

Pentagon Attack

Interview with Kathryn Greenwell
November 9, 2001

Putney: This is an oral history interview with Kathryn Greenwell, a work authorization clerk with the Building Operations Command Center (BOCC). We are in the Pentagon, on November 9, 2001. [The interviewer is Diane T. Putney, OSD Historical Office.]

First, would you describe your key responsibilities here in the operation center?

Greenwell: I take trouble calls, do work orders, answer calls that come in from the Building and do orders for them. That's the main thing we do, monitor the Building systems.

Putney: What kinds of work orders get called into this center?

Greenwell: Structural, too hot or cold, the power goes out, there's a flood in your office, your door doesn't work, there's a hole in the wall, the ceiling tiles are falling in.

Putney: About how many calls do you get, does it vary day to day?

Greenwell: Yes, shift to shift.

Putney: Is this a 24-hour-a-day operation?

Greenwell: Yes, 7 days a week, holidays, everything, 365 days a year.

Putney: How many people are usually in this center?

Greenwell: It depends on the time of day. On a normal weekday there are two operators and a mechanic.

Putney: Prior to September 11 were you aware of efforts to safeguard the Building against some kind of attack? Did you notice, say, in the last few years, preparation for some kind of threat against the Building?

Greenwell: I have only been working here about 3 1/2 – 4 years. I know that they have done table-top exercises on threats against the Building and things like that. I know that when they design the systems, the control system and so forth that it was done in such a way that there were backups and safeguards. As far as being involved in or having specific knowledge, no.

Putney: Were you aware of any crisis action plans that might have governed certain contingencies and crises? Was there a plan that was followed on September 11?

Greenwell: If you are asking about evacuation plans in case of fire, or something like that, yes. I know that the Building Management Office, which I work for--the BOCC is underneath that office--worked with the Defense Protective Service (DPS) on the evacuation guide, because I typed part of that and some revisions of it. We have the guides up in the office; we hand them out. I know that Building Operations has coordinated on fire drills. Other than that, the level I am on is not involved.

Putney: Is there only one BOCC for the entire Pentagon?

Greenwell: As far as the Pentagon Building Management Office, yes. We have the operations and maintenance of the Pentagon.

Putney: You were here, then, on September 11?

Greenwell: Yes.

Putney: Would you describe what you were doing that morning, who else was here with you, and how you learned about the crash?

Greenwell: We always have the weather and the news up on our monitors. We noticed the plane crashing into the first World Trade Center and there was speculation about whether it was terrorists. Then the second one hit and there was no question. After the first plane, Steve Carter called Mr. Irby and asked if he was aware of it. When the second one hit, the first phone call was to our maintenance department to start closing up all of the mechanical rooms, locking down. The second call was to Mr. Irby to let him know that a second plane had hit the second tower, and we figured it was too big a coincidence to be other than terrorists and letting him know that we had started locking down. We called DPS to let them know. We were very aware of what had happened there and were already sending our people out to begin locking down the mechanical rooms in anticipation of a threatcon going up. Since this is a military installation, we know roughly what the drill is, so we were already in motion. We were watching the information unfolding on the news. I was standing here when I felt it, and it caused me to move a bit. Like a sonic boom, it was something going by causing me to sway a bit. I literally went forward and backward. We didn't know what it was.

Putney: What room number is this?

Greenwell: This is 1A336. There weren't any shaking vibrations or anything like that.

Putney: Did you hear something?

Greenwell: Yes, we heard a "thwoom," and then the fire alarm systems went berserk. Alarm after alarm after alarm went off. The first thing was, "What happened?" "What's going on?" Some people went out to see and came back. At one point I looked at Steve Carter and said, "What do we do now?" Normally, when a fire alarm goes off in here, you look at the location on the screen, the smoke detector, pull station, what it is

and respond to it, call DPS and let them know. This time hundreds of alarms went off at one time. I didn't think DPS was going to be much of a help finding that one. It was already evident. It took us a while before we knew it was a plane.

Putney: You heard the alarms from out in the hallway, the actual alarms for Wedge 1? Were you also seeing and hearing alarms in here, too?

Greenwell: Yes. We usually keep this up.

Putney: This is a desk-top monitor we are looking at.

Greenwell: This is our screen, it is generally up on the big screen. There are different views of different things. When a fire alarm comes in it shows up here, it is red and flashing. There is a number here and here. That number was going up and up and up.

Putney: Is it in sequence?

Greenwell: Climbing--1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, all the way up. It is telling you how many fire alarms. It is verification. If you have two smoke detectors, and both of them register smoke, that is considered verified that you have a fire alarm. These were fire alarms and the number was growing and it wasn't stopping. You could see it. It gives you a beep when it goes off. One of the things we do during the day is to monitor all this, and if it's flashing we can click on it immediately, and it will bring up the location. When it was going up to 60,70, 80, and onward, we could not look at any single one. We went to the fire alarm monitor to see where it was. We immediately knew it was wedge one. Steve went out to investigate, and when he came back, everyone had his own suspicions. My first thought was of a bomb. We didn't have verification. Considering we were just watching the World Trade Towers, I can't really say whether it crossed my mind to be a plane. It was something major from all indications, and in our

wedge, so the question became how far from us do we have to evacuate. We did not evacuate, we stayed here answering phones. A determination was made to stay here when Steve came back in. It wasn't something where I was in immediate danger, so I stayed. I was lucky I was able to get a phone call out within the first few minutes to my parents, and I didn't realize how important that call was. I phrased it this way, "At this point in time, I am fine, but I can't talk. Goodbye." I phrased it that way, because I knew that although I wasn't in immediate danger, I didn't know if I was in danger. I didn't know what was going on. I guess it was within the first five minutes that we saw it on the news. It may have come over the radio from one of our guys, but at about the same time we knew it was a plane. Obviously I knew that something major had happened, but not the extent, and didn't know what would blow up. I learned a lot that day. A lot of people think when there is a fire in the Building they all have to get out. But in a building this big.... When I worked at FB2, and something happened on floor one, they did not clear out the fourth floor. They don't clear everyone out at the same time, there would be too much of a stampede, and the buildings are built so that fire doesn't travel very quickly through them. They would evacuate the immediate area and then the others in logical order, so people don't get hurt. It was interesting to realize that we can have a fire in the Building and still work. We had one wedge with major damage, about one million square feet burning, engulfed in the problem, and yet the other 4 million were not. Basically, two-fifths of the Building was involved in this incident, three-fifths of the Building continued to operate and run. I learned a lot that day.

Putney: Who was here with you, Steve Carter and who else?

Greenwell: The maintenance mechanic down here was James Ash, he works for O&M. He and I were taking calls, Steve was in his office, and others came in and out. I don't remember the order of events. I know that the acting assistant building manager, Mr. Candido, was in and out. I don't remember if he was here before the plane hit. I think he had come down before. If he wasn't actually here then, he was shortly thereafter. He was brand new. He had been here a bit over a week. "Do we evacuate?" "What do we do?" It was a brand new scenario for him, too.

Putney: Do you remember who called in first, and what kind of calls you were getting?

Greenwell: No. We had two phones still working. If the line is busy there are five lines to light up. We had two people answering, Steve was here, and at least one of the contractors had come in. I think it was [?], because the first thing to do was bring up Metasys, our control system. We can look at the air handlers in the Building, temperatures in rooms, and control the air and stuff in the Building. The first thing we had to do was whatever was needed to set air barriers to help keep smoke from going around the Building.

Putney: You can do that from here?

Greenwell: We can do it from here.

Putney: Through the computer system. That is closing vents?

Greenwell: Basically it is manipulating the ventilation system to control the flow of air either into or out of a space. In this case smoke was one of the things we wanted to keep from migrating throughout the Building. If you have an air handler pulling in air where there is a fire, it will blow the smoke everywhere, so you want to shut it down. If there is a fire or smoke going one way, if an air handler is turned on another way, it will

blow the smoke the other way. It is manipulating the system to our advantage. We knew the rough area, so we were setting up air barriers to positively pressurize the Building to push the smoke backwards. I am still learning, so I respond to whatever I'm told to do. I would never begin to know what to do, that's up to others. I am a worker bee. But it got very busy very quickly, because Steve said bring up Metasys. Originally we could start to bring it up, and then we lost connectivity. Which meant that I couldn't sit at my computer and bring it up on my screen and manipulate the system. The system is still operational, but I could not manipulate it from this particular point. That meant we had to take lap-tops and go elsewhere. We got hold of different people within our Controls Group and told them what we had to control.

Putney: What is that?

Greenwell: It's part of PBMO, operations and maintenance, a group of guys that specialize in controls—the control shop, the fire alarm shop. As it happened, one of the contractors from Johnson Controls came through the door, and I asked him for help. We had incredible help from them. They are the ones installing the system so of course they understood and knew the system.

Putney: The system is called Metasys?

Greenwell: Yes, Johnson Controls are doing all the work. They were helping us to manipulate the system, also. We had people with lap-tops, only certain people have them and authorization to go into the system. We were in communication by radio or whatever. We were relaying back and forth what we wanted closed, done. Although we couldn't sit here and do it, because that is what it's set up for, the plane took out our emergency backup generator and our hubs all in one shot. What it didn't take out, we

had to take down for the safety of the firemen. Even though we were still up and running, answering phones, and other things, we had to take down power later. They took down one vault early, which knocked out some of our stuff, and we had to take down a second vault later. Most things have multiple ways to operate.

Putney: Are you talking about an electrical vault?

Greenwell: Electro-vault.

Putney: You had to turn it off because of live wires, and the firefighters are in danger?

Greenwell: Yes, where they were fighting the fire. Because we are part of the wedge. If it had happened anywhere else in the Building, it would not have affected us in that way. We would have all been in here.

Putney: So you had to take a portion of the electricity and a portion of—

Greenwell: We didn't, our electrical men from that side of the house disabled the vaults for safety. When they finally took the power down in the BOCC, we had been here about an hour and 40 minutes after the plane hit. We were still answering phone calls from around the Building, including the ones asking what was going on. "I don't hear anything in my area do I evacuate?" "I hear something in my area do I evacuate?" "I'm too hot in my room." "I'm too cold in my room" Steve go one later in the day where the power was out, and they wanted to know if someone was coming to turn it back on. Steve told them if the electrician came up they were to send him down to the center court to fight the fire. There were people who came out an hour or two later and did not know what had happened until they came out of their spaces. They were across the Building or down in the basement and did not know what had happened. We were in here answering trouble calls mostly. We were not writing down calls, but we were

taking important information—people trapped here--we got several of those calls--communications between us and the plant, those things to continue the operation of the Pentagon—that's what we were trying to do. When the power finally went out here, and that's because our electrical side of the house killed the power in one of the vaults, we went out to the center court and continued. Long before that, Steve Carter was out in center court, assuming the role he usually did as assistant building manager. That was in a major incident, he goes next to the fire chief to assist the incident commander. He directs operations and maintenance from there. If the fire chief says he wants the fans blowing in a certain direction, we do that, and if he doesn't, we do that. He has control of the incident, and Steve reacts to what he says.

Putney: You responded to more than one call about people being trapped? Did you personally take that?

Greenwell: There was more than one call that came in, yes.

Putney: Were these people themselves calling?

Greenwell: I don't remember. These were notification calls about people trapped in certain areas. I didn't stop to ask who was calling. It could have been the people themselves, or an outsider who saw someone inside. We were taking that information and relaying it over our radio so that whoever was there could help. It was very intense.

Putney: So people were struggling to get out, and you were trying to get help to them.

Greenwell: Yes. We knew there was fire going on, and we knew people were trapped in that area, and we were just trying to help. It was just notification, the process of doing that.

Putney: The phone would ring here, and someone would report it, and then you would call someone in the courtyard, the command center, and report it?

Greenwell: At the point we were getting the trapped calls, the command center was not set up outside. That only lasted for a short time. It wasn't very long that we were getting calls of people being trapped. I couldn't tell how long, or when they stopped, it all blends together. I answered the phone, did whatever I could to relay that information, passed it on. I was not only answering the phone here, but I was also listening to what was being hollered out about turning off things, and I would have to be doing that here as I was also doing that. For the first half-hour to an hour after the initial couple of minutes, I was reacting. After hearing, "The Building's on fire. It's been hit by a plane," that initial period is extremely busy just doing what is necessary to do. We were trying to do things that had to be done immediately, and that takes coordination in getting the message across. After that you are monitoring and doing stuff. We had the stuff up about the World Trade Center and also about the Pentagon, and I only remember seeing one picture on the top monitor there, the one of the Pentagon, but I don't remember any after that. I never looked.

Putney: It's interesting that on the walls where these huge screens are, they are about 8 feet by 8 feet, the same information can be replicated on the computer.

Greenwell: It comes from the computer.

Putney: Also there are TV screens. That morning you were seeing on TV what was happening in the Building.

Greenwell: Actually, I don't remember seeing it, because I was concentrating on doing my job. I can't even tell you if and when the cable went out. I have no clue. I was too busy.

Putney: At some point you had to leave, what forced you out?

Greenwell: When they pulled the power in the one vault, the final one, it took the power completely down in this area. We had no light, no computer, and no phones. If we had had phones we would have stayed here. We had nothing in here, so we went out to center court to continue, or go up to the BOC, a secondary place, we have where they are doing work orders now. It's not like this. It is a small room where we can answer phones and have a computer. Because the Building was evacuated and there were not a lot of us here, I went up there and did some things over the radio. I was back and forth between there and the PBMO main office, answering phones, and out in center court, depending on where I was needed. From the point that it went black in here until 10:30 or 11:00 at night, that's what I was doing.

Putney: Upstairs or out in the courtyard.

Greenwell: Out in the courtyard or up in PBMO answering phones, or doing other things that were needed. Everybody started asking for things, like port-a-potties, etc. Whatever was needed, because most of PBMO had been evacuated.

Putney: PBMO is?

Greenwell: Pentagon Building Management Office. We are under the Federal Facilities Division, FFD, which is under WHS. There is another RE&F PBMO.

Putney: What was the courtyard like when you went out there the first time?

Greenwell: I did not go out until after an hour and 40 minutes. I peeked out there somewhere at the half hour, 40 minute mark. There was too much going on here to look until that point. There were lots of people. Actually, maybe sooner than that I looked out. I remember people walking out. I don't remember specifics, just people and busy. I remember looking out and seeing all the medical teams out there, waiting in groups to do whatever would help. I was not out there initially when they were pulling people into center court or taking them down to the clinic. I was there at the very tail end of that, and most of the severely burned victims were on their way to another location. I remember the fire department out there, but I don't remember at what point. There were military people there who were massing for whatever they were needed to do, whether they would be called with this or with that. You had medical people. All of us were very conscious of the fact that there were incoming planes. At one point we were told there were three incoming planes near the Pentagon. They were counting five minutes, every couple of minutes. The plane flew by overhead; or you heard a sound of whatever---helicopter or plane--you wouldn't know. You had black smoke going up, and the wind shifted and the smoke went in different directions. You would hear something and you had no clue. They're counting down saying, "incoming." "Three unidentified planes heading toward the Pentagon—10 minutes, 5 minutes." They would tell everyone to go to the center of the courtyard.

Putney: You were still here when the announcement came about possible attacks from other planes, and actually had to leave then?

Greenwell: I was still in center court.

Putney: You had already been in center court?

Greenwell: Yes. I switched from center court to here and back, even though security was stopping people from coming back into the Building, because I worked in the BOCC. At one point I came back in here to get hard hats from upstairs and took some out to center court and some to Corridor 4, toward where the plane came in. Out to A&E Drive. We deliver these to the guys that were there working. It was days later that I realized I went down Corridor 4 and to the right, what I was looking at was where the plane came through on A&E Drive. I didn't really look at it at the time. When I was there they were still hoping to pull people out. People were working out there and some were ready to carry out people on stretchers. I left after delivering the hard hats. We came back here to get water, because it took a long time to get it out in center court. We had some here, and we used that first for firefighters or others. We moved back and forth getting things out of here that would be useful. We picked them, dropped them, and went on. I was able to get in through the fire door. When there was nothing left in here to help out there, I was working back and forth in the office. It was really interesting. I know that for me, the first time I saw one of the American fighter pilots fly overhead. I was a military baby, my husband is military, and I have lived on bases, and whether it's true or not, you feel secure when you see one. When I saw that, I thought, "Okay, we're okay now. We are good to go now." Before that we were everywhere. At one point, when we were outside the Building Manager's Office, and they were calling incoming planes, and the countdown got to a couple of minutes, we formed two groups. In here it was a conscious decision to have half of us in two places so the plane wouldn't get both groups at one time. If a plane comes in and wipes out this half, this half can still go on and operate. I found that very interesting. Matter of factly.

Putney: Half would be here in the BOCC?

Greenwell: The BOCC was closed. They were just saying incoming aircraft. We didn't know where it was going to hit, when it was going to hit, if it was going to hit, how big it was, how small it was, how many there were. They said there were a few unidentified. We didn't know if we were to be hit again, and if so, how much damage there would be. If everyone was in one place they all might be wiped out. If you separated people out you have a chance of people going and taking care of systems. It wasn't panicky, it was just matter of fact. I imagine it's what you would do on a ship, when assessing damage after a fire. Those are different things that I remember. The whole thing was just one big learning experience, but not one I would want to go through again. We find out what the Building can and cannot stand. I know absolutely nothing about mechanical, electrical, or such.

Putney: Did you all come together for a meeting at some point?

Greenwell: After the plane hit and our crews started assembling, they were determining if everybody was accounted for. We were getting phone calls from family. One call concerned a person I could see in the center court, so I could verify that but could not call him to the phone. "I can see him." We had people calling from the outside asking for a certain person, "He works in the Pentagon." I had no way of locating him. PBMO was doing lots of things at that point--accounting for personnel--all were accounted for--imparting that information, on radios, asking people where they were, and the central point was out in center court. I will not say that nothing was done without his say-so, because our people are well trained and know what to do. There were certain things they were worried about and they were taking care of them. They looked at live wires,

whatever the fire chief wanted. It was all being dealt with. The first point of getting together and getting information happened out there through Steve. But whether it was everyone standing in a circle or just reporting in. Immediately, whether one-on-one or in a group, we were already doing it. We might have three people there, the acting assistant building manager was there, Mr. Candido, Mike Bryant, the building manager was there, and Steve Carter was there, and numerous maintenance men. We had information going back and forth immediately. It started before the crash, when we saw the second plane hit the Trade Center. We were already in the process of taking care of business.

Putney: In late afternoon early evening, you were still doing the same things, passing on information, whatever needs to be done?

Greenwell: We were answering phones in the main office. Lots of people were calling in about the people working in the Pentagon. When this number went dead, a lot of people called the Building Manager's Office.

Putney: It's getting to be evening. When did you know it was time to take a break and go home?

Greenwell: I don't know. I carpool with Steve. Actually, I was surprised we went home at all. We left at about 10:30 or 11:00 later. That was the first time I saw anything from the outside of the Building. We were back out at 4:15 or 4:30 the next morning. Steve could not have had more than two hours sleep, because he lives two hours away from here. My commute is about 35 minutes with no traffic. We were lucky, some people from the Building Manager's Office after being evacuated had taken six hours to get

home. When we left, it was so late, we didn't have any trouble getting home. We were mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausted.

Putney: Had you eaten anything that day?

Greenwell: I don't think so. I don't think they brought anything into center court that day. They may have had some stuff around, but I don't remember at what point. If we had something, it was because someone put something in our hands.

Putney: The first time you saw it, was that because you were driving on that side of the Pentagon on your way home?

Greenwell: No, we go out toward the 14th street bridge, toward the airport, but in the parking lot we could see smoke. It was about four days later before I was around on that side at all. I saw it on TV, but that's different. Even though I was here, the access to go into areas, the badging and things went "bananas" during that time. The FBI overnight converged and it became another story. They took control of the scene, and I had no need to go to the helipad area, so I didn't.

Putney: What was September 12 like?

Greenwell: We came in very early and left very late. It was another very long day. The Building was still on fire, and they were still trying to put it out. At that point some people were still trying to come back in. It was September 13th when people really started coming back in. We were in and out of the Building Manager's Office. DPS would tell us we could not get back in because of the smoke health problems. I went home with a good headache on Tuesday, but we were monitoring carbon monoxide and air quality in the offices. The levels were not what we would want them to be, but

we were not in danger. If we had been, our organization would have pulled us out.

There was no one saying we had to do anything.

Putney: What happened in this facility? Did the smoke penetrate the BOCC?

Greenwell: Yes, we had smoke in here.

Putney: Was there water damage?

Greenwell: There was some water damage. I had been in and out of here the day of the fire. The following morning one of the first things I did was put a hard hat on my head and come in here. It was pitch black. The fire was still burning, and everyone was out in center court, I looked around in here and everything was fine. The smoke was light, not black and gooey. That afternoon I came down, and we started to have water down the side. As soon as I found it, I went to Johnson Controls people and our guys, and we pulled out some computers and other things, put them in a safe place, and covered them with plastic. It was a good thing we did, because we had water damage later. What we did made it very easy to come back up when we finally got power back into this area. We had very little damage. The air quality in here has been good, we were able to flush everything out.

Putney: The water damage came from the fire hoses?

Greenwell: I can't tell you exactly. It was coming down through the expansion joints. There was a lot of water that came out of the firefighting process, whether from the broken pipes or the firemen's hoses.

Putney: Anything you recall and would like to mention about that second or third day or through that week?

Greenwell: Mostly customer assistance, which is what PBMO is about. We were getting information from people calling in with problems. "My room has been destroyed. Where do I report to work?" We became a central point for that information and continuing day-to-day operations in the part of the Building that was not destroyed. We were trying to keep normality in that area while taking care of this area. Because the power was off here, I was displaced to the cubicle upstairs.

Putney: How long was the power out in the BOCC?

Greenwell: I don't really remember.

Putney: When did you come back in here?

Greenwell: Officially we are not up and running. The wedge has not been officially occupied. We got a clean bill of health as far as the air quality. Nobody said we had to work down here in harm's way. Right now the BOCC is upstairs. When the phone rings here, it is forwarded upstairs. It's across from the Building Manager's Office.

Putney: Were there any lessons learned from all this?

Greenwell: I'm sure there are lots of them. They are compiling lists of them.

Throughout this there have been thoughts of what would have been helpful, and they were noted to incorporate into future plans. We looked back and thought what would have helped the situation or made it easier. We will continue to evaluate things that we had to do in working with Building systems. There are lessons learned, and they are being looked at for validity. Anyone with any suggestions is welcome to come forward with them.

Putney: Do you see any good coming out of this tragedy?

Greenwell: That's a hard one. If it had to happen, it was lucky it happened where it did, in my opinion, because it was probably one of the least occupied areas of the Building. The numbers were lower than at any other time. Sadly, the renovated area got tested. If there are any lessons to be learned about the way it was built or things done or not done, they will be incorporated in all the other four wedges of the Building and in the part they will rebuild. I would say there is probably a lot of good coming out of it, if there is going to be a response of the nation both with what happened here and pulling together. Walk through the Pentagon and look at all the stuff on the walls. It's not good that it happened, but the response to it has been good. The people here in the Pentagon were incredible.

Putney: Is there anything else you would like to include in this interview?

Greenwell: No.

Putney: We will make a transcription, and I will give you a copy to change and revise. We will put a final copy into the archives for the permanent record of the attack on the Pentagon.

Greenwell: The BOCC played a major role, I played a minor one. There are a lot of people in PBMO that did a lot more than I did. We had guys who had been through fire training and assisted. Our maintenance men had to go and turn valves in smoke-filled areas. If they didn't actually do it, they attempted to, without question. It was incredible. I did a lot of communicating, but I wasn't turning valves, doing anything dangerous. The amount of people calling in to say they couldn't get into the Building to help, including our contractors, was incredible.