

Pentagon Attack

Interview with Edwin Pickens
October 23, 2001

Cameron: This is an oral history interview with Edwin Pickens of the Pentagon Renovation Program, taking place on October 23, 2001, in the OSD Historical Office. The interviewers are Drs. Alfred Goldberg and Rebecca Cameron.

First, please tell us your position and key responsibilities with the Pentagon Renovation Program.

Pickens: I am the construction project controls engineer for Wedge 1. I monitor the contractor's construction schedule and any other local OGCs (other government contractors) to make sure we have a clear flow of work, schedule-wise. I also monitor the contractor's pay request. I review it and recommend that the government pay the amount, reduce it, or add to it every month. That's my primary responsibility.

Cameron: So, you work for a DoD contractor?

Pickens: Yes, I work with the Joint Venture, which is a joint venture of DMJM and 3DI.

Goldberg: What are they?

Pickens: DMJM is Daniel, Mann, Johnson & Mendenhall and I don't know what the initials 3DI stand for. I work for DMJM.

Goldberg: You are paid by them?

Pickens: I am on their payroll.

Goldberg: What is your relationship to the Pentagon renovation people?

Pickens: The Pentagon renovation government-side put out bids for a contract. We responded and got the contract to supply engineers, construction schedulers, and project managers, construction managers, inspectors, accountants—all types.

Goldberg: Are most of the people working on the renovation program contractors?

Pickens: Maybe 50 percent are contractors.

Goldberg: Are they over at the Pentagon Renovation offices?

Pickens: Yes, there or satellites.

Goldberg: You work out of those offices?

Pickens: Yes, sir.

Cameron: So your lines of communication or authority are to someone in your company and thereafter to whom?

Pickens: Primarily, on site I answer to the IPT, independent product team leader, who is a government employee.

Goldberg: Working for PenRen?

Pickens: Yes, or WHS. PenRen is a division of WHS. I have primary responsibilities on site to him and to the construction manager, whoever it might be. It might be a government employer or joint venture, it doesn't matter. On the program side my boss is in the main office, which is called the MOC. He answers to our project manager, who answers to Lee Evey and Mike Sullivan. Sometimes we shortcut and when Mr. Evey asks us to do something we do it.

Cameron: So your office is physically located at the Pentagon?

Pickens: Yes. On the Wedge 1 side. Looking at the building from the outside on Route 27, in front of the impact site, to the right the building turns—our trailer is right there.

Cameron: Before September 11, were you aware of any planning or discussions about possible terrorist attacks?

Pickens: The only things pertinent to that would be designing and building the blast wall system in Wedge 1 and the south terrace job. Those are the only things I can relate to, and they were part of the contract.

Cameron: Were you familiar with any kind of crisis action plans? Even for construction accidents, evacuation plans, those kinds of things?

Pickens: I don't recall any. The only one I know is if there is a construction accident we call DPS to call an ambulance.

Goldberg: Where were you when the plane hit?

Pickens: In our trailer.

Goldberg: So you were pretty close to it.

Pickens: Yes, sir.

Goldberg: You didn't see it, but you heard it.

Pickens: I felt it.

Goldberg: What effect did it have on you?

Pickens: I ran.

Goldberg: Did you get knocked down?

Pickens: It was very violent in the trailer, but I didn't fall down. The pictures were falling off the wall.

Cameron: Who else was there with you?

Pickens: The trailer was almost full, business as normal. We were setting up to finish up Wedge 1 and move over to Wedge 2. We had about 35 people in the trailer.

Goldberg: That's a lot in a trailer.

Pickens: It is a big trailer.

Cameron: So you felt the shock and ran out and everyone else did the same?

Pickens: It reminded me of Arlington when they have flyovers for funerals. That's what it started out as—we thought it was a flyover, the vibration of a plane. It got louder and more violent and everything started shaking and falling off the walls, and then boom.

Cameron: Did you see immediately what had happened?

Pickens: As I came out of the trailer. We had an emergency generator to the right of the trailer so we had emergency power tied back to the new renovation. I saw it sitting at a 45-degree angle, and it was on fire. I ran toward the gate with everybody else and looked back and saw the fire and smoke. But the building was intact except for a black spot.

Goldberg: Had you known about the attack on the twin towers by then?

Pickens: I was watching it on TV and it never occurred to me. We have a portable TV and were watching when it happened. But I thought the plane that hit the Pentagon was a low fly-by from the cemetery.

Cameron: What happened next?

Pickens: We assembled in the South parking lot and took account of everybody in our trailer. Then the police backed us up toward the interstate. We realized at that point what had happened and tried to call people to tell them we were fine. A woman who had been transferred back to our main office in Rosslyn called in on a cell phone—you could call in but you couldn't call out. She took all the names and numbers of everybody in our group to call for us since no one could get out on a cell phone. Meanwhile we sent two people to the mall with lists of names and numbers to call the MOC office in North parking plus all the other people—people's wives and husbands

and so on. At that time the police said another plane was coming in, was about four minutes out, and we should evacuate the area. We got pushed over toward the Navy Annex. We stopped at a street there. That was a good spot because there were big dirt burm on both sides. Nothing further happened, but DPS secured the area and wouldn't let anyone back in. We were there until 3:00 or 4:00 p.m., then made our way to the Metro in Pentagon City and went home.

Cameron: How many people were in the group that gathered when DPS took charge?

Pickens: Everyone from the building who evacuated went to South parking. All the people in Wedge 1 and Wedge 5 were segregated in South parking and then went toward the Navy Annex or toward the mall.

Cameron: From where you were standing for those several hours, could you see the search and rescue operations?

Pickens: I could see the fire trucks and people, but I couldn't really make anything out.

Goldberg: When did you get home?

Pickens: About 6:30 p.m.

Goldberg: What did you do then?

Pickens: I called the office to see when to go back to work. They told me to go to the MOC office first thing in the morning. My truck was still in South parking, so my neighbor brought me in. I got there about 6:00 a.m. and they sent me to relieve Dave Gabel, who was at the impact site.

Goldberg: Who was he?

Pickens: He was the IPT leader from Wedge 1.

Goldberg: You were working for him?

Pickens: Yes, he was one of many.

Goldberg: How long had he been there?

Pickens: He had been there all night. I relieved him. We then made the decision to use our one cell phone as the point of contact from the impact site. Whoever had the cell phone would be in charge. That phone and that number would never leave. Dave introduced me to the head FBI man and to the fire marshal, and informed me that we had expanded contracts in place immediately. They were on site and would do anything we directed them to do. I met the people and when Evey came a few minutes later he said to get anything we needed and make it happen, so we did. We coordinated with the FBI and with the contractor about what was needed.

Goldberg: What did they need?

Pickens: They were looking at getting evidence, securing the area, getting materials in place, things like that.

Goldberg: What materials did they want?

Pickens: Reinforcements to hold the building up. This was a three-way conversation—the fire marshal and the structural engineer on site, who was under our contract. We were coordinating all the information.

Goldberg: The fire was still burning?

Pickens: Yes. We were cutting boards trying to support the building where the hole was, getting wood and steel to hold up the building. Our job was to make things happen. So by mid-day, the first day [Wednesday], the FBI told us what they needed and we figured out how to do things construction-wise. We had some roads built, dumpsters brought in, started moving people away, put tents and rest areas for the

rescue workers, materials to come inside for bracing, trying to remove some things such as the fire truck and the cars burned up at impact. We had rebuilt the fire station for the heliport and gotten a new fire truck a few weeks earlier.

Goldberg: It was next to the building?

Pickens: It was right there, immediately to the left of the impact site. We got approval from the fire marshal to move things out. We fenced off an area in North parking by the MOC, to spread out the evidence. We fenced it off and put the dumpsters in there. The FBI, ATF, and the other law enforcement agencies started going through the debris.

Goldberg: Was the ATF there to assist the FBI?

Pickens: Yes.

Cameron: They first marked the area as a crime scene, to get the evidence, before they allowed much of the cleanup operation to proceed?

Pickens: All the debris was evidence. Everything was handled as evidence until the day they left. People had to get special badges in order to get into the evidence area. Everything was handled by agents on trucks. So, if it ever goes to court, the evidence was always tied to an agent who escorted a particular team to a particular evidence pile.

Goldberg: And of course the fire and rescue people were going in all the time.

Pickens: Yes. We were coordinating everything with the FBI and the fire marshal, and then later on it was the Army, through the JOC, joint operations command.

Cameron: Were there any difficulties or disagreements between the law enforcement and the renovation and cleanup components?

Pickens: Not really. The renovation people were there to help the FBI or the marshal, whatever they needed. If they needed a road, or crane, or generator, or anything, we were there to help.

Goldberg: Most of what was needed was already there, wasn't it? Did you have equipment and supplies available?

Pickens: Not really. Our contractor and other people mobilized the day it happened and got materials and equipment there.

Goldberg: You didn't have a lot on site?

Pickens: We were actually finishing out Wedge 1 and starting Wedge 2.

Goldberg: You must have had a lot of equipment to start Wedge 2.

Pickens: Not that type of equipment, not the bulldozers and cranes.

Cameron: How long did it take for the FBI and law enforcement to finish their investigation and remove the evidence?

Pickens: We started Wednesday. Due to the rescue and recovery, it was about a week before the fire marshal turned it over to the FBI. After that it was about another week and a half that the FBI had control, and then they turned control over to the Army.

Goldberg: You were on site all of this time?

Pickens: Yes, my shift was from 6:00 a.m. until 2:00 p.m., so I usually left around 5:00 or 6:00 at night.

Goldberg: Did you get into the building during this time?

Pickens: No, I didn't have time. The point of contact for the renovation stayed on the heliport. We could get lunch and move around, but we could not get into the building but had to be accessible to everyone. We helped DPS acquire masks.

Goldberg: How many people did you have manning this site?

Pickens: It varied. One shift I worked there were two of us; on another, ten or twelve of us. It depended on the day and time of day. The DPS, or FBI, or someone, would ask for a fence, for example, or refueling heavy equipment because everything was running on generators.

Cameron: Was there a different unit working inside the building to clear it?

Pickens: There were some other people estimating the water damage area further out. But most of the people working in the blast area were fire and rescue people, and we were supplying them. One example—a Tennessee task force came in from Memphis. I had a friend on the team who told me that a subcontractor had requested masks from FEMA but that there would be a two-day wait. Our contractor had them on site immediately, and within twenty minutes that team was back inside.

Goldberg: Which contractor was this?

Pickens: One of our subcontractors called ACM. That is just one example. Or the fire and rescue wanted the blast windows out. You can't just break them out, so we had our contractor take them out in a special manner. It was out of the fire area, but taking the windows out allowed them to move around more easily.

Cameron: Were you able to salvage some things for future use?

Pickens: The new windows were either totally damaged or fine, there was no in-between. In one area we had almost no damage, but at the blast itself they were totally damaged.

Goldberg: Wedge 1 ran from corridor 2.5 to 4.5.

Pickens: That is a different marking from mine. If you are looking at the center of the building, to the right was Wedge 1 and to the left was Wedge 2.

Goldberg: We used to have an office between the second and third corridors. Are you saying the windows on the right side, Corridor 4, were OK, the structure didn't collapse there?

Pickens: No, it collapsed to the left of Corridor 4.

Goldberg: Those windows went down but didn't shatter.

Pickens: A few melted, right at the blast site. But the whole wall held for approximately twenty to thirty minutes after the initial blast.

Goldberg: That allowed a lot of people to get out.

Pickens: If you look at a picture of the building two days after the blast, you can see one of the last remaining windows on the fourth floor. We got e-mail from a man who got out from there.

Goldberg: Did you get many e-mails?

Pickens: A couple.

Goldberg: Do you still have them?

Pickens: There were forwarded to us from Mike Sullivan.

Cameron: At what point have you or will you shift from cleanup and support to rebuilding?

Pickens: After about two weeks, the FBI finished at the impact site and moved to the North lot. It was turned over to the Army, MDW. We were not allowed to go back in until they searched for any personal items, including remains, that were possible to retrieve. We were assisting DPS and the Navy Criminal Investigation Unit and the

structural engineering teams in removing safes from the blast area. When they fell out of the building, our contractor would put them on special trucks to be dealt with. We had teams for a week or two going through to get the classified material and personal belongings out.

Goldberg: These were the Army and Navy teams?

Pickens: They were OSD, I think.

Goldberg: There were mostly Army and Navy offices in there.

Pickens: On the ground level, the first couple of weeks when the safes were falling out of the blast area into the rubble pile, the contractor would pull them out and put them in another area for the trucks to pick up.

Goldberg: The military only cleared certain things out.

Pickens: Only certain classified documents. They held the area for a certain length of time before we were allowed in. During that time the area had gotten wet. We could not ventilate it so mold had grown. We are in there now pulling out all the moldy carpets, furniture, dry wall, etc. We have to wear certain types of air-filtered masks to do this work.

Goldberg: Who took over after MDW left?

Pickens: It was turned over to the building. I don't know exactly who.

Goldberg: The building manager, Real Estate and Facilities.

Pickens: We were just told to start up one morning.

Goldberg: After the military left, you went ahead and are now doing the demolition?

Pickens: We had to build barrier walls to keep people out of the blast area because some of it is structurally unstable. After we built those walls we had to let the tenants in

to pull out their personal effects or documents. That took a week or two, plus the memorial service on the 11th stopped us. We just started up a week ago Monday, basically.

Goldberg: Are you going to be working on the reconstruction, or the renovation?

Pickens: Both.

Goldberg: So you are going to work on Wedge 1 again, and reconstruct Wedge 2 and renovate it.

Pickens: We have broken it up so that our original Wedge 1 contractor is finishing up the wet work in the area of the blast between Corridors 4 and 5.

Goldberg: The half-renovated area, and half of Wedge 2?

Pickens: Between Corridor 4 and Corridor 5 our contractor will tear out from the E ring to the C ring. What we call shell work, all the concrete and outside limestone face, he will put back. At that point, from the center of the building to Corridor 5, we will give to another contractor, the Wedge 2 contractor. Wedge 1 will be rebuilt from center to Corridor 4, his original work.

Goldberg: How are the A and B rings?

Pickens: Besides the smoke and water, they're fine. We will be re-populating the B ring in a few weeks, the A ring in late December-early January.

Goldberg: A lot of people will be coming back to those two rings.

Pickens: Yes. They will take about four to five weeks to move back in. It's two rings and five floors.

Goldberg: Your work is going to be mostly rings E, D, and C, and from Corridor 4 to Wedge work on 6.5, the second Wedge.

Pickens: We classify it from Corridor 4 to Corridor 5.

Goldberg: What about work on Corridor 5 to 6?

Pickens: That is under the other contractor—Wedge 2. The Wedge 1 contractor will work to Corridor 5—just the structure, not the renovation. He will only work from Corridor 4 to the center of the building; we call it the 1.1 line.

Goldberg: What do you mean the center of the building?

Pickens: Here on the drawing is the theoretical center of the building.

Goldberg: That's 4.5.

Pickens: That's column line 1.1. Everything here goes by column line. Our contractor will work from this point to center and he will build it back furnished. He will only build structure from here to here. Then the Wedge 2 contractor will take it and build it to specification. I don't know the time scale.

Goldberg: The same people who are doing the Wedge will be doing the reconstruction, not a different contractor? It's a matter of extending the contract?

Pickens: Yes. This contract will only go to structure. Then he will give it to the contractor who is doing Wedge 2 through 5, the renovation work.

Cameron: When do you anticipate that your part will be completed?

Pickens: We will have this ready to re-populate no later than March 15, 2002.

Goldberg: That's basically from Corridors 4 to 3. Mostly smoke and water damage?

Pickens: Yes, but we have to tear it out because of mold.

Goldberg: What happened between 2 and 3, any damage?

Pickens: No damage, slight smoke damage. We are moving people in next week.

Goldberg: They were evacuated?

Pickens: We had never moved them in. We were finishing up the furniture. We will have people back in the E ring by 9/11/02.

Goldberg: And D and C?

Pickens: Everything will be finished by March '03.

Goldberg: That's not overly optimistic?

Pickens: We will make that, whatever it takes.

Goldberg: The reconstructed area?

Pickens: Where the blast was.

Goldberg: How about the other 2 rings?

Pickens: They will follow afterward.

Goldberg: E ring first; work from the outside in.

Cameron: So you will have the same people and go back to the same work you were doing before all this occurred?

Pickens: I have been doing that for a week or two, now.

Cameron: Have your personnel changed?

Pickens: We've added some people and moved some people off. We've shifted a few, but nothing major.

Cameron: Did the damage reveal weaknesses in the original plan so that you needed to make structural changes?

Pickens: I don't think so. Basically we never touched the structure in Wedge 1, anyway. All we did was take it down to bare concrete and rebuild the interior walls—new air conditioning, new wiring. . .

Goldberg: You put some structural steel in the windows.

Pickens: To me that's not too big a deal. But structurally we didn't change the integrity of the building.

Goldberg: But you strengthened the outer wall.

Pickens: The blast wall is the best thing that ever happened. We built the blast system in the south terrace, too.

Cameron: So you found that what you were doing to strengthen the building was a good plan. Nothing that you would change?

Pickens: No.

Goldberg: So Wedge 1 will be completely restored and occupied by March '03?

Pickens: It will be re-occupied or in the middle of being re-occupied.

Goldberg: How about Wedge 2?

Pickens: I do not know about that. We will have it reconstructed but I do not know the timetable.

Goldberg: What about the timetable for the doing the outer wall?

Pickens: It will be ready for people to occupy on the same date. That's what we are all shooting for.

Goldberg: How much renovation will it be possible to do while they are still building the wall?

Pickens: That wall is part of the structure. That is not a problem.

Goldberg: So you are going to have to re-build all the way through to C?

Pickens: Yes, sir.

Goldberg: So there are all those walls to put up, and the roof, ceiling, and the whole works is expected to be done by 9-11-02?

Pickens: The E ring will be ready to populate. A lot of the concrete will be done but you won't see it. The E ring, to have people in the offices, is 9-11-02.

Cameron: Does your group put the façade back up, to match the limestone?

Pickens: Within a week we had signed a contract to have forty massive blocks of limestone from the same quarry cut. We've already jumped on that.

Cameron: So, basically there are no changes to the structure and design. Are the security aspects under your purview?

Goldberg: There may be some changes introduced in the renovation.

Pickens: But you won't be able to see them. After we get finished you won't be able to know where the actual blast happened.

Goldberg: But some other security things may be built in.

Pickens: Yes, but I'm not privileged to some of those. My problem is getting it built.

Cameron: Have you had any conversations with senior Pentagon people whom you might not have had reason to talk to before?

Pickens: No. Also, we were basically isolated, with an eight-foot fence around our perimeter.

Goldberg: The directions are coming from elsewhere.

Cameron: Can you suggest anybody else who we should talk to?

Pickens: How about William Rock Viner. He works right beside me. When I was running the 6 to 2 shift he would come in from 2 until 10, and another man would take 10 to 6.

Goldberg: This was after September 11. How about before?

Pickens: We were all on one shift, Monday through Friday, and rotated on weekends, if the contractor worked.

Goldberg: In order to get the work done on schedule, does that mean working overtime?

Pickens: I'm here and we are running two 10-hour shifts per day. We are still planning. They are starting to tear out now, we've gotten a big hunk all the way to the C ring as of this morning. We have another week or so before we need to make decisions on shifts. They are looking at three 8s or two 10s.

Goldberg: Two 10s means 2 hours overtime on each shift.

Pickens: Unless you are working four 10s. A lot of contractors and construction people work four 10s a week with three days off.

Goldberg: What do you think of a 10-hour day? Is that pretty rough on construction people?

Pickens: No. Most people are used to a 10-hour day. It's when it gets to a 14-hour day that you panic.

Goldberg: Ten hours of hard work?

Pickens: Most are used to it. Most are hourly employees. Other jobs I've been on, they would rather work 10-hour days during good weather. It's like seasonal work.

Goldberg: Will it be seasonal here, too?

Pickens: I was pouring concrete in 10-degree weather in Chicago. There's always a way around things.

Goldberg: So it's continuous work. We're talking about 18 months. How many shifts you work depends on how much money becomes available, doesn't it?

Pickens: That and the price, a lot of variables.

Goldberg: How many people will be actually involved in the reconstruction and renovation?

Pickens: About 300, average, maybe 400. It depends on what you are doing. If you are tying massive amounts of steel or pouring concrete, you may have an extra 100 men. But if you are just moving forms you don't need that many people.

Goldberg: I'm talking inside as well.

Pickens: That's what I mean, it fluctuates.

Goldberg: How many people have you had work on Wedge 1, for instance?

Pickens: On any given day it fluctuates from 200 to 400.

Goldberg: That's for the Wedge work. But you are adding this reconstruction.

Pickens: It depends on the trade.

Goldberg: That's on top of the renovating team?

Pickens: It fluctuates daily. I can have 200 men today and 600 tomorrow. Dry wall takes a lot of manpower, pulling wire takes very few.

Goldberg: I guess the increased use of advanced equipment has made a big difference in the last 60 years, hasn't it?

Pickens: To a certain point.

Goldberg: Compared with 1942, when they had as many as 16,000 people working at one time.

Pickens: But you didn't have OSHA, labor unions, etc.

Goldberg: A lot of the reasons for building it the way it was originally were because of the labor unions. Workers went to the White House and demanded to be part of it.

Pickens: EPA is out there, and everybody else. They were building something that didn't have anything in it, and we are doing it with people in it.

Goldberg: That's not entirely true, because they moved in as they built the wedges.

Pickens: The security requirements are upgraded.

Goldberg: They were considerable between 1942 and 1943, once we got into the war. That's when the real construction began.

Pickens: The first week or two we used a golf cart to get into the blast area from the MOC, with four to five checkpoints. In one-half mile we went through four to five checkpoints. Security was really tight. We had to use federal agents with delivery trucks. It was taking a massive amount of time to get materials in. Trucks would be met with dogs to search it and then agents put on it to get through the roadblocks. The state police and different law enforcement would stop us.

Goldberg: They overdid it a bit, didn't they? They were locking the door after the cows got out. Did it slow up the actual rescue and recovery?

Pickens: No, when that happened we would resolve it with the FBI. We were trying to stay on top of things like that.

Cameron: But you still have tight security?

Pickens: We do, yes.

Goldberg: We were asking about other people we should talk to.

Pickens: There are people at the MOC and on the other end of telephones that did great. Ellen Suarez was one. She was at the MOC, at North parking. She got a lot of stuff for us that we needed.

Goldberg: You relieved Gabel? He had been there through the night?

Pickens: Yes.

Goldberg: Where did he come from?

Pickens: He lived closer in, I was far out.

Goldberg: He was called in?

Pickens: I don't know. I live on the other side of Manassas now. We are on site at 6:00 a.m., so it's not bad. There is John Lorretti. These were guys I was grabbing to get stuff done, or get the contractor to do, while I was coordinating with the FBI.

Goldberg: Who from Pen Ren was on the site?

Pickens: Daly, Lee Evey, Mike Sullivan, Rich Fitzharris, Jack Kelly—he's actually a consultant, like I am, Evey's right-hand man on the construction site. I thought Lee was living there for a while.