

## Pentagon Attack

Interview with John F. Irby  
November 19, 2001

Putney: This is an oral history interview with John F. Irby, Director, Federal Facilities Division, Real Estate and Facilities Directorate, Washington Headquarters Services. It is November 19, 2001, and we are in the Pentagon. [The interviewer is Diane T. Putney, OSD Historical Office.]

Mr. Irby, would you start by briefly describing your key responsibilities as head of the Federal Facilities Division?

Irby: We are responsible for the operation and maintenance of the Pentagon--repairs, alterations, those kinds of things.

Putney: Prior to September 11, over the last few months or years, had you been concerned about some kind of threat against the Building, terrorist attacks? Have you seen things done to the Building to protect against threats?

Irby: We have done a lot of things to prepare for a terrorist attack, never envisioning that it would be this large. We had concerns, and security was increased, but there is not much you can do without warning to prevent a plane from flying into the Building.

Putney: Did you anticipate something from the air or were trucks the main concern?

Irby: Trucks were certainly at the top of the list. It had never crossed my mind that someone would hijack a plane and fly it that way. We thought about an accidental situation, perhaps a commuter plane being hijacked and flown into the Building, but not an airliner. I think that surprised nearly everyone.

Putney: You had thought of a hijacking and actually a suicide flight?

Irby: Commuter planes fly right over the Building; that's the way the landing strip lines up at National Airport, for little 25-seat airplanes. You can't help but look at those things and think troubling thoughts from time to time. John Jester and I even looked at those things and thought, "What if."

Putney: Was there an emergency plan that was fully or partially implemented on September 11?

Irby: There was no proponent of an emergency plan that covered this event; it just was not foreseen. I don't think anybody anywhere went to a bookshelf and got a plan. What we had was a group of experienced and dedicated mechanics and managers who had a feel for what was happening. I say had a feel because no one person could understand what was going on or knew the full extent, but we knew there was a serious problem in that area that was causing us to lose chilled water, which was needed for cooling the communication and computer equipment in the National Military Command Center and the other command centers. We were losing domestic water and fire water, which are really from the same source, needed to fight the fire, and we had lost some power and were in danger of losing the whole Building's power from short circuits and that kind of thing from water and fire damage. We had all those things going on, and we had mechanics and managers watching those situations. A plan wasn't really necessary, because these people knew their jobs. Coordination was necessary and Steve Carter provided that from the Building Operation Control Center. They were practiced at doing their jobs under more limited emergency situations. This was one situation where, perhaps, the poor condition of the Building helped with that planning because we had had lots and lots of service interruptions from broken water lines,

broken electric lines, and those kinds of things. We had been drilled in damage control through circumstance. But even if we hadn't, these mechanics knew their jobs. They knew we had a massive leak on this line, therefore, we had to isolate that area, find out where the break was, and restore as much service as we could. So that's what they did. Steve Carter coordinated those efforts, dispatching mechanics who were ready, willing, and able to do their part to isolate those utilities. They were coordinating with the heating and refrigeration plant when it came to adding makeup water. We were losing water from the chilled water system, and so they were using fire hoses to fill those tanks. In the meantime they had to make sure that Steve's people were isolating the broken chilled water lines. We had to add several thousand gallons, and had the fire water down to about 15 pounds, which was next to nothing for the fire department, but those situations were resolved rather quickly. Then we needed to leave the electric service on as long as we could so there would be pathway lighting, but eventually we had to take that down as well in the impact area because of the fact that the transformer vault was on fire.

Putney: Were you here on September 11?

Irby: Yes, I was.

Putney: Could you describe what you were doing that morning and how you learned about the attack on this Building?

Irby: We had been down in the command center watching the World Trade Center problems and had just come back up here. I was sitting at my desk, and I heard and felt a thump. I thought it odd, because it is usually a cart going over an extension joint, and there should be two thumps, for the front and rear wheels, but there had been only

one. Shortly after that someone came to the door with the news that we had had a plane fly into the Building. We went out to center court to get a feel for what was going on. That's a place where radio and telephone reception was better than in the Building. We were monitoring conversations back and forth on our internal radio systems. I was struck with how well the mechanics were responding. They were doing all the right things in the right order. It was very gratifying to see that kind of thing happening in such a natural way. Everybody had a part to play. Some were rescuing people, and some were preserving the utilities which were helping the firefighters, and some were giving medical attention. The clinic workers organized very quickly out there in a triage situation.

Putney: You said you had been in a command center, which one was that?

Irby: Our Building Operation Control Center.

Putney: The BOCC.

Irby: Yes.

Putney: Because of the TVs they have to monitor events like that?

Irby: Yes.

Putney: When you left, did all of your staff get out safely?

Irby: Yes, they were heading to the assembly area immediately, out in the parking lot. Then they were required to move beyond that because of concern that another aircraft was coming.

Putney: How did you hear there was possibly another aircraft coming? Was there more than one announcement?

Irby: I had moved to the parking lot by that time to see the condition of the outside of the Building. It was by word of mouth as much as anything. We were never sure of the reliability. We were able to link up with Chief Jester, who had much the same sort of sketchy information, enough to raise concern but not with enough detail to give the impression that it was good, solid information. I am not sure what time it was, but by then the plane could have been down in Pennsylvania. I assume that was the one they were speaking of. There was also concern caused by a FEMA aircraft that was approaching and was mistaken for something it wasn't. There were a lot of rumors.

Putney: You were out by the impact site, by the E-ring area, looking at the hole in the Building rather early, then?

Irby: The collapse had taken place by the time I got out there. We had stayed in center court and inside the Building here to make sure that we were controlling the chilled water leaks and domestic water leaks and taking care of shutting down the vaults as appropriate. It was about the time that we had that corrected that we moved outside to see what was happening.

Putney: You are in 2B146, which is very near the exit way out into the courtyard. Was this area smoky at all?

Irby: It had gotten very smoky. In fact, that was one of the reasons we went to center court. Our staff industrial hygienist (IH) had been taking carbon monoxide readings and found them too high for our safety. Those readings bounced back and forth, sometimes it was okay to be in here and sometimes it was not.

Putney: Whom were you coordinating with? Were people above you calling?

Irby: We were able to establish contact with Paul Haselbush and Ralph Newton over in the 400 Army-Navy Drive, where they had gone.

Putney: Were you able to talk with them by cell phone or do you usually communicate by radio?

Irby: The cell phones were virtually useless, and they didn't have a radio, so I was coming back in here and calling them over the land line.

Putney: Your top priorities, then, would be the utilities. Could you explain the importance of chilled water? It's not something people give a lot of thought to, yet we receive the benefits of it all the time.

Irby: I guess you can start with the National Military Command Center. It is an essential function to coordinate a war effort. It was pretty clear we were at war, so it was essential to keep the NMCC on line. If the communication equipment goes down, they are off line. The communication equipment will go down without air conditioning. So that chilled water is necessary for the NMCC to stay on line. They have backup cooling, backup chillers, but those backup water lines were inter-connected with the plant. If the plant goes down, their chillers come on line. But they didn't have a way to acquire make-up water for their system in the quantities required, so their backup capability just wasn't there. The plant was the best way to get them back on line. We were down for about 25 minutes, for circulating chilled water to them, which wasn't long enough for their equipment to heat up. It was close, but we got the plant back on line in time. The Army command center and the Air Force command center are the same. Of course, the Navy command center was taken out by the plane.

Putney: When the plane struck, it severed major arteries carrying the chilled water?

Irby: Large piping, yes.

Putney: So turning off water gushing out would be a top priority?

Irby: That was. We could do that in our steam rooms, our main mechanical rooms that were not affected by the blast.

Putney: You heard the discussions in the courtyard about critical points, and people seemed to know the severity and what needed to be done. They were being dispatched . . .

Irby: Yes, and they were also dispatching themselves. We had mechanics whose specialty it was to attend to these things, and it was a matter of Steve Carter understanding that someone was on the way to control that valve. If he would instruct someone to do it, they were already on the way. So that was so gratifying. People knew what to do and were doing it; they needed coordination to make sure they were doing it, but it was a well orchestrated situation, I felt. No confusion, everyone was doing the right thing at the right time.

Putney: Smoke could force everyone out of the Building, you experienced it here. How do you control this? Your responsibility would be to try to control the smoke?

Irby: Steve kept the fans running in the unaffected portions of the Building to try to create a positive air pressure of good air in the other areas of the Building, and shut down fans adjacent to the impact area. But the smoke was so great, and the wind direction was such, that we were pulling in smoke along with fresh air. There was no way to avoid that, it was just something that happened. If we hadn't been doing that, we probably would have had more smoke from the fire migrating through the Building.

It was the right thing to do. I think we got less smoke that way, but we still had a massive cleanup from the smoke damage.

Putney: Did most people get out of the Building because they heard what had happened? But the Building had to continue functioning. Essential people stayed at their posts?

Irby: The Secretary of Defense stayed at his post.

Putney: And others like that, people in the command centers. Otherwise, would most people have heard from one source or another, through alarms or word of mouth to leave the Building? Is it your understanding that most people left the Building?

Irby: There was not a problem in understanding that they needed to get out. Most people left before the alarms went off, except in the immediate area. Out in the corridor you could see the terror on people's faces as they left. There was no question that it was not a drill.

Putney: Were the alarms going off triggered by smoke? Were they smoke alarms or fire alarms?

Irby: Some are smoke-activated, but it was water flow alarms primarily that went off. Kathy Greenwell and Steve Carter could probably give you some information on that. There were 70-some alarms that went off the instant of the impact. We had that kind of water flow in that area, so they knew there was definitely something going on. But the Building is so huge that in a typical situation you don't want alarms to go off over the whole Building at the same time. A normal fire might just be one or two rooms which is bad enough, but you don't want people in the ninth corridor evacuating if there is a fire on the fourth corridor; except for this time. The system wasn't designed to handle that,



and we had to dispatch fire alarm mechanics to each fire alarm system to manually trigger those systems. They did go off, but by that time most of the people had left anyway, because it was obvious to them that they needed to get out.

Putney: When you worked your way to the exterior of the Building, what was your reaction seeing that impact site?

Irby: I was stunned, and didn't want to believe it but did . . . You know people were dying . . .

Putney: Did you have anyone in your entire division injured?

Irby: Not injured to need particular care, there were some cuts and scrapes, smoke inhalation, but no one hospitalized. We were lucky there.

Putney: That was lucky because the nature of your work in this division takes your people all over the Building.

Irby: Yes. I walked through that area a week or so before. I sent a fellow over there that morning to check something out. He was turned back by the sound of the impact. If he had been five minutes faster it might have been a different story.

Putney: Were you trying to get reports from your people to account for everyone, and where would the calls come in?

Irby: It was down through each line of supervision that we were doing that. We had a report from everyone rather quickly just through supervisory ranks. There were two Alteration Work Group workers who had been working in that area and were unaccounted for until that evening, but they had gone home.

Putney: As the afternoon wore on, what kinds of things were you doing?

Irby: We assessed the damage and tried to support the FBI and fire department in what they were doing. We wanted to get as much of the Building ready for workers as possible. Not from the standpoint of productivity, but from the standpoint of the image of the country, to show the enemy that they can't shut us down. That was another thing. It wasn't really a directive to get the Building on line, it was just that we all knew we had to do it. It would take Doc Cooke and Secretary Rumsfeld to make the decision to do it, but I think we all would have bet large sums of money that that would have been their decision. They didn't actually make it until about 8:00 that night, and in the true sense of things we probably should not have been on line. The Building was very smoky the next day, and the suit I wore both days had to go straight to the cleaners for the smoke smell. But I think it was very important to get the word out that we would, indeed, be open for business the next day.

Putney: In part, they have to rely on your staff. How did you assess the damage, who is giving you the primary data?

Irby: We have mechanics who have trained with the fire department and can suit up with them and go into those areas and see how things were progressing and what the damage was likely to be in the other areas--how far the water would flood, how we could clean up the water. We suffered a lot of damage from the water and ultimately the mold that followed.

Putney: Your assessments that the smoke could be contained--and people could see that there were certain parts of the Building that were inhabitable . . .

Irby: We were flushing out the bad air with fresh air, as the smoke lessened.

Putney: I suppose the information that you gathered and your earlier assessments of how you were keeping the systems up and running went into the decision to keep the Building open, or was it a decision made no matter what condition the Building was in? Do you think you had any input into keeping the Building open?

Irby: Doc Cooke or Secretary Rumsfeld can answer better than I, because they are the ones that decided. We had a meeting about 8:00 and talked about the condition of the Building. It was with the fire department and the FBI. The FBI was taping off a part of the Building as a crime scene, so that part of the Building was not going to be available. But the Building is so large, they couldn't have it all. They had to zero in on the one area. The fire department's say in it would have been that the Building was not available for occupancy. That would have been a correct decision for them, it should not have been occupied. But from a political point of view, I think they understood and did not argue with opening the Building. So when the announcement went out on the radio that the Pentagon was opening and the parking lot was filling up, there was not much the Arlington County Fire Department could do. They had their hands full with a real fire. If we are coming in by the back door and saying the Building is open for business, it is open for business. While they knew what we were doing, I think in a normal situation the fire department would not have allowed us to occupy it. But we got no argument from them because I think they understood that it was an important international political statement to make. The Building was operable, three-fifths of the Building was a "go," and the Secretary of Defense was in his office working as usual.

Putney: Where did the 8:00 meeting occur?

Irby: It was in the Public Affairs press briefing room.

Putney: Just the key people were there from every one of the key functions?

Irby: Yes, it was an organizational meeting for the group that would head up the recovery. FEMA was there, the FBI had a part in it, and there were DoD elements of various kinds.

Putney: Any decisions made at that meeting?

Irby: Setting up the organization for the Joint Operations Center was one of the key objectives of the meeting.

Putney: Was that the one that was set up at Fort Myer?

Irby: Yes.

Putney: Did you have a representative over at Fort Myer?

Irby: Yes, we had to provide 24-hour coverage over there. Mike Bryant, Bob Candido, Bob Cox and Steve Carter.

Putney: So your Building manager's staff would have been the representatives for the Pentagon?

Irby: For the Pentagon building. The Renovation had their reps there, that kind of thing.

Putney: What kinds of functions did they do over there? Were they feeding you information?

Irby: Yes, information, coordinating, getting from here to there, can you get us access, getting an FBI escort to get in. Routine operation was no longer routine. We had to preserve the crime scene, but we also had to keep the Building operating for national security.

Putney: What kinds of things did the FBI talk about at the 8:00 meeting? The kinds of needs they had or just making announcements about their responsibility?

Irby: Setting up security for the spaces that they were going to control; arranging for us to construct barriers to make that security easier; getting MPs and DPS officers to help with that security, that kind of thing.

Putney: What time did you leave that first day?

Irby: About 10:00.

Putney: You were back on the 12th. What was it like coming back in?

Irby: It was smoky, the roof fire was spreading. They had some flare-ups at the crash site during the night. It was a different world. We had a job to do. If I had time to think maybe it would have been more difficult, but it was just our job and we did it. We were glad to be here to help.

Putney: Did you come back to this area to find it more smoky than when you left it?

Irby: I don't think it was quite as smoky; but during the day of the 11th it was worse as the wind changed.

Putney: Where did you function from on 12 September and did you have meetings with Doc Cooke or Mr. Haselbush?

Irby: Just ad hoc meetings. We were orchestrating the recovery, isolation, and cleaning of things; getting the ServiceMasters in to do the cleanup and various other kinds of things that needed to be done. Dominion Virginia Power needed to check the power equipment, and just getting as much of the Building back on line as we could. There was a significant part of the Building where the power was down, and it was an opportunity to bring an additional area back on line by working with the FBI to get

people back in various areas. It wasn't easy to work with them. The roof was still burning, really out of control, that was a big concern. It was a difficult fire because the fire was under the roof. The substrate was wood and building paper, then the slate tile nailed on top. If you are a fireman trying to put water on the fire, you are just putting it on slate. The slate worked as a roof, and the water never got to the fire. They had to be resourceful to fight that fire; it took them quite a while to become effective. There were rumors concerning Doc about various things happening, and I spent a lot of my time sorting through those rumors. One was that the fire was burning into an NMCC antenna farm on the roof. I went up there and called Doc and told him the antennas are on the 9th Corridor, and the fire was on the 6th Corridor, so it was far enough away not to be too concerned. The firefighters were up there and working like they were fighting a forest fire, digging a fire break on the roof, and it would burn no farther. There were a lot of crazy things like that going on. There was some water damage giving concern about the main telephone switch, and we were assisting in that. We were trying to free up the utilities, keep the drains free in A&E drive so that the water would not rise. It was another world here, really was.

Putney: You had enough staff here to take incoming calls and if you were away the messages piled up, so you called back? Did you work from this office?

Irby: This office and I was really out and around most of the time. We had one person here, I think, but most of them stayed home that day. Some were traumatized, and if we didn't really need them I urged them to stay home. The air was foul, and even if technically safe it caused raspy throats.

Putney: One of the responsibilities was monitoring the quality of the air?

Irby: Yes, several people were doing that. That was one of the functions of the technical staff, to coordinate the efforts of the various groups. Some volunteered, to come in and perform the testing of the air and other things as well--lead-based paint, asbestos, looking into to what degree we had contamination there.

Putney: Was that a matter of sending people out to take samples?

Irby: Right, with the proper equipment, taking samples for analysis.

Putney: So, for the next few days you did the same sort of thing, which was not your normal activity, in any way. It's trying to react.

Irby: It took a month, I think, before we got back to what we could call reasonably normal. That was more redefining normal than getting back to normal. Somebody took a bite out of our Building, it was just a different situation.

Putney: People talked about seeing mold growing up the walls. How serious a problem is mold in a situation like this?

Irby: It could cause death in certain people who are susceptible to it, not necessarily instantly, but there are those who die of asthmatic attacks, and mold spores can trigger asthma or cause you to develop asthma if you don't have it. It is mean stuff. To be sure, there are some who would never be adversely affected by it, they could eat it for lunch and it wouldn't bother them; others could be killed by it. You have to treat it with care. There are different kinds of mold, some more harmful than others, so it takes some lab analysis to determine that. In those early days we were just predicting the mold, if we couldn't get in and dry the place out. But the FBI wouldn't let us in for a week or 10 days and so it just took off. There were some warm days, and with the power out and the floor dark and wet, away it went.

Putney: What was the FBI doing during this time period?

Irby: Their first effort was to support the identification of location of bodies, photographing those areas, and determining what evidence was in those areas. For instance, we knew there were four or five hijackers, and anything on those persons they wanted to recover. What condition they were in, I'm not sure, but it was a potential for evidence to be used to identify the sponsor of the attack. Other than that, I'm sure they were very interested in dealing appropriately with the fatalities of the Building occupants. I had my hands full with other things, and I don't have first-hand information on how the FBI and the fire department split up their duties. That's one of the things I think is significant. People were organized, they had their own responsibilities, knew what they were, and took care of them. That doesn't mean we didn't butt heads once in a while, but when we did butt heads we had a place to do it and knew who was in charge. We knew the priorities, and what we tried to do was to give information. If it wouldn't cause you grief that's greater than the benefit, let's go ahead and do it. With that kind of communication we saw it through. It wasn't necessary for us to go in and find the bodies, that was not our role, but we needed to support those people in every way possible.

Putney: Whose responsibility was it to actually go in and remove . . . bodies?

Irby: That was part of what was covered at the 8:00 meeting. The Arlington County Fire Department considered it their responsibility. But they had experience from after-action at Oklahoma City, that it would be better to ask the parent organization who best should remove the bodies. In that meeting it was decided that the military should actually remove the bodies, not the fire department, so that's the way it was set up. In



Oklahoma City you saw the fire department doing some of it, that's the situation they were comfortable with. Here, I think, we made the right decision.

Putney: Does the Military District of Washington have a role to play in a terrorist attack or any major kind of emergency against the Pentagon? What is its role?

Irby: I think General Jackson could answer that question for you. They stepped up to the plate and volunteered all kinds of services, many of which were accepted and continue. There were a lot of valuable things that they did for us.

Putney: Are you going to any briefings? I know you have the joint center at Fort Myer. Are there any daily briefings that you might attend with Mr. Haselbush and maybe Mr. Bryant or higher officials?

Irby: The recovery briefing was taking place twice a day over at the Renovation office. The Renovation decided that they would perform the construction work and that was only as it should be, because they were mobilized for it, in two different ways. One contractor for wedge one, and another already awarded for wedge two, and both of those contractors were mobilized on site. That was a resource that we had naturally available. The MDW might have thought that they could play a role there, too, and may have volunteered some help, but I think we have greater capability closer to us.

Putney: When you say recovery, what would that include, with those two contractors already on site?

Irby: Mitigating the progress of the damage and getting as much of the space back into normal operation as possible by repairing, that kind of thing. We didn't realize that it had been damaged as severely as it had been at that point. We thought that the area

of structural damage was smaller than it turned out to be. The final assessment was on the basis of advice from the structural engineers working on the renovation.

Putney: As you drive by you can see the hole growing. Is that because the damage was so severe from the fire?

Irby: The heat damaged the concrete.

Putney: Is it the heat damage that was most destructive?

Irby: To the concrete, yes, but others can answer that question better than I. To the contents I think the primary damage was water and mold; to the structure I think heat caused more damage than the actual explosion itself.

Putney: That's not self-evident, it looks like it's not as bad as it will eventually come out.

Irby: On the 12th through the 15th we had a lot that we needed to learn.

Putney: Do you have any lessons learned?

Irby: There are a couple of groups doing lessons learned on this, in more ways than one.

Putney: Would that include people responsible for keeping the utilities up, not only the Renovation people?

Irby: That's where a lot of the arm wrestling was with the Renovation in preparing for these things. We had insisted on redundancy of feeds for the various utilities, and they had gone through some cost-cutting procedures and wanted to eliminate a lot of that redundancy. We had insisted on it, been adamant, and finally won. Those debates were very appropriate and productive. The same with the blast-resistant windows-- Renovation had resisted that at first, but Chief Jester and his people in the Defense Protective Service had insisted on it. Then to put in the windows there had to be all that

other stuff to properly affix the windows to, so we needed that steel framing. When they got in to put that on, they noticed that the wall was brick, which in any explosion would become missiles like huge nails in a nail bomb, and they had to put the Geotech fabric up. That was just an example where, working together, we had a much better renovation product than we would ever have had working separately--everybody taking the time to listen to one another and everybody doing what they do best. It worked.

Putney: So you see the advocacy for the blast-resistant windows from security, perhaps looking at Khobar Towers, and other places, as to what caused loss of life?

Irby: In those situations, flying glass was what killed more people than any other one thing, so they wanted to control that flying glass. This was a much more massive explosion and really an internal explosion, so we didn't have as much potential for flying glass as we might have otherwise.

Putney: Could you explain the significance of redundancy in more detail?

Irby: Redundancy is the power feeding from two different directions. We have a network system here. We were able to feed areas that otherwise would have been interrupted if we hadn't had that flexibility; the same with various utilities. We have multiple ways to feed different sections of the Building. That's what we have been able to do. It helps with a lot of different things, but disaster recovery is definitely one of them. We never envisioned a disaster of this size, but the disasters we were planning for could have done the same things, in smaller chunks. So we insisted on that degree of reliability and got it and received the benefit of it on the twelfth.

Putney: Do you see any good coming from this tragedy?

Irby: It has certainly pulled the country together. Ninety percent of the country is in favor of what we are doing. That is certainly a good feature. We are going to take care of some terrorist activities, and eventually eliminate them, and when it's over, we will all breathe a little easier. It's hard to call, but the "good" would have been if it had never happened.

Putney: Is there anything else you might want to add about your division's response to this attack?

Irby: I just want to underscore that I think our mechanics and managers performed heroically. They had the courage to do their jobs in some very unusual circumstances. They were well-trained, motivated, knowledgeable, and used their heads. There wasn't a plan to pull off the shelf when a plane flies into your building. But they knew a plane had flown into the Building, they were able to construct in their own minds what probably happened and to know that they needed to isolate this, that, and the other valve, and open this, that, and the other breaker, but wait for all the people to get out of the Building first. Don't turn off the sprinkler lines that might be protecting an exit path too soon. They performed like magicians in doing the right thing. They were great.