



Former Agents of the FBI Foundation Oral History Heritage Project

Subject: Attacks of September 11, 2001

Interviewee: Dennis A. Davidson – Oral History Interview on June 28, 2016
Special Agent Service Dates: 1971-2007

Assigned Locations: Boston, Providence

Interviewer: James Tobin, Special Agent Service Dates: 1982-2013

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Summary:

On September 11th, SA Dennis Davidson was assigned to the Boston Division Forfeiture Asset Seizure Team. The team was attending a Department of Justice conference at the Park Plaza Hotel with their Supervisor, John Siracusa. When Siracusa responded to a beeper page from his office, he was informed that a plane had hit the World Trade Center. He rejoined the seminar, but quickly left when he received a second page. The conference was being held in the hotel's basement and it soon became obvious that something was happening when attendees began moving to other areas in the hotel where the communication signals were better. Davidson and his team went to the lobby area where there was a television on showing a plane hitting the World Trade Center. Not realizing it was a second plane, they began to return to the conference when a message came from SSA Siracusa ordering everyone back to the office. Cell phone signals were jammed making additional communication impossible and they decided it would be safest to walk and stay off the trains. The situation at the office was controlled chaos with plans to start a Command Post underway when the building had to be evacuated due to a bomb threat. The work shifts were 10-16 hours, seven days a week, until the second week of December and the building became a fortress with barriers all around. At the Command Post, Davidson was assigned to handling the incredible deluge of phone calls that were coming from everywhere. Everything that was said had to be written up and turned over to the supervising agent. It would then go into the computerized Rapid Start system and leads immediately sent, carried out by the agents, and documented. An incredible amount of intelligence was gathered in a matter of hours and the experience convinced their organization that terrorism cannot be fought by a single entity, but by cooperating and working together with other agencies to stay on top of things.

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FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION
Interview of Former Forfeiture Investigator
Dennis A. Davidson
James Tobin Interviewing Agent
June 28, 2016

James Tobin

(T): Dennis please tell me your full name.

Dennis Davidson

(D): Dennis A. Davidson.

T: What year did you come into the Bureau and what year did you retire?

D: I entered on duty on March 29, 1971 and retired June 29, 2007.

T: What office were you assigned to and what types of jobs did you have in the Bureau?

D: I was in the Boston Office almost all my career and then worked in Providence for a couple of years.

T: What areas were you assigned to the day before Nine-Eleven?

D: I was with the Boston Division Forfeiture Asset Seizure Team.

T: Concerning Nine-Eleven tell me about that day. Where were you and what happened?

D: Well first off in my recollection it was a Tuesday and it was a nice day and we had a conference. The Department of Justice had a conference down at the Park Plaza Hotel. It was called a Component Seminar and what it was is representatives from all the first circuit that worked in Asset Forfeiture for the U.S. Attorney's Office, the Marshalls, the DEA, FBI from Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Rhode Island all had representatives there attending that conference.

T: When did you hear about the planes going into the buildings?

D: Well John Siracusa was the Supervisor of the Forfeiture Team at the time so he was there with Sheila Conley, Sarah Burkwit and myself as our representatives from the Boston Division.

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D: We were sitting there and I believe John had a beeper back then and he got beeped and he had to call the office and he came back and he said that he got a message that a plane had hit the World Trade Center and then he got another beep and he left and he said, "I have to go back."

So he left to go back and before he left he said, "Just do me a favor, don't say anything to anybody in the room right now," and I said, "No problem." He said, "Because it appears that the planes came out of Logan Airport.

So anyway he left us and the conference still was going on. But somehow obviously word didn't take long to get inside that room that something bad had happened and people started to go up into the....because where the conference was below ground there. So people couldn't really converse and a lot of electronic devices wouldn't receive signals.

So a lot of people were really in the dark over it. We ended up going up to the lobby, a number of people including myself and we were watching the t.v. monitors there and we saw a plane hit the World Trade Center. We thought it was a replay of the actual plane, the first plane, not realizing this was another plane, the second plane that had hit the tower.

So after that people still went back into the conference and I had gotten a message from John Siracusa that we were all being ordered back to the office meaning us, our team.

So we were heading out and it was suggested that let's grab the train because it would be faster and I said, "Not me, I'm not getting on any train going underground right now, not until I know what's going on." So I said, "I think our safest way would be let's walk back to the office and stay off the trains."

So we did and on the way back I tried to make some calls with my cell phone to check to see if I could find out any more information and because of all the people on their cell phones it basically was jammed. So you couldn't communicate with anybody. There were no signals going anywhere. The lines were all jammed up on the cell phones.

So we got back to the office and when we got back to the office it was really controlled chaos to some degree going on in there and they decided they were working on a plan to start a Command Post.

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D: And shortly thereafter there was an alarm that went off and it said, "Empty the building because of a bomb threat." So One Center Plaza, Two Center Plaza and Three Center Plaza were evacuated and people went outside.

Like anything people started getting a little scared then and not only people in other agencies out there in the private sector that were in our building but you know people in ours. Some people probably didn't go back to the office even in our area but I did.

I went back into the office but before I did I ran into a couple of friends believe it or not from high school and one who used to work for us in the FBI, I told them, I said, "I'm really sorry for you people." I said, "Because we're the FBI and we bargain for things to go bad sometimes with our jobs" but one of them worked for the U.S. Attorney Kevin O'Day and another was working for a private law firm. But you people didn't." I said, "You know I feel bad for you that you have to go through this."

So anyway we go back; we're back in the building and I'm sitting there and on at eleven o'clock tonight. I put you on that."

In the meantime I was on the phone because with the bomb threat I was really concerned because of the public parking garage underneath us. I mean, you know foreigners who were parking the cars down there and letting people in and it was really a pretty unsafe building for some time.

And I was concerned so I made a call to my sister-in-law to tell her where my will was just in case something happened. So I talked to her for a few minutes and then I left and went home and tried to get some sleep knowing that I was going to be coming back in a few hours and when I came back I went right to the Command Post and ended up working there from Nine-Eleven.

We were working seven days a week and then finally they cut it down to six days a week so we had time off and we were working ten to sixteen hour shifts I believe at the time. And then I worked all the way until I think the second week of December is when I finally got off of the Command Post when they broke it down.

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D: In the interim the whole building turned into a fortress. They didn't know how to secure the area so they put jersey barriers all around in a big loop around the entire One, Two and Three Center Plaza to insure that nobody could drive a truck underneath the overhang and even put some of them sideways so that if they were able to penetrate one of them you still couldn't drive down the sidewalk because there were other jersey barriers turned sideways and would prevent you from doing it.

So it was a pretty scary time and a pretty bad time for them and then we they realized this was the new way they finally got rid of the jersey barriers sometime later and put in much nicer looking planters that served the same purpose so that nothing could get underneath.

T: What type of duties did you have at the Command Post?

D: My duty was strictly handling phone calls and it was just an incredible deluge of phone calls coming in from everywhere and every hour. It sounds corny but I really believe we're safer today because some of those calls we probably took, probably gave us a lot of information that we are able to use today to prevent some of these things from happening.

So our job was to take the calls and then write up everything that they said even if it sounded rather stupid and minute and then turn it over to the agent that was supervising over the Command Post.

Now the Command Post was made up of an interesting situation because very few people ever worked with local law enforcement in our organization probably but in my job I did over the years with the State Police and the local police or whatever so at the Command Post we had police officers sitting there. We had some people from the FBI that were from other field offices. They had people obviously, a good number from our office who were on those shifts and we had some, Revere PD. It was interesting because you very rarely would have ever seen those people working with us.

T: It really did bring a lot of people together.

D: It sure did and what we would do is we would write it up, the supervisory agent would review it and it would go a system that the FBI had then called Rapid Start and it would be downloaded into the computer and then that the computer would store it and then they would send out leads to agents immediately, actually.

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D: These leads would be responded to by agents because nothing was being done in that office other than working Nine-Eleven. There was absolutely nothing else going on. So every agent there was assigned to go out and cover the leads whether it be at the airport or if they got a lead of suspicious people living at a certain address; they would go out there.

So that's what we did after we wrote it up and it got reviewed, had good credibility of the system, then the system would spit out leads and the leads would be carried out by the agents and then they would document it and turn it over to their supervisor.

T: What was the mood of the office the first day you got there and found about Nine-Eleven?

D: It was somber. It truly was one of the worst days in my life. I mean, you know because it was really somber. I mean people were really shocked and the only thing I can say is we were so busy, so very busy that you didn't have time to worry then. You didn't have time to be depressed over it.

All it was, you just wanted to get everything out and get it done and find out even more, even though we knew Mohamed Atta was dead and some of the others we needed to find out how they did it and it was very, very impressive how, in a matter of hours, hours, not just days but hours, how much intelligence our organization got so that you actually knew even what seat these people were sitting in on the planes and things like that. It was amazing.

T: Dennis, anything else you can think of?

D: No I think the only good that came out of that is I think it's convinced our organization that we can no longer be a single entity trying to fight terrorism and what goes on in the modern world.

We have to have outside help. We have to have the cooperation and we have to share some of that information even though we always hold things tight to our vest, we have to share it because we can't do it alone and as they used to say, we have to be right every time when we have something going on. Terrorists only have to be right once. That's what came out of the experience. You gotta work with people. You gotta work with other agencies in order to be able to stay on top of these things.

T: Thank you very much Dennis. It was excellent.