

Pentagon Attack

Interview with Joseph M. Wassel
April 9, 2003

Cameron: This interview with Joe Wassel, the Secretary of Defense's Communications Officer, is taking place at the OSD Historical Office on April 9, 2003. The interviewers are Drs. Alfred Goldberg and Rebecca Cameron.

Mr. Wassel was just mentioning videos about the secretary.

Wassel: Yes, I have the A&E biography that covers his whole life and at the end of it they talk about September 11th. It has a very good image that probably could be turned into a still picture.

Goldberg: Much of it on September 11th?

Wassel: Only about twenty seconds of it was captured, just that one part.

Goldberg: Nothing else about the story?

Wassel: No. Early after September 11th we tried to track down the female military photographer who was out there taking stills, snapping away. We never found her, but we got close. There was a *Soldier* magazine that had some pictures from that day of the secretary walking around.

Goldberg: They didn't know who took them?

Wassel: That was overcome by events. I made a couple of phone calls, but I never followed up.

Goldberg: Is it possible to get the pictures from *Soldier* magazine?

Wassel: Absolutely. This has all bubbled up again. I somehow got in the loop on your printed copy of the secretary's interview. Larry Curry put that on my

desk. After I read it, I said, "You know, the secretary would have a tendency to gloss over some."

Goldberg: Which interview?

Wassel: You did an interview with Secretary Rumsfeld.

Cameron: On the 23 of December.

Goldberg: Well, how did it get out?

Cameron: I don't know. I guess he passed it on to his staff.

Wassel: Possibly. I don't know.

Goldberg: We didn't pass it on to anybody.

Wassel: Correspondence and Directives handles all correspondence. So if it was given to me, it would be in confidence. We knew the interviews were taking place when it came out. That's probably how I got it. It is well taken care of.

Cameron: So there are some photos in *Soldier* magazine and some CNN footage?

Wassel: Right, that was incorporated into an A&E biography of the secretary.

Goldberg: Do you remember which issue of *Soldier* magazine?

Wassel: I know one of my colleagues has the magazine, so I will go back and find out.

Cameron: Would you mind tracking some of that down and sending it along to us?

Wassel: No. Now it has a purpose. Before it seemed self-serving. Now it sounds like something I can do, getting it for historical reasons. Obviously, I would love to have them myself, so I will track down the *Soldier* magazine.

Cameron: Undoubtedly you know that one of our colleagues is in the process of writing the history of this event, for which the services history offices have conducted many interviews. Our office, not surprisingly, has been talking to OSD people. I don't know what kind of graphic materials he plans to use, but I know he would be interested in having whatever you can provide.

Wassel: Great.

Goldberg: Probably a goodly number of graphics.

Cameron: Let's go back to you telling us about September 11th, where you were the first thing in the morning, and who you were with even before the World Trade Towers were attacked.

Wassel: Not a whole lot of recollection of the day prior to the phone call. I usually get a phone call from my wife between 6:15 and 7:00 in the office. She lets me know that she is up. We hung up and I moved on about my daily business.

Goldberg: What time did you come in?

Wassel: I usually get in around 6:00 a.m.

Goldberg: What time do you leave?

Wassel: About 6:00 p.m.

Goldberg: A twelve-hour day?

Wassel: I need to fire my agent! Six to six, and about a half day on Saturdays.

Goldberg: How much of a staff do you have?

Wassel: I have two assigned OSD folks, a chief of airborne travel communications, a SecDef communicator for metro, fourteen folks who work for

the secretary that are augmented by the Air Force, and an IT staff of about seventeen folks. So it's about thirty of us.

Goldberg: An IT staff?

Wassel: Right. I didn't have that on September 11th. On September 11th it was just myself and one person and the fourteen Air Force augmentees. We just recently got the IT staff added.

Goldberg: What do the fourteen Air Force augmentees do?

Wassel: Before September 11th they only provided travel communications support for the secretary. If he were going outside the national capitol region they would go in advance, take a lot of equipment, make sure that we had good connectivity and receive us when we arrived. They keep the communications control room up and running twenty-four hours a day for whatever stop—Denver, Munich, or wherever we happen to be. The Air Force communicators go ahead and do that. After September 11th it was pretty evident that although I had fourteen people with TS-SCI clearances and a lot of communications expertise, we were outside the national capitol region. But we needed a lot of help making communications so we changed the charter. Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz was kind enough to sign off on a letter that we had written. Now I can use these fourteen augmentees anytime for anything and we have established a metro team.

Goldberg: Locally, as well?

Wassel: Exactly. So now they are focused on the residence communications, alternate site communications, limo communications—the boss ought to be

connected wherever he is, because in Bethesda he has to be as connected as he would be if he were in downtown Brussels.

Cameron: At the time then, offices like the ESC and the NMCC were not under your organization?

Wassel: That's right, they were not. Building bridges is the way to get things done so we work very closely with SecDef Cables, which is a tenant unit of ESC. (We can get into that later as far as where the secretary actually was.) I work very closely for a gentleman named Mr. Larry Curry who then works for Ray DuBois. We have an administrative chain-of-command that was to Mr. Cooke at the time, and an operational chain-of-command up to General Craddock (Admiral Giambastiani, at the time) and to the secretary. So, if I get an order to do something from the front office, I don't call my administrative chain-of-command to make sure that it's okay. I just do it. The administrative chain-of-command does play a big role on what we do on a day-to-day basis. It is just not operational.

Cameron: Were you in the same position prior to September 11th?

Wassel: I started as the military assistant for communications in 1998. That was with Secretary Cohen. As my military career needed to branch off to take me to another assignment, Secretary Cohen asked me to stay, fully understanding what it probably was going to do to my career. The position used to be civilian. When they civilianized it again, I applied for it and was lucky enough to get picked up. I was military for two years and by September 11th I had been a civilian for about four months. But I had been in the job for three years, so I was

pretty comfortable in knowing how to take care of the secretary in most circumstances.

Cameron: So you were in the same chain-of-command as you had been under Secretary Cohen?

Wassel: Exactly.

Cameron: But your office expanded its size and responsibilities more recently?

Wassel: Yes, along with the mission. Communications used to support just travel. Metro wasn't thought to be very much. Now, it is important that the secretary stay connected everywhere he goes. So communications, and as you can imagine, information technology requirements, have grown and grown and grown. We just try to keep up with it.

Goldberg: A cell phone wouldn't be enough?

Wassel: Not hardly, and of course they didn't work on 9/11 for about four and a half hours. That was one of the big issues.

Cameron: Why was that?

Wassel: Overload. The over-simplified version of this is if there are two hundred cell towers around town, for example, the transmitter of each cell tower would be able to handle about two hundred and fifty simultaneous phone calls. The companies sell enough phones to be able to handle calls based on a ratio of usage. You call someone and ask them to bring home a gallon of milk and a loaf of bread, or I'm going to be fifteen minutes late, or tell somebody what floor you are on. You might occasionally get a busy signal, but ninety-five or -six percent of the time it will work. When you change the mission of the tower and you have

200,000 people trying to use the cell phones at the same time, you blow the ratio out of the water. It jams them up immediately. People weren't getting on saying, "I'm going to be fifteen minutes late," and hanging up. Your typical cell phone conversation might last one to three minutes, but once these people got on they stayed on. So the ratio literally got blown out of the water. The cell phones were worthless. I tried three different cell phones. I grabbed a couple from people who were walking by. But the carriers share the cell towers as well—Verizon and Nextel shared, so overloads happened quickly.

Cameron: We understand that when the deputy went to Site R there were communications problems there too, and that is not a local site. Who was in charge of Site R?

Wassel: We had taken care of some things at that particular alternate site, but it had been somewhat neglected over the years. It was seen as a Cold War bomb shelter. There had been some money to upgrade its physical infrastructure, but not its telecommunications and IT infrastructure.

Goldberg: Did JCS pretty much run it?

Wassel: At the time, that is right. It was an alternate NMCC and everybody had a wedge. The Army, actually, had responsibility for it. Just recently, under PDB-431C, WHS now has responsibility for Site R. It is in front of Congress now, I believe, to consider it for an extension of the Pentagon Reservation.

Goldberg: That's all WHS needs.

Cameron: Another area of responsibility.

Wassel: Exactly. Mr. DuBois has a pretty aggressive schedule of things going on, there is no doubt, and that's one of them. I think that if people consider it not just a Cold War relic but an extension of the Pentagon, perhaps things can be done differently. I think it was mainly done for budgeting. There are five tenant organizations—staffs for Air Force, Marines, Navy, SecState, Joint Staff, OSD—maybe six or seven different entities were budgeting separately to the comptroller for upgrades. Ultimately, the upgrades for com went through one pipe. So they were getting all of these requirements in from different angles. If you have one agency that's the overall owner of the facility, you have some configuration management of the communications.

Goldberg: With WHS running it they will be able to give OSD much better quarters, because OSD's are far worse than the others.

Wassel: Yes. A lot of attention, obviously, has been given to Site R since 9/11. Tom Wedige, who works for me, went with the deputy to Site R. He did the helo movement and could see the frustrations.

Goldberg: We are really interested in what you did during the day.

Wassel: Nothing comes to mind before I got the phone call that said the first Tower had been hit. It came from Tom Wedige who was in the SecDef Cables operation. That is a call center/nerve center for the secretary. 692-7000 is the first number that everybody learns when they come into the Office of the Secretary of Defense. If you need something they resource you out or create a phone patch. I might call and say, "I need to talk to Mr. Dubois at home." I would call that number and they would put it into the database.

Goldberg: Why did they put that center in Cables?

Wassel: Cables was established in 1963 under McNamara when the president got hold of a cable, what we now call message traffic, and wanted an answer to something.

Goldberg: We've had cables before 1963. We have cables in our office from 1949 or 1950 on.

Wassel: I see. I was only aware of it from around 1963. Well, over the years Cables evolved from being a message center to a twenty-four-hour call center. Over the years it progressed from being paper and cables to electronic message traffic. I think, over the years, it just made sense to put the phone switch in Cables since they were there twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. When phone patching became possible, it became a communications nerve center as far as a call center is concerned.

I had worked in Cables before I was in this job. As a captain in the Air Force, I worked there from 1995 to 1998. When TWA 800 exploded off the coast of New York, everyone piled into Cables. When the bomb went off in the Olympics in 1996 and Secretary Perry was in Sydney, Australia, the nerve center was Cables trying to get him back.

That's where I received the phone call. Tom was down there and had seen the attack on the screen. They get the phone calls from the NMCC or the outside and pass it to the front. They would literally write up a notification and run it across to the senior leadership on the E-ring. I got a phone call that it had happened and I was on my way down to Cables. As I was coming in, Amy

Kingston, one of the executive support officers working as the senior duty officer, ran out saying that the other Tower got hit. That's when it looked like we were going to have a very bad day. I saw it on the screen as it was happening; they were replaying it. I stepped in and made another call to my wife. She was going to get a new Social Security card that day. I said, "You know, it is probably not a good day to go into a federal office building. Why don't you stay home and we'll get the card later." I was not thinking of any other implications at that stage, but obviously when the second one hit, it was not an accident out of the clear blue sky.

So we all started thinking, What's next? What are we doing? What can be done? Cables can get busy because of phone patches in all directions. Did the Army need help? Did the National Guard need to be called out? What was the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA's) role? Did FEMA need airlift to get in there? The National Airborne Operations Center can be given to FEMA to get around the globe, if they need to get somewhere. Cables can also be a command center, because it had so many communications in it. I knew Cables was going to be very busy. I went down and saw it. Cables seemed to be handling it fine.

I went down to Larry Curry's office. He had plans to go over to the Archives that day. We had a discussion and he actually said, "We could be next," meaning the Pentagon. I thought about that for a moment or two, but I didn't run to my office and start pulling things off my shelves at that stage. I wasn't thinking contingency at that point.

Goldberg: What would you have pulled off your shelves?

Wassel: If something were going to happen, we have a standard briefcase of things. We would have lots of cell phones. We would have secure cell phones. We would take iridium phones, which would work very well. When cell coverage is no good, the iridium phone hits a satellite system and it is not overused. So we would have had some connectivity with that. I would have pulled off other devices—M-4s and what-not.

Goldberg: What would you have done with them?

Wassel: I probably would have put them in one of the vehicles. The secretary has a chase vehicle and his vehicle.

Goldberg: All this is on behalf of the secretary?

Wassel: That's right. My focus is really the secretary and the deputy. It doesn't go much further than that. That allows us to have laser-focused capabilities. The personal security people are the same way. They are assigned to the secretary. Although they certainly care about everyone else's security, their responsibility is the secretary. That's how it works for me as well.

So, we had a discussion. Mr. Curry planted the seed, but I didn't run to the shelves to pull the equipment off. We went about our daily business.

Goldberg: To whom do you ordinarily report?

Wassel: In both directions. On a daily basis I report to Larry Curry in Communications and Directives, and I report to the front office, either to the military assistant, O-6 level, Colonel Bucci, or to Admiral Giambastiani. So, if I'm

going to take a day of leave, I must tell a lot of people that I'm not going to be there.

I went about my business. I went up to the Military Personnel folks. I was in the Air Force and am currently in the Reserves. I don't know if I was asking for an old performance report or what I was doing, but I was in Bob Seltzer's office on the 4th Floor, just outside the A-ring circle. I was having a conversation with a female master sergeant about my records when I felt the thud. She was lucky to have a window in her office and the window pulsed and bulged significantly. It didn't break or crack. It definitely wasn't the air conditioning coming on; it wasn't someone dropping a heavy trashcan or desk. Something had struck the building.

Goldberg: What was the number of the office?

Wassel: I'm not sure of the number. It was opposite the crash site in the A-ring.

Goldberg: Inner court.

Wassel: Right. We were mid-conversation when we felt the thud and the window did its dance. The first words out of my mouth were, "That wasn't good." I got up and didn't say good-bye. Started walking pretty briskly, but walking to the front office, because I knew the secretary was in the office since we get his daily schedule.

Goldberg: You were walking down the 9th Corridor.

Wassel: Right. I came out of that office and down the stairs just across, down to the third floor and walked down the 9th Corridor. At that time I was passed by a woman who was frantic and crying, saying, "A bomb went off in the courtyard." That confirmed that it wasn't just the air conditioner. I still wasn't running at this

point, but I thought something really is up. I think there were some other people talking above a normal conversational voice and she was definitely frantic. I came down the 9th Corridor and took a left on the E-ring and started walking towards the secretary's office, which is where I was going to go. When I got to the flag just outside his office, he was standing in the doorway. One of the Defense Protective Service (DPS) agents was there and Rick Kisling and Kevin Brown, the director and deputy of security for the secretary's office—right across the hall—were out in the hallway. The secretary started walking towards the site. I don't know if he said anything, he just started walking. It was pretty evident that we were going over to see what had happened.

Goldberg: What direction did he go?

Wassel: We were headed toward the 8th Corridor and started walking around the building on the E-ring. As we got closer, I guess we were about at the Mall Entrance area, the smoke was so thick. We had gone down a floor and tried to get closer. There was an O-5 that met us with a fire extinguisher. I know he was Army because he had on a short sleeve Army uniform. He said, "I've just come from there, you can't go any further."

Goldberg: So you were accompanying him all the way?

Wassel: That's right.

Goldberg: Did anybody say anything about that?

Wassel: No. It was just him. He came out and he didn't even talk to his staff.

Goldberg: The security people didn't go with him?

Wassel: Right. He came out of his office but Admiral Giambastiani and Colonel Bucci didn't know where he went. He literally walked out and kept going. I was with him.

Goldberg: Who else was with him?

Wassel: Kevin Brown and Rick Kisling. Rick, Kevin and I had a discussion. Rick said, "I'll go get the limo. Where do you think you're headed?" One of us said, "It looks like we're going to the crash site, or 'event.'" I don't know what the word was that we used. I think I asked the secretary early on if he knew what it was and he said that it was an airplane. So I gather from that he knew it was a plane. At that stage Rick Kisling said, "I'll get the limo and chase and I'll meet you over there. So if we get over there and we have to go somewhere, the limo will be there." Kevin said, "Right." Kevin stayed with me. So it was the secretary, Kevin, one of the Defense Protective Service agents, and me. I don't remember the name of the DPS agent. DPS has responsibility for the secretary when he is inside the building.

Goldberg: So there were four of you from that point on.

Wassel: That's right. We headed that way, went down a set of stairs and got to the 0-5, the Army colonel that had a fire extinguisher and said, "Sir, you can't go any further from here." I think he recognized the secretary. So we went outside of the building.

Goldberg: The Mall Entrance?

Wassel: We didn't get as far as the Mall Entrance. There is an exit on the side of the building near Public Affairs.

Goldberg: An emergency one.

Wassel: One that you wouldn't use normally. I believe so, only out but not in.

We took some doors out and I think we were there by the Mall. We walked past the Mall Entrance and came around the corner to the fire. The thing that struck me was there was absolutely no evidence whatsoever that there had been an airplane.

Goldberg: You were walking briskly the whole time?

Wassel: Yes. I was talking with Kevin. He was a little angry, I think, that this had happened. We put all of the pieces together and saw that we were under attack. When we came around the corner, we stopped maybe ten, fifteen, or twenty feet from the corner of the building and looked. The secretary, typically very calm, said something along the lines of, "Oh my goodness"—I don't want to quote the secretary exactly. We continued out and around. They were trying to clear the area. The process was already happening. Personal security, cops were there.

Goldberg: Was there a great deal of smoke?

Wassel: It was a beautiful day. The smoke was going inside and up. Really, all we saw was the physical flame. It was a nice clean, huge burn coming from the outside of the building, out and up. It was perfect visibility from us to the crash scene. There were little chunks of metal around. The thing I was struck with was that there was no evidence of a plane, no tail, no large wheels, and no large engine.

Goldberg: It went all the way in.

Wassel: Yes, but there were little pieces of airplane, one foot by three inches, strewn around. As we came around, we came to get a different view, a head-on view. As we were standing there, people were calling for help. There were already some stretchers there and people trying to give medical attention. There were people to our left sitting on the grass. They were starting to set some triage when we heard someone say, "Hey, I need some help." A fairly heavy woman, as it turns out, was on a stretcher and a guy couldn't carry it himself. So we got caught up in the moment of it, and went in and helped him bring the woman to the grassy area where they were setting up a triage. We helped the woman to the side.

Goldberg: Who were the people already on the scene?

Wassel: They were faceless people at the moment. After we helped her to the side, we were standing there and saw the limousine and the chase car. Rick Kisling was catching up with us so we could evacuate the secretary, if necessary. I was approached by Lincoln Liebner. We thought he was injured because he was covered with blood, but he was not injured. He has since been recognized with the Army Cross or Silver Star for his gallant efforts for pulling people from the building. He asked if we needed help with anything. I said, "I think you are doing the right thing. Cables is certainly very busy, but they need help here." The secretary then said, "Joe, you need to help set up communications here. They are going to need helicopters and ambulances, and we need communications to help them coordinate this effort." I said, "Yes sir," and I started running to the limousine to get a ride back. I was thinking—this is a direct

order, I must do something, get back into the building and start making phone calls. I was thinking about Dr. Baxter who was the flight surgeon for the secretary and runs the 11th Wing Flight Medicine Clinic on the 4th floor. I got about half way to the limo and thought better of it. In the chaos, would I be able to find this person? I thought about contingency operations and Dr. Baxter, who is a very good friend of mine. He travels with us and we knew that [he and the secretary?] exercised regularly. Interestingly enough, because planes land at National, the scenario they planned for was a plane hitting the building—not on purpose, but you still have to respond the same. So, as I got about half way to the limo I decided that there was probably already a mechanism in place to take care of this recovery effort. I'd better not leave the secretary, he was going to need to be connected and I had to remember what my job is. If necessary, gently remind him what I needed to be doing for him.

Goldberg: How were you going to keep him connected if he was there?

Wassel: Well that was just it. I went back and said, "Mr. Secretary, I know Doc Baxter, and I know that there is a mechanism." We could see the mechanism unfolding in front of us—stretchers were starting to line up, ambulances were showing up, the fire department was showing up. This was going to be taken care of by the professionals. I said, "I really need to get you on the phone with the president," and he agreed with that.

Goldberg: Why did you say that?

Wassel: I don't know. It just seemed to make sense. I've never suggested that the secretary talk to the president at any other time. It just seemed that he

probably needed to talk to the president. He agreed and said, "Where do we go?" I don't mean to say that he was confused or that he didn't know where to go or that he didn't know what to do. He wanted to know where was the best place. In other words, stay right here and do coms from the limo which we had done on many trips before, or go back in the building, or go to DISA which was up the road, or go to his house which has communications. I think what he meant when he said, "Where do we go?" was where is the phone that you want me to use to talk to the president? That's what he was asking. I knew that the limo and the cellular coms worked off the same cell towers. So the limos and the cell phones weren't going to be players. I took a gamble in that the hit seemed to be localized and we should have good communications inside the building. It is a pretty robust infrastructure; it should still be working. But that was a flip of the coin. If we got to the office and the communications were not working, then we had to come up with plan B, but that seemed to be sensible. This provokes questions. Did he make a decision to stay? How did we make the decision to go back into the building? I don't know other than he said, "Let's go" and led us all back into the building. We walked back into the Pentagon.

Goldberg: You didn't take the limo?

Wassel: We didn't take the limo. They followed us up to the Mall Entrance. He is a walker. He doesn't take elevators, he takes the stairs.

Goldberg: Under the circumstances, given the critical situation, you would expect him to move as fast as possible.

Wassel: If you are at the helicopter pad, the Mall Entrance is not that far. By the time he would have gotten into the limo and then made the turn around to go back, it probably would have been about the same.

Goldberg: But the limo could have taken him to the River Entrance.

Wassel: Right, but that did not happen. We walked briskly, went into the Mall and walked around the E-ring to his office. His staff only found out where he was after the fact. Rick and Kevin and I were with the secretary, which had seemed perfectly fine, but we were not thinking that his special assistant, his senior military assistant, his junior military assistant, and everybody else—it was just us and the secretary. So we walked back in to the secretary's office and I believe either Rick or Kevin had the key to get us into the office, because the door had been shut and the staff was out in the River Entrance area. They didn't see us come back in.

Goldberg: They had gone downstairs and out?

Wassel: Right, they were all out at the River, and we were now in the secretary's office—Rick, Kevin, the secretary, and myself.

You're right. Why did I tell him to get on the phone with the president? Why did I walk into his office? He walked in to the bathroom in his office and I walked over to his secure phone and hit the button for the White House Situation Room, and told them that I had Secretary Rumsfeld for the president. They said that they would put him through. Presumably, at this stage the president was still on the ground. Since this interview came onto the books, I called over to our red switch folks . . .

Goldberg: On the ground in Florida or Barksdale?

Wassel: I believe he must have still been in Florida, although I handed the phone to the secretary before the president got on. Presumably they spoke although I have no record stating that he did. I've thought about it since then. I called the Defense red switch folks that track every phone call in and out of the instrument on his desk, but their records only go back six months. They are electronic. I have not called the White House Sit Room to see if they log phone calls in for the president, which they may. That is something I probably should follow up on to see if they actually spoke.

Goldberg: Presumably they did.

Wassel: Right.

Goldberg: He certainly spoke with him more than once during the course of the day.

Wassel: Right. I'll find out about that. We stood in the office and his staff started trickling back in. I had gotten a phone call that there was going to be a secure video tele-conference at 11:00. I don't know what time it was then. Depending on this and that, it was 10:30 or 10:40 by the time we got back to his office. It would have been helpful to find out from the phone record about the outbound call. It was definitely before 11:00 and definitely after 10:00. Admiral Giambastiani was now in the office announcing the secure video tele-conference with the White House at 11:00. Everyone came in and then we left the front office to go back to SecDef Cables. We went into the Cables office and the secretary went into the Cables chief's office and sat. Then the vice chairman and

the special assistant, Mr. Di Rita, Admiral Giambastiani, and Colonel Bucci started piling in. I believe Torie Clark was there and I believe Mr. Haynes mentioned something about being in Cables. I don't know. I don't think I knew him at that stage or would have recognized him. Another phone call came in, I think, from Air Force One. I don't think we initiated it. The White House initiated a phone call to Secretary Rumsfeld from Air Force One. I remember this because they called me and I got on the line and was talking with his senior communicator named Chief Tedford. I said, "Chief, this is a really bad connection. But this is a strange day." They were using UHF SATCOM. You can get a lot of work done on it, but it is really a poor quality voice, a lot of crackle. Normally, I wouldn't put the secretary on such a bad connection, but obviously that day we were going to do any coms we could get. So I went in and told the secretary that the president was on Air Force One and wanted to speak with him and that the connection was bad. They have two handsets. He grabbed one. I don't know who got on the other one. Typically, it would have been Admiral Giambastiani, but I don't know that for sure. Or maybe he was on by himself. I stayed in. The call was short. That makes me think that maybe they couldn't reach the president. Maybe that's why this phone call took place, because the question was along the line of "Are you okay? Is the Pentagon still intact?" Presumably, that's why that phone call came in. I hadn't thought about it until now that perhaps they couldn't connect with the first call, maybe because he was en route to Air Force One and they couldn't get a good connection. That was one phone call that I definitely know happened.

Goldberg: He needs better communications.

Wassel: Absolutely. No doubt about it. That's a whole different discussion.

I think we started creeping towards eleven o'clock. The secure video tele-conference was going to happen downstairs in the Joint Staff area. The whole nucleus with the secretary and the vice chairman went down to the National Military Command Center (NMCC). The deputy was a part of this as well. They went into the tank, as they call it. They had their secure video tele-conference. At this stage all of the horse-holders are outside—the vice chairman's aides, the security folks, the deputy's communicator Tom Wedige, and myself. We're standing there watching this on the news while they are having their secure video tele-conference with whatever senior leadership was available. Presumably the vice president and Dr. Rice, and whoever else was on, I just don't know. The chairman was in Europe, coming back; secretary of state was in Peru and was coming back. The president didn't have secure video tele-conference on Air Force One. So presumably, he wasn't on the first one. It was probably the vice president and the secretary. That went on for quite a while, and the NMCC started filling up with some smoke. We had heard about this fourth airplane. We were just waiting for the principals to come out to let us know what we were going to do. We were now gathering the equipment off the shelves, and we were populating the limos with lots of gear—laptops, cell phones, etc.

Goldberg: Were you upstairs in Cables?

Wassel: When I was going into Cables, I saw Tom Wedige, the deputy's communicator, in the hallway and said, "You need to get gear in the limos and

meet me in Cables.” I didn’t know that we were going to be in the NMCC at that stage. He met me back in Cables. The limos were ready to go with whatever gear we could get to put in them. We were both in the NMCC waiting for the principals to come out of the secure video tele-conference.

In that period of time, we heard that a fourth plane might be coming to the Pentagon to finish the job. We all looked at each other, sort of chuckled, and then we picked up the phones to try to get an outside line to call home—the “I love you” phone calls. I did eventually reach my wife at the house who said, “Is the world coming to an end; is this the end?” I said, “No, everything is going to be fine, just a couple of airplanes. We’re fine, I’m fine.” So we got past those phone calls. Each one made one, and we stood there to wait for the principals to come out.

We got word pretty quickly that the deputy was going to depart for Site R. That was a big deal. Rick and Kevin were somehow in the loop on getting the helicopter to the River Entrance. Tom Wedige and I shook hands and they went out the side door and the other principals stayed in the tank for a while. They eventually came out of the tank and saw that we were handing out masks because the smoke was getting too much.

After this secure video tele-conference we went back to Cables. The secretary went from meeting to meeting at that stage. My personal interaction with him was minimal. The admiral pretty much took over and told me what I needed to do after that. My role was not to be at the secretary’s side. I’m there to make sure that the admiral has everything he needs to support the secretary.

So at this stage I'm no longer at the side of the secretary. There is no need for me to be at the side of the secretary. We were following the small inner circle. We went back upstairs because of the smoke. The admiral looked at me and said, "If the smoke continues to get bad we'll need to go." He had a small staff meeting and said, "Joe, I need you to let me know where we need to go for the best communications." The president on Air Force One was headed to Barksdale and then went up to STRATCOM for the secure-video tele-conferences. I guess he did his first one from Barksdale. While they were preparing for that, I was trying to find alternate sites.

Then at 1300 for the secure video tele-conference I found myself . . . Upstairs there was only a small room that everybody was piling into—the vice chairman, the secretary. I was getting ready to pull the door shut and go stand in the hallway but the admiral asked me to stay because there was a secure phone there. In case something happened—not that I was trained on how to use the VTC but I could do some connectivity. I stayed in and that's when it came up that the president was there. So I was there for the first secure video tele-conference. Not everything that was said was classified. I don't know that this is the right forum to repeat what the president was saying and how the conversation went.

Goldberg: If it's classified, it's all right.

Wassel: The president first had a couple of comments. George Tenet took the lead asking, "Was this terrorism and was it bin Laden?" We had the president,

Tenet, Armitage for SecState, the Departments of Commerce and Transportation, and we were there.

Goldberg: Armitage?

Wassel: Deputy Armitage was sitting in for Powell from the state department. At the White House Presidential Emergency Operations Center, you had Ms. Rice, the vice president, Mineta from Transportation, and Commerce. The president, after he found out that it was terrorism, made a statement saying, "We've got to be back to work tomorrow; can we be back to work tomorrow?" He started going through the pecking order. "Will the banks be open tomorrow?" There was quite a bit of discussion about the keeper of the federal note that allows the Federal Reserve Banks to be open or not. There was a big discussion whether the banks would be open and commerce would continue. They talked about the airplanes getting down and that they would stay down for a period of time. It would take days, perhaps, before they could let planes fly again. "Secretary Rumsfeld, can you still survive in the Pentagon? Is everything going okay?" "Yes, sir, we'll be open for business tomorrow. We're open for business now." I think that is about all I can garner from about a thirty minute VTC. Some of it was way above my head. There was so much going on. Actually, to be honest with you, I was trying not to listen, because it is not my role to be in senior policy matters. I'm supposed to make sure if the phone rings or if they need to make a phone call, I can do that. I tried literally to be a fly on the wall, but keep my ears shut. This is the first time I have repeated this other than to make points to other staff to let them know how important it was—certainly in classified close-hold.

Goldberg: It is difficult to keep your ears shut under such circumstances.

Wassel: Right. Certainly, I hear a lot of things but I don't repeat a lot of things.

This is a first for that. When that secure video tele-conference broke up, Senators Warner and Levin came over. We did several trips out to the site to see how the battle was going against the fire and the injured.

Goldberg: Who is we?

Wassel: That's a good point. Again, I was out in the hall doing what I'm supposed to be doing and to be ready when the secretary said he was going. Now I was the communicator so I needed to be with him everywhere he went. Normally, if he walked somewhere I wouldn't go, but in this case I went with him, so security went, and Admiral Giambastiani and I went.

Goldberg: Went where?

Wassel: Out to the crash site.

Goldberg: This was about what time?

Wassel: You guys would know better when the senators arrived.

Goldberg: In the afternoon.

Wassel: The SVTC happened at 1:00 p.m. and the one I sat in on probably lasted about thirty to forty minutes.

Cameron: The press conference was around 4:00 p.m, as I recall.

Wassel: We had been out to the crash site before that, and I think he went out again after the press conference.

Goldberg: He went out twice more?

Wassel: I believe we did go out. In the days after, the fire was certainly a lot closer to some critical communications infrastructure than anyone realized and that fire went on for a couple of days. Just when we thought we had it out, it would start up again and it kept getting closer to the 5-E Switch, which is a \$10 million phone switch. If it goes down, pretty much everything, all unclassified communications, would go down inside the Pentagon. Cell phones don't work that great in the Pentagon, so it was very important for us to save this switch. Fire then was not the issue, water became the issue. So we started covering it with paper and plastic to protect it. After the press conference and back and forth to the crash site, about 5:30 or so it seemed safe enough to go back up. There were no planes flying. We weren't in fear of that at all. So the secretary went back to his office at about 5:30 or 6:00. He went back to his desk. The staff repopulated and I sat where his civilian confidential assistant, Arlene Nestel, usually would sit. I started answering the phones. Then the deputy came back at about 7:30 or 8:00 p.m., and Tom Wedige sat at the desk next to me until the secretary went over to the White House at about 10:30 or 11:00 p.m. We waited for him to come back and we had some pizza at this stage. He came back and we all went home and came back the next morning. We left about 11:30 p.m. and got home at about midnight and back on the road the next morning and to the Pentagon at about 4:20. Believe it or not, we were doing business. The phones were working, the faxes were going, the e-mail was working, and people were slowly trickling back into the Pentagon, getting through the new increased security.

Goldberg: Can you remember anything else that happened during the afternoon? The senators came over. You weren't present at the meeting with them?

Wassel: No, sir.

Goldberg: You weren't present at any other sessions that took place?

Wassel: No, sir.

Goldberg: Any other communications that occurred?

Wassel: No. Just the first call we attempted to make, and I walked out. Then the one from the president I know he did make. And in the tank downstairs, I was not present. I was in on the 1300.

Goldberg: The 1300 was also down in the NMCC?

Wassel: No, it was upstairs in the executive center. At this stage his staff was at the appropriate distance as a support staff. I don't see the secretary on a daily basis. Only when we're traveling does he see me a lot. I do see him from time to time. He lets me know through his snowflake traffic when he wants things done, or if he has questions. Other than that I see him in the hallways like anyone else would. Everything was appropriate after the second secure video tele-conference—the distance was there. My office is on the B-ring, but for the next couple of days I sat up on the E-ring with Rick Kisling and Kevin Brown in the security office, which has close proximity to the secretary's office. I ran coms up there for the first couple of days.

I wanted you to know what I know about the first minutes and the first hours. I told this story to Mr. Curry a couple of times and I think he is the one who called the office to set up the interview this morning.

Goldberg: This is very good. You have filled in a lot of gaps. It will be much more possible now to get a coherent picture of what happened in sequence during the course of the day, and probably much more accurately than before. You have been a great help.

Wassel: I was talking to Tom before I came over and I talked to my wife about coming over to see you. I said I was going to remember words and facial expressions and exactly what was happening because I was focused on the secretary and he was not focused on himself. He was focused outwardly on the recovery and what was happening, and then it turned national and global for him. It would make sense that he would gloss over some of the things about what he said, what his body positioning was, or what phone calls he made and what office he happened to be in at the time. Obviously I would know, because as soon as he went somewhere different, I would look around to make sure we had everything we needed for him from a com perspective, if necessary. So, what he was doing is very vivid in my memory.

Goldberg: We have interviewed a lot of people now and we can get a composite that is far greater than any one person could possibly give. By getting ten people telling us what happened during the course of the day with the secretary, and for how long, etc., the total is more than the sum of the parts. You have come up

with a good composite, which we wouldn't have had otherwise. This has been very helpful. A very good interview.

Wassel: Great. I am glad to tell. I think there was a booth in the Pentagon where you could go and sit and tell your 9/11 story. I didn't really have the time to do that. Sometimes it is embarrassing to tell people what I do for a living, because by the mere title of what I do it sounds braggadocio. So I don't really talk about it too much. But I thought this was helpful to the record, and helpful to let you know that the secretary, from the moment it happened, was business. He went out, saw what was going on, and started formulating what was going to happen next. That was pretty impressive and certainly his calmness kept everyone else calm. I have seen him in a couple of other situations before and after that. I guess unflappable is the word that I would use for him. Absolutely. Not thinking about his personal safety, thinking about others in the beginning and thinking about how to protect the country after that, was very impressive.

Goldberg: If you could let us have anything else—pictures, videos, and any notes that you have would be very helpful to us. We'll send you a copy of this transcript and ask you to make any changes, to make sure it's your considered recollection.

Wassel: Great. If you don't know the Mrs. Rumsfeld story—I don't know it very well—but it would be a good book. She was at Bolling Air Force Base and popped into a house. Security was trying to find her; she doesn't have her own security. The secretary was very concerned about where Mrs. Rumsfeld was during all of this. Occasionally he would be in the middle of something and would

ask, "Have we found Joyce yet?" Security found her at Bolling Air Force Base in a general's home sitting with the general's wife watching it all unfold on television. It turns out she was being well taken care of at Bolling. How amazing it must have been for the general's wife to be home, and the secretary of defense's wife is at your door and comes in to watch television with you and have a safe place to stay until she could be brought back. The traffic was a mess so she had to stay there for a while. They are an amazing couple. It is a pleasure working for them. Thanks for this opportunity. I appreciate it.