

## Pentagon Attack

Interview with James Phillips  
November 9, 2001

Rochester: This is an oral history interview with Major James Phillips, Commander of the Operational Services Branch of the Defense Protective Service (DPS), taking place on November 9, 2001. [The interviewers are Stuart Rochester and Richard Hunt of the OSD Historical Office.]

Major Phillips, as head of the Operational Services Branch of the DPS, what are your key responsibilities normally?

Phillips: I supervise five commands—watch commander, which is the first shift from 0700 to 1500 with approximately, if we are full staff, of roughly about 100 personnel with a combination of supervisors and officers. I supervise or am in command of the second relief, which has a combination of roughly, when we are full staff, about 65 personnel. The hours of that command are from 1500 to 2300. Then we have the midnight or third shift, which is from 2300 to 0700 that has approximately, full staff with supervisors and officers, 55 people. Then I am in charge of the Special Operations Attachment, which is our emergency response team which is considered another department that is a SWAT Team response unit. Also, in that division SOP we have the Canine Unit. Then we have our Protection Service Unit that protects the Secretary of Defense and the high key officials in the “Gold Coast” E-ring area. Then I have the Contracts Compliance section. That section monitors outlining buildings with contract guard services. We have a captain, a lieutenant and a sergeant right now that oversee that division, plus the Remote Facility Building comes under the

contract. That is the division that checks everything that comes in, i.e., packages, the mail—the whole nine yards. Those are my overall responsibilities.

Rochester: At the time that the two airliners hit the World Trade Center in New York, were you aware of that prior to when the airliner hit the Pentagon building? Did you have any reason to believe that the Pentagon was also a target at that point?

Phillips: At that time, no. Ironically, on that particular date, I happened to be in headquarters in 2E165. I was there conversing with some of the officers and supervisors when on the TV, it showed the first plane hitting. I thought that it was an accident, but when the next plane hit, I knew that it wasn't an accident. This is based on my training and experience that I received from DoD at Northwestern University and Fort McClellan. At that instance, I knew that it was a terrorist attack. Subsequently, I came back over to my office to contact SOD commander, Captain Weston, to let him know that we should tighten up our posture based on what had happened. Prior to me picking up the phone to contact him, Chief Jester called me to go over our contingency plans. I told him that ironically, I was getting ready to call Weston. I subsequently called Weston and we were going over the plans. I told him to get his units up—to contact Lieutenant Page who, I think at that time, was the acting watch commander, because Captain McGriff, I believe, was off. So we had to tighten up our security posture and our police action. This was around 9:15. I got back to my office a couple minutes later and talked to the chief. Meanwhile, I'm making preparations and around 9:30, on that radio right there—I had one of my staff members with

me, Officer [Nyman?]. The next thing I heard—I think it was Sergeant Austin saying that a plane hit the Pentagon on the Heliport side. She was excited. I'm sitting right here.

Rochester: You're in your office on the Concourse?

Phillips: No, I'm in my office right here. I had left the headquarters. I was talking to the chief on this phone. One of my staff members came in. I knew right then and there that it was a terrorist attack.

Hunt: Could you feel something?

Phillips: Yes. When the plane hit, prior to hearing her voice, I thought one of those carts from DSSW had hit. That was the first time I had heard that overhead. I normally don't hear that sound in my office—you might hear it in the other office. When the radio transmission went, I already knew that it was a terrorist attack. Everything keyed in—from New York to this.

Rochester: So you are in your office here (2E-148). So you are aware now that the Pentagon itself had been hit? Did you have set responsibilities in the event that something like this might happen?

Phillips: Yes.

Rochester: Given the chaos and the magnitude of the event, were you all kind of winging it or were you following a certain outline?

Phillips: At that instance—I know that my key role is communications, but when the plane hit, Officer Cynthia [Nyman?] immediately went toward the courtyard. I went through the courtyard on my way to communications. I saw people bleeding. I saw one of our lieutenants—Castro. She is our administration

lieutenant who works out of the deputy chief's office in room 1A145. I saw her with somebody. I started assisting people in the courtyard, but then I knew what my role was—in communications. So about five minutes later I went to the DPS Communications Center. It was hectic in there. I said, "We have a responsibility—let's roll." We have a bunch of contingency plans for an event like this. Ironically, my wife was on my mind. She works in the Building for Army DCSOPS. When I went to the courtyard, I was worried about her and I went up in that area. When I saw the smoke, I was worried. When I got to Communications, I gave her a call and quite naturally I didn't get through. My mind was boggled, but I knew what I had to do. So during the course of the day, I continued to try to contact her. After a couple of hours in Communications, I went to the courtyard again to try to go in to see how much damage was done to the 3rd floor, 4th Corridor, C-ring, where she worked. The smoke was so bad I couldn't see. I was asking some of the fire personnel how bad was it in there, because I wanted to find out if she was okay. He said, "Man, it's terrible." They couldn't get all the way in. So I went out to the crash site area to get a visual. From what I saw from the outside—I'll be honest with you—I thought she was gone. I kept calling her on the cell phone and couldn't get through. I just let it be. I didn't say anything to anybody until after four or five hours had passed. I shared my concern with one person—the deputy chief. I said, "I don't know if my spouse is at work or not, because I haven't heard from her. I know that the traffic is gridlocked but by this time, she would have called me." I said, "That's not her." I let it be because I knew I had a command to attend to. Then around 2:45, I get

a call from home. I thought it must be her, but it was my daughter who is a freshman in [ ? ]. They had let them out of school early. She asked, "Did you hear from Mom?" I said, "No baby, I haven't." I didn't want to say that she's possibly not here because of this incident, but I said, "I haven't heard from her. Just pray for her." So about an hour later, I received a call—and it was her. You just don't know how that made me feel. And I blessed her out. But during the chaos she had told one of my supervisors who knew her to tell me that she's all right. She had parked on the North Parking side. So during this hectic time, my supervisor never informed me during the course of the day. He had a problem with inhalation and I just he was a little post-traumatized. He didn't come back for about a week after the incident. I never got the word, but he was apologetic after the fact. I told him, "You just don't know how worried I was." A lot of my officers came up to me because they didn't know that I had gotten word from her after the fact.

Rochester: You had to deal with a personal matter and the extraordinary circumstances.

Phillips: I had the responsibility and the duty to get my personnel to do what we had to do.

Rochester: It is amazing that you were able to keep your mind on your duties.

Phillips: I'm spiritual so I turned it over to God.

Rochester: Were your communications intact the minutes and hours following the attack on the Building?

Phillips: Yes. We had our phone lines. We were operational.

Rochester: Who was in charge and to what extent was there coordination between your people and the incoming rescue and fire people?

Phillips: Good coordination. Everybody came out of the woodwork and came together. We have the (COG) Council of Government. Everybody knows what they are supposed to do in a major event. Ironically, we even had tabletop exercises, which includes other agencies. We have consequence plans. Everybody knows what they are supposed to do and by God it happens.

Hunt: Was this preparation adequate for the event that actually took place?

Phillips: Yes. The only thing, I can honestly say, is that based on the event there is a lot that is uncontrollable.

Rochester: Were you aware whether at any point the secretary came over to the area?

Phillips: Yes. I vaguely heard that over the airwaves, but it was a little bit sketchy. [ ] the (PSU) Protective Services Unit. Now, I thought, based on our procedures, we were supposed to go to COOP. They were supposed to take him out of the Pentagon—but the SecDef is the SecDef. He didn't want to leave. He felt that it was his obligation to go down and try to help. Here's where we had a little problem, because that is not what protocol was about. He should have been out of here.

Rochester: You have to defer to him ultimately? If he refuses to leave, that's his call?

Phillips: Yes. I look at the overall picture—you need his leadership. Yes, it's heartburn, [but you have the waiver factor?]. It's the same thing with

biochemical, certain people are expendable. That's the way the structure is— some are and some aren't. You have to go with your leadership role.

Rochester: How orderly was the evacuation of the Building?

Phillips: When I left my office to respond to the scene people were coming out. I thought it was orderly. Based on feedback there was a little bit of panic that set in. But I think everybody got out reasonably well. There were a lot of people constantly assisting others. There was unity. Looking at the monitors down at Communications at the entrances I thought the people got out of here quickly.

Rochester: Take me through the rest of your day as you are starting to get a handle on control and securing the area. Again, given the confusion and the chaos that must have existed for a fairly long period of time before you could determine the extent of the damage and the casualties, etc., over the next couple of hours following the event what kinds of responsibilities did you have later that afternoon into the evening? Take me through the rest of the day the best that you can recollect.

Phillips: I was all over the area. I was concerned for the welfare of my officers and my spouse. I was in Communications, in the courtyard, and I went around to the crash site. In Communications, during the first couple of hours, I had to make sure that we had enough resources, because we are understaffed, as we speak. We recalled officers from the other shifts. Ironically, when officers heard of the incident, a lot of them came back to the Pentagon. The midnight shift got off at 7:00 and they weren't even in their beds when the incident happened at 9:30 and a lot of them came back to assist around 10 or 10:30.

Hunt: Did they have trouble getting back?

Phillips: No. A lot of them were riding the shoulders of the highway. One of my captains who lives out in Gaithersburg normally reports in around 2 or 3 o'clock in the afternoon, he joined the state police convoy escorting people in to the scene.

Rochester: Did you get involved at all in the follow-up criminal investigation dealing with the FBI?

Phillips: No. Our Criminal Investigations Division (Major Fisher) was working with the FBI.

Rochester: What happened the next day?

Phillips: I stayed here until midnight, and I had come in that morning around 7 or 8:00. So I worked straight through to midnight, went home, and came back in around 3:00.

Rochester: The Building was deemed safe enough, at least the portions that had not been structurally affected, to reenter the next day with many offices resuming their responsibilities?

Phillips: Right. A lot of people came back. We did not have a lot of employees calling in.

Rochester: What was your main task in the days following? Did you get into any of the responsibilities of dealing with classified information—safes that may have been located in the damaged parts of the Building?

Phillips: One thing I like about our organization, we are detail-structured. Deputy Chief John Pugrud's responsibility was to maintain the classified portion. We

used the military because, based on our resources, we were short. We had to cordon off a lot of corridors. So from an operational standpoint the military assisted us from the first to the fifth floors, Corridors A to the E-ring—from the 2nd Corridor, which we considered the hot zone, to the 7th Corridor. We had a seal around that area. We stationed the military with the DPS officers to block that area.

Rochester: When you got into the courtyard, did you or any of your men get into the Building and actually in the vicinity of the impact? We have heard conflicting stories about whether there was any intact portion of the aircraft. We heard about a wheel being seen. Can you shed any light on that?

Phillips: Yes, a couple of days afterwards I saw that the plane did come through, because the cab light came all the way up to the A&E drive—4 t h Corridor. I was astonished. You could actually see the hub of it. I went inside the Building with Sergeant Peterson and Officer Hill. They were our main supervisors who were coordinating with the military. They were doing a lot of work in various parts of the Building. They had the masks and the whole nine yards. They saw a lot. A couple of days later, I went in with them, because I wanted to see the area where my spouse worked—to see how much damage there was—for my satisfaction.

Rochester: We heard that some of the officers ended up assisting in the rescue operations—the first response. I remember hearing of Officer Hoopii, Lieutenant Stout.

Phillips: One of my peers was on the Heliport side of the Building. As a matter of fact, Officer [ ? ] saved an Arlington County or Virginia State Police officer who was overcome by smoke inhalation.

Rochester: I remember reading that.

Phillips: There were a lot of officers who were involved.

Rochester: Did you lose anybody?

Phillips: Thank God, we did not. As I looked at the way the plane came in on the Heliport side--where we don't have static posts—if it had been any other side, we would have been heavily hit.

Hunt: Do your people have respirators as part of their normal equipment?

Phillips: No, but now we do. At the time we had the gas masks that weren't worth anything—a piece of garbage. They were recalled. We got new gas masks finally.

Rochester: Do you have any information on whether the plane intended to hit that wedge of the Building or possibly intended to hit the portion where the Secretary was?

Phillips: I don't know. If that had been the intent, it was poor. If the plane had hit any other part of the Building, there would have been a lot more devastation. Ironically, the part that was hit was the newly renovated wedge that took a lot of the blast.

Rochester: Two months later, what remains the biggest continuing challenge you have from a Building security standpoint? You are obviously on an upgraded alert.

Phillips: The challenges that I face are, and I will stress, our resources—going through turnovers in our organization. The turnovers are in reference to the pay aspects. We have a lot of good officers that come to our department from our academy after 10 or 12 weeks in Georgia. We are not competitive as far as the salary—federal or local. We lose a lot of good people. DPS is like a stepping stone. They go to other agencies.

Hunt: Are they civil service?

Phillips: Yes. Our senior leadership has identified the problem. They try to make efforts to upgrade the force in the retirement package, and to get our resources back up to par because we are very under strength. I work in coordination with Major [ ? ]. He wanted to know how we functioned so short-staffed and still maintained our level of professionalism.

Rochester: So September 11th really dramatized the staffing problems?

Phillips: Oh, yes. We had that staffing problem prior to September 11th.

Rochester: Are there any other “lessons learned” either on the organizational side, staffing side or the procedural side resulting from the September 11th experience in terms of how your guys are organized? You mentioned the problems with the gas masks that you had that were not sufficient. Is there anything else you can add?

Phillips: We now have additional procedures in place. You can't stop a plane, DPS can't. We are looking at other scenarios like anthrax, bio, and bombs. You can see that the configuration of the parking lot has been redefined. You are going to have risks in certain areas. That's a given. You try to minimize your

risks. Since then, we have had studies. We have procedures in place as far as Alpha, Bravo, Charlie and Delta. Some of the procedures might have been redefined, but I come back to our resources.

Rochester: Are things getting back to normal?

Phillips: Yes. I am not a micro-manager. I give my commanders directions and guidance. We are Forcecon Charlie; however, we still have day-to-day operations to perform. Training must still go on even though we are in 12-hour shifts. That is one thing that must get off. The reason we are in 12-hour shifts is because of our resources. We are operating on two shifts—6 a.m. and 6 p.m. shifts. When I combine the two shifts, I still don't have enough resources to manage the way I am supposed to. We have the military here, but when we have Forcecon Charlie or Delta these are positions that DPS should man. Overall, based on our strength, we're doing the best that we can.

Hunt: When the people evacuated the Building, at some point, were they told that they should go home or were they just milling around in the parking lots?

Phillips: That is a good question. There was gridlock. They couldn't go anywhere.

Hunt: Did they get access to their cars if they were in the parking lot?

Phillips: Some did. I think there was a period of time when they were told not to move their cars.