had a lot of problems getting our teams out of DC. I kept requesting resources and they would call back to say they couldn't get them to us. I requested additional bomb resources and additional hazmat resources, along with more bodies. Very early I knew we didn't have enough people on scene. We had people in DC, and more people in Northern Virginia in Tysons Corner who were sent to Dulles Airport because the hijacked plane left from Dulles. We had to have people there to grab evidence. So I had two major sites in Virginia operating at the same time.

Putney: With that second plane in the afternoon, you were already up across from the Navy Annex. Did you ever see the plane? We have one account that the plane was supposed to be doing aerial reconnaissance on its way to land at National Airport.

Combs: I remember something like that, but I couldn't swear to it. By day two we were putting up FBI helicopters and planes taking aerial photographs, so there were a lot of overflights by our people taking overhead photos. Lots of helicopter overflights and some airplanes.

Putney: What were the incidents that you studied for lessons learned?

Combs: The biggest one was the Oklahoma City bombing. A lot of things we did at the Pentagon that were quite beneficial were as a result of what we learned at Oklahoma City. The police chief from Oklahoma City retired and was hired by the FBI as a

consultant and I was fortunate to work with him for months downloading his brain. The thing that helped me the most were the months I spent with Sam Gonzales who was the police chief of Oklahoma City. There were times at the Pentagon where I specifically made decisions because I remembered Sam Gonzales saying, "That's what we did at Oklahoma City." We had also studied the Africa bombings in 1998; my office sent teams over there. We had a lot of studies from the Tokyo subway attack. But Oklahoma by far was the best.

Goldberg: We'll think of more questions, no doubt. Thank you.