



Former Agents of the FBI Foundation Oral History Heritage Project

Subject: 9/11 Response at FBI Headquarters

Interviewee: Dale Watson Oral History Interview on November 23, 2015 in Herndon, VA.
Special Agent Service Dates: 1978-2002

Assigned Locations: FBIHQ, Washington, DC

Interviewer: David Williams, Special Agent Service Dates: 1972-2001

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Summary:

Dale Watson was the FBI's Assistant Director of Counterterrorism at the time of the 9/11 attacks. On the morning of September 11th, he was in the Strategic Information & Operations Center (SIOC) at FBI Headquarters briefing Director Mueller on the USS Cole investigation when his executive assistant informed him that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center. Watson quickly began coordinating the FBI's response by calling in people he immediately trusted. The field offices in New York and Pittsburgh needed support, resources, and personnel since each investigation was a major case in itself, which the Lab had to coordinate separately, and then also as one attack. Resources were readily provided for whatever was needed, although finding immigration data was challenging. Details about the individuals on each of the planes was quickly established, which was crucial in finding out who was behind the attack and coordinating a fact-backed response.

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Federal Bureau of Investigation
Interview of Former Executive Assistant Director
Dale Watson
Dave Williams, Interviewer
November 23, 2015

Dave Williams
(Williams):

Hello, my name is Dave Williams. I am a retired Special Agent with the FBI, and I am currently involved with the Society of Former Agents of the FBI doing an oral history program among those who were most intimately involved in the "Nine-Eleven" response following the worst terrorist attack in the history of the United States.

Today is kind of a special interviewee. We have Dale Watson, who at the time of 9-11, was the Assistant Director over all counterterrorism in the FBI.

Dale, it's good to see you here.

Dale Watson
(Watson):

Good Dave. Thanks and I'm happy to do this.

Williams:

Here we are. In Herndon, Virginia and today is November the 23rd, 2015 and we're about ready to go. I'd like to start at the beginning Dale if we could. What were you doing when the nine-eleven attacks actually occurred?

Watson:

Well Dave, I get asked that a lot because of my position there at headquarters at the time which you reflected on. I was in our operations center, we called it SIOC. I think most Bureau people understand that, and I was participating in a briefing with the new Director of the FBI concerning the USS Cole investigation and where we were on that investigation of the bombing of the naval warship that killed seventeen sailors in Aden, Yemen.

Williams:

The Cole bombing took place just about exactly one year ahead of nine-eleven. I believe that was October 12th of 2000, and you were in charge of the investigative response coordination at that time?

Dale Watson

November 23, 2015

Page 2

Watson:

Yes that was part of the terrorism responsibility we had in Aden, Yemen and, yes, to answer your question it was about eleven months before 911.

Williams:

As I remember, the FBI had quite an expanded presence overseas and we did a response all the way out to Yemen. How did that go? How did you set that up?

Watson:

Well that was a result of some dedicated people to include yourself. After the two embassy bombings in Africa, we realized that we needed a more rapid response of people to get overseas and so we created the Rapid Deployment Teams that we set up around the country; FBI teams; one out of Miami; one out of Los Angeles; one out of WFO; and one out of New York that covered different parts of the world. They were kind of the jump teams.

So, immediately after the Embassy bombings, there were like eleven hundred FBI people sent to those two Embassy bombings. The USS Cole investigation, as I recall and I might have my numbers wrong, but I believe we initially sent five hundred Agents.

Williams:

That's an awful lot of people to be overseas. That must have been a hot spot.

Watson:

There were a lot of issues for the FBI working overseas at that time. You had to deal with the ambassadors and State Department headquarters to try to get "country clearance." You always got into a conversation around the long weapons and, "can you take weapons," and quite honestly the Director of the FBI was very adamant that we were not going to put Agents in harm's way overseas without having them duly armed. So there were a lot of struggles.

Williams:

That's a good point because clearly those Agents who responded were targets as well for any future action that may have occurred where they would be the victims.

Dale Watson

November 23, 2015

Page 3

Watson:

Correct, and this is not about nine-eleven, but I remember being in one of the Embassy locations overseas, I think it was Tanzania the night that President Clinton responded by shooting the forty-two cruise missiles at the same time that we had 800 personnel that were exposed. There was no prior coordination with us around protecting our personnel. That was an interesting time.

Williams:

Yes, I'm sure they were. A little bit of, what we call the "pucker factor" at that time too.

Watson:

So, to answer your question, it was about the USS Cole, where we were, reference the facts we knew immediately, soon thereafter that al-Qaeda had done this, but it was a long drawn-out investigation; very painstaking. So, we were trying to get the new Director up to speed on where we were and what needed to be done, where our personnel were, etc., etc.

So, we were in SIOC and then my EA, executive assistant, opened the door in this small room in SIOC and said that a plane had crashed into one of the World Trade Centers and we flipped on the TV.

I saw that, and I saw the picture of the building that had been hit and the smoke coming out, and it reminded me of the Oklahoma City bombing case. I was in Kansas City at the time when I saw the building there in Oklahoma City burning and smoking and your first reaction was, "Dear Lord, let this be a gas leak in Oklahoma City." My first reaction was, when I saw the World Trade Center as well, "I hope this is some kook flying along the East River of the Hudson and decided to make a wrong turn and just crashed into the building." That lasted for just a few minutes and, then, as the events unfolded, we knew we were in for a long drawn out process.

Williams:

So you were in the room with Director Mueller, at that point, and you were told about the crash into the World Trade Center.

Watson:

Yes, that's correct, and then we made some calls. I remember making some calls, and then I think it was Mark Connor that came in and said...

Dale Watson

November 23, 2015

Page 4

Williams:

He was an analyst?

Watson:

He was a CT Analyst at FBI Headquarters, correct, and worked counterterrorism and he stuck his head in and said, "We've been hit!" Another plane had hit, I think it was the sequence of events. I can't remember right now. It's either the second tower or the Pentagon and, at that point to everybody, it was obvious what was going on here.

So we broke. I remember breaking, and the Director and I went upstairs for a few minutes. I went upstairs to get some stuff because I knew what was coming. I went upstairs, called home, basically said, "I won't be home for a while," and then went back down to SIOC and started working; there were thousands of things you had to do and thousands of things going on in SIOC.

Watson:

I don't reveal this very often but I never took a day off from 9-11 up until Thanksgiving and that included all Saturdays and Sundays, but everybody was working hard. I'm not pointing that out but one of my mindsets was that this thing, whatever this was, I mean there were a lot of people associated with me outside the Bureau and even in the Bureau that were extremely mad about this. And I remember my mother calling and my two brothers and people across the board, the in-laws, and they were saying, "This is terrible. We gotta do something. We need to nuke them or bomb these people responsible for this."

I'd listen to that, but I never really got angry, and I reflected back on that. Why was that? I never got angry about what had happened until the first day that I took off which was Thanksgiving and then I guess it was being away from it for a little while that you say, "Man this was terrible. We should grind up these people," in the thought process. So you say, "Well what were your thought processes?"

At that point I was so focused on not the plane crashes investigation, so to speak, because right afterwards, almost immediately after that, we identified the people that were on those planes, that were all dead, and I was pretty convinced that there might have been one or two loose ends that we were going to have to tie up on individuals, not sure if they were still in the US or overseas, or alive or whatever. But my focus shifted to directly to, "Are there other groups?"

Dale Watson

November 23, 2015

Page 5

Watson:

And so I've often said those cases, the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, those cases in my mind were not totally closed, but they were not primary at that point. I knew that we would run down everything these guys had ever done in the United States. I knew that through the investigative effort, that post-event, that we would figure this out and that was pretty well accomplished with a lot of good people around the country and overseas doing everything they could to cover the leads to put that story together. But I thought that story was post and people that did that, they were dead. I did not think we were going to learn a whole lot, but we might learn a little more. I was really concerned about other potential cells in the United States. So I shifted my efforts to "who else" and that led into a whole other set of nightmares and experience with INS. That's it.

Williams:

So Dale, your first thing is you began to coordinate the FBI's response. Do you remember how or who you reached out to begin the coordination effort? You were going to need a lot of people.

Watson:

Yeah, and I'd gone through this before around the Embassy bombings and Khobar Towers, USS Cole, even the Kansas city task force that was established around the Oklahoma City bombing case, and I knew you had to assign responsibility in pieces to make this thing work. So, there were a lot of people. I called in people that I trusted almost immediately. They couldn't get there initially but arrived shortly. A couple of people come to mind. There was Art Cummings and you, Dave, as well as Debby Stafford and I've drawn a blank here, I'm going to offend somebody, but I don't remember.

Williams:

Jim Bernazzoni?

Watson:

Jim Bernazzoni, I think he was in Houston at the time.

Williams:

Yeah, I think so.

Dale Watson

November 23, 2015

Page 6

Watson:

I know you were in Milwaukee, Debby (Stafford) was in Kansas City, Art was in Richmond and so the idea was to get people that had been in involved in this stuff in the past to get in there and help us run this.

Watson:

At the same time, everybody in the Bureau family wanted to help and I do remember something that stuck out in my mind on that day. There were a lot of retired Agents that had worked this stuff, a lot of them that I knew had not worked terrorism stuff, but they had since retired and they tried to get in contact with me, and I tried to call as many as I could.

Sometimes real late at night or real early in the morning, I would call them and say, "Hey, good to hear from you, what's up?" They would say, "I'm retired but I'll come back there and do anything. If you guys need trash dumped, coffee made, whatever, I need to help out here, and I'll do it for free." So I can't tell you, I don't want to call out those individuals but it was a rush of the Bureau saying, "This is really big." Those guys wanted to get back in the fight, guys and women, and so I remember that distinctly.

So, I'm kind of rambling here but as we got going with this thing it was...I can't tell you the emphasis and how big this was and what everybody was doing. There were so many meetings and so much stuff going on it was just hard to coordinate, and the best way you survive on that is to have experienced people and give those responsibilities and say, "Take, care of this, look at the flight that went into Pittsburgh etc."

So, I don't know if that answers your questions.

Williams:

Well, sure it does. I'm thinking about you. You're in the SIOC, and you're coordinating this whole thing. Do you remember who you were able to reach out and call upon for assistance in bringing all the resources that we would need to bear? I mean, were there positions you could think of?

Watson:

Yeah, the people that served were real good. There were some people, I mean most...well...

Williams:

Concerning the crisis?

Dale Watson

November 23, 2015

Page 7

Watson:

I mean, they rolled up in there along with... and there were the communication packages. The people in SIOC, not necessarily the "SESers," but the lower, I don't want to call them lower, we had been through this before and so they knew what was coming and they actually did a good job.

Of course all the section chiefs and the unit chiefs in counter-terrorism, all the ADs (Assistant Directors) and the other divisions were dying, not dying, they were readily available. Everybody was at your disposal to make sure we had what we needed.

Williams:

Do you remember, just thinking back about, were you able to establish communication with the New York Office?

Watson:

Shortly after the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and the plane crash up in Pennsylvania, you had to coordinate those field offices because those were major, major investigations in and among themselves, and you had to get in touch with the Pittsburgh people to make sure they had all the personnel needed. You had to coordinate now with the Lab, with the evidence response team.

There was no way that one team, wherever, could process all the scenes. So, you coordinated all that, and I will give credit where credit is due. Those people running those programs were able to dispatch and get people headed in the right direction. The next thing you know is that they said, "Oh yeah, we sent a team from Richmond up to D.C.," or something, and it's the right thing to do to help out at the Pentagon.

Williams:

The New York Office had to relocate.

Watson:

They were. I spoke to Barry Mawn. It was very difficult to get in touch with anybody.

Dale Watson

November 23, 2015

Page 8

Williams:

Barry was then the head of the New York Office?

Watson:

Yeah, he was ADIC of New York, and actually I remember talking to him, and he had just displaced the New York FBI office to; I can't remember it was somewhere uptown. So he was between places, and he had Mary Jo White with him, the United States Attorney, and I asked Mary Jo, I said, "Mary Jo, I'm not going to hold you to this, but how many casualties do you think we might have here today?" And she said, "Oh I don't know, she said, it's gotta be twenty thousand or something." I'm not saying that for that but that was kind of the tenor of the times and they were trying to get set up. So, he had his hands full at the United States Attorney's Office. I mean it was all, not pandemonium, it was uncontrolled chaos I guess, and the people that did, I mean you would be amazed at the people who stood up and performed across all the FBI, Agents as well as professional staff. You could tell they were really good at that and they came along and did exactly what they had to do.

Williams:

You were aware at that time, then Dale, that America was under attack.

Watson:

I remember and I thought to myself that it felt like a burden...when I went upstairs to get the stuff that I needed immediately after the first plane crash, I realized what was going on. It felt like a crushing, thirty ton bag had been put on my shoulders, and it's not about me. But then I quickly said, "Okay, that's what it is, and we're gonna do the best we can here, and we're gonna figure this thing out and whoever did this, we'll know who did it and why they did it, and we're gonna figure out if there are other people that are trying to do us harm."

It was never any grind 'em up type deal that you know you couldn't function in, and it was a pretty wild time there for about the first three or four hours where we had FAA calling, we had a "hot mike" from FAA. They reported to us that there were like, I can't remember the exact number, Dave you might recall this...there were fifteen or seventeen airplanes incoming airplanes to the United States that had "squawking..."

Williams:

Emergency?

Dale Watson

November 23, 2015

Page 9

Watson:

“Emergency,” and so we were trying to sort all that out were there fifteen planes headed to the United States? And when you think of that, it was pretty frightening. And then I heard, I don’t recall exactly who told me this, but we were all in SIOC and if you’ve ever been in SIOC it’s...I have forgotten what floor it’s on, I think it’s on the fifth. It’s all walled in, no windows, no nothing, and you get in there and you don’t know if the sun is up, if it’s raining, if it’s snowing or whatever.

I believe it was the AD (Assistant Director) of HR (Human Resources) comes in and makes a statement in front of me and I think Director Mueller that there’s panic inside our building, and I never knew that. I never heard that. I didn’t know what was going on with that. I later determined that it was not true, but employees were evacuated from FBI Headquarters.

I talked to some people, and they were told initially to get out of the building, and so there was a very humorous story I learned about after the fact, people were ordered to evacuate to the basement, then back to their offices and finally out of the building. It apparently was a comedy routine situation. There was another incident where apparently the jets were scrambling over and it kind of shook the building - about the same time that the lights went out in SIOC. I remember sitting in there in the dark for about thirty, forty seconds and thought well maybe this is it. (laughing)

Williams:

(Laughing).

Watson:

But I think Mark Connor and Shari Farrar were with me or somewhere along there. I’m certain Mark (Connor) knows the story.

Williams:

Shari, at that time, was the Acting Chief of Staff for the FBI.

Watson:

I believe that is correct, or Deputy Director.

Williams:

Well, whatever, serving that role for sure...

Dale Watson

November 23, 2015

Page 10

Watson:

Sure, and we were all in the room. We were talking about trying to do something, and it all turned out not to be what we thought it was and then you just sit there and say, "Hmm, this might be the one that gets us all." But fortunately it wasn't the case.

Williams:

Was there any contact you had, or did the White House reach out to you? As I remember the President was in Louisiana at this time and there was, I don't know. Were you able to maintain contact with the White House?

Watson:

Yes, almost immediately they wanted a SVTS (Secure Video Teleconferencing Service) which is a video, audio.

Williams:

Secure video.

Watson:

Yeah, secure, audio-video, and so they called and set it up, and they specifically asked that I sit in on this meeting. I think it was the first meeting. So I walked in there, and it's the major actors for the government. It's Cheney (Richard Cheney was then the Vice President of the United States), he's on the screen, Rice (Condoleezza Rice was then the National Security Advisor to the President) was there. I can't remember the others. It was the whole Counter-terrorism Support Group, the CSG, which had representatives from the DOD (the Department of Defense) and White House, and I'm missing somebody, State, and CIA.

So, they were sitting around waiting for us to say something, to tell them something and Cheney says, "Well, what do we know about this?" And there were five hundred questions, and I learned a long time ago in a big crisis like this the initial information you get is generally not correct. Dave, you know that as well as I do - that it's just not correct when it comes out and you have to be very careful about it. So he was saying, "Well what about the..." I mean there were hundreds of instances, "What about the report that there was a bomb, a car bomb, in front of the State Department? "Dale, what do you know about...there's a fire up at the Capitol, not the Capitol, the Pentagon?" And of course we don't know a whole lot about anything at this point other than, you know, we know what we know at that point; that it was the Towers, and the Pittsburgh flight, and the Pentagon.

Dale Watson

November 23, 2015

Page 11

And so you had to play that. So I sat in there for about ten minutes and, then I realized this is not a place I needed to be. They need information, and I don't want to sit here for three hours on a "hot mike" with these people and then people come in and funnel them because there were a lot of things I needed to be doing. So I think it was Tim Caruso (Special Assistant to Dale Watson) at the time, he went in there and sat with them.

Williams:

Okay. What in particular challenges did you find come up, things that you had trouble getting done in the early stages?

Watson:

That's a good question. I hadn't really thought of it. I remember seeing, particularly around big cases like Oklahoma City and the Kansas Task Force out in Junction City where most of that evidence was collected in that case. When it's a big one, the Bureau puts massive resources and, "whatever you need you get," and I can't remember being stalled out by anything and it was all available. Everybody was trying to help the best they could. Chertoff came over. He was the....

Williams:

Mike Chertoff?

Watson:

.....Deputy of the Criminal Division or Crime Division.

Williams:

I believe he was the Deputy Attorney General, was he not? I think he was on a very senior level with the department.

Watson:

Yeah, yeah. He was over there saying, "Hey, do you need paper or whatever, or what do you need to do, if you need search warrants...?" I mean they were very, very good and aggressive.

I had a hard time getting immigration data; not through any fault of INS at the time, but just through their volume and how they do it, because we wanted to figure out how many like people, not profiling, but commonalities were in the United States and that was a task that was almost impossible.

Williams:

Dale Watson

November 23, 2015

Page 12

That would be very, very challenging I would imagine, absolutely. What would you consider to be the greatest achievements that you were able to complete in the very short period of time right after the attack? What did we get done quickly?

Watson:

It was pretty quickly established who were on those planes and identifications off the manifest and then we did checks on those individuals and found out the nationalities of where these people came from. So, we knew right away where they'd come from and most of them had "clean passports," etc., etc., which becomes an issue later on. We were able to collect some data from the scenes that were pretty crucial; photos of Atta for instance, and we were able to go back and study his background.

I mean just hard work. I mean just hard investigative work by the street Agents out picking up the surveillance of the airport, you know, when they went through the magnetometers and all that information all the way back.

Watson:

And, as we went on, it was very clear that whatever they had done, whatever they did later on, we figured out they made a practice flight run out to Las Vegas. We never really could figure that out, but the investigative steps that the Bureau took were just phenomenal and able to say what these guys did and how they did it.

Williams:

You mention the name Atta, Mohamad Atta, who was termed to be, by the media anyway, as the ring leader of this group. As I recall we found some of his identification very early, New York did.....

Watson:

That's correct.

Williams:

...in the scene at the World Trade Center. Did you consider that to be key that he was on there or did we have any past information on him, per se?

Watson:

Well, as time went on, initially within the first few hours we did not, and then we started checking our records and started digging around and found out that, yes, we probably knew, I think we knew that al Mihdhar (Khalid al Mihdhar, one of the terrorists) came in in August. We didn't know

Dale Watson

November 23, 2015

Page 13

about it at the time, and by the time, August, his I-94 revealed he was going to stay at the Marriott in New York City, and there were nineteen Marriott's in New York city, and once he was stamped in, he was gone, "in the wind." Gone.

Williams:

Okay, Dale one of the things that typically happens in a case of this magnitude is perhaps sometimes somebody's actions or a group action will come to your mind as being particularly noteworthy. Was there anything like that that you have retained over these last fifteen years?

Watson:

Just the dedication and the hard work of...I'm always amazed at that, that the Bureau, if you look around and people say bad things about the Bureau. Internally we talk about so and so can't do something or whatever. But then, when the time comes for the Bureau to perform, it is as Senator Leahy once told me soon after 911, when there were real concerns that the FBI was going to get blamed for this, he said, "Dale we're not gonna do anything to change the FBI to a point where it is no longer a National Treasure. We understand that the Bureau is the best, and you guys do a great job."

Now, reflecting back on what he said because I already knew it, that whenever you dealt with the FBI, and I'm not slamming any other federal agency, but you could always tell if the Bureau got involved it was done right and it was done to a degree where it didn't leave too much imagination of what were the facts.

And I've reflected back on my training a long time ago that, when Pan Am 103 was blown up, there was a rush to judgement, and they thought for sure that the Syrians had done it, and they pushed the FBI, and the FBI wouldn't say that and eventually it was determined to be Libya.

Watson:

So, it was very crucial to get this right because there were people that really wanted to do something. So if Hezbollah was involved and not al Qaeda that's a different set of US Government response. If it's sponsored by the Iranians, state sponsored through MOIS or whatever, that's a different scenario.

Dale Watson

November 23, 2015

Page 14

So, I was always aware of that and the people like you, Dave, and Debby, and Mark, and everybody else, were aware that this has to be factual because we're about to do something here.

Watson:

But to answer your question, I was always amazed that I never called anybody during that period of time: SACs, ASACs, and supervisors, whatever that there answer was, "We'll get this done," and just the way the FBI is and we should be very proud of that fact, and I've always seen it. And even after I retired, I still deal with federal agencies and no one can hold a candle to it and it's just our quality of people, our dedication of our people to do what's right always comes out, and so that's why I say about 9-11.

It was one of the darkest hours of the country. It was one of the finest hours for the FBI, and there was a lot of things that went on after that. People wanted to really blame the Bureau, and I'm here to tell you that the Bureau survived, and the Bureau is the Bureau and will always be the FBI because the American people have trust in us and will continue to trust us as long as we do that and as long as we have leadership that will do the right thing and not be swayed by political actions.

Williams:

Well, I thank you very much and it's been wonderful talking to you about this, and we will be moving forward. There will be some other folks interviewed here. I don't know that they'll be anybody of your rank and coordination level, so, we thank you for taking the time to be able to discuss this with us Dale.