

## Pentagon Attack

Interview with Alvina Woodson  
8 November 2001

Putney: This oral history interview with Alvina Woodson, Contract Specialist, is taking place in the Navy Annex, Federal Office Building Two on November 8, 2001. [The interviewer is Diane T. Putney, OSD Historical Office.]

The first question is rather general. Would you just briefly describe what it is that you do as a contract specialist?

Woodson: Our contracting office is responsible for the up keep, maintenance, alternations, and renovation of the Pentagon and the Navy Annex. What I previously did was a lot of services contracting. Our main customer was called the Support Services Division. They were responsible for everything within an office—the office furniture, equipment, carpeting. We also had special commissions, and their duties involved consulting services contracts and, of course, any agencies that needed to organize conferences.

Putney: Did you change your job after September 11th?

Woodson: Not so much as I changed my job, I am just on a different contracting team within the Real Estate and Facilities Contracts Division. We have four contracting teams that just serve a particular customer and their needs. Again, my previous contracting team did a lot of services for the facilities in the Pentagon. Now I am here on the construction side of the house, but I am still a part of the same division.

Putney: When did that change occur?

Woodson: The decision occurred the last part of August. My official change was to take affect on the 4th of October. However, as a result of September 11th, the office that we were in was adjacent to the crash site, so we were displaced. It was kind of hectic for a while because we were sharing space with other co-workers and other team members, and that got kind of crazy. I was moved to the Butler building with the director, and when the project came up about the memorial services scheduled for October 11th, my director chose that task for me.

Putney. That's why I'm here, too, in part, to learn about that. Before September 11th were you aware of efforts by Pentagon officials to think ahead about a possible terrorist attack through anything that came through your office that you were involved with? Could you see that there was some effort to try to improve security in the Building? Just as an employee, did you notice that things were, over the weeks or months, tightened up in any way?

Woodson: I did notice the security tightening up. I didn't hear anything specific. Also I really didn't pay much attention to that either. We deal with a lot of acronyms that I will just know by acronym and not know the full title. There was a commission called PCCIP (Presidential Commission on Critical Infrastructure Protection). It was about critical protection, and we had serviced that commission for a while. They have since then disbanded. That is when I kind of noticed things, and this has been about two years ago since they have been disbanded if not quite two years. Again, it was just what I have noticed from every day, but not really hearing anything specific.

Putney: When you were in the Pentagon did you have opportunities to do fire drills or evacuation of the Building drills or anything like that?

Woodson: Yes, we did.

Putney: You had instructions on what to do in case there was an emergency?

Woodson: Yes.

Putney: Were they fire drills mostly? What was the nature of anything they might have told you?

Woodson: They were fire drills. They always had the Building Circulars announce when they were going to do evacuation tests. I want to say from what I can recall they were fire drills and evacuations. When the alarm went off, you just left the office.

Putney: So the system was operating in your area, where you actually heard a voice? Not only just some kind of an alarm but a voice like a PA system?

Woodson: Yes.

Putney: Were you in the Building on September 11th?

Woodson: Yes, I was.

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

Woodson: Within our office, we have a small private office, so I was in that private office with my team leader.

Putney: What room were you in?

Woodson: Room 5A523. I was going over some working notes with my supervisor. I should back it up a little bit. Just before us having that meeting,

she had gotten a call from her husband to state that the World Trade Center had just been crashed into. So we stood around for a few minutes trying to figure out what was what. Then one of my co-workers had gotten into her e-mail and within a few minutes of that, there was an e-mail from DPS. I can't remember how it read, but something like "Everything is okay, we under the Normal Threatcon level. If there is any further information we'll let you know." We all went back to our desks, and just went on about our work. We were sitting in our office working and then all of a sudden we heard a crash and felt the office shake. From there, we just grabbed things and went out the door. There was no standing around the second time. We just followed everyone in the direction that they were going to evacuate the Building.

Putney: What did you think was causing the sound/explosion? Did you think of an airplane?

Woodson: No, I did not. My first thought was that it was a bomb—something blew up. No, not necessarily an airplane.

Putney: Was it even necessarily like it was terrorists or maybe an accidental explosion?

Woodson: I thought that it might have been an accident.

Putney: Was the evacuation orderly? Did people know what to do? Are you close enough to see some of the people who were very near the impact sight?

Woodson: No, not that close, but I did see everybody going into the same direction as opposed to people standing around trying to figure out which way they were going. We were all going in one direction. We did get down the stairs

to go in what is called the A&E (Access and Entry) Drive. It is like an inner rotary road. The metal doors had already been pulled down. I guess that was for security reasons. So we had to go back into the Pentagon to go down some stairs that took us to the center court that lead us up to the Metro Entrance to be on the outside of the Pentagon. I didn't notice panic, and I didn't panic. I was just going with the flow. It appeared that everybody was going in the same direction. There really wasn't any chaos. Within a few minutes I could smell the smoke. I would say a quick two minutes and everybody was just standing outside the Building. There were DPS officers out there telling everyone to get farther away from the Building. As we got farther away from the Building, we could see the smoke rising up. Where we existed from the Building, the crash site was to our left, so that is where we saw a lot of the smoke come up. We just got back farther and farther from the Building. I had a cell phone with me because I was able to grab my purse, which was a lesson-learned. Because a few weeks prior, there was smoke coming out of the basement from one of the kitchen areas, and I got caught in hall sweep, and I was on the outside for about two hours without my purse. So I had my cell phone, and I was trying to call my family. I wasn't getting any service. I just moved farther and farther away, and at the same time, the DPS officers were telling everyone else to move farther and farther away from the Building. We wound up across the street and into Crystal City. Eventually we were in the parking lot of the wholesale club before I could get reception on my cell phone. We were still seeing smoke from that direction. They eventually did get everyone even out of the Pentagon parking lot.

Putney: What was the smoke like? Did you see fire?

Woodson: No, I did not see fire. I just saw thick black smoke.

Putney: Was it blowing in your direction at all? Could you smell anything?

Woodson: Yes, I could smell the smoke, but I couldn't see it. At least, I didn't notice it.

Putney: Are the DPS officers saying anything other than move away from the Building? When did you learn that it was a plane that had hit the Building?

Woodson: Listening to someone that had their radio on in their car.

Putney: And you made the connection to the Trade Center?

Woodson: Yes.

Putney: At that time, you realized that it was a terrorist attack?

Woodson: Again, my first thought was still not a terrorist attack—just an accident.

Putney: Did you hear anything about a second plane might be on its way?

Woodson: Yes, I did.

Putney: Who told you that?

Woodson: Again, I heard that on the radio. We ended up out of eyesight of the Pentagon. Once we got to this car that had its doors open and the radio on loud, we stood there for a good while just listening to it on the news.

Putney: What did you do for the rest of the afternoon and how did you get home?

Woodson: I hung around. I normally take the Metro to work, but this day I drove because on Tuesdays I normally stay late. I hung around just by chance I would

be able to get back on the reservation to get my vehicle. I hung around with two other workers until 2:30. They did not let us back onto the grounds. From there, we took the Metro home.

Putney: So your car was there all night.

Woodson: Yes.

Putney: What did you do the next day?

Woodson: Because I am in procurement, I did get up the next morning to go through my take-home papers to find out if I had a letter that designated me as an essential employee. As well as being a contract specialist, I am also a contracting officer. I can sign contractual documents. I didn't find that. I did get dressed and prepared in the event I was told to come to work. I hung around home until about 7:30 or 8 o'clock until I got an answer at the office. I talked to Nancy Judd who is the director of contracting. She said that a few people were in and that she could use my assistance. So I did come in. I should say that I am a workaholic. I really was looking to come in to help in any way that I could.

Putney: What was that like? Did you take the subway back in?

Woodson: Yes, I did. I took public transportation. I took the bus to the Metro and the Metro in.

Putney: What was it like the next day coming into the Building?

Woodson: I believe they let us up through Pentagon City as opposed to the Pentagon Metro, and we walked across the street to get in. There were very few people. For that being a normal workday there were very few people. I was one

of the people that were called crazy—what are you going in for? It was probably the number of people that had to work on the weekend.

Putney: When you entered the Building was it different?

Woodson: Actually, I went into the Butler building because my director is housed in that building. I kind of knew right from the start that I would not be able to get into the Pentagon. I reported directly to the Butler building.

Putney: From South Parking?

Woodson: Yes.

Putney: There were few people there. Who was all there?

Woodson: My then team leader, Donna Truesdel, Tina Nevitt, Nancy Judd, Linda Luczak who is my team leader and current supervisor. If I am not mistaken that was it.

Putney: What kinds of things were coming into the office at that early time that you helped out with?

Woodson: We definitely had a lot of calls from people inquiring, "Did everybody get out okay?" One of the first things I did get to handle was the Industrial Hygienist contract. They do the air monitoring of the Pentagon. We needed to get the air tested near the crash site to see how safe it was for occupancy—to get as close as possible to the site in the offices that could be occupied. So I did do one of the delivery orders for that—a basic contract that is written and you just write "tasks as needed."

Putney: Industrial Hygienist—is that a standing contract already on the books, but then as the need arises you apply "tasks"?



Woodson: Yes. It was not a brand new contract.

Putney: What is that term again?

Woodson: It is called an Indefinite Delivery and Indefinite Quantity (IDIQ) contract.

Putney: What were they looking for?

Woodson: Asbestos, lead—there were quite a few line items on that order—different types of bacteria and particles in the air.

Putney: The people are on site doing it within how much time?

Woodson: They were there that same day, because their management or their key personnel used the conference room in the Butler building to set up shop so they could be right there on site. I'm not sure how soon the actual work began.

Putney: Those people were already there to organize it. You had seen them there the next day?

Woodson: Yes.

Putney: What other kinds of things came your way.

Woodson: We had a company called Musco Lighting who donated lights for the search and rescue effort for a two-week period. So there was no charge there.

Putney: Even donations had to go through contracting?

Woodson: Yes. We did that as a no-cost purchase order.

Putney: So you had to do the paperwork on it?

Woodson: Yes.

Putney: Some sort of a short-form?

Woodson: Yes.

Putney: Your computers in the Butler building are still up and running? You didn't lose power?

Woodson: No.

Putney: Any other contracts let that day or the next couple of days that you worked on or that you might even be aware that your colleagues are working on?

Woodson: Not anything that I can recall. I know there were other projects that were going on. Again, Linda Luczak would have more information on that than I would. I was in a different realm of contracting so I was not aware of everything that was going on as opposed to working from my own office. I don't want to say that nothing else was there—just because I didn't know it. There were quite a few things that were going on because I know Linda was hopping a lot. If I am not mistaken, we did a lot of escorting contractors for a cleaning company called Service Masters, because they were there twenty-four hours cleaning the habitable spaces. I did a lot of escorting for them until many of their employees were able get building badges to access the Building, as well as escorting a lot of people to the roof to start repairs.

Putney: Then as the rest of the week unfolds, could you just describe any other types of things that you were doing?

Woodson: My main focus was that I did a lot of the escorting. Again, I was a person that was displaced, so I could not continue on the contracts that I had been previously working on. The following week we started to recreate some of our contract files that had immediate actions from the office that we could no longer get access to. So that got kind of crazy.

Putney: Did you try to go back to your office?

Woodson: No, because as a matter of fact, Nancy told everybody that worked in the office to come to the Butler building. I couldn't tell you if anybody else tried or even how far they would have gotten.

Putney: And you knew that everybody in that area had gotten out okay?

Woodson: Yes.

Putney: You didn't have any serious injuries or any injuries that you knew of?

Woodson: No.

Putney: It is just that you can't go back there.

Woodson: Correct.

Putney: When are you able to go back?

Woodson: We were able to go back the 2nd and the 3rd of October to box up our personal effects. We are just waiting for them to ship them over to us. They put us in those little white suits, and we had masks and rubber gloves. Just from what I saw, there was some smoke and water damage. In my cubicle—I didn't check the whole office—which is near the door, I only had a minimal number of things on the floor that were damaged by the water. I didn't have too much destroyed. There was smoke damage. It was really dusty in there.

Putney: I gather it was kind of orderly as different sections opened up for people to go and get their personal items.

Woodson: Yes.

Putney: You waited your turn, perhaps?

Woodson: Yes. They scheduled our office for that day. I believe they were scheduling people on the 3rd, 4th, and 5th floors on the 5th Corridor to go in that day. They had an escort for our group.

Putney: So you still haven't gotten the items?

Woodson: No, we have not.

Putney: Do you know why?

Woodson: No, I don't. We were just told to box them and leave them there and that they would schedule somebody to move them to the Butler building.

Putney: Then at some point, you are going to get involved with the preparations for the memorial service.

Woodson: Yes.

Putney: Is there anything else that you are going to do different before the word comes that you are going to get involved with the memorial service and how did that come about?

Woodson: Nothing else different. Again, other than just trying to recreate files via e-mail and faxes that we didn't have access to. Probably by the Friday of that following Tuesday the 11th, our Budget and Finance Office was able to get back into their space. They were a little bit closer to the impact area. We utilized them to go down and get contracts as well. At that time our focus was trying to recreate files so we could just proceed with work. I was just going crazy sitting around twiddling my thumbs.

Putney: It was near the end of the fiscal year too.

Woodson: Yes.

Putney: A most important time for you.

Woodson: Yes.

Putney: How did it come about then that you were going to get involved with supporting the memorial service?

Woodson: I was tentatively scheduled to do some escorting detail on the weekend of the 23rd. So that Friday before, I had sent Nancy Judd an e-mail just to let her know that I was still available and to just let me know, because she had sent out a schedule of the people that were on standby. I didn't hear anything one way or the other, but I still went in because I had a little work to do. So I had received an e-mail from Ms. Judd to say that she had a special project for me and that we would talk on Sunday. We were both in Sunday, the 24th for a couple of hours. That was when she told me that OSD Protocol Office was having a memorial service for plane crash victims at the Pentagon, and she wanted me to spearhead that project. If I am not mistaken, I believe she was at one of the first meetings that Friday the 22nd. I attended the following meeting on Monday the 25th.

Putney: What kinds of things did you have to do?

Woodson: Our overall requirement called for approximately 1,000 family members of the plane crash victims being transported by plane, train or bus into the Washington D.C area—the Crystal City area specifically—to attend the memorial service. Our contracting office had responsibility for the lodging and the transportation on the day of the memorial service. Initially, we were required to contract with four hotels—100 rooms each. We figured that 400 rooms would

suffice for the family members. I think after the second meeting, as things were unfolding the protocol office called a meeting every day. The meetings consisted of everybody involved. I know all of the military services were there and about four or five different branch representatives of Washington Headquarters Services attended and that is the umbrella that I fall under. We had daily meetings at 7 a.m. So 400 rooms and 1,000 family members turned into 3,000 family members and 750 rooms. Not only were we contracting for the rooms, but also we were feeding them. We also responsible for transportation from the airport to the hotels and from hotels to the Pentagon on October 11th and return, and back to the airports as they were departing. Initially they were going to have a ceremony for just the family members under a tent in the Mall area of the Pentagon parking lot, but once the numbers grew from 1,000 to 3,000 they figured that was too big to contain. So they decided not to do the ceremony and just do the lodging. So outside of the lodging contracts, we contracted with this company called Party Perfect, which is a special events company, for seating for 26,000. That included foldout chairs and bleachers. We did port-a-johns. The water by Aqua Cool was donated, and that was 15,000 bottles. Anything that would involve outside seating—stanchions and ropes. I worked with, however, U.S. Army Audio Visual Department (USAVID). They had worked on their end with a contractor to build the staging, the dressing for the staging, and the audiovisual equipment. Those big TVs, I found out, were called jumbotrons. You learn something new every day.

Putney: I was in the back row. Those were wonderful.

Woodson: The Army did the coordination for that, but the contracting paperwork came out of our office. Initially we started out with six hotels in the Crystal City area, and it expanded to four more with a total of ten. We contracted with ten hotels to house the guests.

Putney: Were the 3,000 family members of the victims in the aircraft and the Pentagon?

Woodson: Yes. It was for anyone coming in from out of town as opposed to local. That 3,000 number did get reduced to between 2,200 and 2,500. The protocol office would have an exact number.

Putney: Were they the immediate family members?

Woodson: From the meetings that I attended, initially it started out as immediate family, and again, I don't want to broach too much on what I think the protocol office should be stating. But again, just getting this out of the meeting—then there were issues as to how can you tell how to define "immediate family." A friend could have grown up with this family—and just because they are not blood it doesn't mean that they are not family. I know that initially they were going to limit the number to eight, and the number did get moved up to fifteen per victim. I think it did get to be a little more than that and then they started to handle it on a case-by-case basis.

Putney: You knew then that it was moved over to the parade area.

Woodson: It is called the River Plaza. That is where the ceremony was to be held. They were going to have the ceremony in a big tent in the Mall parking lot.

Putney: So you were the lead contract person to make sure that happened.

Woodson: Yes.

Putney: What were your days like? Did you start at 7am with meetings, phone calls, and coordinations?

Woodson: Like I said, I am a workaholic. My work hours are 7 to 3:30, but I'm in the office anywhere between 5 and 6 a.m. A couple of days while working this project, I was in between 4 and 4:30 a.m.—just to get a jumpstart knowing that I was going to be here past 3:30. We are an agency, and OSD protocol is one of our customers. They tell me what they want, I and go contract to buy it for them. Not all of the fine details were worked out. Of course, I think, with this being the first time for them, they believed a lot of the details were contracting issues, which they weren't. But I spearheaded a lot. I had the rooms, we allotted for meals, but then we needed to know what is going to be served, because that's a cost factor—"Well, okay, why don't you just give us buffet?" "Well what would you like on the buffet?" So we did give them seven buffet style meals. We just picked a moderate cost between the ranges that they had, so that we would have a good variety of foods for the guests to pick from. We had counseling rooms.

Putney: Were you thinking about bringing the families in the day before or how many days were involved?

Woodson: Three days (10th, 11th, and the 12th). They arrived on the 10th and departed on the 12th.

Putney: So you had to make decisions yourself?

Woodson: Yes.

Putney: Protocol is there but they are feeling their way through it too.



Woodson: Correct.

Putney: You're just making decisions because somebody has to tell the hotels what to do.

Woodson: Correct.

Putney: Are you still meeting more often right up to the day of the event?

Woodson: I attended meetings from the 25th of September to the 9th of October. That Monday, the 8th was a holiday. We met on the 10th as well. We met all the way up to the day before the ceremony.

Putney: Are there any other significant problems or issues that came up that you were able to help with?

Woodson: Transportation became a sticky issue. Initially, they had in mind or they wanted the hotel to be responsible for the transportation from the airports to the hotels. But the hotels don't get involved in that part unless they were coming in from National Airport where there was a courtesy shuttle. At the time National was closed. So people were coming in from BWI and Dulles, and the hotels weren't doing that because that meant that they would have to shell out money for a contract with the bus company. The Military District of Washington (MDW)—I'm just not sure what their whole realm of responsibility was, but I do know that they were responsible for transportation to and from the airports. They were also responsible for the transportation from the hotels to the Pentagon on the day of the ceremony—at least a portion of it. Initially, we were only to contract for twenty charter buses then that requirement turned to 40 but went down to 30. It did get rather sticky there for a little while, where they did lean on

Contracting to support and supplement for the buses that they could not get for the day of the event.

Putney: What is the pace the day before and day of the event?

Woodson: Just about all of my contracts were awarded by the 3rd of October. It was just working out the details. It did get hectic between the 3rd and the 10th. On the morning of the 10th, I still had quite a few issues on the availability of the counseling rooms and parking space allotment. So I just took it upon myself to go and visit each of the hotels, because I was getting various calls, and I had a lot of questions. I also made a stop at the command center, which was housed at the Sheraton. That is where the protocol office had their command station set up. Once I got to each of the hotels and fielded their questions, which didn't turn out to be as bad as I thought, I got a greater satisfaction. When they showed me their setup, I felt so relieved, a lot better, compared to a few days ago when I was ready to pull my hair out and just scream at the world. The day before the ceremony was quite calm even though I was out of the office just about the whole day visiting the six Crystal City hotels. The day before was quite calm for me, and it was therapeutic.

Putney: You had mentioned the counseling room.

Woodson: Yes. They wanted a mental health counseling room and a chaplain's room set up along with a hospitality suite for the families to intermingle. So we had three additional rooms outside of the lodging rooms at each hotel.

Putney: And there were chaplains available?

Woodson: Yes, in each of the hotels.

Putney: Was there not a time when the families could look at the impact site?

Woodson: I don't know.

Putney: Whatever the protocol office decided on was the agenda?

Woodson: Yes.

Putney: What did you do the morning of the 11th?

Woodson: The morning?

Putney: I guess most of your work is done?

Woodson: Yes. The morning of the 11th, I escorted a few people into the Building to attend the ceremony. Actually, I was just walking around trying to find something to do. I was trying to decide how soon I wanted to get there to the space. Obviously, for security reasons, when you went out there, you would have been seated immediately. However, since I was behind the scenes I had a staff badge. So I was able to assist a little bit. I assisted when I saw a long line in front of just a couple of port-a-potties on one side of the parking lot, when just on the other side, but behind hedges that nobody could see, there were six more. I felt that that was my duty to let them know, "Over here, no waiting line." Then I just waited for the ceremony to start, which was absolutely great. It was moving, touching, and the tearjerker part for me was the scrolling of the names.

Putney: It was a magnificent ceremony, and the weather was great.

Woodson: Yes, it was.

Putney: What was it like after the ceremony? Did you have closing-up-the-loop activities?

Woodson: Yes, I did because there were still a couple of modifications to satisfy the changes that had to be done to a couple of the hotel contracts. Once they were awarded the big portion of it was over, and we were just working out the small details. I just had to go to a couple of funding channels, which is a follow-up to paperwork for the modifications.

Putney: Were you operating out of the Butler building at that time?

Woodson: Yes.

Putney: Were there any lessons learned that came to your mind during this or afterwards from September 11th onward? One was—take your purse!

Woodson: Definitely. I don't think so much as lessons learned on my part. We did have to do a protocol after-action report. That involved lessons learned. One of my key things was to have, from their standpoint, a dedicated person to work with our contracting office. The protocol person that was spearheading this was spearheading everything. So she wasn't always available for me to ask her questions where it was not for me to make the decision, but I made the best decision that I thought fit to move on. That was the one and only thing, which is an important thing. I know when I leave the office now, I take my glasses with me because, on the 11th, when I left, I left my glasses on my desk. That was only one major personal thing that I had to get replaced. I listen a little bit more. This hasn't affected me as I have seen it affect some of my other co-workers. I just don't think about it, because if I think too much about it, then it would scare me. I just move on with my day. I do know that I need to pay a little bit more attention to what's going on around me, and not be too naïve about things. I

thought that the Pentagon would have been the last place something like would have happened—the absolute last place.

Putney: Is there anything that you see that is good coming out of this tragedy?

Woodson: Unity. Definitely unity.

Putney: Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Woodson: Not that I can think of. It definitely was an experience.

Putney: Part of history—world history, U.S. history, and military history.

Woodson: Yes. Fifty years—I can say, “I was there. I was a part of it.”