

Interview with John Connell

18 December 1991

Office of the Secretary of Defense
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Goldberg: This is an interview in the Pentagon on December 18, 1991, with Mr. John Connell, former administrative assistant to the Secretary of the Army. This interview has to do with the Pentagon building and Mr. Connell's recollections from his long tenure in the building.

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When did you enter the building as an employee, for the first time?

Connell: In November 1942.

Goldberg: What was your status at the time?

Connell: I was a civilian in the Secretary's office, employed as the personnel manager.

Goldberg: The building was not completed at that time, was it?

Connell: That's correct.

Goldberg: You moved in at the same time that the Secretary and the Chief of Staff moved in, which was on November 15, 1942.

Connell: That's correct. We were part of Mr. Stimson's office, who was Secretary at that time, and when he moved, we moved.

Goldberg: What were conditions like in the building, at that time?

Connell: It was a state of confusion. There were very few office partitions. File cabinets were arranged so as to provide makeshift partitions between various offices. The only offices that had partitions were the ones on the E ring.

Goldberg: Anything else that you remember from that period?

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Connell: The roadwork around the Pentagon was still largely unpaved. The buses used, as I recall, a dirt road to get to the Pentagon. There were rather muddy conditions on rainy days.

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Goldberg: Construction was still going on inside the building, wasn't it?

Connell: Yes, particularly on the fifth floor.

Goldberg: That wasn't completed until January 15. What facilities were available in the building at the time, for employees?

Connell: There were cafeterias, operated by what later became GSA. It was adequate. I don't recall snack bars. There might have been one or two, but primarily we relied on the cafeterias for eating facilities.

Goldberg: What was the concourse like at that time?

Connell: I don't recall any sort of business down there at first. Walgreen's drug store was one of the earliest to come in. The First and Merchant's Bank of Virginia came in later.

Goldberg: The drug store didn't come in until 1944. Were there any other stores before that, any other amenities or facilities?

Connell: I don't recall any. The clothing store had been over on C Street, where the State Department building is now. Old apartment houses were there. He moved in fairly early.

Goldberg: How about the barbershop?

Connell: That came in later, too.

Goldberg: How did you go to and from the building?

Connell: By bus. I lived in Alexandria, and there was good bus service.

Goldberg: What was the general transportation system like at the time? A lot of people must have come by car and car pool.

Connell: I don't know as there was much car pooling at the time. There was adequate parking, of course, but not many people drove, they relied on the bus.

Goldberg: So there was adequate space for those who did drive. Were there any traffic jams in the neighborhood?

Connell: I don't recall any.

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Goldberg: So you didn't have any trouble getting to and from the building?

Connell: No. We had one or two heavy snows in the early years. I remember on one occasion walking from the Pentagon to Park Fairfax, where I lived at the time.

Goldberg: What were your working hours?

Connell: In those days, 7:30 or so until 6:00 or 7:00 o'clock at night, Saturdays, and sometimes on Sundays.

Goldberg: And there were second and third shifts, also?

Connell: Yes, in some offices.

Goldberg: But in lesser numbers, because most people worked the daytime shift?

Connell: Yes.

Goldberg: So how long was the average work week for most people?

Connell: It was certainly more than 40 hours; my own hours ran about 48 per week.

Goldberg: Before the war it was 39 hours.

Connell: True.

Goldberg: Were you aware of any segregated facilities in the building?

Connell: No, not that I recall.

Goldberg: The rest rooms and the cafeteria were all unsegregated?

Connell: Yes.

Goldberg: There had been consideration given, initially, to segregating blacks, according to Virginia law.

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What were your reactions to the building, when you came in?

Connell: I thought it was exciting, not just the time, but working in the building. Having been in the Munitions Building, and the temporary building on the site where State is now, and then up at 18th and Penn. Ave. in what is now the Securities and Exchange Building, and then to the Pentagon.

Goldberg: A lot of moving in a short time.

Connell: We were expanding so rapidly that we had to move around.

Goldberg: What are your recollections about other people? Do you recall conversations, attitudes, or expressions of opinion about the Pentagon?

Connell: A lot of people found it thoroughly confusing, because of the size and arrangement of the building. There were many stories going around about people getting lost in the building. There was a lot of confusion.

Goldberg: Was the general feeling that it was an inconvenient place to work?

Connell: I am sure that whatever building you had, people would complain about it. Most of the complaints were about finding their way.

Goldberg: How about working conditions--was there a lot of noise, and confusion?

Connell: Not in my particular area. Being attached to the Secretary's office, we were probably more fortunate in getting better space arrangements than many offices. There was noise and dust, but that didn't seem to bother many people.

Goldberg: Was the center court used a lot during the war years?

Connell: Not at that time. I went into service in May of 1943.

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Goldberg: Where did you go from here?

Connell: I was drafted and went to Greensboro, N.C., to the Army Air Corps basic training camp. From there I went to Seymour AFB, Indiana, for about three months, and from there to Miami Beach to the Army Air Corps OCS. Then I went to Alabama, Panama City, Fl., to OSS and back to Washington on 23rd St., the old Naval Dispensary.

Goldberg: Full circle back to Washington. Were there vehicles already operating in the building at that time?

Connell: Bicycles.

Goldberg: In addition, pneumatic tubes?

Connell: No motorized vehicles. Originally we didn't even have bicycles; everyone walked.

Goldberg: In the beginning there was an indisposition to provide any athletic facilities, so initially they hesitated to do anything that could be considered extra, for the building. Finally they put in showers and lockers down where the POAC is. Do you remember when the other facilities were put in? Did you return after the war?

Connell: I came back in February 1946.

Goldberg: Were the full athletic facilities here at that time?

Connell: I don't remember.

Goldberg: I came into the building in 1946, after returning from overseas. I joined POAC, and I think they had finished the facilities.

What was your impression of the building at the time?

Connell: I followed the general sentiment that it was too large to house the War Department after the war was over. We are talking about prior to the National Defense Act in 1947, when the DoD was created. So nobody thought that the War Department

would ever be large enough to use the whole building, and they talked about moving other government agencies in here.

Goldberg: This attitude was during the war years?

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Connell: No, this was after I returned.

Goldberg: What was your feeling about the architecture of the building?

Connell: I thought it was a horrible example of architecture, but I recognized that it was a good design for housing so many people. I think at one point the figure reached around 32 thousand, at its peak.

Goldberg: Probably the maximum was 32-33 thousand. It reached almost 32,000 during the Korean War, as well as during WWII.

Connell: As an alternative to building a high-rise, the arrangement of the five rings made sense.

Goldberg: But you don't think highly of it?

Connell: No, I am an artist, so from an aesthetic standpoint it doesn't attract me at all.

Goldberg: Does its size overwhelm you?

Connell: No.

Goldberg: That means it must be pretty proportional, then, don't you think?

Connell: I would be more impressed by a higher-story office building than a spread-out building.

Goldberg: Why? Because you think vertically, instead of horizontally?

Connell: I guess so.

Goldberg: My own attitude is rather favorable toward the Pentagon as architecture. You must remember, they put up this building in 16 months. They did the design work in a few

months. Considering the time that they had for both design and construction and the pressure they were under not to make it fancy, didn't they get some variety, with the columns, porticos, River and Mall entrances, and so on?

Connell: The entrances were a relief from the monotony of the rest of the building.

Goldberg: I think I have a more positive appreciation of it, perhaps because I want to.

Connell: I'm speaking strictly as to its aesthetic features. As a practical structure, it can't be beaten. To me, it's a much more practical building than a 110-story building.

Goldberg: No doubt about it. This kind of horizontal transportation within the building is much superior to all that vertical. You can get everywhere in a short time, here. Not as short as usually said, but if you run you can get between the two most distant points in five minutes.

Connell: Once you understand the basic design of the building, it is fairly easy to get from one place to another.

Goldberg: Do you have anything else that you think is pertinent? I am writing a history of the building, and its 50th anniversary is coming up.

Connell : I suppose you have resurrected all the original pictures of the various designs.

Goldberg: Yes. I have the papers of one of the chief architects, David Witmer, whose son brought them to me a few months ago.

Connell: One plan called for a tower in the center court.

Recruitment and reception of typists and clerks coming into the department, we were getting around 300 people a week. We had trouble finding housing for them all. There was a building on 18th st. across from the Old Securities and Exchange Commission,

where we housed our stenographic pool. That term covered all kinds of clerks that were coming in. We had trouble finding places for them to work.

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Goldberg: Were people eager to work in the Pentagon?

Connell: Everybody was so busy.

Goldberg: They had a lot of names for the building, didn't they?

Connell: Yes, the Puzzle Palace, and many names I don't recall.

Goldberg: Any interesting anecdotes?

Connell: I recall that this was the prior site of Washington airport. We used to have to stop traffic when planes were landing. There was a blimp hangar, also.

Goldberg: Is there anything else pertinent? Why didn't Stimson like the new War Department building?

Connell: I don't know. He was very content where he was in the Munitions Building, and didn't want to leave.

Goldberg: Did you hear of any expression of sentiment from him about the Pentagon?

Connell: No.

Goldberg: Did you hear anything from Marshall? Any gossip?

Connell: No, I don't recall any remark being attributed to Marshall or Stimson. They were not much for casual conversation.

Goldberg: Did you hear any remarks about Somervell?

Connell: No, but he was certainly busy.

Goldberg: He was a powerful figure on the scene during the war. He did a remarkable job, in his way. Anything about Patterson, or McCloy?

Connell: No. I don't recall anything.

Goldberg: Who is still around that you know from that time?

Connell: My deputy is still around, he moved in at the same time I did.

Goldberg: Was he drafted, too?

Connell: Yes, but we both came back after the war. He lives in Alexandria. Offhand, I don't recall many others; some are general officers now.

Goldberg: If they were field grade officers then, they wouldn't be too young now. I'm sure there are some. Ridgway is still alive, but he didn't stay in the building very long.

Connell: I don't think Bernie Rogers was in the building.

Goldberg: He was a very junior officer. Most of those before him are gone. Westmoreland is still around.

Connell: I think he lives in Charleston. He was a combat officer, I don't think Dick Stilwell was in the building until long after the war was over.

Goldberg: Most of those still around would have been people out in the field. The staff people here in the building would have been relatively few in number.

Connell: Is Rudy Winnacker still alive?

Goldberg: No, he died in 1985.

Connell: I was shocked to read about Len [Niederlehner]; he wasn't a young man, but he was a giant to us.

Goldberg: I want to thank you for this, it has been helpful.

Connell: That time frame sounds reasonable. We contracted to have those pictures, particularly Marshall's, the Chief of Staff and Secretary of State. It was called the Marshall Corridor. We did brighten up the background.

Goldberg: Did you put in some other corridors, then, too?

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Connell: Later on we put in the Time-Life corridor.

Goldberg: That was before, in 1960.

Connell: We later put in the Medal of Honor, after the Marshall Corridor.

Goldberg: Did the Army put that in, or OSD?

Connell: One of my people, J.B. Hudson, will have records showing when that was done.

Goldberg: Any others you can think of?

Connell: The Chief of Staff's corridor, on the second floor.

Goldberg: At the Mall Entrance area.

Thank you.