

Pentagon Attack

Interview with Marion "Snake" Cochran, Jr.
December 3, 2001

Putney: This is an oral history interview with Marion (Snake) Cochran, Jr., the Pentagon locksmith. The location is 1B256, and it is December 3, 2001. [The interviewer is Diane T. Putney, OSD Historical Office.]

Would you describe your key responsibilities as the locksmith?

Cochran: We are responsible for cutting all the safes, maintaining all the physical security devices for the Office of the Secretary of Defense. That includes high security locks, office door locks, cipher locks, safe locks, and vault door locks, pretty much anything having to do with physical security for the OSD, in and out of the Building.

Putney: Even before September 11 were you involved in or aware of any tightening of security, things being done throughout the Building with a terrorist threat of some sort in mind?

Cochran: They normally do the random security checks as people come in. That's just a random thing, so I didn't notice that much building up to it. Sometimes they increase security a bit, then it dies away, and then pops up again.

Putney: Is your office involved in any plans or planning for emergencies? Are you part of any plans that OSD publishes?

Cochran: The lock shop is not so much in the loop of plans about preventing terrorism. They have sections specifically for that. We are mainly to secure the doors and things like that.

Putney: You were here in the Building on September 11? Would you describe what you were doing that morning and how you learned of the attack?

Cochran: I came in, and the guys were sitting here with the tool cart loaded. We had been doing a lot of work in the renovated areas, putting in locks. They were loaded up ready to go up to that area that day. They had the TV on and were watching the incident at the World Trade Center when I came in.

Putney: This TV is right behind us.

Cochran: They had just turned it on, and we watched the news. We were mesmerized by it, and if it hadn't been for that they would probably have been in the area of Wedge 1.

Putney: That needed a lot of work because it was the renovated area, and people were moving in, requiring the locks to be installed.

Cochran: Right. We were putting in the dial combination locks on all the vaulted areas up there. We have done a lot of work there in the past, probably in excess of 200 locks have been installed.

Putney: How many people work in this shop?

Cochran: When that actually happened we had a contractor working with us also, but he has since left for another job. Along with me there's Mike Dooley, a government worker who was a cop in the Air Force and retired August before last; John Butowski, the man I worked for when I came on board with OSD--he has since retired and came back as a contractor. He is one of the main people responsible for the locks in the renovated area and has been doing a lot of work there.

Putney: Had you not known about the World Trade Center, he could have been there. How, then, did you know something had happened to this Building?

Cochran: We were sitting here when our back door, off A&E drive, started rattling badly, like someone was yanking on it. I said, "Who is that idiot that doesn't know how to knock?" Mike went and looked out of the door, and no one was there. He looked to the right and saw a big billowing cloud of smoke and debris. He yelled, "We've been hit, get out of here!" We ran out A&E drive to the parking lot.

Putney: Which parking lot was that?

Cochran: South Parking.

Putney: What did it look like? Were you with others? Was there a general evacuation at that time?

Cochran: Everybody was trying to get out of the Building, not so many coming that way, because it is not a generally known exit. It's a roadway that pulls into the Pentagon and is manned by the DPS officers. It is not specifically listed as an exit or entrance to the Building. It's closest to us so we went out that way. Along the way we helped a few people. There were a couple of cleaning personnel, mentally challenged people, and we showed them how to get out of the Building. We went to the parking lot as far as we could towards the side of I-395, across the roadway.

Putney: Could you see the impact site?

Cochran: We couldn't see the impact, but we could see the big ball of smoke. As soon as we got outside we could smell the jet fuel, the petroleum-like smell. The crash site was around the corner. We were on the 2nd Corridor side facing I-395, and the crash site was at Corridor 4, facing Washington Boulevard.

Putney: What was it like with all the people out there?

Cochran: There was a mass of people standing around. My wife was trying to reach me, and I tried people's cell phones, but they didn't work. We stood around. I didn't take any bags or secure my alarm zone. We don't deal with classified material here, per se, but we have an alarm zone because of all the equipment. I was thinking about that, and someone asked me if I wanted a ride home. Everyone was leaving, and I knew we weren't going to go back into the Building. I knew all my guys were okay because we all went out together. I accepted the ride, and we went to Pentagon City Mall, where her car was parked. While she went to get it, a couple of us used the pay phone there, and I called my wife. We started driving around. Traffic was so bad. People were walking faster than we were going. She works computers here in the Building, and her husband is a contractor who works in Crystal City. She circled around to pick him up, and we were sitting in non-moving traffic. We couldn't move anywhere. All of a sudden we heard someone yell, "Get down, get down!" There is a little park area to the side of the road, and everyone was lying down alongside the road. Marshals were all over the place, and all of a sudden they called it clear.

Putney: What did you think was happening when they were shouting to get down?

Cochran: I thought it might be a bomb or suspicious package. They finally called it all clear, but we still were not moving. Someone said we should stop and eat. I said I was going home. I got out and walked toward the Pentagon so I could get to Rosslyn to get the Metro. By the Pentagon, I met a cop--we are a part of DPS--who called me over, and I told him I didn't lock up. He showed me a back way and helped me back into the

Building to secure my zone. There was a lot of smoke, but we weren't anywhere near the fire.

Putney: Was there smoke in your facility?

Cochran: Yes. Not too dense to see through, but a real bad smell. I picked up my bags and secured my alarm zone. I walked to Arlington Cemetery and caught the Metro, and proceeded home. When I got home I proceeded to get on the phone and tell everyone I was okay.

Putney: It's amazing. We aren't in the Building now, we are in Rosslyn. Dr. Goldberg got about 50 calls.

Cochran: I got calls from people I hadn't seen for years. Some woman I used to work with as a locksmith, but haven't seen in years, called to make sure I was okay. A guy that my wife and I work with from Richmond called to check. My mom was calling, my best friend, everyone was trying to call but couldn't get through. The circuits were busy.

Putney: What was it like the next day? What time did you come in and which entryway did you use?

Cochran: Everything was blocked off at the Metro. I'm not sure that we could get into the Pentagon from the Metro or not. I might have had to go to Pentagon City and get off and walk back here. After that you could take the train in but you had to be a government employee to get off at the Pentagon. I probably used the South Terrace level, the 2nd Corridor entrance, the new one. Security was real tight, checking packages and such. I got in and half of the Building was shut down. From Corridor 2 1/2 around to Corridor 7 was closed down. They were still fighting the fire. The fire on the roof wasn't put out yet. We were sitting here and nothing was going on. We went

out on perhaps two jobs. We hung around until 2:00 p.m. and then we decided to quit. We were sitting here, and this door was open to air out the office. Mike was looking down A&E drive where the fire department at the 3rd Corridor were trying to put the fire out and were up on the roof breaking out the slate tiles. I was on the phone about a service call when all of a sudden he yelled, "They're evacuating, get out, get out!" This time I grabbed my bag and locked the door. We got halfway out the A&E door, and they cancelled. It turns out that everyone was so paranoid that a FEMA plane was in the general area and hadn't notified anyone so everyone freaked. As soon as they found out whose plane it was they cancelled the evacuation.

Putney: That was a good indication of the atmosphere of the place. People were not sure what was going on and how many more sites might be attacked. Eventually you got a call about the safes, didn't you?

Cochran: Yes, we knew it was coming. We had seen a new type of safe device, a chop-saw that clamps to the front of the safe. It is a big circular saw blade of about 14 inches that you put on the safe and it cuts the bolts. It's a lot of sparks and cutting, but we knew something had to happen because the safes in the fire would have to be drilled. Safe locks, when they get to a certain temperature, a thermal relocker goes off. Also the new digital locks would have been fried. We knew something was coming, so we ordered a chop-saw.

Putney: When were you talking about this problem? Was it before you got called?

Cochran: We had looked at the device before, and we liked the idea of it.

Putney: It's called a "chop-saw?"

Cochran: It's designed by Lockmasters. They came in and showed it to us when they were developing it, to get our input. We use a lot of security devices, and they usually come to us when they are going to do something like that. We liked it, but told them a few things to change because of sparks and such, and they made the modification. As soon as the attack came, I knew safes were in that area and that we would be the ones to get tasked to open them. Other agencies have locksmiths, but they aren't as fully equipped as we are to do that kind of thing. Sure enough, we got one in, and it's a good lock opening device under perfect circumstances, but the safes were in the fire and had fallen and debris had fallen on them. Their sides were all caved in, and that bent the suspension rods inside. So even if we got the combination drawer open to defeat the lock, we still had to pull the drawers out. The suspension lets them come out easily but if not we have to force them out. We still struggled, even cutting the bolts. We had to pry the drawers out. It was a lot of work. One day Mike was opening some safes, and I was taking care of some jobs in the Building. The safes were moved out, I guess by the construction people, part of the recovery. The people looking for bodies were moving the debris onto a pallet. All of the debris from the site went out to the end of North Parking. They were looking for personal things, identification of bodies, and things like that. Once they saw it was a safe they loaded it up and carried it out to the incinerator. They came to the incinerator near the heating plant where they burn the classified material. Once we opened them the material had to be disposed of.

Putney: So the incinerator was a main area where all the safes were moved.

Cochran: Yes. They had 20 safes at a time that they were opening. One day Mike was out there struggling to open the safes, and the Arlington County Rescue Squad

came by, and Mike asked them to use their "jaws of life." They couldn't let us use them, but they did the job on the safe. They busted the sides of the safe right out.

Putney: Could you describe that piece of equipment?

Cochran: It operates a hydraulic tool that hooks up to the motor, gas powered or electric. There are hoses connected to the tool. When you power up the pump it pumps hydraulic fluid through it to the "jaws of life," which is a big unit with different sized tips. You can either spread out or collapse things. We used that tool. We didn't use the cutting tools of the fire department, but just the spreading device. It's a lot of pressure, about 16,000 pounds. Mike said we needed to get one of those, so we did an emergency request through WHS, Nancy Judd, and they got it for us in two days. The people from Singer-Fire equipment place in Gainesville delivered it on Saturday, and we got training on it. Mike loves it.

Putney: So he was working it right out near the incinerator.

Cochran: Right.

Putney: When you get a safe open, what happens to the contents?

Cochran: The Army was responsible for certain areas, the Navy for certain areas. I think there were also a couple of Air Force offices located near there. A lot of the stuff was highly classified because it was from the command center, they had people from the different agencies out there. DIA was there because of the high level of classified, and Army and Navy personnel. Once we got it open, they determined whose material it was. The first day we were working there, everybody was standing around trying to figure out where to start. Some of the safes were still smoking from the fire, they were that hot.

Putney: From inside the drawers, smoke was coming through those tiny cracks?

Cochran: You could see it coming out. I saw a safe lying there and it was sort of distorted. The bottom drawer was partially moved. I took a pry bar and started struggling with it. I pulled the face off. The safes have no fire protection in them whatsoever. They are just made to secure material. I guess the tighter it's packed inside, the less air gets in, so there is perhaps some fire protection. I got the front of the drawer off, and the first six inches of material was crisp, burned. But eight inches back the rest of the drawer was just singed around the borders. I called for someone to come look at it. DIA, Army, and Navy came over. I fished the stuff out because I had the work clothes on, and it was determined to be a Navy safe out of the command center. It was then their job to look at the material and determine what to do with it—whether to keep it, burn it, or what. If they wanted to take it, they would load it up, and if they wanted to burn it they would give it to the incinerator personnel right there. Some of the stuff in the safes was totally burned, and some was in good shape. It depended on where the safe was in the fire, how long it was in the heat, that sort of thing.

Putney: Did you have different types of safes? Some were the older, mechanical type, and some were electronic?

Cochran: Yes.

Putney: Did one type hold up better under the heat?

Cochran: Not really.

Putney: I guess it depends on where it was located.

Cochran: We had some with mechanical locks, but we don't really know how much heat was involved. No combination envelopes were available, so we didn't know the combinations to dial them open.

Putney: Does the locksmith have the capability to "crack" safes?

Cochran: You mean trying to manipulate the combination?

Putney: Yes.

Cochran: Not on government containers. They are designed to be manipulation proof. There are things built into them that will not give you the signals that the lock will give. Some safes on the outside made for commercial use can be manipulated. It's not something I have cultivated a skill for, because I am a government locksmith. It does help a bit when you are troubleshooting a problem with a mechanical lock, to know how it works inside, but as for sitting there and feeling out a combination, you can't do it.

Putney: So you have to use physical force to get them open.

Cochran: Yes, and these safes were mangled pretty good, with the fall, the sides caving in. The heat was so intense, some of the dials, IDs, and handles, were melted off or moved. Some of the electronical locks were melted except for some wires, the ribbon cables coming out of the lock were still dangling. That was weird. Most of them were messed up.

Putney: Even the older safes do not have fireproofing. Did safes at one time have fireproofing?

Cochran: At one time certain safes had some fireproofing. Some old Remington Rand safes and Shaw Walker safes had some fireproofing built in. They were only made to secure up to Secret material, at the highest. Plus, most of them have been turned in

because they had asbestos in the top and a little ring of asbestos around the front [?] of the [?]. Some of the old Diebold safes, which are pretty heavy, had a lot of concrete on them and a couple of them had some fireproofing built into them, also.

Putney: How many safes did you eventually work on?

Cochran: The lock shop here includes Mike, me, and John. Probably the initial batch was somewhere around 85 to 95 safes. That's when the Armed Forces Information Services wrote an article about us. They listed around 85 safes.

Putney: We will include this article with your interview.

Cochran: Then it died out, and the safes stopped showing up, because they got all of them out of the crash site. We had a brief period of rest. But then all of a sudden after the FBI finished their investigation, they had to start getting the safes out of the area and cleaning it up. They had to demolish some of the Building to get it back to an undamaged area. Part of the area was damaged but unsteady, and people were afraid to go in and get the safes out. They started using a big crane with jaws on it, nibbling away at the Building, crumbling concrete, and taking things out. When they came to a safe, they would go in with the jaw, clamp and crush it, and bring it out. Another crane would come by and grab it and take it to the incinerator, at which time it would be just a mass of metal. It would be crushed in on the sides, and much harder to get open. Totally now, I guess, including the first batch, it is close to 180-200 that we have opened. I think we are pretty much done with it now, because they have boarded up the rest of the Building. It looks like they are finished nibbling at the sides of the Building. Now there might be some safes still inside that area, but they can bring them out without mangling them so much.

Putney: To recap the ways you opened them—you used a crowbar on some, but the main two pieces of equipment are the chop-saw and the jaws of life. Once again, for the chop-saw, where do you attach it, to the drawer with the dial on it?

Cochran: Yes. It has a big 14-inch abrasive blade on it, and we had to make two cuts on each side of the drawer, about an inch and a half apart. That allows a part of the bolt mechanism that locks the drawer to fall out. With one cut it won't go anywhere, but with two, that little piece falls out and you can go in with pliers, grab the bolt that is locking the door, and pull it in. You do that on both sides, and pull the bolts in. That works well in a perfect situation with no other damage to the container, but that wasn't the case then. Once one got the combination drawer open, the others will just open.

Putney: Which of the two pieces of equipment did you rely on most?

Cochran: The "jaws of life." There was so much damage to the safes that that was the only way we could get them open. Even with the chop-saw, with all the other damage we had, we couldn't get the other drawers open. These safes are designed for the suspension to freeze up in a crash. They had been in a fire, so all the grease and lubrication in the suspension had dried up and melted away. Plus I heard that they were designed so that the doors wouldn't fly open in a crash, but would freeze up. We were trying to overcome that, plus the bent-in sides and everything else.

Putney: Was more of the material inside the safes preserved or burned and destroyed?

Cochran: I think probably about 50-50, depending on where the safes were. Some of them were completely crisp. Different agencies were there, and supposedly they bagged the stuff up and people would determine whether to take it or not, just burn it.

Putney: Sometimes you would open the safe, and everything inside was crisp, not identifiable?

Cochran: Yes. We opened up one where the material inside was singed but the next drawer down was full of plastic vu-graphs and binders and such that were not damaged. That was weird.

Putney: Were the safes hot to work on or were they just warm?

Cochran: Some were still smoking, but most of the heat was coming from the inside. The very first day some people tried to pry one open, and air got in and it started flaming. They were afraid to touch them after that.

Putney: Is there entirely paper inside the safes?

Cochran: Mostly. People keep disk drives, vu-graphs, plastic binders, but mostly paper.

Putney: So you were not too worried about what was inside that might be damaging to your health in some way?

Cochran: We weren't worried about that, because we knew there was no asbestos in those particular ones. The safety office was concerned about it, because in the area itself there could be asbestos in the dust that coated them.

Putney: Where did all the safes get moved to them?

Cochran: I don't know. I think they had a dumpsite where they put everything. Once we cut one open, they would make sure it was empty and then move them over to a big pile.

Putney: Did you happen to save any of the metal pieces from the safes? We are looking for artifacts as well as photos and documents. A melted dial or something would give an indication of the heat and the destructive power of the crash.

Cochran: We didn't, but maybe someone at the incinerator did.

Putney: I know that some of the historians and museum curators that were allowed to survey the art also picked up a computer that was melted, but the top still opened on the laptop. They will preserve that as an artifact. Did you have any other tasks in terms of the Building itself, securing things?

Cochran: After everything happened, certain areas had to be secured and people escorted in. Power was lost, there was a lot of water damage, and if people needed to get into an office that had a lock that wasn't working, they would get me, and I would go there with the occupant and the FBI and open the space. Certain areas, specifically the SOLIC, they had an office with a lot of computer equipment in there, and I went and fixed the lock. We went in and they started moving stuff out. I came back and fixed the cipher lock later.

Putney: It was just routine for you?

Cochran: Yes.

Putney: How long were you working then, say, on extended hours?

Cochran: About three weeks. About a week afterward I was home, and Mike called from Crystal City. The Navy had moved out, but some people were moving in, and we had to go and redo the offices to make them livable. We fixed the door locks and got keys and that type of thing. Mike got called in early, and I went in about noon, and we ended up working until 1:00 a.m. I had to come back in by 6:00 a.m. the next morning.

They wanted the lock shop manned from 6:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m. until further notice. We did that for about three weeks, seven days a week. Then we went back to regular hours. But police in the Building are still on extended hours.

Putney: Did you have any lessons learned that you formulated as you were working these weeks?

Cochran: Not really. That type of attack will probably not happen again, because everybody is looking for that now. They will come up with something, but there isn't much you can do to prevent that. More people were more affected by it than me. I hate the loss of life. It didn't make me afraid to come to work. Some people are still really messed up by it. I knew two people that died. One worked in PA&E, an OSD employee, Brian Jack, and he flew out to LA for a meeting, and then the plane comes back and crashes into his own Building and kills him. Another guy that Cindy and I used to run into around the Building was real friendly and handed out candy. I found out later that he died in the crash when I saw the memorial display they put up. That was shocking.

Putney: Did anything good come out of this tragedy, that you can see?

Cochran: Everyone is more security conscious now; they check bags, and the MPs are here now.

Putney: Is there anything else about how it affected your division?

Cochran: Just that our workload increased because of all the safes we had to open. I took care of the stuff here in the Building, and Mike and John did some of that. There are also a lot of vaulted areas where they had to put people that were displaced. It is

hectic trying to get things secure everywhere they are putting people. It was "Hurry up, hurry up, we've got to get a lock on this door because we're moving people in."

Putney: In the Pentagon you have to have a lock on the door even if you don't have classified.

Cochran: Yes, a key lock is minimum, and if it's a vaulted area there is a combination lock and a cipher lock.

Putney: It's a tremendous workload. Are you back to normal now?

Cochran: Pretty much. Most of the safes are out, but now it's a matter of keeping up with the regular workload. It still comes in spurts. John is still doing work up in the renovated areas, plus the B- and A-ring rooms that are still standing. He is doing the red TC closets where they process classified, making sure the locks work. Also in certain areas where they are moving people. The people in the renovation are still generating work for him. Sometimes it just pops up all of a sudden, and it is a rush job.

Putney: This is an interesting account of the support activity of OSD. This is an important aspect of security. I appreciate your time.