

Pentagon Attack

Interview with Bob Cox
November 15, 2001

Hunt: This interview is taking place on November 15, 2001. The interviewer is Richard Hunt of the OSD Historical Office. Would you please state your name and position?

Cox: I'm Robert Cox, and I'm chief of the technical staff of the Federal Facilities Division.

Hunt: Was that your position before September 11, as well?

Cox: Yes.

Hunt: What were you doing on September 11 before the plane hit the Pentagon?

Cox: I was in the Remote Delivery Facility giving a presentation on an A76 cost comparison, where we were to decide whether to outsource the running of the Pentagon heating and refrigeration facility.

Hunt: When were you aware that the plane had hit the Pentagon? Were you aware that planes had hit the World Trade Center?

Cox: No, I wasn't. Actually, the contracting officer at the presentation came in and said that the World Trade Center and that the Pentagon had been hit. In the Remote Delivery Facility we were running a videotape of the presentation to record it, and on the playback you can hear the explosion. But I was giving a presentation and was so absorbed in it I never heard it until she came in and said everyone should get out. We were evacuated into the parking lot.

Hunt: Was there any sense of the building shaking and vibrating?

Cox: I did not feel it, but I think others there in the room not involved in making the presentation did feel it and hear it. You can hear it on the tape.

Hunt: You were told to evacuate the building. Were you involved in any efforts to help people out of the building?

Cox: The Remote Delivery Facility has armored gates, and they closed down automatically as soon as it happened. We were evacuated to a parking lot that is a part of the facility. We were there for about a half hour watching the boiling black smoke and then the OK was given to open the gates to allow the large group from the delivery facility to evacuate across Route 110 and get farther away from the building. All but a couple of people left at that time. I was one of the people who stayed at the Remote Delivery Facility. Phil Samon, the manager of the alterations work group, and I went back into the building with a couple more of his people. In the remote facility there are warehouse facilities where we have inventory of a lot of things, including respirators, flashlights, and general equipment. The first thing we did was to pull equipment we thought would be advantageous to those responding and on the line out of our inventory and put them on carts. The Defense Protective Service had individuals running carts back and forth to the center courtyard to get the materials to the people who needed respirators, filters, and those kinds of things. We emptied the storehouse and sent the stuff forward. In the process, we were trying to brainstorm what could possibly be used to move forward. Dennis Smith from the Pentagon building manager's office, who was designated as part of our emergency response group and had gone through firefighter training, came to get his self-contained breathing apparatus that was stored in the remote delivery facility. I jumped on the cart with him and rode into the

center courtyard, the staging area for triage and the fire department and the Pentagon building manager's office to provide support to the fire department. So that is where I went. I could get there.

Hunt: What did you do once you got there?

Cox: My supervisor had been evacuated as well, along with the building manager, so I was the ranking person in the center courtyard for our division. I was receiving reports from the assistant building manager on the status of the building and trying to help him brainstorm ways in which we could facilitate and help the fire department. One of the big issues going on at the time was the hemorrhaging of the building's water supply. We had lost all pressure, so we were trying to brainstorm ways to isolate that hemorrhaging part of the building so that when we turned off the valves we could bring the pressure back up. I was really there just to support the building manager. They had things well in hand. I was getting more information than I was giving. I was acting as the liaison with the people in the heating and refrigeration plant, who were trying to continue service. When we lost water, they had to shut down. We were trying to bring them back on line, and did so in about 20 minutes. That was important, because we had the rest of the building to continue to operate, and some areas in the building, such as the National Military Command Center, were critical to keep operational. They have redundant systems that support those things on a temporary basis, but we needed to get the plant up and operational. To do that, we had to work with the building manager so that certain valves were turned off to allow for the isolation to bring the water back up and take care of providing heating and cooling. I was acting as liaison between the building manager and the heating and refrigeration plant.

Hunt: Keeping the computer networks operational required cool air. Was that part of what you were doing?

Cox: Right, all those things were important, including the operation of air handlers to evacuate smoke. That had to be done in a way to minimize impact on the damaged part. We didn't want to run air handlers that would fuel the fires. We wanted to run them in a way that they would help evacuate the smoke. Amazingly, the building manager's group, specifically, under Steve Carter's direction, was able to manipulate the heating and cooling systems in a way that reduced carbon monoxide levels, initially very high, to acceptable levels by 10:00 that evening. He was one of the real heroes. That was an amazing feat, given the size of the building.

Hunt: Are there carbon monoxide monitors so that you could tell when it reached an unacceptable level?

Cox., Matt Skoronsky, an industrial hygienist, is a member of the building manager's office and he had some monitoring equipment and put it immediately into the NMCC because of the possible danger there. He also was monitoring the building manager's office, which was kind of a cross section. We only had a few instruments available. It gave us an idea of what was going on in the building.

Hunt: How were people communicating? Were people running back and forth, or were they on two-way radios?

Cox: The Pentagon building manager's office has a radio net. One of the lessons we learned was that in an emergency, having the entire organization on one net doesn't work. Everyone was trying to talk at once. They were stepping on each other in transmissions and people with real needs to get word out weren't able to communicate

with the appropriate individuals. So in some degree, actually running back and forth and finding people and having verbal communications rather than radio communications was necessary in order to communicate the requirements. That was a downfall and a lesson learned that we want to try to correct. Obviously, any emergency communication is an important part of that process.

Hunt: You mention that people were evacuated from the Remote Delivery Facility across Route 110. Was traffic stopped along that route at that time?

Cox: No, it certainly was a hazard. Traffic was speeding along, but it had diminished quite a bit by then. People were crossing that very busy highway to get away from the building. One unique thing I observed that made me proud to be a part of the organization was that so many of the uniformed folks, who had been evacuated initially, were called back and came back to help. They were running into the fire. That says something. There was a continuing danger, and reports of additional planes that might be coming. All those threats were there and those folks were running to the danger area. That really impressed me. I will always have a lasting memory of that.

Hunt: People were evacuated into the parking lot, initially?

Cox: Yes, and from what I understand they kept moving the perimeter farther out. Eventually some people ended up as far away as the other end of the 14th street bridge. Those folks were from the day care center. They evacuated them to the other side of the river. The children had to walk all that way. I don't remember how many kids, but keeping them all together was heroic also. Others were pushed up to FB 2, the Navy Annex, and were being continually pushed farther and farther out.

Hunt: At some point was it decided that the workers should be dismissed and told to go home?

Cox: I don't know that there was any way to communicate that to those folks. Many of them made the decision on their own that there was nothing they could do, they couldn't get to the building and their help wasn't needed, so they left and went home. There were people who had carpooled who wound up hitchhiking home. In my case, I carpooled and I was the driver, so the man who carpooled with me could not get a ride and had to hitchhike home.

Hunt: How long did you stay that day?

Cox: It was about 10:00 or 10:30 that night, after things started to settle down. But they were still fighting the fire. I had been up on the roof about 10:00 that night and it was still an inferno. There wasn't much that the building management group could do, they had done all they could. They had isolated building systems, gotten building systems back on line, and the folks who stayed to man the building stayed all night. There just wasn't anything I personally could do to help, so there was no point in staying.

Hunt: The next day you started early, I would assume?

Cox: Yes, I was here probably around 5:30. That was the beginning of my real response. Initially, it was things having to do with isolation of the building and helping the fire department. The next day was when my participation began where I felt I contributed. I'm not sure I contributed a lot that first night. In my position and the function of my staff, our responsibilities have to do with providing contracts and getting resources lined up. Luckily, just a few weeks before this happened I had written a contract, a design build, a new type of task order contract. There really aren't any

others like it anywhere. We had gone through a selection process and had selected four contractors so we could tap them to do anything that we needed done. So, we had those four contractors on hand that we could call immediately to handle any kind of situation we might have.

Hunt: So these weren't contracts limited to a specific function, but general, open-ended contracts?

Cox: Right. One of the first calls we made after we put the fire out on the roof was to fix damaged areas that were over office space that hadn't been damaged. We knew that if we didn't close up that roof we would have dramatic damage. It was imperative that we get in there and put some temporary covering on the roof. The incident happened on Tuesday. By Thursday we had already contacted one of the contractors and had already begun the process of repairing the roof.

On September 10, I was given an additional responsibility, as part of a reorganization, for the safety and occupational health of all of the building occupants. That had previously been handled by another division. I had just received all of these new people the day before the incident. One of the immediate things I had to take care of was how we were going to respond to the health and safety issues revolving around the contaminants that fire and other damage had caused throughout the building. We didn't really know the extent of the contaminants or what they were, and we had to immediately begin a monitoring and testing program to ascertain what we were dealing with and where the contaminants were. That was on Wednesday. That was the first thing I did.

Hunt: Was this a formal process you set up to review what had to be done?

Cox: It started out as an informal process, because I really didn't know what I was doing. I had just gotten this action and had only general ideas about health and safety. It was a real learning curve and it was a heck of a way to learn. It didn't take me long to understand what I had to do to create a monitoring and testing program that would allow us to measure the contaminants that people were going to be exposed to. We began that process on Wednesday. We began the process of lining up resources, contractors, who would be able to do things like the roof and other projects we knew we knew were going to happen. Wednesday was spent doing those kinds of things.

Hunt: Was money an issue, or were you confident that you would be able to get the funding you needed?

Cox: I knew that money was not an issue, given the situation. Obviously, I consider myself a custodian of the taxpayer, so we didn't do things foolishly. At the same time, we didn't let things stop us from accomplishing the appropriate actions. We thought things through as we went to make sure we weren't spending money foolishly.

Hunt: Were any steps taken to streamline the contracting process, to get the needed contracts in place quickly?

Cox: The new contract process I had developed and awarded just prior to this was a complete streamlining of that process. We had, literally, all of the resources we needed to react to any situation, no matter what, overnight, because of this contract and other existing contracts that we had in place.

Hunt: When you set up this new procedure, were you thinking in terms of possible emergencies, or just streamlining procedures to save cost?

Cox: We weren't thinking of emergencies, but really of a way to streamline the acquisition process so we could get more time on construction, repairs, and those kinds of things. The process of acquiring the contract with the four contractors had taken about 10 months, so it was the culmination of all of these efforts that just happened to be timely.

Hunt: It was real serendipity.

Cox: We had a contract already in place for industrial hygiene services that we had awarded six or eight months earlier. So testing and monitoring for contaminants was not an issue; we had a contractor already here on site and automatically began a 24-hour shift. We had other contractors on contract to do things like asbestos removal and lead removal. As the days went by and the FBI released areas to us and we tried to reoccupy those areas, we knew what contamination we had in what areas. We had asbestos contamination between corridors five and six. Water had damaged ceilings that contained asbestos and the plaster was on the floor and we knew we had a problem. Because we already had existing contracts for that kind of work, the Pentagon renovation office was responsible for bringing those places back so they could be occupied. They did not have the resources on site to do much of the work. I simply handed them my resources to manage. It was a unique situation. I was giving them contractors that were managed by their contractors and their design build contractors were managing my contractors and directing them to do work. It worked well because there was an attitude of everyone wanting to be helpful, not necessarily doing it for the money. They wanted to be part of the recovery. We had hundreds of people here literally overnight.

One of the other activities we were coordinating was the custodial response. We had to clean up the soot and smoke damage and all those things.

Hunt: And the water as well?

Cox: Yes. It was limited water damage in most of the building, but there was an extensive amount of soot and smoke damage. Our contracting officer, who is also on this floor, Nancy Judd, had gotten a contractor, Servicemaster, on board Tuesday night and we had begun the process of getting people in. It was not an easy thing, because everyone without a badge had to be escorted. The escort ratio, which had been one to ten before the incident, went to one to three. We had contractors who hadn't been badged who we needed, for example, to work on the roof. We had 60 people on the roof at one time, working, who didn't have badges. They hadn't gone through the checks to get them. We had to provide escorts for them. We had 250 custodial personnel from all over the country who came in to work the emergency response and they had to have escorts. We had a tremendous outpouring from the building tenants. Nancy Judd put out an E-mail asking for volunteers and had about 100 escorts over the next couple of weeks who had volunteered their time to escort, sometimes way into the night, even on Saturdays and Sundays. For example, one of the things that happened on the roof was that some volunteer uniformed service members who wanted to help were assigned to escort contractors. They got up on the roof, and they also helped take off the roof alongside the contractors. They worked side by side and came off the roof with soot all over and smiling.

Hunt: The contractors weren't upset that someone else was doing part of their job?

Cox: No. We had impressed upon them the immediacy of the response and they knew they could marshal limited resources and we could only provide escorts for a certain number. They embraced that whole thing and it was never an issue of "they are doing my job." They were working hand in hand.

Hunt: The military were officers and enlisted?

Cox: Absolutely, I saw several full colonels up on the roof. There were lieutenant colonels, all down the line, on the roof pulling burnt material off and disposing of it. We were of course careful not to put those folks in harm's way. Because of fall protection and the requirement for tie-offs, we did not put them in those kinds of situations. But where there were areas that we felt were safe for them, they jumped in and helped, it was heart-warming. They also helped a great deal with escorting the custodial services, getting them in the right places at the right times. Logistically, it was an unbelievable effort to get all these people going, doing asbestos removal, cleanup, roof removal, assessing the current contaminants. All these functions were going on simultaneously.

Hunt: And all this information was coming to you?

Cox: Yes, so my days were pretty long.

Hunt: You must have been pulled in many different directions in those days.

Cox: Yes. I usually got here by 6:00 a.m. and many times I left at 10:00 or 11:00 at night, or later, depending on the situation. The days absolutely flew by; it would be 5:00 p.m. before I even realized what time it was. I would forget to eat; I was totally absorbed in what I was doing. It wasn't just me, everyone around me, as part of the recovery effort, was doing the same thing.

Hunt: Has your routine returned to normal at this point?

Cox: For the most part, yes. It lasted about three weeks, when it was so intense. Then things started to level off and get back to normal.

Hunt: Are you involved with contracting for the rebuilding, the reconstruction of the Pentagon?

Cox: No, that's the Pentagon Renovation Office. Obviously, we are involved from a coordination perspective. Since we are the operators and the ultimate product that they provide is what we have to maintain and operate. We are intimately involved in the design and review process and in watching the quality control that contractors and PenRen are providing. Out of this office, we are responsible for commissioning new buildings with new building systems, and the acceptance of those spaces. The Pentagon Renovation Office is organized around integrated product teams. There are leaders for each of those integrated product teams. One of the teams is the commissioning acceptance integrated product team, and that leader is a part of my organization. That is unusual, because we are not part of PenRen, but we run that IP part. So the commissioning is another initiative. Since we had a third party contracted commissioning specialist we were able to marshal those resources as well to help identify the condition of the building systems after the incident. It was very important to determine what we needed to do. Those folks had been intimately involved in wedge one and understood the entire intent of the renovation. So, those efforts were managed out of this office as well.

Hunt: Looking back, do you see any lessons learned from this whole experience? You mentioned the communications and the net as an issue.

Cox: Yes, and that is probably the single most significant issue that we had. There are some auxiliary issues, but improving the means of communication has to be our focus. We actually are in the process of making efforts to do that. This office is now responsible for providing a public address system that will allow the Defense Protective Services and others to direct the building occupants during an incident in the future. It takes it all the way out to the parking lot, we will have a speaker system out there and will be able to isolate areas.

Hunt: Was this part of the renovation of wedge one, or is it being added now?

Cox: It is being added now as a result of the incident. Next Wednesday we plan on awarding that contract. It's going to one of these four contractors that we were able to have on board right away. It's a design build type of thing, they have all of the designers, architects, and engineers already on their staff. They will come in and assess. We will tell them what our requirements are, basically our ability to communicate to our tenants. Obviously, there has to be a wide variety of ways to do that. We have hearing impaired, sight impaired, isolated areas of high security. So we will be looking at a number of ways of contacting—cable television, signboards, audibles. We were able to quickly get a contractor on board to assess and recommend technical solutions to provide this, and I set a goal of having an operational system within three to four months. This is unheard of; normally we would be talking two years.

Hunt: That is a pretty ambitious goal.

Cox: Of course, another offshoot is that as we were testing and monitoring for contaminants we kept all the information and test results in a data base. We shared those with other organizations that are working the same issue with us. We were the

lead organization but we had assets from Walter Reed and from the Army's medical staff. We pooled all those resources and created a database of all this information and then plotted it on drawings so we knew where everything was. The next step in that process is to create a medical surveillance program. It's a massive project that we are just beginning to get underway, and I believe that Johns Hopkins is going to be helping us with it. It is identifying all the people in the building who could have been exposed to the different types of contaminants. Then going through a screening process to create a medical surveillance program so that we can in fact document and help those who may have been exposed. They may not even be aware that they had been exposed.

Hunt: This would be a multi-year effort, probably?

Cox: Yes, and it is a huge undertaking, when you consider not only the tenant population, but all the contractors that were on site and the emergency responders. It's a huge effort.

Hunt: Even just determining who was in the building at the time of the attack.

Cox: Not only at the time of the attack, but the contaminants extended well beyond that for weeks. We reoccupied so quickly—the roof was still on fire. We had contaminant exposure by moving into areas that had not been decontaminated. Then, we had new contaminants being introduced because of water damage to dry wall and other things. Mold began to grow, and that created a new type of contaminant. We have to monitor and understand who could have been exposed to those kind of things because some of the molds are very damaging to the respiratory system.

Hunt: Was the decision made to reoccupy parts of the building so quickly for psychological reasons, or to keep the functions going, or what?

Cox: We were told that Secretary Rumsfeld had made the decision that we would reoccupy the next day to send a strong message to the terrorists that they had not impacted us. Everybody in the organization got on board with that idea. We wanted to send the same message. But as a result of that, we may have exposed some people to some things. We really don't know that, but we want to do the responsible thing of doing the research to determine whether or not people were exposed and what that level of exposure was, so that those people can be informed. It is the right thing to do. That's another massive effort that's underway. And then we have issues of protecting against bio-chem, which we area involved in as well.

Hunt: So things really haven't gotten back to normal.

Cox: That's a relative term. The days aren't as long as they once were, but the hectic pace is still there. The sense of urgency is still there, the urgency is just for different things.

Hunt: Is there anything else I should have asked you about your experiences during this period?

Cox: The things that come to my mind and the feelings that I had at the time, I don't know if those are common questions or have any relative value. Bbut I know that at the time all this was happening it was a very emotional time for many people. Most of the people involved in the actual response and recovery didn't have time to go through the emotional decompression that others had the opportunity to go through. Ours came much later, weeks and weeks later. Everyone I know and talk to who was involved in this intensive effort unanimously felt privileged to be a part of it. There were so many people that we knew who, like me, got many phone calls from family and friends

worried about my safety. This was overwhelming. When I talked to people, they all wanted to do something. Everyone, I think, in the whole country wanted to do something. We all felt privileged because we were able to help; it was a general feeling that I know was shared by many. We were lucky we got to work through all those things by actually doing something and being part of the whole recovery. There was an amazing feeling of satisfaction that went with the whole effort. In the long hours, the things we were doing, all we really ever thought about was that we were privileged to have had the opportunity and that extended to the contractors and the long hours they were spending.

Hunt: Other people have made the comment that the normal office rivalries just disappeared during that time, and people cooperated and got along much better.

Cox: Absolutely. Many of the parochial or organizational lines disappeared about whose part was whose in the project. People were just interested in doing whatever they could to help whoever needed assistance. It didn't matter who it was, as long as they were helping. That's the only other thing I wanted to add, was that emotional feeling and sense of satisfaction and fulfillment. I think for many of them that emotional decompression or dealing with their feelings of what had happened to them was a delayed effect because they were so intent on what they were doing. It was three or four weeks later before we realized what had happened and began to deal with all of the emotions.

Hunt: I want to thank you very much for your time, it has been a very enlightening interview.