

Pentagon Attack

Interview with Lt. Michael Nesbitt
November 7, 2001

Rochester: We are interviewing Michael Nesbitt, of the Defense Protective Service (DPS). The date is November 7, 2001, and the interviewers are Drs. Stuart Rochester and Roger Trask of the OSD Historical Office. We are with Officer Nesbitt in the command center of the Defense Protective Services offices.

Lt. Nesbitt, give us an idea of what your responsibilities normally are with the Defense Protective Service.

Nesbitt: First of all, I supervise all of the people working in DPS records and communications center. I have eleven employees at any given time. The day shift is four employees. If there is an incident of any kind--assault, theft, a security problem--anything that is written and given a case number comes to me and is put into a records management system and I am responsible for that. Also, employee requests, things like that. In the communications center we are tasked from WHS (Washington Headquarters Services) with all-season fire response. We don't have a fire department at the Pentagon, but we have a direct line to Arlington Fire, which gives us direct support. We are the primary police department, the law enforcement presence, with DPS, and WHS, so if there is an incident, we are the dispatch center. We send an officer to that location. We take in and send out information. That is our primary responsibility for WHS, and I am in charge of it.

Rochester: Were you in the Building when the attack took place on September 11, and how close to the impact site were you?

Nesbitt: I was sitting at my desk, here in 1A315, by the far northeast wall. I had CNN on, and I had just heard that a plane hit the North Tower of the Trade Center. Actually, the way it went, somebody said that the Tower had been hit, and I turned the TV on, and I'm looking at the Tower on fire, and thought it was pilot error. I am an amateur historian, and I thought about the Empire State Building when the B-25 landed in it in 1948. But as I was watching I saw a jetliner fly into the South Tower, and I knew it was not an accident. A friend called me right then, and he asked me to help him pour concrete. He has quite a story himself. He is a supervisor at the crash site now. His name is Lt. Bill Stout, and he lives in Falls Church. He said, "You've got to get over here to help me." I said, "Bill, somebody just flew a jet into the South Tower at the World Trade Center. We've got some problems here." I called the Chief of the DPS, John Jester, and asked him if he had seen the news in New York. He knew about it, and he told me to send a message to RE&F by e-mail about the incident in New York and that everything at the Pentagon was fine. We were going to be more aware, and keep our security posture, but we were not going to raise it to Alpha or Bravo. So I sent an e-mail, and had no sooner sent it out when I heard a boom and felt the Building rattle. I have been in this room since 1989, and it was the largest boom I had heard. I looked over my shoulder and saw the Towers burning. I looked at my PC and at the wall, which was in a direct line, and everything on the other side of that wall was the affected area. I got up and went into the other room where all the alarms are located. Any intrusion alarm, from a motion detector or anything, even a fire alarm, comes in okay. I went around the corner, everyone was sitting there, and I asked them if they had heard the noise. A whole bank of alarms had come in at the same time from that

area, one big line of red. I started hunting. Because one of the alarms had gone off, a camera automatically came up, a recorder. I saw one of our officers standing at the doors and the doors had been blown off the hinges. They had lost power and we were to get some more cameras over there. We were looking for another camera. Someone brought another camera up on one of the monitors and we could see nothing but billowing red flames and smoke. I thought someone had hit the Navy gas station with a bomb or something. I got on the phone, my direct line, and called Arlington and told them we had an unknown situation. Someone thought a plane had hit us. I thought another situation was at 800 Joyce St., where the gas station is. Arlington knew about the Pentagon, but not the gas station. At the same time our four radio channels--one is a police media aid to all the police departments in the area, and one is an EMS channel to the Tri-Care Services area--we could hear all their radio transmissions. Somewhere within a 15-minute or so time frame the biggest voice on the radio was Major Laurie Brown, head nurse at the Tri-Care facility. She was telling people what to do and heading up the triage system. She started screaming for EVACS, calling for DPS over the radio. She kept saying, "We need EVACS." Sometime during that time frame Chief Jester came down and told us to get on the "big voice," the PA system covering most of the Pentagon. We were to announce that we had been hit by a plane and everyone was to evacuate. At the same time all eleven phone lines were lit up. We were trying to get information in and out. I got on the PA system and asked everyone to evacuate, but not towards Corridors 3 and 4. I had several people come to me and say, "Thank you for that message. We had no idea what was going on." Then Chief Jester ran out to the center court and a few minutes later came back and said, "Mike, you've got to get

Fire or somebody in here because people are trapped. They're burning alive." So I got on the phone and called Arlington. A couple minutes later Jester came back again and said the same thing: We had to get an engine unit and EMS unit into the center court for people who are trapped and people with burn injuries. In the meantime one of my officers, Darren Hall [?], came in and told me that I had to do something, that a woman was dead in the center court, and there were others dying. Major Phillips came in and said that we had to get out. Major Brown was still calling for EVACS. I have a national warning phone that would hook me up to at least 20 agencies within the metropolitan region. I asked for EVACS, evacuation helicopters, to come and get people to medical treatment. I asked for Park Police. People already knew what was going on. I asked for Eagle #1 and Eagle #2, the two helicopters of the Park Police. They were already in the air. I have no idea how many phone calls I took. I talked to the secretary of defense's office more than once, from a brigadier general to a two-star general, trying to give them some update on the situation. The room, meanwhile, was starting to fill with smoke.

Rochester: So at the time of impact, there was no immediate damage to your area, but it gradually filled with smoke?

Nesbitt: Yes. From what I understand, the actual impact site was about 100 yards away. When the final bit of debris landed it was less than 100 feet away. On the other side of the wall, down that hallway, the nose was sitting there.

Rochester: To get back to the time you were watching the World Trade Center, was there any awareness or information on your part about a third aircraft coming in this direction?

Nesbitt: No.

Rochester: You didn't have any information that we were in immediate danger here at the Pentagon?

Nesbitt: No. I've seen a lot of things happen around here. I've known people to have been killed here, shot or crushed by something, but nothing like that.

Rochester: Who took charge at this point as you were becoming aware of what the circumstances and needs were? At what point did things begin to be coordinated and orders begin to go out in a systematic way? When did things gradually become more organized?

Nesbitt: We started to put up a command post right around South Rotary Road and Fern Street, by the I-395 ramp. They were using that area for some protection, I guess. We were trying to coordinate with them.

Trask: Who was at the command post?

Nesbitt: I know Major Koerber, my commander, was there. He had a radio. Whether a military person of some rank was out there, I don't know. I know that Chief Jester was in the Building, and was with the secretary at one time. I know we were going from here to Major Koerber asking him for instructions. After I talked to the Park Police and asked for the helicopters, a few minutes went by and someone from the Military District of Washington called to check on the situation. They said they understood we needed evacuation helicopters, and that about 40 were ready to fly. Meanwhile smoke was filling the room, and we still had no idea of the extent of the damage or what was going on with the rescue operation. Then MDW came back on the phone to tell me they had personnel help, a battalion of troops was ready to go. I said the major highways were

already affected. They could probably put the soldiers down in the North Parking lot, and coordinate from there. They would be coming from Fort Myer, or across the river. In the same time frame the District of Columbia government called and said they were mobilizing the National Guard and had a helicopter. We took it. The Transit Authority called and said they had 40 buses at our disposal.

Rochester: Did you remain in this area, or did you go out?

Nesbitt: I never left the area. As I told Major Phillips, I was not going to leave until there was no other way out. In actual fact the next day the fire was out of control.

Incidentally, Verizon got hold of us and donated hundreds of cell phones. I distributed them to officers and civilian personnel. We then made contact with the Terrorism Task Force and others.

Rochester: So you had adequate communication?

Nesbitt: Yes, but it took a while. Verizon got a truck and asked the Maryland State Police to give them an escort across the bridge; they were coming from Columbia. We have two phone closets, or booms, here. If we lost those phones, the Pentagon would be basically shut down. One individual, Al Tillis, the head of Verizon, had to walk home. He lives in Old Town, Alexandria. He called me to ask what was going on. I told him and he rode his bike back here, got in using my name, and kept the phone lines up, even when the fire department told him they were going to flood the area to put up a fire break, which would in effect destroy the phone lines and all the phone circuits. He and his people wouldn't leave. He called me more than once to ask me to get people out of his office who were trying to get him to leave. He came back in even after his son broke his arm and he didn't leave for five days. The first day there were many calls coming

asking me to do things, and I just happened to know the right people to call to get them done. The second day I was here from 5:30 a.m. until 11:00 p.m. I came back in at 4:30 a.m. and the place was full of smoke. All my people came in on that shift and did everything they could to get in. We took 12-hour shifts. When the second shift came in it was manned. When I came back at 4:30 the room was completely filled with smoke. The Building was on fire. Every fire department within the metropolitan area was here battling the flames.

Rochester: This is still on the 11th?

Nesbitt: This is on the 12th. We heard that the fire was still out of control, and it was hard to breathe in here. I went around the corner and told everyone to leave if they wanted to. I wasn't going to leave until the last moment. This was like a ship and we were all going down together. One of my officers said they would not leave until I did. We stayed, and the smoke dissipated suddenly.

Rochester: You mentioned contact with the secretary's office. Do you have any sense of when he found out about what was going on and his first reaction?

Nesbitt: They were blind at first. A brigadier general called and asked me what was going on. I said at the moment we had about 100 casualties. He said, "You and I are going to get to know each other pretty well in the next few hours." The Exec/Sec called me and told me that the secretary was on the move and was going over to the crash site. The Air Force called and said they had three choppers coming to take the secretaries and service secretaries out of the area. Someone said that the secretary refused to leave, that the helicopters were lined up on the parade ground but that he insisted he was staying with the Building no matter what.

Rochester: Had there been any contingency planning for an event of this magnitude whereby your control or communications might be knocked out?

Nesbitt: Yes, there had been.

Rochester: Was that planning sufficient, based on what has happened? Are you now developing new plans based on lessons learned?

Nesbitt: Yes, we are developing new plans. We have a fallback center. We had one at the time, but we couldn't switch the phones at the time. That was the problem. There was a lot of information coming in and going out, and had we lost the phones we would have lost the ability to function. For example, the cell phones—without them I couldn't have done that. People were asking me to move food in here, public affairs wanted to get the information out and start letting people know. We were still in a life-threatening situation. If we had lost the phones we would have lost the capability to get all the outside medical and police personnel we were trying to get in here. I still had a radio, and could have conveyed some information, but I could have lost the phone side of it. We have a fallback center, but I also have a large portable radio with a lot of power. I could have stayed in radio contact with the area. We were working on a contingency even before this to switch the phones out, but if those phone closets had gone we would have lost everything.

Rochester: Were there any other things about the first 24 hours that strike you as particularly significant in terms of individuals or developments? Did you lose anyone? I heard something about a DPS contractor?

Nesbitt: There was a DPS contractor. I understand that they were putting in alarms and he was walking downstairs to have a cigarette and was right in the area of the blast.

Rochester: In the wrong place at the wrong time. In the days that followed, did you participate in daily briefings either within your own DPS group or as part of a team?

Nesbitt: A daily briefing was started to put out as much information as we had at the time. The crash side started to fade and we went right to the anthrax side.

Rochester: Two months later, what remains the biggest challenge from a building security standpoint that you have to deal with, in the aftermath of the event?

Nesbitt: That first night, around 5:00, I got a call from the FC and the NFCC. I talked to two majors or a major and lieutenant colonel, and they wanted to know what to do with the battalion of troops they had coming in. The secretary didn't want to have that sort of posture. They were on standby but needed to know who gave the authorization to come in. I said I did, but I tried to explain that I was a mere GS-11 acting on intuition. We were acting moment to moment on the situation at hand. He said then they would not send the troops over. But now, guess what? We now have the final third of the 87th airborne here. They have been instrumental with the security of this Building. The first two nights, when I needed something, I did a lot of work for the secretary of the Army, with Colonel Philips. They would get hold of me and I would call others to get what they needed. Bill Stout was running the whole show at the crash site.

Trask: What was his position?

Nesbitt: At the time he was working in the secured services side in threat assessment. He went out to make threat assessments on different buildings we have. He is an organizer and can-do guy, who came up to take charge. Whenever I needed something I could go to him; as the time went on some people rose to the top like cream. I'm not

including myself in that, I've been doing this for a long time, but I've seen a lot of people doing a lot of things.

Rochester: In terms of protecting classified information, is that something you are normally tasked with?

Nesbitt: No. I got involved with it a bit on the Army side, as they wanted to go back into their affected areas to remove material, and I was using some of my officers. Sgt. Peterson and Officer Hale handled escort service, to take the people in and out. They are still doing that. They have also evolved into something new. Sgt. Peterson is now in charge of the BAT, the biological assessment team. Lt. Hale ended up being 107 alpha, and we can call him for any incident inside the Building and get things done.

Rochester: To get back to a question I raised earlier, are things gradually getting back to normal, and after a few months what will be the major challenges you will still face from the standpoint of Building and personnel security.

Nesbitt: I know we are getting some more MPs. There have been new things come to light--changes to the roads around and adjacent to the Pentagon, and the manpower issue of the 503rd and 3rd infantry. I'm not sure which battalion is up in the 3rd infantry, but with the 503rd out of the 82nd we are dealing with Major Bird. He is very intelligent and honest. These people have augmented our people beyond belief. We are bringing up more MPs, and the security of this Building, I think, is the best anywhere in the metropolitan area, not only on the biological/chemical weapon side, but also on the manpower side. Some might argue about the manpower side but security-wise we got it tight. We were getting ready to move in this month to a new and larger command center, about twice the size of this, but the Navy took it over after their offices were

wiped out. Regarding my people, I have the highest regard for them, the ones that weren't here during the initial impact and the ones on the radio side, also. Colonel Publy was here and told everyone to go, but no one did. Even when it got so bad, they never gave up.

Rochester: We thank you both for your performance on the 11th and for this interview. Is there anything else you want to add? You will have an opportunity later when you review the transcript. I know it becomes a blur with the passage of time.

Nesbitt: From the impact to this anthrax and the problems nationwide, I can't say enough for the military support we have had. The Pentagon is amazing. The next day the secretary said, "Business as usual," and you can't believe how many people came back to work. It shows the resolve of the American people.

Trask: Those people who came back to work the next day, were they doing their regular duties?

Nesbitt: As best they could. This whole area up to the concourse was so smoky everyone was told to evacuate. We only had three-fourths of the Building open; everyone else went home. We couldn't go upstairs without a mask. The fire department chased one of my men down the hallway telling him not to come back in here. The man came in here anyway. I can't say enough for my people; they stayed with it to the end.

Rochester: Thank you very much.