

Pentagon Attack

Interview with Matthew Morris
December 5, 2001

Putney: This is an oral history interview with Matthew Morris, the supervisor of the Pentagon generator systems program. It is December 5, 2001, and we are in the Pentagon. [The interviewer is Diane T. Putney, OSD Historical Office.]

Please describe your key responsibilities as the generator systems program supervisor.

Morris: I am in charge of the generator crew that is responsible for the emergency power in the Pentagon. The power generates from transfer switches, UPS (uninterrupted power source) systems.

Putney: Prior to September 11 were you or was your office involved in any preparations for some kind of threat against the Building?

Morris: No, not really. We never had any idea that something like this would happen.

Putney: You were here on September 11? Could you explain what you were doing that morning and how you learned of the crash?

Morris: John Robinson and I were here in the office, and we were watching TV when the planes crashed into the World Trade Center. I then left the office to go down to the Remote Delivery Facility (RDF) to check on some parts for generators. I was on my way over there when the plane hit the Pentagon.

Putney: Were you in the tunnel or outside the Building?

Morris: I had just gone in the 6th Corridor from the A&E drive. That is the drive on the inside of the Pentagon. I had just walked in through those doors when the plane hit.

The doors had swung shut behind me, and when the plane hit, they flew open again.

Putney: What was it like to be that close to the impact site?

Morris: There was a really loud crashing noise, and I got some effects of the blast, the air blowing and the heat.

Putney: Could you hear?

Morris: Yes, I was about a hundred yards from it. I was far enough from the debris.

Putney: What did you do?

Morris: From what had happened to the World Trade Center, I knew what it was. I went around the A&E drive. There is a fence between the 4th and 5th Corridors, and people were trying to climb over that. There is a combination lock on that, and I couldn't get it open. I went back to the generator room and called John Robinson and asked for the correct combination, and I managed to get it open. People were running out that way. I then went around the A&E drive some more to the C-4 vault, an electrical vault. The doors were blown open, and I could see people running through there. The vault was still energized.

Putney: How could you tell?

Morris: I could hear the transformers humming and see the digital displays showing the voltage and what not.

Putney: Could you describe what the vault looks like? What's in there?

Morris: There are four sets of transformers in line from the doors all the way back toward the outside of the Building. Along the sides of the wall are the high-voltage

disconnect switches, and a whole set of low-voltage switch-gears that are being fed from the transformers.

Putney: You actually saw people?

Morris: They were running through the vault. There was about an inch of water on the floor in there, so I went inside. The disconnect switches were easy to get to, so I shut that down.

Putney: How were people able to come through that vault?

Morris: The doors were blown open on impact, but there didn't seem to be a lot of damage inside the vault itself other than the water.

Putney: How dangerous was that, the power lines and water on the floor?

Morris: I couldn't believe it, but they didn't know what they were doing when they ran through there. They were just trying to get out of the Building.

Putney: What area were they coming from?

Morris: They were coming directly from the area where the plane hit.

Putney: Were they helping others or were they just individuals who were able to get out?

Morris: They was just individuals. There were some people just off the sides of the vault doors helping people down from the second floor. The window had blown open on the second floor. I went back into the vault and grabbed a contractor's ladder that was in there. It was too short, so some military people grabbed a toolbox and set the ladder on top of it and were able to get a couple of people out that way.

Putney: With the water on the floor, people could have been electrocuted by touching a transformer?

Morris: It is well insulated, but I wasn't sure how much damage had been done to the back part of the vault, because you couldn't see very well. As it turned out everything was still pretty well insulated, although there was still the water there, a dangerous situation.

Putney: You know, as an electrician, exactly what to do to deactivate that vault?

Morris: Yes. We had a generator outside the Building there that was also feeding emergency power. We had been trained on how it worked, because that area had just been renovated.

Putney: That generator right outside the Building was destroyed, wasn't it?

Morris: Yes. We just finished doing a salvage job on it a few weeks after the crash.

Putney: The plane hit it?

Morris: Yes. It cut a groove across the top of the 40-foot container and set the 1,000-gallon fuel tank inside on fire. A lot of the news footage you see in front of the crash was that fuel tank burning.

Putney: So you think the airplane fuel was burning within the Building not what we were seeing?

Morris: Yes. By the time the news crews got here most of the flame you saw was the fuel tank burning outside the Building.

Putney: How many people did you see coming through the vault site, and while you were in it were people still coming through?

Morris: Yes. There were a few people coming through when I got there, and a few more as I was switching the voltage off.

Putney: It was good that you were there.

Morris: Bill Thomas, an electrical supervisor, went down to the electrical vault in the basement that was feeding that section, to shut it off from the main source. But I didn't know that at the time.

Putney: Did you get a chance to look at that vault afterward? Was it damaged?

Morris: Just the corner closest to the crash site, a bit of cave-in there, but all the electrical stuff was undamaged.

Putney: The people could get out because the doors from their side into the vault had been blown open? It wasn't like a wall had been blown away?

Morris: Right. Part of the ceiling was caved in on one side, and the entrance on the other side was open. The doors on the outside were blown completely off.

Putney: So as you approached, you saw the doors open.

Morris: Right. The doors were blown out into the drive.

Putney: So the reason they were able to get there from their work area was because—

Morris: The door on the backside was open, and they just ran right through there.

Putney: So there was a door on the other side, too, and that got blown open.

Morris: They were blown open, but not entirely off like the outside doors.

Putney: With the ladder were people then able to get out by climbing down the ladder?

Morris: Yes, two people climbed down, a female lieutenant colonel and another officer. The lieutenant colonel did not want to come out. She was screaming that there were people still on the inside. There was nothing we could do, the smoke was just pouring out of there.

Putney: Was it a window they were coming out of?

Morris: They were coming out of a second story window.

Putney: It was blown out?

Morris: It was blown open on the bottom, and they were able to climb out the bottom of the window.

Putney: I heard some stories of the windows being too strong to break.

Morris: The window was cracked, but still basically intact except that the frame had blown outward on the bottom.

Putney: The lieutenant colonel knew that her colleagues were still in there.

Morris: Yes, she didn't want to come out. But there was no going back in there. It was just too thick.

Putney: Did you see smoke coming out of that area?

Morris: Yes, it was pouring out, especially in the upper floors.

Putney: It is hard to imagine anyone being able to breathe.

Morris: They were sticking their heads out of the window just to breathe, there was no way to go back in without a respirator.

Putney: The smoke forces her out, then?

Morris: Yes, everyone was yelling at her to come out.

Putney: But she was saying people were still in there.

Morris: Yes.

Putney: Tough one What service was she from?

Morris: I think it was the Army.

Putney: When you got them down were there other people that could help?

Morris: Yes, there were 20 or 25 people trying to get them out.

Putney: Were there medical people?

Morris: Not at that time. I don't recall seeing anyone out there then.

Putney: It's all happening so fast. What did you do then?

Morris: I didn't know what had happened to the generator outside, so I made my way to the 3rd Corridor and out of the Building to see if the generator was on. If it was still there, it should have come on because of the power outages. I was going to shut it down, but I saw that it was on fire, so I didn't have to worry about that. Then the Defense Protective Service (DPS) and the firemen were telling me to get out of the Building. I got out for a while.

Putney: Why did they make you get out?

Morris: They were getting everyone out. They did not want to let me back in. I had to go back around to the A&E drive entrance by the 2nd Corridor to talk DPS into letting me go back in.

Putney: What did you tell them you were going to do?

Morris: I told them who I was and what I had to do.

Putney: What were you able to do with your skills to assist with the firefighting and rescue?

Morris: There was not a lot we could do as far as firefighting. We didn't have any equipment. There were still a lot of electrical systems that had to be looked at. Later in the day we went around and shut off some more electrical vaults just to make sure the power was off to the damaged areas.

Putney: Was that to protect the firefighters?

Morris: Yes, and anyone else that might still be alive.

Putney: What other vaults did you go to?

Morris: We went to the B-5 vault, and the C-3 vault. Bill Thomas was in charge of that, and Russell Taylor was here, too, we were all doing that.

Putney: How many vaults are there throughout the Building?

Morris: There are approximately 12 or so.

Putney: And you are closing down those closest to the site?

Morris: Any of them that are bringing power to the damaged areas.

Putney: The second one, was it in a badly damaged area?

Morris: Yes. We tried to shut down the power to areas with water damage and structural damage.

Putney: Did your staff have any meeting at any time that afternoon?

Morris: It was just me and John Robinson here from the generator crew that day.

Putney: You knew he was okay.

Morris: Yes, I had called him to get the combination, and he went off to do what he could.

Putney: People were trying to account for you and John.

Morris: Yes, as soon as I turned the power off in the C-4 vault, I called the Building Operations Center and let them know I had done that. I knew John was all right.

Putney: I have a picture here—now for that C-4 vault, could you give a description of where that is located?

Morris: The A&E drive runs between B and C rings. The C-4 vault is just off the 4th Corridor on the drive between Corridors 4 and 5.

Putney: Which is exactly where the plane hit. So that is the closest vault to the impact site.

Morris: Right.

Putney: Where were the people coming through the vault coming from?

Morris: They were coming out of the area close to Corridor 4 through the vault into the drive. They ran towards Corridor 5 to get away from the fire.

Putney: The window where you saw the lieutenant colonel was where?

Morris: That was right above the vault, a bit closer to the 4th Corridor off to the side of the C-4 vault doors in the A&E drive.

Putney: That's very close to the impact area. Since you were on the A&E drive, did you see others trying to get out that couldn't get out?

Morris: No, I didn't see anyone banging on windows or anything.

Putney: The generator is here by the heliport?

Morris: It was grazed by the aircraft as it went in here by the 4th Corridor.

Putney: If the impact had turned off all the regular power in that area, and you didn't have the generator for backup power, wouldn't it be more difficult for people to get out of that area? Does that area become completely dark? Did they lose exit lights?

Morris: No, they were still backed up by battery.

Putney: Would you think it was more difficult to get out then?

Morris: I'm sure it was, but by the time I got around there to shut the C-4 vault down, I don't think anyone could have gotten out without assistance anyway. Especially in the area that had collapsed, everything was dark there anyway.

Putney: What did you do then? How did your afternoon proceed?

Morris: I got back into the Pentagon. There were some threats of more aircraft coming in, and we came here and watched to see because they were trying to evacuate people

out of the Building again, and I figured the safest place would be in the basement. We watched the news. There wasn't any further danger. We then went around and did what we could.

Putney: You were in ME857A.

Morris: Yes, it's in the Mezzanine, below ground. We got together all of our flashlights and radios and took them up. They were then forming rescue teams, and later they brought in portable light sets that we set up in center court and on the A&E drive for security lighting.

Putney: You were helping with the wiring or were those by generators?

Morris: They were portable.

Putney: You were just helping them set those up?

Morris: Yes, we set those up and took care of them while they were here.

Putney: What did you notice happening in the center court, since that was mostly where you were operating through?

Morris: I never got back out to the outside until later on in the week. In the center court they were setting up triage areas, laying out body bags for any victims they recovered, and they ended up bringing most of them to the outside of the Building anyway. They had rescue teams formed and ready to go in, but there was no way to get in there without equipment. When I first came back to the Building and went back around the A&E drive. These were some people trying to get back in to see if they could find people—wrapping rags around their faces and what not. There was just no going in there—not without a bottle of air. The smoke was just too thick.

Putney: Could you describe that smoke? It was pouring out of the Building from every crevice?

Morris: As I went around the Building doing different things, it got thicker the higher you went. The fifth floor was almost impossible to get around, because the smoke had permeated all around the Building. The smoke was everywhere in the Building a couple of hours after the crash. There was no getting away from it. Some areas you couldn't get into at all, it was so thick, especially around the crash site.

Putney: What was it like before the Building collapsed?

Morris: I couldn't see the collapse from the A&E drive. I saw the doors blown open at the C-4 vault, and something from the aircraft had punched a hole in the wall on the A&E drive. I could see that hole, and the fire in there.

Putney: Did you see what looked like part of an airplane?

Morris: I didn't know what it was. It was just a hole that had to have come from the aircraft.

Putney: How big was the hole?

Morris: I had to walk pass it to get to the C-4 vault when I first went over there. It was about five feet in diameter.

Putney: Did you see anything that looked like it came from an airplane?

Morris: No.

Putney: Was smoke pouring out of that hole?

Morris: Yes.

Putney: When you got to the exterior of the Building what was it like to look at the impact site?

Morris: The smoke from the fuel tank from the generator was obscuring my view.

There was a huge fireball from that fuel tank burning. We had about 700 gallons in that tank at the time, and it all burned up. So it was a pretty good-sized fireball.

Putney: Did you see people trying to escape by that time?

Morris: After the two people got out from the second floor, I didn't see anybody trying to escape from the interior of the Building. I didn't stay around the outside that long.

Putney: The windows on that outside were they supposed to be blast-resistant?

Morris: Yes. The ones that didn't get directly impacted were pretty much intact on the outside.

Putney: Were the firefighters there by the time you got outside?

Morris: Yes. There was one DPS officer and someone from the fire department was there to tell me I couldn't go back in. I had to go around toward the 3rd Corridor just to get out to that area because the smoke was so thick on the first and fourth floors I couldn't get through there.

Putney: What time did you leave that day?

Morris: We didn't get out until 9:00 that night, after we got all the lights set up. It was a late day. We came back in early the next morning.

Putney: Were you able to get in easily the next day?

Morris: Security was very tight the first few weeks after the attack. There were a lot of roads closed off.

Putney: What kinds of things did you do the next morning?

Morris: We went around and refueled the light carts, the portable light sets they had set around the center court and the A&E drive. Then they looked at shutting down some vaults in the 6th Corridor. The electrical shop had charge of that.

Putney: Were the firefighters asking you to turn those off?

Morris: Yes. There were still problems with arcing going on in the crash area. There were some uninterruptible power systems in that area that were still live because they were backed up by batteries. Some of our emergency power by the eighth corridor was feeding all the way around to that area, so we had to look at that, too.

Putney: Does each segment, or wedge, of the Building have its own backup system?

Morris: We are working on consolidating all the backup power, but each section does have its own. Each agency has its own emergency systems.

Putney: For the computers?

Morris: Even larger.

Putney: Like the command center, where the big communication systems have built in temporary back up systems which don't get cut off. Could they have been causing the arcing?

Morris: Yes, and some of the emergency lighting that we have on the small light safety generators around the Building, too.

Putney: What are those?

Morris: They are used for stairway and hallway lighting, emergency lights for those areas. I think we have four of them left. There was a small generator in that area before it was renovated. When they pulled that out, they tapped off the one further

down for the lights temporarily until that wedge was tied into the consolidated emergency power areas.

Putney: Would you describe what happens when you see the arcing? What is it?

Morris: I didn't see any, it was firefighters reporting it.

Putney: What do you see when you see it?

Morris: It was all low voltage so it was like a small flash of light. It is still enough to be dangerous.

Putney: It is coming from wires?

Morris: Yes.

Putney: Because they are broken, the electricity might sizzle or something?

Morris: Yes, it could definitely restart a fire.

Putney: You definitely want to stay away from it, because you are afraid it might electrocute you?

Morris: Yes. You need to de-energize it so there is no additional potential for fire.

Putney: I guess firefighters have to pound through walls to get at the source of the flames, and they don't want to put their axes against live wires.

Morris: Exactly, if something is hot.

Putney: Firefighters don't usually know where to turn this kind of stuff off, they depend on people like you with expertise.

Morris: Yes.

Putney: At the same time, you were trying to keep electricity going to other parts of the Building, because the secretary wanted the Building to be up and running the next day

and people would be coming back to work. It was an odd situation, turning it off and closing it down.

Morris: Yes, and later on, as things started to get back to normal we re-energized some of the vaults in the 6th Corridor so that area could be used again, the 7th Corridor side of that area. Then we had to isolate certain areas of the vaults.

Putney: Throughout the 12th, the next day, what other kinds of things were you doing?

Morris: Basically helping out where we could, making sure the lights were working and what not. We really did not get out to the recovery area as far as setting anything up. We were helping people hook up generators and things like that, but there were already military people out there doing that kind of work, and I had more than enough to take care of inside the Building. Usually we only had two or three people here at a time.

Putney: Does this shop keep a 24-hour shift?

Morris: Yes, we have a 24-hour watch. We have only one person on the night shift and two on the second shift. Usually there is two or three of us here on the day shift and on the weekends there is only one person per shift.

Putney: For the rest of the week, you assisted wherever you could and made regular calls.

Morris: Yes, making sure all our systems are operational.

Putney: Are you back to a normal schedule and workload, and how long did that take?

Morris: About a month after the crash, they moved all the light carts out and things got back to normal. We started upgrades again and tried to make things as best as we can.

Putney: I know the Building has the Building Operations Command Center (BOCC), and it is very modern and up-to-date, but on September 11 you couldn't turn off electrical systems from that center. Is that going to be possible in the future?

Morris: Yes, I think so. I'm not sure how much control they will have over the high-voltage part of it, but they will be able to shut down some of the local things.

Putney: Were they able to do that then or was the system not yet up?

Morris: It was not running completely. I don't think it was designed at that time to shut anything down electrically other than air handlers and such.

Putney: I know people had to go and shut off water valves, despite the computers in the control center. You said that the 4-C vault is high voltage, what is the voltage?

Morris: It is 13,800 volts, and then it is stepped down to 480 volts for the low-voltage switch gear.

Putney: Throughout this time have you thought of any lessons learned for your shop and the kind of work you do to better prepare for a crisis like this?

Morris: I'm not sure anything could have prepared us for this.

Putney: Once it happened, was there something you needed? Did you have to ask Contracting for anything that might have helped you out or were you pretty well equipped?

Morris: We were pretty well equipped to keep things running in areas that were unaffected. As far as the damaged area, there was nothing we could do with that.

Putney: Can you see anything good coming out of this terrible tragedy?

Morris: I am surprised at the number of people that stayed in that area to help out and help people get out of the Building. When I got back into the Building, there were

teams of volunteers already assembled, ready to go back into the crash area. They were untrained, but were willing to go back in and try to help.

Putney: Without the proper equipment.

Morris: Yes, it was pretty amazing.

Putney: Is there anything else that you think we should include in this interview?

Morris: No, not really.