



Former Agents of the FBI Foundation Oral History Heritage Project

Subject: Attacks of September 11, 2001 -15th Anniversary Interview

Interviewee: Thomas J. Pickard Oral History Interview on November 23, 2015 in Richmond, Virginia by Telephone. Special Agent Service Dates: 1975-2001

Assigned Locations: FBIHQ, Washington, DC

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

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Summary:

On September 11, 2001, Thomas Pickard was Deputy Director at FBI Headquarters in Washington, DC and Director Robert Mueller had only been sworn in the previous week. He was preparing for a 9 am meeting when his secretary alerted him that a plane had hit the World Trade Center in New York City. Barry Mawn was the Assistant Director in New York and within seconds Pickard was on the phone with his secretary since Mawn had already rushed over to the World Trade Center. When Louis Freeh, the previous Director, left the FBI, Pickard served as both Acting Director and Deputy Director from June 25th until September 4th. During that summer there were consistent intelligence reports that something was happening, but no indication of a location or time frame. The SACs on the East and West coasts, and Southern states, therefore, were alerted to be ready for anything and everything. When the second plane hit, both Pickard and Director Mueller knew it was a major terrorist incident. All Assistant Directors were immediately called to the Strategic Information Operations Center (SIOC) which Pickard ordered to open fully. The situation was extremely chaotic at that early stage and they were inundated with reports coming from all over the country. The SIOC staff was faced with the challenge of coordinating efforts with other federal agencies to organize the chaos and get to the facts of the situation so they could understand what was happening and provide accurate information. The CIA and NSA were present and they had an open line of communication with the President. Overall, the events that unfolded left many questions, but with all agencies and offices working together significant changes were able to be made.

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**Federal Bureau of Investigation
Interview of Former Special Agent,
Thomas J. Pickard
Dave Williams Interviewer
November 23, 2015**

Dave Williams

(W):

My name is Dave Williams. I am a retired Special Agent with the FBI and I'm talking by telephone today to Thomas J. Pickard, who is in Richmond, Virginia, and we're interviewing him as part of the Oral History Program on the "Nine-Eleven" response by the FBI to the worst terrorist attack in the history of our nation.

This conversation is of course being recorded for the Society of Former Special Agents of the FBI Oral History Project, and it will be memorialized, and it will be online, and eventually will be going to the Library of Congress.

Tom, how are you doing today?

Thomas J. Pickard

(P):

I'm very good. It's a beautiful day. It reminds me of Tuesday, September 11th, 2001.

W: Yes. Do you remember what you were doing that day when you first came to understand that we were under attack?

P: I was in my office at FBI Headquarters. At the time, I was the Deputy Director of the FBI, and Robert Mueller had just been sworn in as the new Director, one week and one day before...on September fourth.

I had just finished two different meetings, one with my staff and another with the Assistant Directors at FBI Headquarters, and we were getting ready for a nine o'clock meeting with a newly appointed SAC.

My secretary, Veronica Breesford, she came running in my office and she said, "A plane has hit the World Trade Center in New York City," and she said, "I'll turn on the t.v., and I'll get you the New York Office."

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P. I just kind of sat there stunned for a second, and then I looked outside because I had gotten to work early that morning, and it was a nice clear sunny day, not any problem with flying, and so I got the New York Office on the phone.

I was speaking to the secretary to the Assistant Director in New York, Barry Mawn's, secretary, and I asked her where Barry was, and she said, "We heard a loud noise. It sounded like a plane came near the building." They are about ten blocks north of the World Trade Center, and she said, "We heard it crashed into the World Trade Center, and the Assistant Director, Barry Mawn, is on his way down to the World Trade Center and grabbed a handy- talkie. I said, "Do you know what kind of plane or anything like that?" and she didn't know. But I told her, I said, "Why don't you keep the line open so if you hear anything from Barry, I'll put you on the speaker, and you can tell me."

W: If my memory serves me correct, I'm not that old, so I think maybe it does, you were actually the Acting Director of the FBI right up until September the fourth. Is that correct?

P: That's correct. When Louis Freeh resigned as Director, I became the Acting Director for the summer from June 25th until September 4th. So, during that summer, I had served as both the Acting Director and Deputy Director.

W: And, at that time I remember looking at some of the post-event publications and it was always entitled the system was, "blinking red." Were you on kind of high alert that something might be happening during that summer?

P: Yeah, surely right around the time Louis Freeh was leaving, we were getting consistent reports that it was some chatter that the various intelligence agencies were picking up which indicated that something was afoot. They didn't know what it was, but they knew that something was going on. They didn't have a location, and they didn't have a time frame.

This kept up through the summer until about early August and then, all of a sudden, we heard that this chatter or traffic had died down. So, we didn't know what that meant, and we didn't have any knowledge of where or when or what it was.

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P: But in the meantime I had a conference call with the SACs in July and alerted them that there was a possibility as something happening, and we didn't have any idea what it might be but that they should have their Evidence Response Teams and SWAT teams, and make sure they're ready to be deployed wherever it might be. We didn't have any indication, so we needed to make sure that teams on the East Coast and the West Coast, and southern United States were ready for anything and everything.

And we had told them to check with their sources and see if they could pick up anything. But we didn't have anything specific, and we just kept trying to figure out what was going on or whether they could glean anything more from the chatter they were hearing. But it (the chatter) was confined to what we thought were code words but didn't make any sense.

W: So, after you had your initial conversation with New York with Barry Mawn's secretary, at that time were you of the suspicion that this was an act of terrorism, or we were still uncertain?

P: We were still uncertain. About that time my secretary turned on the television, and they were starting to already play scenes from the World Trade Center. You couldn't tell what had crashed into it, but something had crashed into it pretty high up.

At that time, I called the Director's Secretary Wanda Sifford and asked her where the director was, and she said he was down giving a briefing.

The previous week we had spent the whole week briefing the Director on emergency actions in the event we had to deploy because of a nuclear attack, a deployment of the Hostage Rescue Team, or a biological weapon being located in the U.S., what actions we would take, what capabilities we had and things like that.

So he had just finished his classified briefings, and we were getting ready to start giving him some information about how we hire our people and how we discipline people, or how the investigations progress and getting him acclimated to his new role as Director of the FBI.

I told her that I was on the phone with New York and that there had been a plane crashed into the World Trade Center and, so I said, I didn't want to leave my office because I was afraid, all of a sudden, the telephone lines would be jammed with people calling and things like that, and I didn't want to lose that connection to New York.

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P: So, he (Director Mueller) arrived in my office about five minutes later, and he said, "What's going on?" And I was back on the phone with Cathy McGowan, who is Barry Mawn's Secretary, and I said, "Look at the t.v!" It was behind him. And I thought it was a replay possibly of the first plane, and I didn't realize it at the time that it was actually the second plane hitting the World Trade Center. And once that happened, then we knew we had a major terrorist incident.

W: What did you do then, if you can, it's kind of tough remembering specifics almost fifteen years later, but do you remember what your actions were then to try to put together a response? Who did you call upon or what did you do?

P: The first thing I did was I called down to SIOC, the Strategic Information Operations Center, and told them to open the entire SIOC; get hold of all the Assistant Directors, get them down there, and myself and the director, we took the stairs down two flights and went directly to SIOC, and we set ourselves up in the main conference room and, at that time, people were starting to pour into SIOC.

W: And did you have a need; thought you were going to need more resources, or how did you kind of staff this out and put it together?

P: We were still trying to, at that early stage, trying to figure out, "Was it just New York?" We hadn't heard about the Pentagon, and we hadn't heard about the flight that was still airborne. So we were still trying to understand, "Was it some kind of accident or something like that or what?" We were pretty convinced it was terrorism but we didn't know the full ramifications and, as soon as we got down to SIOC, they started getting reports of bombs coming off near the State Department, bombs going off near the White House, attacks on the Sears Tower in Chicago. It was just an inundation of different events happening all around the country.

But we were trying to sort out from all the chaos as to what was accurate and who we were getting it from. In the meantime I asked that I be connected to NORAD, the North American Air Defense Command, at Cheyenne Mountain.

P: I was put through to the colonel in charge of the watch that day and told him that I believe we definitely were under attack: two crashes in New York, and we were getting wild reports other things happening throughout the United States, and he said they were going to “full alert.” And then it was just trying to get the SIOC staff with all the other federal agencies: FAA, Secret Service, all the host of agencies that form the Joint Terrorist Task Forces to bring together all the information so we understood what was happening, and where it was happening, and try to make sure we were getting accurate information.

W: Did you have any particular obstacles to doing this, anything, any structural things that kind of got in the way that you had to work your way around to be able to “ramp up?”

P: The biggest obstacle was just trying to, in that early couple of hours, trying to understand what was happening, how much of this information we were getting and trying to sort that out and get it out of the way and not react to that.

We were getting calls from everybody and anybody whether it be the White House, the Pentagon, or whatever trying to understand looking to us to be a central clearing house as to what’s accurate, what’s not, and then we get the report of another plane crashing into the Pentagon, and we were still trying to figure out how many more.

By this time I was on the phone with the Administrator of the Federal Aviation Administration, Jean, I can’t recall her last name, and she was discussing about grounding all aircraft, and I told her I thought it was an excellent idea because she asked me, “Do you know what happened.” I said, “I have no idea.” I said, “All I know is we’ve got definitely two planes have crashed into the World Trade Center and a third one crashing into the Pentagon.” And she immediately, her staff started grounding all the planes in the U.S. air space and those coming into the U.S. air space, and they were trying to account for the planes, and we were getting regular reports from the FAA representative in SIOC as to how many planes were up, how many they had contacted, how many they had told. They didn’t know what had happened but, you know, “Get to the grounded as fast as you could.”

W: Were there, at that time, any reports from FAA of other aircraft that were squawking emergencies?

P: Oh, many. They were having problems contacting certain aircraft for whatever reason they couldn't raise on the radios, through different channels, and other aircraft that had inadvertently or purposely hit their signal to indicate that they were having emergency problems.

So, it was just if you could imagine everybody, a hundred people in a room, kind of remind you almost of the New York Stock Exchange, when you see that trading is going crazy, and everybody's yelling and everybody's waving papers or trying to get attention. And many times it was incorrect information, but the people were trying to decipher whether it was good or bad information or not.

W: I well remember there were reports on the media that the State Department was under attack, and the mall in Washington was afire. I don't know how you burn a mall because it's grass. But this was all going on, and you were kind of in charge. You had to figure out how to organize this thing, and get through the chaos, and get down to the facts of the matter. Was that a particularly difficult thing to do and, if so, how did you get around it?

P: After about an hour of this chaos, it started to settle down as people were able to populate the different positions in SIOC and start to go back to initial reports, and check them out, and get some understanding of them.

-Around this time, the Director was getting calls from the President and lots of people, and we realized it was not good for him to be in the middle of the chaos. He needed to be just right next to it but removed from it so he wouldn't be in the middle of all this back and forth as to false reports and things like that. So, I finally spoke with him, and he agreed that he needed to sit in a small office just off the conference room and, we could try to decipher what was happening, what wasn't, and give him accurate information so that when he took a phone call from the President or the Vice President or the Secretary of Defense, he'd be in an area where it was calm, he was getting accurate information and he wasn't being caught up in the noise, the bedlam that was sometimes going on.

W: Do you have - excuse me - open communication at that time with the White House, and with the State Department, and other members of the U.S. Intelligence community? Was that arranged?

P: Yes, well we had representatives from the CIA, and NSA right there in SIOC, and so they had their direct communications with their commands.

P: The Pentagon had just had a plane crash into it, and so communication with the Pentagon was not good. And if you look at some of the reports the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, was out there himself, outside the Pentagon trying to help people who were injured and things like that, and his staff was also trying to get him to “You don’t need to be doing this. You need to be running the Defense Department,” and they got him back inside.

We had a wide variety of agencies. Our main focus was, at that time, with the FAA trying to work with them and help them with the massive task. I didn’t realize how many planes were in the air coming to the United States or over the continental United States at one time especially now that it was getting around ten or ten thirty in the morning and trying to get them all down.

In addition we were getting the reports that different planes were being diverted and, there was only one actually, but we had numerous reports of other planes being diverted, being off course, being out of radio contact, and these were causing quite a bit of turmoil as to what could be done and what couldn’t be done in relation to them.

W: The other thing, at this point, it would seem that right in here you got word about the other aircraft going down near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. How did that information come in to you? Do you remember?

P: It came in in a couple of different phone calls from the Pittsburgh Division, and it was “spotty” at first. First it was that there was a plane, and it was already into the Washington, D.C., area, and that they were out of radio communications with it, and they were hearing different individuals speaking over the plane’s radio system. Then it became that the plane was down. In the meantime fighter jets from Andrews Air Force Base and from other bases were scrambling - trying to find this aircraft.

We were still trying to figure it out and finally the SAC in Pittsburgh, at the time, called me and I said, “You gotta find out as quickly as you can where the black boxes are and you need to get them to the FAA (Federal Aviation Administration) and NTSB (National Transportation Safety Board) so they can try to figure out what had happened on these planes.”

We were starting to think that they’d been hijacked, but we weren’t confident in that assessment. We didn’t want to go off and make a decision based upon what we were surmising happened, but we weren’t

sure, and we were hoping if we could get a hold of the black box we might be able to find out what exactly happened on the aircraft.

P: It was still early at the stage. Everybody now talks about 911 calls from passengers and things like that. We hadn't really started to get them filtered into us. We were still trying to figure out, was this rogue crews, was somebody hijacking the planes? How did they get the weapons on, or whatever they used? And we were still trying to piece that together.

I was back and forth with the FAA, and they were trying to think that we might have some insight into that and we didn't. The FAA Administrator was trying to figure out what actions they needed to take to better protect the aircraft. And, at the time, this is like ten thirty, eleven o'clock in the morning, September 11th and, we were still trying to figure it out.

It sounds crazy fourteen years later but, at that time, we were unsure as to exactly what happened, and we were trying to sort that out, and we had lots of scenarios, and we were trying get a handle as to what we had and what we didn't have.

We were also trying to get the passenger manifest list as quickly as possible, and start going through those names, running them through our data bases to see if there were any individuals we could identify. And we had the Dallas Division. I remember they were working on all the American Airlines flights. They were over at American Airlines headquarters there in Dallas, pulling everything they could as fast as they could trying to get all the manifests for what people were on. Also whether there was any hazardous cargo or anything like that.

W: Was there any concern at all within the building, that the FBI Headquarters Building itself might be targeted?

P: Yes, there was...we were sitting in the conference room at about eleven o'clock, and I had all the Assistant Directors with me, and we were trying to sort out all the different things that were happening. And, all of a sudden, there was this large noise and I just looked at the Assistant Director in charge of the building, the head of the Administrative Services Division, Shari Farrar, I looked at her and I said, "Did we get hit?" And she said, "I don't know," and she ran out of the room and called the office manager for the building and stuff like that and found out that we had a problem with our heating and air conditioning, and it had shuttered and then shut down and they were restarting it.

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But it was kind of how on edge we were on something like that. We just thought maybe it had hit the other side of the building because it's one entire square block, headquarters.

W: Tom as you reflect back on that day and the days that followed, were there anybody's actions in particular that seem to be way, "above and beyond," or particularly heroic as you think back?

P: Well the employees in New York and Washington Field Office, Pittsburgh Division, they just rose to the occasion. I mean it was...and particularly someone like Lenny Hatton who lost his life that day. He was a bomb tech in New York, and he ran with his police department partner into the World Trade Center, and we was never heard from him again. He died that day with his partner.

There were many others like that where you heard about employees just going in, whether it be at WFO, to try to pull people out of the building. The amount of jet fuel that was thrown onto these crashes from each of these planes was tremendous and what caused so much of the problems with the buildings.

I was talking with the SAC in Pittsburgh, and I was really pressing him. I said, "Have you found the black boxes yet?" And I still remember him telling me. He said, "Tom, they're in a piece of metal more than one foot by one foot in this wreckage." He said, "It's just pieces of everything and there's hardly any piece that's bigger than, 'one by one.'" I was just kind of stunned when he said that.

It was like... I had been involved with the crash of TWA 800 on Long Island, and the Navy had brought up huge pieces of the plane that were still intact from that crash, and the SAC was telling me that from what the information he was getting is the plane went straight into the ground at a very high speed, and he just couldn't comprehend it.

W: It's just, reflecting back on just how absolutely incredible. Did you have any that you walked away from, not just that day but after you walked away from the response, what were the feelings you had about where we, America, was going to be going with respect to this whole thing of terrorism?

P: Well I think we understood that the law enforcement response wasn't enough to deal with it at the time. We had always been working on the premise that the rule of law, which the Attorney General Janet Reno generated and promulgated, we'll bring them back, we'll bring them to

trial and they'll be dealt with in a federal court and we'll present the evidence and deal with these criminals.

P: But now it had taken on a whole new dimension and it wasn't a fight just strictly for the intelligence agencies. It was a much bigger fight, and we had seen in the East Africa bombing, the Khobar Towers, and the USS Cole an escalation, but nothing like we saw in Nine-Eleven and their sophistication on how they learned from previous bombings.

We saw that accelerate, as they learned that we would capitalize on any pocket letter they had, any phone calls they made, any credit card receipts to hunt them down, but they had realized that those were weaknesses they had. And they had started to become much better at communicating without leaving a trail, at dealing with the aftermath from what we could do, and how we would pursue them. So, they had become much more sophisticated.

W: Well it was quite an ordeal and, of course, you were right at the apex of the whole thing and even when you look back on it, it's still shocking to everybody how America could change on that one day and has remained that way.

Tom, I thank you very, very much. Is there anything else you'd like to add to this that I have not covered with you?

P: One other thing I would up testifying before the "Nine-Eleven Commission," and I think that was in 2004, as I recall, and I had been asked by the victim witness coordinator for the New York Office that a group of women whom we immediately termed, "The Jersey girls," had always wanted to meet me, and George Tenet, and the head of NSA, just to speak with and look at people who were in the government who had been there then. So I had told her I said, "I didn't want to meet with them until after my Nine-Eleven testimony." I wasn't being rude but I didn't want to meet with anybody.

So after that I met with the Jersey Girls, as they were called, and it was a little bit tense at first, shaking hands with them, and offer my condolences to them but then, after a while and back and forth and give and take, I tried to answer all their questions as to what happened and what we knew and what we didn't know and why we hadn't taken action against Moussaoui (Zacarias Moussaoui, a member of al Qaeda) or the Phoenix memo and things like that.

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I think they walked away feeling, at least satisfied that somebody met with them and somebody had spoken with them. I think the Nine-Eleven commission had met with them, but it wasn't the same as meeting with people who were in charge that day and had a responsibility that day.

So it was a pretty difficult meeting but I felt better afterwards and, I know if they did, but they seemed to feel better after that meeting.

W: Tom, thank you very much. You've been very giving of your off-time here in your (Unintelligible) and it is very much appreciated.

P: Well, my condolences go out to all those especially the family of Lenny Hatton and the family of John O'Neill who had just retired a month before. They lost their lives that day and the nearly three thousand who lost their lives that day.

It was a great change in the way America views the world and how we dealt with terrorism and problems in the world.

W: A whole new world after that day and hasn't changed back since really. Again, I thank you very much and this is Dave Williams talking to former Acting Director of the FBI, Tom Pickard, on November the 24th, 2015 and that will be the end of this interview.

Thank you so much.

P: Thank you Dave.