

Pentagon Attack

Interview with David O. "Doc" Cooke
October 18, 2001

This is an interview with David O. Cooke, Director of Administration and Management of the Department of Defense, taking place in his Pentagon office on October 18, 2001. [The interviewers are Alfred Goldberg and Diane Putney, OSD Historical Office.]

Goldberg: Doc, can you start by telling us what your responsibilities are as Building Commandant and Director of Washington Headquarters Services, with particular reference to the events of September 11th.

Cooke: Building Commandant might be a bit of an overstatement or understatement it all depends on who you are talking to. Perhaps my nickname, "Mayor of the Pentagon," summarizes the basic municipal responsibilities of fire, police protection, water, power, the assignment of space, including parking space. I could go on, but also budget and personnel, etc.

Goldberg: You forgot history.

Cooke: History is not one of my responsibilities as Mayor of the Pentagon. That is my responsibility as Director of Administration and Management, and I am proud to tell you, of all people, that we have a very vigorous, flourishing historical program, as witnessed by my willingness to subject myself to your thirteen questions.

Goldberg: Everybody else is perfectly agreeable to doing this—even eager to have questions asked of them.

With reference to September 11th, how much warning was there, if any?

Cooke: As I was concerned, none. I am speaking not only of the incident here at the Pentagon but the prior incidents up in Manhattan.

Goldberg: But wasn't there some apprehension here when it was learned that the Twin Towers had been attacked—that there was a possibility of the Pentagon also being attacked? Some people seemed to have some intimation of it.

Cooke: I was not one of them.

Goldberg: Well, obviously over the years, we had given thought to the security of the Building in the event of attacks. Most of the ones that were thought possible did not include aircraft flying into the Building.

Cooke: Yes and no. They did include the possibility of a small aircraft, probably containing explosives, which would either drop the explosive or possibly dive into the Building, but never considered to be a threat was a fully tanked airliner, which would, in effect, act as a guided missile and strike the Building.

Goldberg: When I had my office on the 5th floor, almost every other time I heard a plane fly over, which was very often, I thought to myself, "What a simple matter it would be to drop some bombs on the way." So, obviously that was a consideration. But I suppose that most of the attention was paid to the possibility of truck bombs and that sort of thing.

Cooke: I think that is probably true that the threat would have been a land threat—or light plane.

Goldberg: The changes, the precautions made outside the Building were with that primarily in mind at the River Entrance, the Mall Entrance, the Concourse, etc.

Cooke: Yes.

Goldberg: What major building alterations were made over recent years to improve security?

Cooke: As you know, we are in the process of a complete renovation of the Pentagon, which is stretched out over a long period of time. During the renovation important changes were made, not in the expectation of the attack, but just out of good prudence to put in blast resistant windows, to put in structural steel in the wedge. But again, not with the viewpoint that we were going to be attacked by a hijacked airliner—the furthest from my thoughts.

Goldberg: The structural reinforcements were understood to improve security against some kinds of attack?

Cooke: Yes. Some of the changes we made were to make it more difficult for devices outside of the Pentagon to be able to read what was going on electronically or by visual means in the Pentagon itself.

Goldberg: Was there a crisis action plan in effect that was implemented on September 11th?

Cooke: I don't think so, in that sense. There were, of course, any number of so-called "Coop" plans and evacuation plans. [Continuity of operations plans] But we were not in a heightened condition of readiness at the time.

Goldberg: Was there conscious implementation of any plans in advance?

Cooke: No, we were in a somewhat normal readiness position.

Goldberg: How did you learn about the attack?

Cooke: I had heard the story of an attack in Manhattan, and I turned on the television. CNN, I think. We were getting that when the plane struck the Pentagon. I didn't feel it sitting here in this office. There was no shock that I felt here.

Goldberg: Did you hear it?

Cooke: No.

Goldberg: It is a big building, isn't it?

Cooke: It is a big building, and I was working on something.

Goldberg: So you learned about it from the television?

Cooke: Yes.

Goldberg: What did you do then?

Cooke: First of all, the alarms went off. We had been having some problems with clarity.

Goldberg: Were they fire alarms?

Cooke: Yes, voice and sirens. My concern was whether they were working. At that time there were little if any smoke and fumes in this part of the building. Those things came later, as the HVAC system picked up and distributed the smoke, etc., throughout the Building.

Goldberg: What is the HVAC system?

Cooke: Heating, ventilation, air conditioning system.

Goldberg: What did you do then?

Cooke: I went down to see that our Pentagon police force was properly stationed at the River Entrance. I put in calls to our chief of police, John Jester, and

assistants to see what they were doing. They were very difficult to reach, of course. I don't have a cell phone, but I understand the cell phones were virtually useless. They were simply overwhelmed by the volume of calls.

Goldberg: Where did you go from here?

Cooke: I did not evacuate. The images of the skipper going down with the ship did not cross my mind at all, but I wanted to make sure that the people were leaving in an orderly fashion, offices were vacated, and the rest. Since we tried to do most of this by telephone, I stayed here in the office.

Goldberg: Did anybody try to get in touch with you?

Cooke: Yes, but I don't recall who. They were reporting what had happened.

Goldberg: Did you hear from the secretary or the deputy secretary?

Cooke: No, I did not.

Goldberg: Do you know what they were doing?

Cooke: I do not.

Goldberg: So, I would have to ask them?

Cooke: I would think so.

Goldberg: At some point, you did leave the office and go somewhere else I presume. Is that correct?

Cooke: Yes.

Goldberg: Where did you go?

Cooke: Home. I was here in until around 7:00pm.

Goldberg: In the office here?

Cooke: Either here or in the Building.

Goldberg: Did you go to the Command Center?

Cooke: No.

Goldberg: Do you know whether the secretary or the deputy went there?

Cooke: Are you talking about the one opposite the secretary's office? I think the secretary stayed in his office until he went home.

Goldberg: So, your main concerns and priorities were to make certain that all of the elements of Washington Headquarters Services, etc., were doing what they were supposed to be doing.

Cooke: Precisely.

Goldberg: That was your priority during that whole period of time?

Cooke: Yes.

Goldberg: You went home about 7pm.

Cooke: Yes. Of course, I was well aware of the tremendous aid given to us by the Arlington Fire Department, the Police Department, and by any number of people. Jurisdiction over the site of the incident, by the way, rests with the Fire Department and remained there until the Fire Department was satisfied that the fire was under control, which was a period of about two and a half days.

Goldberg: But the FBI secured the area?

Cooke: Well, the FBI's jurisdiction kicks in when the Fire Department turns it over to law enforcement—not before that. With the Fire Department, the emphasis, of course, is on the rescue of the living—and there will be any number of stories, I suspect you will get, about heroes among our own Pentagon police

and the Arlington Fire Department. The secretary went out and tried to help in the physical removal for a short time.

Goldberg: So the FBI agents didn't all rush into the building immediately looking for evidence?

Cooke: No. The first of the evidence that existed was extremely hot. They would have been burned to death or asphyxiated.

Goldberg: Was the entire building evacuated?

Cooke: I would think, yes. There were rumors, wild speculation that a second plane was hijacked from Dulles and was on its way to strike the Pentagon, and it would be here in two minutes. I was, at the time, down at the River Entrance. One of the enlisted people from the front office said, "Mr. Cooke, you've got to get out of here. The plane is coming in." By that time, four minutes had passed. I said, "Well, it's rather slow."

Goldberg: Was it a pretty orderly evacuation as far as you could tell?

Cooke: No. No evacuation is precisely orderly. There was no great panic in the sense that no one got trampled on by more vigorous people.

Goldberg: During the afternoon, you were here in the office?

Cooke: There was smoke, and fumes were getting heavier on this side of the building, but less here when we kept the doors closed. As I said the heating, ventilating, and cooling system introduced things through the duct system.

Goldberg: During the day, you were talking with your police people and with others. Who else were you in contact with?

Cooke: The military assistant to the deputy secretary. Our emphasis there was “Tomorrow—what are we going to do the day after?” Automatically, the condition of readiness was elevated. We were marshaling forces—many of whom would be stationed at Fort Myer. I think there was some discussion as to whether the Military District of Washington has any jurisdiction over the Pentagon. It is a matter of long regulations. It does not, but we were fighting that jurisdictional battle. I think the commanding office of the military district wanted to proclaim something. I said, “Fine.”

Goldberg: What sort of thing?

Cooke: The condition of readiness. Who had responsibility at the site of the impact. Obviously, the Fire Department had.

Goldberg: Well, your position as commandant was affirmed, in place, from 1978 on.

Cooke: Of course.

Goldberg: What is it that the MDW actually did?

Cooke: There were issues about whether the police were under the direction, authority, and control of John Jester, my civilian police chief, or perhaps under the 2-star of MDW—typical issues of a crisis situation. I don’t regard this as untoward or having any affect on the operations whatsoever. A special task force was created at Fort Myer where I had a representative from the police force and other parties who were supplying assistance to get some order out of the chaos. That worked very well for a couple of days.

Goldberg: It was done on Tuesday the same day?

Cooke: It was forming late Tuesday afternoon, and it took place Wednesday.

The fire was extremely difficult largely because of the antiquated structure of the Pentagon. Under the slate roof there were wooden support beams, and the fire went to the wood—like a forest fire—leaped. It was a tough fire. This task force at Fort Myer had representatives from most of the agencies involved.

Goldberg: What plans were in place for assistance from the local jurisdictions for fire, police, medical, rescue, etc.?

Cooke: Well, the local jurisdiction for fire is Arlington County. Any fire in the Pentagon is classified as a three-alarm fire. There was no reason to call in that sense.

Goldberg: They knew.

Cooke: That's what they did, and this happened to be a considerably more serious event than a normal fire at the Pentagon. The Di Lorenzo Medical Clinic, of course, was on the scene. The medical personnel were doing triage, if you will.

Goldberg: Was there outside medical help also?

Cooke: They were coming, sure—from local hospitals and health departments, etc.

Goldberg: Were there plans in place for that?

Cooke: There were no plans in place to handle a disaster the size and magnitude that occurred.

Goldberg: So, a lot of this was ad hoc?

Cooke: Well, based on plans. I don't want to say it was improvisation in that sense.

Goldberg: The hospitals are used to providing emergency assistance—presumably not on this scale though. But the Building medical people played a very large role right from the beginning.

Cooke: Sure. Not only the local, but Bethesda and Walter Reed had people out here also. I think Bolling AFB as well.

Goldberg: Did the local clinic coordinate this? Did they take charge?

Cooke: I don't know.

Goldberg: But Arlington County came through very well, presumably?

Cooke: Extremely well. Not only Arlington County, but the Virginia State Police, Alexandria, Fairfax—tremendous support.

Goldberg: Montgomery County came too.

Cooke: Yes.

Goldberg: The Defense Protective Service presumably played a major role in the whole business.

Cooke: Yes, an important one. Although, they were stretched very thin doing the normal security, which had, of course, been heightened as a result of the incident. We had done things to strengthen security in general—spread them out. So they are badly needed now. Then eventually, early in the game, we requested and received the help of two Maryland National Guard MP companies. One was from Salisbury. I have forgotten where the other one came from.

Goldberg: All the way up there?

Cooke: They were billeted at Fort Myer, of course. We needed MPs to augment a strained, thinned out police force where you needed trained MPs.

Goldberg: A lot of military were provided, presumably from Myer and elsewhere to help with the rescue work.

Cooke: I think to some degree, but the rescue work was essentially the Fire Department.

Goldberg: Was there a command post established at any time on the scene?

Cooke: I think the post you are referring to is at Fort Myer. John Jester spent a lot of his time at the scene. The MDW commander was there quite a bit. A big thing—hadn't happened before.

Goldberg: The FBI appeared on the scene fairly quickly, didn't they?

Cooke: Indeed.

Goldberg: Did they have to be notified or did they come on their own immediately?

Cooke: I don't know who notified them.

Goldberg: We have talked with Michael Sullivan. We will talk with Lee Evey also.

Cooke: Mike is the number two guy.

Goldberg: He had a pretty good notion of what the damage was and what the plans are for repairing the Building.

Cooke: We have a better notion as we get into it. We suspended repairs during the preparation for the memorial service. We just started again this morning.

They had all of the offers of help they needed from contractors.

Goldberg: Do you think this is going to speed up the whole business of the renovation too?

Cooke: No. I don't think it will speed it up.

Goldberg: Suppose you get more money?

Cooke: Money is not time, and you can only do one wedge at a time.

Goldberg: But you could do them faster if you had more money.

Cooke: You mean, if we spend more money on overtime, etc.

Goldberg: If you had the money you could.

Cooke: I don't know.

Goldberg: With two shifts. They went to three shifts when they put the Building up.

Cooke: Indeed, they did.

Goldberg: What do you see is the outcome here? Aside from the renovation and repair of the Building proceeding and plans presumably for increased security for the Building to the extent that's possible, what are the other concerns?

Cooke: Vindication of the improvement is the existing windows, which didn't blow for an appreciable time, thereby, allowing people to escape.

Goldberg: The windows eventually blew when the structure collapsed.

Cooke: Yes.

Goldberg: They didn't blow before that?

Cooke: Not as I understand. The improved use of the structural steel, where I suppose that wood was used originally because we were saving the steel for the real war back in those days.

Goldberg: Also, the carpenters' union wanting more work. The bricklayers did too.

Cooke: I think there have been lessons, which we are still in the process of learning. But this Building was not built with security in mind. Without going into the details about the structural security weaknesses—I have no desire to talk about—there is not much we can do without a bunker mentality, if you will, and close everything down.

Goldberg: Any consideration of anti-aircraft?

Cooke: I am not aware that that was seriously considered by anyone. We could very well—read all of the newspaper reports about the instructions to the fighter pilots. If they can't reach the secretary and the president, some lonely brigadier general someplace is going to make the decision.

Putney: With Arlington County, over the years, there were responses to small fires, exercises and training scenarios?

Cooke: We have had an increased number of exercises, but they did not involve Arlington County—practice evacuations of wedges of the Building. There have been a number of exercises about the fire alarm system. The county has had a long experience with working with Defense. I suspect there have been a fair number of incidents, but none of them were as serious as this.

Putney: When was the first time you got out and you actually saw the damage—walking over to it. And what was your reaction?

Cooke: It may have been a couple of days before I got out to look at the damage. My concern was the wellness and functioning of the Building that

wasn't damaged and what we could do improve the work we had to do. I was concerned about our childcare center.

Goldberg: Do we have reasonably accurate figures on the number of people who were killed, injured, and got out? Has anybody compiled those?

Cooke: We have quite accurate figures on the number of fatalities. We are in the process now of interviewing people. Luckily we were in a period of transition, moving into the new and moving out of the old.

Goldberg: At any time during the next few days did you have any words with the secretary or the deputy secretary?

Cooke: I think indirectly through the military assistants. They were both heavily concerned with our response to this act.

Goldberg: Presumably, we are making other provisions to deal with future emergencies that may occur in terms of the buildings and ground security.

Cooke: Presumably.

Goldberg: Are we drawing up new plans and procedures? Are you going to build up the Defense Protective Service to any extent?

Cooke: Right now we are going to remain augmented by two military police companies from Forts Stewart and Bragg. We're waiting until the dust settles. Our police force was working up until about a short ten days ago, twelve hours on and twelve hours off.

Goldberg: They can't keep that up.

Cooke: I discovered something about the dogs. The dog can work about 45 minutes, then it needs to rest for about fifteen to twenty minutes.

Putney: Is there constant checking of the quality of the air for places like this for the well being of the workers?

Cooke: Oh yes. This has been going on long before the incident and is still going on. And now we are checking, of course, special filters for the presence of anthrax. That's another story.

Goldberg: Who were the key people during this emergency as far as your are concerned?

Cooke: I think, from the viewpoint of the operation, the Chief Fire Marshal of Arlington County, John Jester and his assistant John Pugrud. We had convened by this time a Crisis Coordination Committee.

Goldberg: At Fort Myer?

Cooke: No. This is the one here.

Goldberg: What was Haselbush's role during all of this?

Cooke: All of his people, and his number two. We had to move, and we were able to get empty space in two buildings in Crystal City. They were involved in putting offices together—chairs, tables, typewriters, etc. We had tremendous cooperation from GSA.

Goldberg: Some of those people will be able to come back before long, won't they?

Cooke: Yes and no. There will be a few who will be able to come back.

Remember, we are going to try to repair, completely, one wedge and maintain our schedule to do something in Wedge 2. Many of the people won't be back for several years.

Goldberg: But some of them will be back soon. The renovation people think they will be able to provide a lot of space in a matter of months.

Cooke: I think people will be at Crystal City for a long period of time.

Goldberg: Is there anything good that you can see coming out of all of this?

Cooke: Some of the things that we're doing in renovation have been vindicated. The resources from the community were heartening to see. The innate stability of our work force in the Building—military and civilian—was also heartening.

Goldberg: They came back to work the next day.

Cooke: The day after mostly. There was every reason to bring them back to work early. We've been using the word "incident."

Goldberg: We're talking about an attack. The Korean War was not called a war for many years.

Cooke: The ways of historians are obscure and arcane.

Putney: You did say that this Crisis Coordination Committee had already been in existence?

Goldberg: That was something we built fifteen or twenty years ago.

Cooke: It has been used sporadically. The level around the table would not be the very senior people. The chair was usually Lisa Branson or Pete Verga. I would show up occasionally.

Goldberg: This is an intermittent thing?

Cooke: No, regularly scheduled twice a day.

Goldberg: How often?

Cooke: When the attack happened, I think for the first two weeks, perhaps, they met twice a day.

Goldberg: At what level?

Cooke: Military would be 0-5/0-6.

Goldberg: What did they accomplish?

Cooke: They had a briefing about what each of them was doing.

Goldberg: Did they meet during the first days of this incident?

Cooke: Yes, the Wednesday and Thursday. By the end of the week they were going full blast.

Goldberg: Did you attend?

Cooke: Only occasionally.

Goldberg: What did it accomplish?

Cooke: I think you will have to ask.

Goldberg: Who would you suggest talking to?

Cooke: Peter Verga.

Goldberg: Where is he?

Cooke: He's in Policy, and a deputy under secretary. Lisa Branson.

Goldberg: But the chair usually came out of Policy?

Cooke: Yes.

Goldberg: We thank you for your patience.