

## Pentagon Attack

Interview with Roy Hilliard  
November 6, 2001

Hunt: This interview was recorded at the Pentagon on November 6, 2001. [The interviewer is Richard Hunt of the OSD Historical Office.]

For the record, would you please state your name and position?

Hilliard: My name is Leroy Hilliard, and I work for WHS, RE&FD. That is the Real Estate and Facilities Directorate.

Hunt: Where were you at the time of the September 11 attack?

Hilliard: We were in our regular office space, 3rd Corridor, fifth floor, 5E320, I believe.

Hunt: What were you doing immediately before the aircraft crashed into the Building?

Hilliard: My coworkers and I were having a general conversation. We had a meeting scheduled for 10:30 that morning so we were just talking prior to the incident.

Hunt: Had you at that point known that two planes had crashed into the World Trade Center?

Hilliard: No, we had no knowledge of it.

Hunt: Could you describe what happened when the plane hit the Pentagon and what you did afterward?

Hilliard: It was somewhere around 9:30 a.m., maybe a little bit later. We were standing in our office space, conversing, when suddenly we heard a big explosion-like sound, which gave the Building a real good jar. We looked out the office window and saw a huge plume of fire going up. I said to Mr. Brady, "I think we just had our first bomb explosion." That is what we initially felt it was. Mr. Brady and I started to go around the

corner to try to determine what it was. When we got to the apex of the 3rd and 4th Corridors on the fifth floor, near the escalator area, we saw people coming down on the 4th Corridor side running and screaming, with some smoke behind them. One or two ladies were being assisted by coworkers and we directed them to the escalator and stairwell so that they could exit the Building. Soon after that we observed a very dense plume of smoke coming down the corridor. That was on the fifth floor. After all the employees seemed to have left that area we moved down to the next floor, the fourth floor, where we observed the same kind of thing. On the fourth floor, people were running and screaming and the dense smoke covered most all of the 4th Corridor side. I believe that is the area where the smoke control doors that cross the corridor had begun to close.

Hunt: They closed automatically?

Hilliard: Yes, they were closing automatically on the 4th Corridor, and John Brady was assisting another gentleman. The two of them were trying to hold that smoke-control door open as people came through. As they came through I was directing them down the stairwell and down the escalator to get out. Panic certainly had set in, and we wanted to make sure we assisted them in any way we could. We still don't know whether anyone was trapped behind those doors or not. They were pretty strong doors. It took John and the other gentleman all their strength to hold them open, and John is a huge man.

After that, we moved down to the third floor, and the same kind of thing was happening. As the smoke got closer to the escalator, it was very dense. You could not

see anything behind the smoke. There were a few people who came out from the smoke on the third floor, but we couldn't see anything behind that.

Hunt: Did you have flashlights?

Hilliard: We didn't have anything at that time, we were just trying to assist wherever we could. As John directed them out, I directed them down the stairwell and the escalator. We followed that same scenario all the way down to the first floor. The first floor seemed to have been more damaged with more injured employees. I was impressed, because there were so many military people that I did not know who were coming back into the Building with fire all around them.

Hunt: You could see the flames?

Hilliard: We could see the flames from where they were going into the Building. That was on the first floor at the A&E drive. They were going back in and pulling people out. I noticed that a lot of people were standing around, but there was no medical help, nor were there ambulance or firefighters. That was the point where I left John and attempted to come back out to get some of the firefighters and ambulance people into that area, because it was evident that people were trapped there. As I came back into the inner court, the injured were laid out on the grass and being attended by, I believe, some of the medical staff here in the Pentagon. I then went to the South Parking gate area and asked one of the DPS policemen to call for an ambulance and firefighters. They were on site, but on the outer ring, on the outside of the Building. We needed some assistance on the inside, in the inner court. He made a radio call to some dispatcher, and within several minutes we had at least one or two firefighters and I could escort them back to Corridors three and four on the first floor. About the same

time, he was able to get an ambulance into the inner court. The ambulance came in and assisted wherever it could.

Hunt: Do you know how long it took from the time you asked for the ambulance for it to get there?

Hilliard: I think it was within 5 to 10 minutes that it reached the inner court. The firefighters were on foot, they didn't have a truck. The fire trucks were on the outside of the Building. We trotted into the area.

Hunt: When did you become aware that an airplane had hit the Pentagon?

Hilliard: I was not aware until after we came out of the first floor area where the most damage was. That's when I heard someone say it had been an airplane. I imagine it was about 45 minutes after the impact that I actually found out what caused the incident. At about the same time I heard others talking about the Twin Towers. That's when we realized that we really had a terrorist situation. Prior to that I didn't know what it was. We were concerned mainly about getting as many of those people from the third floor out as we could.

Hunt: Do you have any idea of how many people you actually helped to get out?

Hilliard: I have no idea. I wasn't counting.

Hunt: Did you have time after the explosion to get any gear or anything to help you?

Hilliard: Not knowing what the incident was, or what caused the impact, my purpose was to get as many people out of the Building as we could and then get out myself. However, we started from the fifth floor and went down to the first floor, making sure that we assisted anyone in that area that we were aware of. We tried to assist them in any way we could. I had no gear. There wasn't time to go and look for gear. I think I

would have wasted valuable time just looking for that kind of thing during the time when people were running and panicking.

Hunt: So it was chaotic?

Hilliard: Yes, it was very chaotic. I guess I can be thankful that John was there, because of his size and strength. I don't think I could have budged the fire doors on the fourth and the third floors once they started to close.

Hunt: Were those fire doors also on the second and first floors?

Hilliard: On the fourth and third. I believe that on the second floor, if there was a fire door it was probably already closed. By the time we got to the second floor, that smoke, though moving very slowly, was very dense. It was all the way to the D area where the fire door was. I don't remember whether it was closed or open, or whether there was even one there on the second floor. I do know that on the fourth and third floors there were fire doors.

Hunt: Were the floors slippery, with fuel, or any other liquid?

Hilliard: Not at that time. You have to remember, as soon as we heard the impact we started to try and determine what had caused it. When we heard people screaming on the 4th Corridor side, and after we evacuated that area we went down to the next floor and did the same thing, and we kept going down that way. The first floor was a bit different from the others in that we could see that people were really trapped there. From the second floor up we observed nothing that was slippery that would cause further accidents. The employees were able to move very easily, though they were running, and they were able to move to the escalators and to the steps.

Hunt: Did you have anything to cover your face?

Hilliard: Not at that time. The little bit of smoke that I inhaled caused an almost instantaneous-type cough, just gagging, and that was just the fifth floor, so I can imagine what it was like for those people caught behind it.

Hunt: But the people coming out had no protection for their faces?

Hilliard: They had no protection. They were crying, screaming, coughing, and so forth.

Hunt: Were they walking, or were they crawling?

Hilliard: They were running. I remember two or three ladies being assisted by someone as they came out from their workspace. They had no protection whatsoever.

Hunt: Were the people in the courtyard instructed to go home at that point?

Hilliard: I doubt it. I think everything was kind of chaotic. They weren't really sure what had happened or the extent of the damage. So there were a number of people in the inner court and quite a few out in the parking lot area. I do recall that somewhere around 11:30 or so there was another indication of an incoming plane, and so employees were told to leave the property, to get to the parking lot across the highway. That was what happened, with the exception of the medical people and firefighters and so forth that I saw in the inner court. They stayed there. It was the non-injured people that were asked to leave the property because of the indication of another incoming plane.

Hunt: When you were working your way down from the fifth to the third floor, was this on the A ring?

Hilliard: Yes, as we came around the 3rd Corridor from the E ring toward the A ring. When we got to the A ring we could look over and see the 4th Corridor. We looked

around the apex area there on the 4th Corridor side when we saw the first people running and screaming.

Hunt: How long were you able to proceed with your rescue efforts? Was there a point where you had to stop?

Hilliard: No. I think there was a point from the fifth floor down where we could assume there were no more people in those corridors, since we couldn't see or hear any more coming. But when we got down to the first floor, there was major activity. Right there at the C-ring area on the first floor was where the military people were coming back into the Building. You could see the fire.

Hunt: Were firefighters going in with them?

Hilliard: There were no firefighters at that time. People were taking the portable fire extinguishers and anything they could find and coming back into the Building and bringing people out. I recall at least two or three military people going back into the Building at that location.

Hunt: They were bringing people out?

Hilliard: Yes. That was the point where I left John. Down that driveway there was a lot of water. I left to go and find some assistance.

Hunt: Did you at some point later in the day try to assist the rescue efforts on the outside of the Building?

Hilliard: No. As I recall, the outside was under the control of the command of the fire department and those people on the outside. I believe at 11:30 or 12:00 or so there was an indication of another incoming and that was when almost everyone out in the parking lot moved to other side of Route 395.

Hunt: The firefighters continued to work, even though there was the threat of another incoming?

Hilliard: Yes none of the emergency people left then, to my knowledge. They were concerned about the people in the Building.

Hunt: Did you continue these efforts through the afternoon, or did you get involved in something else?

Hilliard: We weren't really allowed back on the property after that. We got caught on the outer boundaries, and with the threat of another incoming the idea was to reduce any more injuries or deaths. I didn't get back on the property until about 6:00 that evening. At about 6:30 they allowed me to get to my vehicle, and I left.

Hunt: The next day, you came in early?

Hilliard: We were back on duty. We were trying to synchronize and organize efforts to make sure that the Building was safe for other employees that were back to work. This included those areas where there had been no damage. There was a lot of smoke and residue, and we as safety officers had to make sure that those areas that were inhabitable were safe. So we were strategizing from that standpoint in terms of air sampling, monitoring, making sure that asbestos was not getting into the ventilation system, or that the employees were not going to be exposed to something hazardous. Now, we did get another threat that morning, on Wednesday, close to 11:00 or 12:00. I think they found out later it was a FEMA plane. We got an order to vacate the property. We were all back within 30 or 35 minutes.

Hunt: It was quickly disseminated that there was a threat and the people evacuated?

Hilliard: On Wednesday?

Hunt: Yes.

Hilliard: We heard it over the two-way radio. It was one of the DPS people that said that we were to vacate the property. But they soon learned that it was friendly.

Hunt: Are there lessons that should be learned from this from your perspective as a safety officer?

Hilliard: I'm sure there are, based on recommendations that have been made. We had no way of knowing once those fire doors closed whether there was anybody left behind. We don't know whether there were any deaths from smoke inhalation at this point. If there are any lessons to be learned, I certainly think that one would certainly be to look at the tension that is required for those fire doors so that in the event someone did get caught behind them it would be just a matter of a good pull to enable them to get out, assuming they knew in which direction to go.

Hunt: Did the fire doors have handles?

Hilliard: I don't recall. Those things are supposed to be flush against the wall. Certainly that would be in the picture in terms of grasping something to pull it back. They may very well have those.

I do think that from the standpoint of lessons learned, practice makes for perfection. I think DoD in general, in the Pentagon, needs to be a bit more vigilant in terms of the scheme for preparing employees to function during an emergency. We have the fire prevention week when we practice fire drills and so on, but I think we have to be a bit more adamant during those practice sessions to ensure that every employee follows the directions set down by the management. This pertains to people coming back in the Building to pick up items when they are supposed to be evacuating. You

could see that from time to time, even after the impact of that plane, people were coming and going. Though they saw no immediate danger, they had no way of knowing whether there were going to be other explosions. I think that when there is an emergency and we must evacuate, every employee ought to go and not be allowed back in until it is cleared by an authoritative source. That is one of the most important lessons to be learned in this whole incident.

Hunt: On September 11, did a bell sound to alert people and tell them to evacuate, or did the police just go around and tell people to leave the Building?

Hilliard: On the fourth floor, and maybe the fifth, there were announcements that it was not a drill, but an emergency, and people should leave the Building. Also there was the strobe light and the alarm. That operation is zoned, as I recall. Wherever the danger is, that's where the alarm sounds. If there is no need for an alarm at the 10th Corridor, employees on that side of the Building might not be aware of what has happened. Even though they heard or felt the explosion or the jolt, they may not have heard the alarm. However, at Corridors three and four, five and six, maybe even seven and eight, but for sure at three and four and five and six, that alarm did go off.

Hunt: Is there anything you wish to add to this interview?

Hilliard: I would certainly say that the little bit I may have done is nothing compared to those brave people on the first floor that came back into the Building and helped their colleagues or others. I hope that DoD can find each one of them and thank them.

Hunt: Was there a point where the effort on the first floor had to stop because of the fire?

Hilliard: I really don't know. After I left that general area, I came out to the south parking area to find some medical and fire assistance. Once we got a firefighter back into the area where we had the most concern, I did not go back there with him. I can only assume that he called for other help.

Hunt: In the days after the attack, did your job get back to normal?

Hilliard: No. The safety office, and I am sure building management, worked from that point on for ten days straight. Many of us were working overtime. I know that on one shift I worked from 9:00 a.m. until 10:00 p.m., continuously, with all my coworkers. We were alternating. Building management had people around the clock. We never got back to what you would consider normal until last week. There were many areas sending requests to evaluate office space to check for hazards, such as asbestos or other health risks from residual material. So we were somewhat overwhelmed, trying to make sure that those areas where employees were still working were safe. Many employees were concerned about the heavy black soot, lead residue, asbestos, other organic or hydrocarbon materials that might have been floating around because of the fuel. We were working 15 to 16 hours a day for three to four weeks. We are still getting various requests about specific areas. I think as far as the general public areas, corridors, and hallways, they are pretty much verified for safeness. In the many specific office areas that we have evaluated, we have determined that they are safe to reinhabit. We still get questions. It might be just a slight odor of smoke from the drapery or carpet, but we still go in and take a look, especially if the employee has real concerns about that.

Hunt: This has been very helpful. Do you want to add anything else?

Hilliard: I'm just happy to say that if I have helped in any way, just directing someone to a stairwell, I would do it all over again. I don't think I would have any apprehension about helping anyone out of a situation like we just had, and if it means anything, I would be glad to do it over and over again. I think we were blessed in that a lot of the area had been vacated. We had just moved to our new office two weeks prior. Had we been in our previous office I wouldn't be here this morning. Originally our office was at the second floor, 5th Corridor. So I can be thankful.

Hunt: So the office you had left was vacant when the plane hit?

Hilliard: Yes. Had that area still been occupied, we really would have had much more devastation.

Hunt: Thank you very much for your thoughts, this is very valuable.