

Pentagon Attack

John Robinson
December 5, 2001

Putney: This is an oral history interview with John Robinson, generator operator and power controller for the Pentagon. It is December 5, 2001, and we are in the Pentagon. [The interviewer is Diane T. Putney, OSD Historical Office.]

Would you briefly describe your key duties here in the Pentagon?

Robinson: During the day I am a day-man for the generator shop. I maintain all generators for life safety. With the new Remote Delivery Facility (RDF) coming up, we will be operating those.

Putney: Life safety pertains to what lights?

Robinson: There is life safety in every other light in the hallways so that if the power goes out we will still have lighting. Also the stairwells have lights, exit lights.

Putney: Had you or this shop been involved any preparation for a threat against the Building?

Robinson: No.

Putney: You were here on September 11?

Robinson: Yes.

Putney: Would you describe what you were doing that morning and how you learned about the attack against the Building?

Robinson: I was on watch, because the man who was supposed to stand duty called in sick. Matt Morris went up to the RDF. He called me and said he couldn't get a lock unlocked for the construction [?] and for me to bring the bolt cutters. I picked up the

cutters and ran up. When I hit the A&E drive at the 7th Corridor, I saw the smoke and didn't know what was going on. When I got to the 6th Corridor, I saw the C-4 vault doors laying in the drive and heavy smoke coming out. I thought the vault had exploded. I didn't know that a plane had hit the Building. I rushed down but didn't see Matt. There were people injured and coming out of the Building on the second floor. They were helping people get out that way.

Putney: On the second floor, how were they doing that?

Robinson: Off an extension ladder. There was a major there, and I helped him to assist people out of the Building. A lieutenant commander was badly burned and had a head injury. I cleaned out some trash and got a self-propelled vehicle (SPV) and drove it through the rubble, water, and what not. We put him on the back of it and drove straight to the Di Lorenzo Clinic. I came back up and cleared up some more debris and put two women on the back of the vehicle and took them toward the POAC. They were evacuating people out of there. There was a helicopter landing when I got there. We dropped those people off, came back, picked up a doctor and nurse at the Di Lorenzo Clinic, put them on the back of the vehicle with the cart that they had, and rushed back. As we pulled up three more women came out. They had head lacerations. We put patches on their wounds, and we took them over to the evacuation area.

Putney: Can you point out on this chart where you saw the people coming out of the Building?

Robinson: It was 4th Corridor, at the C-4 electrical vault, in the A&E drive.

Putney: How were they coming? Some from the second floor via the ladder, and some in other ways?

Robinson: There were people coming out of the 4th Corridor, through the 5th Corridor, that were hurt, coming into the A&E drive.

Putney: Where is the Di Lorenzo Clinic?

Robinson: At the 8th Corridor entrance.

Putney: You were cutting across?

Robinson: We went straight through the A&E drive, out 8th Corridor to the clinic.

Putney: The clinic is on the E-ring?

Robinson: Yes.

Putney: That is a driveway there, too.

Robinson: Yes. There is a cross-way that goes across to north parking.

Putney: While you were doing this was the drive filled with smoke?

Robinson: Yes, and there was glass and debris. There were three holes in the Building where the bricks had been blown out. We were getting body parts off to the side so they could be DPS people and an FBI agent were at the 5th Corridor on my last trip, and they wouldn't let us get closer than the 5th Corridor. We had a whole group of people that were arguing with the FBI agent and the DPS officer trying to get into the Building and see if there was anyone else to save. But both the officer and the FBI agent said at that time there would be no one because of the heavy smoke.

Putney: Did you agree with them?

Robinson: Oh, yes. It would have endangered other lives. As thick as the smoke was, you couldn't see in front of your face, even with a flashlight.

Putney: These individuals didn't have respirators?

Robinson: We didn't have respirators until about 12:00. At about 1:00 they moved us all out into the center court and told us to stay out there. When we got there they were setting up a triage area. The people from Walter Reed were starting to come into the Building. They were setting up different areas for triage. Two hours later they picked up that stuff and started laying out body bags, to use it as a morgue area. Then they stopped that, and we got a bunch of water from the RDF to keep everyone hydrated. We didn't get out of there until 11:30 that night.

Putney: Were you at any point in a meeting with others?

Robinson: No.

Putney: So you were there being of any use that you could?

Robinson: Right.

Putney: Later in the afternoon, what kinds of things were you doing?

Robinson: I still had the self-propelled vehicle. We have two people who work in the Building Manager's Office that are volunteer firemen. They had their equipment down at the RDF. I took one of them down there to get their respirators and supplies.

Putney: This is Mr. McCormick?

Robinson: Charles McCormick and Dennis Smith. We got their equipment and came back. At the same time, they were off-loading more water so we grabbed water and passed it out.

Putney: That was a very warm day. Was there water down in the RDF?

Robinson: Yes. That is a Remote Delivery Facility service, and that is where the men who deliver water to the Pentagon had their truck parked. They unloaded it and brought the water in.

Putney: You had a vehicle that you could load up and bring over?

Robinson: Yes.

Putney: So you were doing a variety of things. Hard to say what you'd do next. It would depend on what the need is.

Robinson: Right.

Putney: Did the FBI get there quickly?

Robinson: They were here very quickly. Whether they have an office here or not, I don't know. We were picking up plane parts in the A&E drive around the 6th Corridor.

Putney: Of the three holes, was one bigger than the others?

Robinson: Right at 4 1/2 Corridor there was a hole about 8 feet in diameter, and about 10 feet from that a whole section was blown out. Another section past that was blown out, plus C-4 vault--all were blown out.

Putney: You could see parts of the airplane that deep within the Building?

Robinson: Right.

Putney: Were you able to move that, or did the FBI say not to?

Robinson: They said, "Don't move it." They wanted everything left as it was.

Putney: You were here late in the evening just doing all kinds of things?

Robinson: As soon as they got the light carts in, we positioned them. We made sure everyone had water. The following day we came in at 5:30 and assisted as we could.

Putney: What was it like? Had you yet seen the main impact site?

Robinson: No, I hadn't seen it until the next day. The fire department said they still had arcing going on. We checked the vault to see if everything was off there, and we then went all the way out. That was when I saw the exterior for the first time.

Putney: So the next day you entered the Building by the A&E drive area by the vault and walked toward the E-ring, through C, D, and E-ring, down the 4th Corridor. What was that like?

Robinson: We had respirators, boots, and gloves. The smell is not explainable. I know what dead bodies smell like. I did a tour overseas, and I know what it's like. Basically what they are doing to the Building they needed to do.

Putney: Was there debris around that you had to walk over?

Robinson: Yes, there were a couple of collapsed walls. It was hard walking down through there. There was a lot of water. There were bodies still in there.

Putney: You were walking out to the E-ring?

Robinson: Yes. At the same time, we were going into the corridor side that we could get into, to see if there were any live wires.

Putney: This was September 12, about what time?

Robinson: About 9:00 or 10:00 a.m.

Putney: This was early, and you were some of the first people in there. You were searching for live wires, what needs to be turned off and what is causing the arcing. You had to go into a lot of offices, and you were seeing everything. It was quite dangerous, some other things could be collapsing on you.

Robinson: That day they had rescue people there building frames to keep the second and third floors from collapsing. That was in the area past the part that was collapsed.

Putney: Were search and rescue teams in there, too?

Robinson: Yes.

Putney: And the FBI?

Robinson: Yes.

Putney: What were they doing?

Robinson: They were considering it a crime scene, and you had to have credentials to get into the Building and into that area. If they asked for assistance, we gave it to them. They were sifting through--can't call it "sifting." They were doing a crime scene type work.

Putney: How long were you in there?

Robinson: About two hours.

Putney: Did you see electrical systems still operating?

Robinson: With the UPS units there were some, because they use batteries. There were some of those batteries arcing. Basically there was nothing to do about that. They had a Hazmat team in there putting chemicals on the batteries to neutralize the acid.

Putney: The UPS is a power system?

Robinson: It is an uninterrupted power source (UPS).

Putney: It is for big computer systems and small ones. There are extra pieces of equipment that kick on when the main power goes off, and they were doing what they were designed to do.

Robinson: Right. But even with all the boards and wiring in the UPS that were burned, there were still the batteries, anywhere from 1.5 volts to 6-volt batteries. There were also batteries in some of the fire alarm boxes that needed to be disconnected.

Putney: Who was with you as you went through these offices?

Robinson: Robert McCloud, Bill Thomas, Dan Murphy, the assistant building manager, Robert Candido, Mike Gargano, Booth, and Mr. Rodriguez.

Putney: Actually there were quite a few people who had to go into that area for quite a few purposes—electrical, crime scene, search and rescue.

Robinson: And at the same time they were still fighting the fire.

Putney: Was the fire still being fought in that area as well as on the roof?

Robinson: Not where we were. The area we went into is where the Building had already collapsed, around the 4th Corridor. The fire was still burning in the 5th Corridor area, up on the roof.

Putney: You were wearing a respirator--had you had training?

Robinson: Yes.

Putney: You had been in the service and had some training?

Robinson: Yes.

Putney: Was that one of the most difficult things you have done while working for the Pentagon?

Robinson: Yes. It's the worst thing I've done.

Putney: Were the victims not removed immediately?

Robinson: No. It was two days afterward that I recall. When we went to assist the DPS officers hooking up generators into the wreckage area where they set up their offices, they then started taking out the bodies.

Putney: The military did that, not the firefighters?

Robinson: I don't know if the firefighters or rescue workers did, but I saw the Old Guard doing it.

Putney: The next day was tough. How long were you here and what else were you doing?

Robinson: That Wednesday I was here for my regular shift, 5:30 to 2:30.

Putney: It was exhausting, I suppose, mentally and physically. You had to pick your way through the debris?

Robinson: Yes.

Putney: The next day and for the rest of the week, what were you doing?

Robinson: Basically the same things. We were refilling the light carts and generator carts. We had to go in a couple more times.

Putney: You were using gasoline?

Robinson: Kerosene.

Putney: Was this for the generators for the huge lights, exterior and inner courtyard?

Robinson: We were doing the ones inside the Pentagon itself. The contractors were doing the ones outside where the crash site was. We maintained the ones in center court and the A&E drive.

Putney: Was there any other kind of support you were giving directly related to the impact site?

Robinson: There were several days after the fire was out that they were complaining about arcing, and two or three times we had to go and check it out. Basically, it was the batteries in the UPS units.

Putney: Did you call in the Hazmat people?

Robinson: They had their own.

Putney: Did the firefighters have the capability?

Robinson: The firefighters have that capability, as far as I know, plus the FBI had the Environmental Protection Agency people here.

Putney: I guess people couldn't go in to get their personal belongings until a few weeks later?

Robinson: It was almost a month later.

Putney: So the firefighters and the FBI were in charge of the area, and you had to deal with them to get in that area. Then did the control come back to the Pentagon building manager or the Military District of Washington (MDW)?

Robinson: I'm not sure about MDW, but the outfit called PenRen, the Pentagon Renovation, was involved. We had to go through them if they requested something from us involving the site.

Putney: It took a while to do the recovery of the remains and evidence, and the FBI was still in charge during that time?

Robinson: Yes.

Putney: Were you giving any more support during that time period?

Robinson: Just when they called us. We were filling up the light carts every day until they didn't need them any more. Then we removed them from the Building.

Putney: They were there 24 hours a day. The highest priority was to keep the Building up and running and do it as quickly as possible?

Robinson: Yes, it was.

Putney: When people were able to go back into their areas to retrieve their personal belongings, did they need any support from your shop?

Robinson: No. PenRen and the FBI had them suit up in the protective gear and respirators. They had to wait until the fire department and the EPA said it was okay for them to go in.

Putney: Were you aware of the quality of the air around the Building?

Robinson: I didn't notice anything.

Putney: It wasn't obvious?

Robinson: I didn't hit bad air in there on September 11 until I hit A&E drive at the 7th Corridor. That's when I started hitting the smoke.

Putney: That was coming from the burning fuel of the plane.

Robinson: Yes, and the building materials.

Putney: While you were giving assistance was anything going through your mind to remember in case anything like this happened again? Do you have any suggestions?

Robinson: I think everything was handled the way it should be. I was designated a long time ago to be on a first reaction team. When something like this happens, all that goes out the window, because you have the FBI, the firefighters, etc. Basically, if you go up to a military officer and tell them you are a first reaction officer and qualified to give instruction, they don't want to hear it. They need to be educated along with the rest of the people in the Building that certain people are designated to be on the first reaction team.

Putney: How does that work? Are there teams with different functions all over the Building? Who is in charge of setting up these teams and what were you supposed to do as part of the first reaction team?

Robinson: The Pentagon Building Manager's Office, with the WHS people, have designated certain people to be first reaction. They sent us to class and gave us material. We were supposed to tell people if they are allowed in the area. If they are not allowed in the area, they should be escorted out. DPS is supposed to be assisting us and we them.

Putney: For your line of work, a first reaction would be to find out where the power is still flowing and go in and turn it off?

Robinson: Yes.

Putney: Sometimes that could involve your going to a dangerous site, where fires are raging, to get close to the vault if it is still operating.

Robinson: Right.

Putney: Basically what you saw happening was pretty much the way it should have unfolded? People were doing what they were supposed to?

Robinson: For a civilian-type of building, and the type of people that are in this Building, to me everything went the way it should. There is a little animosity going between different groups, but that's just the way it is here.

Putney: It probably is less than normal now. I ask you this: do you think anything good came out of this tragedy?

Robinson: In a tragedy like this, to me there is no good. I had quite a few acquaintances that were killed. There was a young lady in the Navy; this was her last week here. She was going to San Diego.

Putney: Your job takes you all through the Building, and all the offices?

Robinson: We don't go into the offices unless we are actually requested to. We work mostly with the generators and the power.

Putney: The people depend on that, they call for support, and coordinating on it.

Would there have been a need for you to have been in that area? Could you have gotten a call to be there?

Robinson: We were going to go to the emergency generator that day to check it out.

What saved us were telephone calls. When we saw the towers get hit it grabbed our attention. If that hadn't happened, we probably would have been out there.

Putney: You were just going to check on it, the fuel level, and things like that?

Robinson: Yes, do a start up, make sure the batteries were charged.

Putney: It sits right out there. There is the helipad and the generator. Was that just out there temporarily? Wedge one was being renovated, and its main power was coming from the power plant?

Robinson: Yes.

Putney: But until its regular backup power was on line, you were depending on just the generator?

Robinson: Yes, it is a life safety generator.

Putney: Would you explain that once again?

Robinson: That generator operated elevators, escalators, hallway and stairwell lighting.

Putney: How long was it expected to sit out there as the backup?

Robinson: It was to be out there until after wedge two got done.

Putney: So it would be out there for a long time. So you would have to go out there on a regular basis to make sure it would perform its job. It sits in a dormant state until it's needed?

Robinson: Right. We have to do a weekly and monthly maintenance on it.

Putney: You were going to do the weekly maintenance?

Robinson: Yes.

Putney: You have a TV here, and most people said they heard about the World Trade Center Towers by one means or another. You just got drawn to it and mesmerized by it?

Robinson: More than mesmerized. I can't explain the feeling I had.

Putney: Did you think about this Building, then, being vulnerable, when you were watching what happened in New York?

Robinson: Not about this Building, but about D.C. To this Building something could or couldn't happen, but I mostly thought about D.C.

Putney: Although you said that you didn't conclude right away that it was a plane had hit the Building. You thought perhaps the vault had exploded?

Robinson: Right. The first thing I saw was the heavy smoke coming form the C4 vault.

Putney: Did you think in terms of terrorism, or just that it was an accident?

Robinson: I thought it was an accident. As I got closer and saw the other holes with smoke coming out of them, I realized what had happened.

Putney: Is there anything else you would like to add to this account?

Robinson: Not really. A lot of people did things that have not been recognized, I will say that.

Putney: Can you name some?

Robinson: No, there are a lot who don't want recognition.