



## Former Agents of the FBI Foundation Oral History Heritage Project

Subject: Attacks of September 11, 2001 -15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Interview

Interviewee: Mark Connor Oral History Interview on April 21, 2016 by telephone in Arnold, Maryland. Special Agent Service Dates: Unknown

Assigned Locations: FBIHQ

Interviewer: Rosanne Russo, Special Agent Service Dates: 1979-2007

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### **Summary:**

Mark Connor was an Intelligence Operations Specialist assigned to the Radical Fundamentalist Unit at FBI Headquarters in the Strategic Information Operations Center (SIOC). On the morning of September 11, he was standing outside a room where Dale Watson, the Executive Assistant Director for National Security, was briefing Director Mueller on the USS Cole. Connor saw the first plane hit the World Trade Center and when the second plane hit, informed Watson and Director Mueller that the United States was under attack. Due to his experience with terrorism, he immediately responded by opening communication lines with New York and other field offices and combing through real time intelligence reports for anything coming through about the attacks. Determining what was needed from the FBI to respond to the attacks was difficult. There was chaos when communication with New York was lost at one point, but once re-established they achieved what was needed. In this interview Connor talks about events that occurred that day and the feelings he experienced.

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**Federal Bureau of Investigation  
Interview of Former Intelligence Operations Specialist,  
Mark Connor  
Rosanne Russo, Interviewing Agent  
April 21, 2016**

Rosanne Russo

(R): My name is Rosanne Russo. I am a retired Special Agent of the FBI. I am talking by telephone to Mark Connor at his home in Arnold, Maryland.

The conversation is being recorded for the Society of Former Special Agents of the FBI for the Oral History Project Commemorating the Fifteenth Anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 per our conversation on April 21, 2016.

Again I thank you Mark for having volunteered to be interviewed for the Oral History Project and for having signed and returned the waiver form. Your time is certainly appreciated.

After this interview is completed it will be transcribed by a former Bureau typist. You will be sent a draft for your review and corrections or changes if needed. Following your review you will receive a copy of your transcript and a disk containing the transcript.

As a caution I remind you not to disclose the identities of any informants, any sensitive material could be redacted by the Bureau to preserve security.

So Mark I'm going to begin with the first question. What were you doing when the Nine-Eleven attacks occurred and where were you?

Mark Connor

(C): So I was assigned as an Intelligence Operations Specialist to the Radical Fundamentalist Unit, the sister unit to the Osama bin Laden Unit and we were stationed physically in the Strategic Information Operation Center at FBI Headquarters, SIOC.

At the time of the attacks I was physically standing outside a room where Dale Watson, the Executive Assistant Director for National Security was briefing newly installed Director Mueller on the attack on the USS Cole.

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- C: While standing there I saw the first plane hit one of the World Trade Center buildings but at that point it was assumed to be maybe a small plane that had strayed off course and hit the building, and then when the second plane hit I actually knocked on the door, opened it and informed Mr. Watson and Director Mueller that the United States was under attack.
- R: Okay. You've already identified your position as an Operational Specialist for the Islamic Fundamentalists Unit. How were you brought into the response?
- C: So we actually, because we were physically located in the SIOC and unfortunately had a lot of experience with terrorism attacks we responded automatically.

All of that included opening up communication lines with our New York Field Office, other field offices and starting to comb through intelligence reporting to see if anything real time was coming through regarding the attacks.

- R: Okay and I know you've already answered the next question regarding being assigned in the SIOC. You were already physically there and you mentioned that you worked for Dale Watson. Is that who you reported to?
- C: Well Dale Watson was the Executive Assistant Director at that time. We had a reporting chain that was several levels below that, but at the time of the attacks everyone just reacted and went to do the things that we knew that were necessary when something of this magnitude happens.

So our information was provided back to our unit chiefs at the time and then that would be pushed high, we usually say pushed up but it was pushed over because the senior leadership was actually in the SIOC.

- R: Okay, and who was your unit chief at the time?
- C: Our unit chief was Dave Frasca.
- R: Is that F-r-a-s-c-a?
- C: F-r-a-s-c-a and the unit chief of the Osama bin Laden Unit was Debby Stafford who was brought back to FBIHQ from Kansas City.
- R: Yes. In addition to responding to leads and requests in the SIOC, what exactly did you do? What was your assignment at that point?

C: So there were actually...we didn't get assignments. I think as I mentioned we reacted so the first actions that those of us had been involved with before were to reach out to the affected field offices to determine what they needed from either personnel, resources, whatever and then we actually kept...it was the first time in my career, we actually kept open lines to the New York Field Office as they had to move to a safe location and we kept an open line communication with them so that we could determine their needs at every second during the crisis.

R: What were the challenges that you faced?

C: Well the immediate challenges were obviously chaos. We didn't know what was next. We didn't know what the field offices would need. New York for example, the New York Field Office had to relocate because of the attacks. So trying to determine what was needed from the FBI to respond to the attacks in that extraordinary circumstance was probably the most difficult thing to deal with.

R: Do you have a specific example? I know you were having to react, but for example what was something that you thought was an impossible task...and how are we going to handle or respond to this?

C: Well I think I don't know if I can come up with a specific example. I know that the immediate line that was open with the New York Field Office was shut down and I know there was a lot of chaos at Headquarters to get the line, get the communication lines open with New York to find out what they needed, who they needed, where they needed them.

You know there are a lot of assets the Bureau could bring from a lot of different disciplines. When we lost that I think that was probably the biggest concern at that point. But once we re-established communications we were able to provide what was necessary, but obviously and unfortunately after the fact.

R: The next question is what were you able to achieve, based on our discussion I know that you were able to achieve responding to the needs of these other offices. One achievement that stands out is that you were involved in helping to stand up a line connection with New York.

R: Is there anything else that you'd like to add about the achievements?

C: Well you know I would push it beyond me obviously.

R: Yes.

C: And I would say that there may have been more but there was particular supervisory special agent assigned to Headquarters to the Osama bin-Laden Unit who thought and believed that his resources could be better used and he did not stay at Headquarters. He went to the Pentagon on September 13<sup>th</sup> to respond with a bunch of agents from WFO.

So I think what comes to mind are the people who make the decision to do what is best, not what is by the book and that's probably what comes to mind.

R: Okay that's a very good example. What would you describe as the most touching moments of your experience during that time?

C: Well two-fold. First is the shock and anger when you realize that your country is under attack. The second is I believe a handful of us stayed there in Headquarters for about three days before we went home. We had no idea that Headquarters had been evacuated. We had no idea beyond the original attacks because once we saw them on television then you'd go in to the reactive mode.

So I think when I got home roughly seventy-two hours after the attacks my wife had the foresight to videotape all the news coverage and some that I certainly had not seen and it just was sickening.

R: Is there a particularly interesting story you'd like to share like the example of the agent that just said, "Look I'm going to be more effective over at the Pentagon than sitting here." I think that's an interesting and a good example of people making decisions to better the situation.

C: As we were broken-up into different groups, I was assigned as part of a FISA (Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act) team that would support emergency FISAs (court approved electronic surveillance). We quickly developed a process by which we would operate and while discussing particular requests, two people walked into the room and one of them told us this was not how we would be operating. In very loud and colorful language I asked who this person was and what he thought he was doing. Turns out he was the Assistant Attorney General for National Security at the Department of Justice. Needless to say, I didn't remain a part of the FISA team.

R: That's an unfortunate memory which leads me onto the next question - What is the feeling that you experienced because there was so much stress and anger as feelings that other people had and what were your feelings? I know you mentioned earlier there was shock and anger.

C: Anger is first. When you realize that the United States was under attack its anger. Then there are stages of it. I actually supervised squads of agents that were responsible later for interviews of high value detainees at Guantanamo Bay and we learned through those interviews that they had hoped that up to eighty thousand people would die.

So kind of shocking beyond the pale of what was expected. We were, those of us that were there on Nine-Eleven, we knew or quickly learned how many people worked in those buildings and we were mortified at what the casualty rate could be.

You hate to say after the worst attack on America in history, that we were lucky. But had the evil people of al-Qaeda waited two hours the casualties would have been much more dramatic.

So I think those feelings...I was dispatched to Germany a month a half after the attacks because of the Hamburg cell to help our legal attaches office and I was pleasantly surprised at the reaction from those that worked for the German Intelligence and German Law Enforcement how willing they were to share and cooperate because of how shocked they were of what occurred.

But it's a deep hatred. It's a deep desire to find and destroy the enemy.

R: Yeah, yeah. What heroic efforts did you observe?

C: You know I was at FBI Headquarters so I can't say that we were gonna observe heroic efforts; not from our position. I think the FBI supervisor who left Headquarters to go to the Pentagon I don't believe that to be heroic and I'm sure he would agree with that. He just thought it was the right thing to do. I think the heroes were at the points of impact for all these events and I think the heroes proved themselves afterwards when the United States responded.

R: Yeah I think that's good. Is there anything else you would like to add?

C: I'll tell you what we called a funny story internally. It's not funny but..

So we're monitoring events. We're trying to deal with this catastrophe and we knew, we had heard that authorization had been given to shoot down a flight headed towards Washington, D.C.

R: Yeah.

C: And a couple of us looked at each other and literally said, "I'd hate to be the fighter pilot who has to do that" and almost in unison the FBI Headquarters Building starting shaking and then the lights flickered and I can't remember if they went out. But I know they went off and on and I thought to myself, "Holy shit. I don't mind giving my life for my country but I never thought it was going to happen in SIOC."

R: (Laughing). Yeah.

C: And it ended up being the sonic booms from the fighter jets that were dispatched for Flight 93.

R: Oh wow! Oh that's really fascinating.

C: Yes.

R: And it caused the power to fade in and out?

C: It did, yes.

R: Interesting, very interesting.

C: I don't know literally if it was the sonic boom because there were so many issues with the cell phones crashing the system I just know it coincided with the building shaking and we heard the boom and thought, "Okay this is it."

R: Yeah, that's incredible. Mark, there's just one thing that I wanted to revisit a moment. I think it's interesting that you were dispatched to Germany. How long were you assigned there working with German Intelligence?

C: So I went to Germany in...I want to say from October through late December. I think I got back on Christmas Eve.

C: I was supporting the legal attaches' offices efforts with regard to the Hamburg Cell. So we met with the German Federal Police and Intelligence almost on a daily basis. But it was also farming out all the....I mean there were so many leads coming in that it was going through those,

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assigning those out, trying to prioritize them and yeah it was quite an interesting time.

R: Yeah very much so. Well Mark we've pretty much gone through everything unless you have any other thoughts you'd like to add or mention before I turn off the recorder.

C: I don't think so. I think just generally speaking I would say there was a lot of armchair quarterback information. It was the most devastating act in American history.

But I would just assure anyone who hears or reads this that the men and women of the FBI poured everything into this both before and after and that it's obviously a biased view but they were as affected as much as the people who were harmed during the attacks and I hope sometime in history that would be realized.

R: Well thank you so much again Mark and I'm just going to turn this off and talk to you before we hang up.