

Pentagon Attack

Interview with Stephen Cambone
July 8, 2002

Cameron: This interview with Dr. Stephen A. Cambone, Director, Program Analysis and Evaluation, is taking place in the Pentagon on July 8, 2002. The interviewers are Drs. Alfred Goldberg and Rebecca Cameron.

On September 11 you held the position of Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Policy. At that time, had you been briefed about the possibility of an attack on the Pentagon?

Cambone: No, not an attack on the Pentagon. I came into the Building on the same day the secretary did, as his special assistant, in January 2001. I had served previously with him on the Missile Threat Commission and the Space Commission. In July I was confirmed as the principal deputy under secretary for policy. I moved out of the special assistant's job into the principal deputy's job. There hadn't been any specific reference to an attack on the Pentagon. During the course of the year there were a number of references to plots and plans, but not anything specific. During the course of the year we had a review of work that had been done on the USS Cole bombing, which was just coming due, and had people paying attention to such problems. Most of the reporting was with respect to terrorist threats overseas, not here at home. Warnings of such threats overseas had caused us to send ships to sea sometime in late spring or summer on the basis of an anticipated attack. There was sensitivity to the possibility that we would be struck, so in that sense the September 11 attacks were less surprising since the notion of being attacked had occurred. The notion that we might be surprised was

appreciated, but the date, time, place, manner, and consequences were all very much unanticipated.

Goldberg: Was there any kind of disaster plan for the secretary's office?

Cambone: People knew where to take him, and how to do things. The offices, in terms of day-to-day support subsequently, hadn't exercised any of that, which is probably unfortunate. We could have done better. Since then we have done a lot of work to improve our ability to respond to another attack. I spent that day with the secretary, as did Jim Haynes, Vice Admiral Giambastiani and Tori Clarke. The Vice Chairman was there for most of the day, as well.

Goldberg: This was in the command center?

Cambone: Yes, we started in the Executive Support Center (ESC) and went down to the National Military Command Center (NMCC) because of the delay in transferring information back and forth.

Cameron: Were you with the secretary at the meeting that was taking place when the first attack came?

Cambone: No, ironically I was in my office talking about getting the crisis coordination capability better organized. Admiral Lopez had been in during the course of the summer talking about ways of doing things; we were getting ready to test and organize them. When the first airplane went into the World Trade Center it struck me as an opportunity to exercise some of the capabilities, and I asked for the people who were involved to go down to the ESC. It was roughly 9:00 a.m., and no sooner did I do that and go back into my office than the second plane hit. I thought the first crash was an accident; the second clearly wasn't. We got everyone downstairs by 9:30 and were in the ESC by 9:37 when

the plane smacked into the Building. On my way down to the ESC I stopped in at the secretary's office and saw Admiral Giambastiani and told him that he needed to get the secretary of defense out of the Building. He asked why and I told him of the airplanes that had flown into the Twin Towers in New York City and there was no telling what would happen next. I left that message and went on to the ESC. It turns out he did get out of the Building, but only to run around and take care of the victims.

Cameron: So you were at the ESC when the plane came in; could you feel it, or hear it?

Cambone: It sounded as though the air conditioning vents had been pressurized—that rumble you get through the vents. Some moments later someone came in and said the Building had been hit by an airplane, which, again, changed the nature of things. At that moment I asked for the Building to be evacuated and also locked down. We had to get troops in to ensure that the Building itself wasn't going to be under assault, and secondly that folks in the Building didn't leave behind open offices, safes, etc.

Goldberg: To whom did you say that?

Cambone: Doc Cooke.

Goldberg: You called him?

Cambone: No, he was there in the ESC. It took a while to get everybody organized.

Cameron: By the time the plane hit the Pentagon, people drew a conclusion different from it being an accident?

Cambone: Yes, when the second plane went into the World Trade Center, it affirmed that we were under attack. The next question that came up was whether there were combat air patrols over Washington, and that whole process was set in train.

Goldberg: When did the secretary come back to the command center?

Cambone: It wasn't a long time, as I recall, because he fully realized that his job was inside, not outside the Building. General Myers was there, and we started organizing ourselves. One of the first things they did was change the DefCon rating and put it at three. We called the Russians and asked them to stand down the air exercises that they were running. We called the Embassy to relay the request; they stood down quickly. Then, the SecDef got in touch with the president, to set rules of engagement and what process would be used from that point on to keep the president informed.

Cameron: If the secretary was mostly concerned with international issues, who was dealing with events at the Pentagon itself?

Cambone: I sent Colonel Duffy, my military assistant at the time, out to work with Mr. Jester's people, the folks who run the Building, to make sure that we had constant reports coming back in about the state of the Building, rescue, and security issues. She did that liaison work for the remainder of the day.

Goldberg: Early on the secretary decided the Building would keep on operating?

Cambone: He decided somewhere in the afternoon, toward evening, that it would open the next day. Senators Levin and Warner came down to visit, and I think it was at the time they were there that the secretary said we would reopen the next day. He had gotten enough information on the damage, and the smoke was beginning to clear.

Goldberg: By this time you were getting smoke where you were?

Cambone: By the middle of the day the smoke in the NMCC was to the point that we were getting ready to move elsewhere. We came up the stairs, and the ESC by that time had cleared out. Even though it was one floor up, it wasn't filled with smoke. We spent the remainder of the day there. ✓

Cameron: So fairly quickly someone determined that the Building wasn't under attack?

Cambone: No, I don't think we ever concluded that it was not, that a further attack might not take place. The secretary sent the deputy secretary to a secure location, along with a support team. They took off and came back after dark. We didn't know what other things would take place. By that point the president was at Offutt and conversation went back and forth about whether he would stay later or come back here. The president was insistent that he come back here, and so he did. There was no way of knowing whether there would be subsequent attacks.

Cameron: You mentioned troops being summoned.

Cambone: You would have to check with Jester to see how that unfolded. By the next day we had Military District of Washington troops here. They were not MPs, as I recall. I think they were standard infantrymen.

Cameron: They had the Old Guard here.

Cambone: Yes, we did, because they were the nearest troops, and they took up their stations. How long it took for them to get here and so forth, I don't know.

Cameron: How long did you stay that day?

Cambone: The whole day. I went with the secretary to the White House. They had a meeting at 9:00 when the president got back. I waited for him outside the meeting room, then drove back up to his place, where he was dropped off. They brought me back here, and I got in my car and went home. It was about 11:00 that night.

Cameron: Did the secretary task you, or did you assume any specific area of responsibility that day?

Cambone: No. It was mostly in support of him, whatever he needed—telephone calls, notes taken, that kind of thing.

Cameron: Did you go to the crash site yourself that first day?

Cambone: Yes, at about 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon. Perhaps it was the next day, it kind of blurs.

Goldberg: The secretary went out only the one time?

Cambone: Yes. I believe it was the next day when I went out, because the Building was not on fire.

Goldberg: What was going on inside, if it wasn't on fire? Wasn't there still fire inside?

Cambone: Yes, but it wasn't burning, wasn't billowing black smoke anymore.

Goldberg: Fires were flaring up from time to time.

Cambone: That's true, but it was not like the scene on the first day.

Cameron: Did you know anyone at the crash site?

Cambone: No.

Cameron: Did you stay in touch thereafter with any of the DPS, or Doc's people?

Cambone: That was what Colonel Duffy did all day long.

Cameron: And the days thereafter?

Cambone: It transitioned pretty quickly to the folks responsible for these kinds of things. At the time, the under secretary for policy was not here, nor were the two assistant secretaries. Feith, Rodman, and Crouch were all out of country. Doug [Feith] got back on the evening of the 12th, so on the 13th he assumed his responsibilities. Whatever I might have been doing in an "acting" under secretary capacity he took over.

Cameron: So you met with him the first time on the 13th.

Cambone: He slipped right into his role and they started preparing the secretary and the deputy secretary to go up to Camp David for the weekend.

Cameron: Was that the first time that the Policy staff assembled to discuss what your role would be thereafter?

Cambone: I very quickly rolled back to doing transformation. The planning for the crisis management and wartime crisis management went over to DOMS people, Kathy Condon and her people on the Army staff. On the OSD staff T.K. Kuster and his people rolled right in and did what they had to do. Pete Verga was taking a lot of that responsibility.

Goldberg: As principal deputy you had a dual role, didn't you?

Cambone: I was forced into it by circumstances.

Goldberg: You were working directly for the secretary and also for the under secretary.

Cambone: The other person very much involved in this was Lisa Bronson. She is an extraordinarily competent woman and spent the entire day of September 11 marshaling the staff.

Goldberg: From Policy?

Cambone: No, for the Department, on the OSD staff. A great number of people in the Building left, and she had been evacuated. I sent word for her to come back and she did.

Goldberg: What was her position?

Cambone: I think she was NATO office director in Policy. She is an enormously competent person and worked all day sorting out the parts. They held situation meetings every couple of hours and she was able to organize and direct folks to get things done that needed to be done.

Cameron: Earlier, the secretary had commented publicly that the computers in his office couldn't communicate with Policy's computers. Did that kind of problem come up as a security issue?

Cambone: No, most of it was done face-to-face, so it wasn't a problem. The secretary transitioned very rapidly into planning for the war. He left the management of the Building to the professionals here—recovery, repair, and all those kinds of things—and focused very quickly on rules of engagement for the air patrols, surface ships, and making sure there were deployment orders for the troops, things of that sort.

Goldberg: Did he pay some attention to plans for the renovation of the Building that would make it more secure?

Cambone: That was much later. I have not been involved in all that. Do you mean the event at the time, or subsequently?

Goldberg: Subsequently; changes that might affect his office.

Cambone: I have not been deeply involved in that. You need to talk to Giambastiani or Di Rita.

Cameron: Although you were responsible for crisis management issues on the international front, did you also become involved with homeland security thereafter?

Cambone: Not early on. I got enmeshed in that some time around March. For a variety of reasons secretary White ended up with those responsibilities and duties and he was busily carrying them out over the winter. By early spring it was clear that we needed a permanent organization in OSD to look after that. I started in February talking about it and in March was asked to put together a transition plan and a new organization and we

did that. I sent it down to the deputy secretary last month. It's just a matter of executing it.

Cameron: So you were involved in that particular function relatively early.

Cambone: Yes, and I have since paid attention to the domestic security planning and exercises and things of that sort.

Cameron: Since the last quarter of the year?

Cambone: The last quarter of 2001. I got increasingly engaged in it about the time of the Olympics, so from late January or early February up to now.

Cameron: Prior to that time you were looking at aspects of the war?

Cambone: No, I went back to doing transformation. I had a Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) to get out, a DPG to get out, and a budget to finish, and that's what I did.

Cameron: How much did the QDR change as a result?

Cambone: None. There were phrases added to take account of the facts, but substantively it didn't change at all. In terms of my day-to-day work, it was related to getting the transformation on track, and we are on track.

Goldberg: You were in the command center in large part because of your personal relationship with the secretary rather than your position.

Cambone: A bit of both, actually. When the plane went into Hainan Island in April, I was the special assistant at the time, and there was nobody else to handle the crisis, so I was assigned to handle it through that first week of April. Doug, interestingly, wasn't here for the first days of that one, either. Doug wasn't in office then. So we carried that through the month of April, and then the pilots and crew came back on the 30th. So it was anticipated that I would be somewhere in the command center if there were a crisis of

one kind or another, which is why I was working on the crisis management effort at the time of the event. We were trying to get better coordinated with our own internal organization and management crisis. SecDef asked me to do that. So in the event, I went to the crisis command center. If something happened today, that's exactly where I would go, despite being PA&E now, rather than Policy. I don't mean to underplay your point, the relationship with the secretary is important.

Goldberg: So it's there regardless of which position you are holding.

Cambone: Yes.

Cameron: Did September 11 affect the way you do business, the way your jobs developed, your responsibilities or your organization's responsibilities?

Cambone: What we did, on the new Homeland Defense Office that we are trying to create, is embed in that office the domestic crisis or incident manager. That person will be there and connected to the various parts of the Department, in communication with the Joint Staff, the White House, and the Army. All of that will get more properly, officially, lashed up together. What we have now is a very good set of *ad hoc* working relationships, and for this 4th of July we put together what I think is a very good incident management team and process. With each one of these we learn a bit more and get better at doing it. Once we get the new Homeland Defense Office in place, the incident manager will be there, there will be exercises, and they will have some command over resources and people and be able to handle situations much better. Therefore, the role that I had as principal deputy, crisis management, will slide over to the Homeland Defense Office, which makes sense.

Goldberg: That will be an assistant secretary's office.

Cambone: Yes. That leaves the senior management of Policy freer to do other kinds of things in a crisis.

Goldberg: Thank you very much, we appreciate this.

Cambone: If there is anything else I can do, let me know.