

Pentagon Attack
Interview with Dennis Smith
October 29, 2001

Putney: This is an oral history interview with Dennis Smith, maintenance inspector, in the Pentagon Building Manager's Office. It is October 29, 2001. [The interviewer is Diane T. Putney.]

Briefly, please describe your key responsibilities.

Smith: I am an inspector for the Building Manager's Office. I inspect contractors' work and also do procurement and credit card accounting. I also belong to the Pentagon Emergency Action Team (PEAT), which includes fire fighting, HAZMAT, etc.

Putney: How long have you been with this office.

Smith: About a year.

Putney: In this year have you been aware that prior to September 11 there had been some concern about terrorism?

Smith: Since I've worked in this Building, which has been eight years, I have always considered it a potential target.

Putney: What kinds of things have you seen happen in the Building to protect against terrorism? What was the nature of the terrorist threat that people were thinking about before September 11?

Smith: From my perspective, I thought that the terrorist threat would be a car bombing, and, actually, all the air traffic over the Pentagon has been on my mind. Everybody here has talked about the way the planes fly low over the center court all the time. It wouldn't take much to drop a vial out of one of those planes. There are protests here all

the time, and DPS handles them well. We also have an emergency response unit that I belong to that cleans up after the protesters—whatever they throw down, blood, paint, etc.

Putney: Were you aware of any different contingency plans or exercises and were you part of them?

Smith: I have gone through firefighting training for Arlington County. We are supposed to go to a hazardous materials class next month. So precautions for future events have been thought of and implemented.

Putney: What about fire alarms and evacuation drills for the Building, did that occur on a regular basis?

Smith: It wasn't often, but when the alarm goes off, people leave. Since I've been here I don't recall a practice run. These are busy people.

Putney: Could you talk about what you were doing on September 11, just prior to the crash, and how you heard about it?

Smith: I was inspecting work and had come back to the office to do paper work. I noticed that everyone was coming into the conference room that we are in now. There was a big screen TV that is always on to important news. I saw the planes hit the World Trade Center. Like everyone else, I felt that sadness in my heart. I went outside and was talking to some contractors. All of a sudden we heard engines, not a normal sound for the planes overhead. When I was in the Marines I was in the air wing, and I am used to the sounds of the engines. This one had the pedal to the metal and was coming in fast. We turned around and saw the upright part of the tail, and then it hit. The concussion came into the center court with a bang. There was a big, giant ball of

fire, red and black, and the heat hit us like from a barn fire. Then parts started flying out of the sky. I ran to my office quickly and told everyone to get out of the office. I went over toward where the plane had hit—went into 3/4 Corridor, into the A&E drive, and there was chaos, smoke, and fire burning. The water lines were broken and live electric wires were hanging. There were military and civilians helping people out of the Building. We rolled around in the water and then went into the Building and pulled out two Army guys from the first floor. I looked up, and on the third floor there were people beating on the windows, which were getting darker and darker as the smoke overtook them. The next thing we knew, they were gone. I noticed that the nose gear of the plane had gone all the way through the wall on the A&E drive, and a tire and part of the front stem of the plane were sitting there. Two or three times they called out that another plane was coming and told us to get out, but we just stayed where we were. We did get out of the Building onto the A&E drive, but ran back in every time they called it. My firefighting partner, Charlie McCormick, who is also my boss, was stuck out in South Parking. When they went out there they couldn't get back in. I couldn't raise him on the radio. I hooked up with Steve Carter, who takes care of the Building Operations Command Center (BOCC). My job as far as the PEAT is concerned is to get in touch with incident command, which is usually the fire department or DPS. They put up an IC command in the center court and one outside. I didn't get to see outside for a couple of days, but I knew floors were caved in. I got hold of him and another guy, and we went to the power plant, where my equipment was stored. I had turnout gear, fire department Self Contained Breathing Apparatus (SCBA). I then came back, but I still hadn't hooked up with Charlie McCormick. My Marine Corps frame of mind told me I had to go in. The

first place I went to was where the people had been beating on the windows. They were all dead from smoke asphyxiation. As I made my way through the smoke and flames, there was water all over the floor, nine or ten inches on the floor because the pipes had broken. Stairwells were like waterfalls. There were body parts floating around. I saw a foot. . . a torso. . . a lady hanging upside down from a chair. . someone's head sitting on a file cabinet totally burned; I found people sitting at a conference table totally charred. I found a man standing with his arms up in defense, leaning against the wall. Apparently, he saw it coming. He was totally burned. I went floor to floor on the collapsed 4th Corridor side and yelled to see if anybody was still alive. I didn't find anyone. I could see where the flames had shot down the hallways and the implosion had blown doors. Where the floors had collapsed I made mental notes, and when I got out, I gave the firefighters a diagram of what was burned, what was not, and where the damage was. I went to the roof. There were body parts there, also. There was a little bit of everything everywhere. There were body parts in the center court. The medical people from the Army are really good.

Putney: From the clinic, probably.

Smith: Not just the clinic, the professional medical people were right there. I honor the people who stayed. A lot of people, and you don't see this on the news, stayed in there before any help ever came, were heroes, and they don't get any kind of medals. They stayed there through the whole thing. I stayed around the clock. They had doors blown off switch rooms for the National Military Command Center (NMCC), that we had to get power into. We set up emergency generators for them. A lot was going on. I don't remember the order of everything. I do remember things like when we were shutting

systems down there were a lot of our own guys that did a remarkable job making sure that the power and gas were shut off in some areas. Mr. Carter and I went down into the tunnels to shut down the water lines. There was no power down there, it was pitch dark and smoky, but it was still hard to breathe. I had a respirator, and he went down just so far and told me to go down to the tunnel to the left and shut down the manifold and all the systems. It worked well. The maintenance men from each department all stayed, and if they hadn't done all they did, the Building would have suffered much more damage. They pressurized the systems on both sides, which pushed everything back toward the explosion site; water and gas had been shut down. One of the men, who was having knee surgery the next month, was running around with a cane. He did his job. Nobody ran off, we all stayed, about 60 of us. We all stayed. It's our house. It was my house, and somebody parked a plane in it. The fire department came up, and I finally hooked up with Charlie and from then on it was whatever they needed us to do or find. Our job was to escort and help them, because they didn't have intimate knowledge of the Building. "Where do we hook our hoses up?" It was all volunteer work for us.

Putney: With that first assessment that you did, you had already gone to the heating and refrigeration plant and gotten your gear, then how did you get back? Did you go through the center court into the Building?

Smith: I entered the Building from the center court.

Putney: You were going to report back to the incident commander, who set up the command center in the center court.

Smith: Right.

Putney: Were you by yourself?

Smith: Yes. Usually as a firefighter we are supposed to have a partner, but he couldn't get there so I just went in. I swept every room that I could.

Putney: You had your equipment on and the fire was still burning?

Smith: Yes, you can still feel it. I have air for an hour on my supply, depending on how much oxygen I used. I got about 40 minutes on that bottle before I had to come out. I kept telling myself to breathe slowly. You get a warning when the air gets low, and that's when I got out. I was sweeping every room to see if anyone was still alive. I observed the damage done and gave an assessment of where the collapsed floors were to Steve Carter and my building management. They did the initial survey showing the crash area, the burn area, and the smoke and water area. I knew the hole was big, because when I was on the fifth floor in a Navy area I was looking through a big hole in the wall. One of the doorframes was pulled up off the floor and had sunk down into the hole. I could see the ambulances and fire trucks outside. It was very hot.

Putney: Where did you enter?

Smith: Here, on the 3rd and 4th Corridor apex. When it happened, I was standing at the 1 and 2 Corridor apex, which gave me a clear view. That's where we heard the engines come up, saw the tail come up, and an instantaneous fireball. I gave this assessment when it happened.

Putney: Where did you go to give that assessment?

Smith: I reported back to Steve Carter. IC command, incident command, was here at 3rd and 4th apex in the center court. The first one on the scene, usually the fire department, is the incident commander, and everyone else comes to him—all of the fire departments, DPS, etc., and he controls efforts and keeps track of people. That works

at every fire. I came back to him, and Steve Carter was there and every one I had to contact was there. Throughout all this, I took breaks now and then. I was up in the Building Manager's Office, where they had pictures of each floor, and I told them, "This floor is damaged here to here. This is smoke. This is fire. This is smoke and water. This is collapsed." That's how they made the first initial assessment.

Putney: After that, you were helping turn off systems with Steve Carter.

Smith: Yes, and building operations helped. What they couldn't shut down automatically, they had to do manually. That's when I helped him.

Putney: What time was that?

Smith: I couldn't tell you, even the time the plane hit. I come to work and don't look at the clock. It doesn't matter to me. I just know the sequence of events.

Putney: Where is the Building Operations Command Center?

Smith: The Building Operations Command Center is here, at the smoke line. I went in with him while it was still in operation, and there must have been 300 fire alarms going off simultaneously.

Putney: Can you describe that for us, how big it is and what is in there?

Smith: It's probably about 30 by 15 feet. If you've seen movies about the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), it is like that, with all the screens up around the room. It has five screens on the wall showing different systems, and they can pull up on the screen any of the systems in the Building. The ones with alarms were all lit. All of them were going off. In the meantime they were answering the phones until they were all shut off. People were calling for this, that, and the other. Then the power was shut off because it was right next to the incident. The plane took

out the power in that section, and also the emergency backup generator that was outside, so there was no power, period. This area was renovated, but there were still old electrical lines going through it beside the new lines, which were knocked out. So there were still live wires, but not power throughout the section.

Putney: These boards indicating systems, would that be water and electric?

Smith: Everything—electrical, water—it monitors everything. They were wired into that system over there, and when the plane hit it took everything.

Putney: They were wired into the newly renovated section as well as the old section?

Smith: Right. There are more in the new sections than in the old, because it has not been fixed with new switches and such, that the newer section has. The plane managed to take out a good part of it.

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

Smith: Yes. There is an emergency BOCC on the 2nd Corridor, but it is not as sophisticated as this one.

Putney: We are going to ask Charlie if he can take us into the Building to see some of the damage.

Smith: I don't think anyone can go in right now. They are doing demolition.

Putney: When you were talking with Steve Carter, he knows that certain valves have to be shut off. Where is that occurring?

Smith: In the tunnels. In the front of all of the apexes there are tunnel doors leading to tunnels underneath the A&E drive and branch out underneath each corridor. We went down around the A&E drive to shut off the valves.

Putney: You had the respirator, and the tunnel was smoke-filled, wet, and dark?

Smith: Yes.

Putney: He was describing it to you because he couldn't get far enough to do it himself?

Smith: Yes. There is a set of red valves. You follow a pipe down and turn toward a set of valves. I grew up in the trade, so I have a sense of what to look for. I went up and down the tunnel to the manifold and found the valve. The ones I was shutting off were the sprinkler systems.

Putney: The BOCC was still operating, but at some point had to be closed down, also?

Smith: Yes, the fire department closed it down, as far as I know.

Putney: There was just too much water down there?

Smith: I don't know what the water pressure is in this Building, but I have seen just a small two-inch line break where a lot of water is pumped out. When I went in, there was a good nine or ten inches of water, the stairwells were waterfalls.

Putney: That is not necessarily water from the fire hoses, but pouring out of the huge pipes in the Building?

Smith: Right, there are thousands of pipes in this Building, and some of them were broken in that one area.

Putney: Did Mr. Bryant call you all together that afternoon, to regroup?

Smith: I am kind of a "rogue." The Building Manager's Office had someone there 24 hours a day. They did a great job with people in shifts, doing phones and responding. The building manager knows about everything that happens in this Building. If we need to find out what is going on in a certain place, I go and check it out. Every time they needed something inside that area, I went in. A couple of days later, I was told to go

home, and I got some sleep and came back. Then I began helping with the rescue efforts on the outside.

Putney: So you didn't go home that first day, you were checking things out and reporting back.

Smith: Right. The Red Cross, the Salvation Army, all the people out in the tents had blankets, pillows, and cots, and you could get some rest. We could kick back and relax for a bit and then go back to work. I did go to the rescue end of it.

Putney: Did you have any contact with the urban search and rescue people?

Smith: Yes, Tennessee, Mexico, Arlington County, all of them. I am versatile, if I want to get something done, I do it.

Putney: And you know the Building. I imagine that is a great help to those guys.

Smith: The thing is that I will do it anyway, I will help wherever I can, and if you don't want me in there, it doesn't matter, I will go in anyway. I worked my way around the FBI and everyone. I had no problem.

Putney: Did you notice that the FBI got control from the fire department at some point?

Smith: They were in control, period. They set up their incident site. The fire department was on site first, to control the fire, but the FBI contained the area. At one point or another it all went to the FBI, and they started changing badges for certain areas. I had badges to get in anywhere.

Putney: What was their mission?

Smith: It was a crime scene. They went through the center court looking for plane and body parts and tagged everything. They investigated everything. The fire department goes in first; no one can go into an IDLH unless it's extremely necessary.

Putney: When the fire was out, the FBI started investigating?

Smith: Yes.

Putney: At what point did the people go in to start getting personal belongings?

Smith: That took a while, because the FBI had to release the area. They released areas bit by bit.

Putney: They used a systematic approach to searching the whole area?

Smith: Right. They slowly gave us back sections of the Building. Even when people went back for personal effects, there was a lot of asbestos around the Building, so they had to suit up. Before that, I was going in and getting computer parts, discs, and whatever people needed from certain areas. We were innovative with that. Only firefighters could go in, so I put the suit on certain people, like a lieutenant colonel, to go in and get things out.

Putney: It was done in a systematic, orderly way. Were they removing debris? When did it start to be moved to a different site?

Smith: The FBI was collecting plane parts. We didn't get an area until it was cleared by them.

Putney: So you were there for days and finally had to go home.

Smith: Yes, they sent me home. I got the hell scared out of me on the way home. I went by way of Suitland Parkway, the north side of Andrews AFB. Planes go right across the highway. When I heard the sound of one, my heart started pounding. I pulled the car over, and people thought I was crazy.

Putney: At what point did you go around to the outside of the Building and see the big gash?

Smith: That was a few days later. It was horrific. It's like Oklahoma or New York. You feel bad for the people and can't believe it, but when you see it hit our own house it's a totally different feeling. I can now exactly feel what those people in Oklahoma or New York feel. It's totally different than what you see on the news.

Putney: It didn't match up with what you imagined. You were operating from the inner court.

Smith: I went from the A ring to the E ring. I knew it had collapsed on the E ring, because we could see the doors down and through the next floor. But I never saw the outside and didn't know how big the hole was.

Putney: You were in closer to the 4th Corridor.

Smith: Yes, A, B, C, D, and E from 5th Corridor to 4th Corridor, from the collapsed side this way to that way.

Putney: Towards the inner court and then towards 3rd Corridor.

Smith: Yes, and everything from the center court to the outside of the Building on the 4th Corridor. I was everywhere on the 4th Corridor, from A to E. I didn't concentrate so much on the A and B rings, there was just a little smoke. But once I started going down it got worse and worse. The people on the fifth could get out, coughing and gagging, but they could get out. We are taught never to give anyone our air, because if something happens to us they would have to drag us around.

Putney: Did you see any structural innovations in the renovated area that withstood the impact better than in the older part of the Building? Did the renovation do anything to save lives?

Smith: No. The thing I saw that the renovation had done, the windows, didn't help. The E ring is tougher as you go out, the windows are a different glass, but I saw people die beating on the windows trying to get out. I beat on one with a pickax, and it took ten hits to put a small hole in it when we ran a cable for the emergency generator. The people couldn't bust that window out, and they died there. The windows are great if a car bomb comes, but who expected a plane to fly into the Building? As far as I am concerned, that plane didn't do a damn thing to the Building. My personal opinion is that when it hit, we still had control of two-thirds of the Building. After they cleared certain areas, we had two-thirds of the crash site back. That only left one-third of the area where the big plane hit. I think the Building stood up really well, and I have to hand it to the bunch that built it. I have found all kinds of old beer cans and bottles from back then, I know they were drinking on the job, but they did a hell of a good job. Think about it, a 757 taking out 24 columns on the first floor and that's all that fell. That's a hell of a good, structurally sound Building.

Putney: People said they heard a couple of explosions, and you said they took out the generator. That's not the vault, the heating and cooling plant's vault, right by the heliport. There is a generator out there.

Smith: There is a vault there, the helicopter pad, and the tower. Here is a generator on a tractor-trailer, and trailers here for construction. The plane took out this trailer with the emergency generator. It didn't hurt this, but hurt the access doors, bigger than this room, and ripped one of them open like a sardine can. So it took out that generator there and the roof of the vault. I only saw the tail part, and on the A&E drive I saw a 12-foot round hole in the wall where the nose gear came out. The nose gear was lying in

the A&E drive itself. I saw another section back further up between the columns, all brick, which was blown out with enough force to knock a set of steel double doors open on the other side of the A&E drive. It came through over three-quarters of the Building and still had enough force on this side of the roadway to blow a set of double doors on the other side of the roadway. That's a hell of an impact. I couldn't tell you what it hit on the outside of the Building. I wasn't there.

Putney: But there was a generator hit out there.

Smith: Yes, I saw it. There wasn't anything left of it but a twisted mess.

Putney: They sent you home, and you came back?

Smith: I slept for a while, it was still daylight when I came back.

Putney: Then what kinds of things had to be done at the Building Manager's Office?

Smith: They were still answering phones and that kind of thing. People were calling for information about people they knew and asking about personal belongings in the Building. I had nothing to do with the phones. I was on site.

Putney: There had been a lot of safes melted; you can't reopen them.

Smith: They were hot.

Putney: I know Snake, who works in the lock shop. Did they have to get the safes out in the courtyard and find out who owned them?

Smith: I have no part of that. I saw them trying to get the safes out of there. They were heavy; I have had to move safes before.

Putney: How long did it take your office to get back to normal, and are you back even now?

Smith: I don't think it took too long. Once everything cleared out from the outside and everyone was gone, we were about 90 percent back to normal. I am still dealing with my normal stuff, but I don't think anybody will ever get back to normal here. Go down to the center court, wait for a plane to take off, and see how many people look up. Are you in the Building?

Putney: We are in Rosslyn. We were moved out of Wedge One. They weren't going to move the history office back until the whole Building is renovated. Our office was right in the area.

Smith: It's a good thing you moved out, we wouldn't be having this interview.

Putney: Walking home, when the jets flew over that morning

Smith: I saw that F-16 up there fully loaded, and I was like "YES! It's all cool now." My personal opinion is that they took the one out in Pennsylvania. There were two of them here. You could hear the command centers all over, "We have another inbound," and those two shot out of here like bats and went north. They were gone. It doesn't take any time to get to Pennsylvania in one of those. There are no tollgates. Plus, when a plane goes down, it's big, and the debris is around a mile, not six miles. That's my opinion. I think the only reason they aren't saying anything is because everybody had been called on the cell phones about doing something, and nobody is going to dispute them. So why not just think that everybody was a hero. If it was me, I would let them think that, too.

Putney: To your mind, are there lessons learned for the kind of work you do?

Smith: Just more training, have a good knowledge of the Building, and keep the training going. There is nothing more or less I would have done.

Putney: You guys are in the business of keeping the Building up and running. It's your job.

Smith: A lot of us look at it that way, it is our house, not a building, and we will be here until we retire. Personally, I like this Building. It's not like the usual office building where every floor looks the same. There's diversity here, all throughout the Building, from the lowest guy to the highest, everyone puts on his pants the same way. This is our house. Everyone wants to make sure it runs right.

Putney: How about communications gear--were you able to communicate with each other?

Smith: I think so. It could be better.

Putney: Is that just a radio?

Smith: Yes. We call from one place in the Building to another. Everything goes through operations command. If we can't get hold of somebody, someone else will relay it. It works well, but it could be better.

Putney: People relied on cell phones, and they didn't come through.

Smith: Yes, they were gone. These phones did well, we had 17,000 people trying to call home. I personally didn't call anyone for 24 hours or so. I have four kids, and I finally called them and my mom and told her to tell everyone else. My family knows if I see someone that needs help, I stop, it's just the way I am. I will go into a burning building and pull somebody out. It's my nature. One man I was talking to in the center court told me he ran over to Macys. I told him there's nothing wrong with that, everyone is different. It's human instinct to save your butt. I was talking to Charlie, and he said people went running out and turned around and ran right back in.

Putney: Do you have anything else to add to this interview?

Smith: When we were digging through the rubble, we found an admiral's flag, and I brought it into the office. Someone said, "That's FBI evidence." I took it to the Secretary of the Navy's office and gave it to him to give to the officer if he was alive, or to his family. There's really nothing else, everyone did what they could. I give a lot of credit to the people working here, the maintenance people, they did their job. If they hadn't, we would have more problems than we do.

Putney: Everyone was watching when people came back to work in the Building the next day. It was functioning as usual. It's probably the only building to take that kind of punishment and still function.

Smith: No other building in the United States or the world would be able to do that. If you think about that, anywhere this could happen, there wouldn't be people back the next day going to work. So the systems and the people operating the systems are the best.

Putney: Thank you so much.