



Former Agents of the FBI Foundation Oral History Heritage Project

Subject: The morning of September 11, 2001 in New York and events leading up to the 911 attacks.

Interviewee: Charles Stern Oral History Interviews on June 6 and June 15, 2016 by Telephone.
Special Agent Service Dates: 1985-2012

Assigned Locations: Oklahoma City, New York City, Newark

Interviewer: Brian R. Hollstein, Special Agent Service Dates: 1967-1977

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Summary:

In this two-part interview, SA Stern discusses his involvement in cases of domestic terrorism and his experiences in New York on the morning of the attacks of September 11, 2001. After serving as a uniformed police officer for five years, SA Stern was accepted into the FBI in 1967 and assigned to Oklahoma City. He was there for three years and worked on a wide variety of cases including international terrorism, government crimes, Indian tribal cases, and counter-intelligence. In 1989, he transferred to New York and became part of the country's first Joint Terrorism Task Force with NYPD working on cases of Iraqi based domestic terrorism, including the 1994 World Trade Center bombing, the Philippine Airliner attack, and the TWA Flight 800 explosion. In 1997 SA Stern was promoted to a Supervisor of a Counter-Terrorism Squad, remaining in that position for eight years, until he transferred to Newark in 2005 to do counter-terrorism work. On the morning of September 11, 2001, SA Stern was on limited duty since he was still recovering from injuries from a car accident. He was coming to work a bit later to miss traffic and was sitting at the entrance of the Holland Tunnel, looking right across the Hudson River at the Twin Towers of the Trade Center, when the first plane hit the North Tower at 8:46 am. SA Stern discusses the events of that morning and the task of setting up an FBI command post at the location of the Trade Center as the second plane struck and the South Tower collapsed.

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FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION
Interview of Former Special Agent,
Charles B. Stern
Interviewing Agent
Brian R. Hollstein
June 6, 2016

Brian R. Hollstein

(H): Today's date is June 6, 2016. My name is Brian R. Hollstein. I'm interviewing Charles B. as in Bravo, Stern (S-t-e-r-n) on the telephone and you're known as Chuck, right?

Charles B. Stern

(S): That's correct.

H: Okay, we're all set. Chuck where do you come from originally?

S: I was born in Atlantic City, New Jersey and I lived there until I was about five and then we moved to the neighboring town which is also a beach town, Ventnor and I grew up there.

I went to the University of Pennsylvania, the Wharton School which is the Business School at U of P.

H: Great and how did you happen to find the FBI?

S: Well I was really interested in a law enforcement career even before I went into college. Then I went in as a business major I guess thinking a little bit about the accounting major if the Bureau found that desirable. So I was interested in the Bureau also. And then after I studied accounting for a while I could say that didn't interest me as much as I thought it would. So I ended with a Bachelor of Science in Economics.

Once I got out of school, you know the Bureau, if you didn't have an accounting major the Bureau wanted three years of full-time work experience and I was interested actually in uniformed police work.

S: So I took the police test, the civil service test for my town and I ended up being hired right after I graduated from college. So I was a uniformed policeman in the town I grew up in and I did that for five years. Although after I had the first three years of work experience-as soon as I could-I applied to the FBI and it took me two years to get in.

Charles B. Stern

June 6, 2016

Page 2

H: Yeah that was what was happening according to how many people were retiring.

S: Exactly, right and I remember what the applicant recruiter told me was that you could never tell, that they might have a need for a former submarine captain, so he really didn't know. In fact I needed two weeks' notice and we came right up to the...then they thought they had me in a class and I was telling the applicant recruiter, "Gee I really need the two weeks because the town owes me some money and if I don't give them the two weeks they're not gonna give me that money that they owe me" and it was kind of like a severance type of a thing.

So I ended up...they still wouldn't tell me. I ended up after the two weeks putting in a letter just saying I intended to do resign to take this position and fortunately the offer did come through and I went into that agents' class.

H: Okay well that was good. Before we get started on your actual Bureau activities and what have you I want to remind you that we don't want any classified information discussed. If you know it to be classified and we don't want any informant names or designations used and we should be avoiding also any sensitive investigative techniques which we might get into talking about too.

So those are the only things. So you went through training school and let's just very quickly go through what offices you were involved in.

S: Okay. I went through and finished Quantico and of course you receive your new agent's first office assignment during Quantico and mine was Oklahoma City.

I had never really even thought about Oklahoma City as far as places to go. I really never even thought about Oklahoma City at all, and so I ended up going there and I spent just over three years there.

Did you want to go into what I did there?

H: Well, was it Criminal work?

S: Yeah, I was on a squad that did a variety of things. We handled some of the RA territories-they were handled off that desk. We did foreign counter-intelligence, international terrorism, civil rights, general government crimes, and crime on government reservations.

Charles B. Stern

June 6, 2016

Page 3

S: So for a while I had a road trip in Canadian County, Oklahoma, which is one of the counties to the west, and that encompassed the El Reno Federal Correctional Institution. So I did some cases out of the prison. I did some Indian tribal cases; some leads and stuff on crime. It was crime on the Indian trust land. It was actually crime on Indian reservations.

H: Right.

S: But there were no active reservations so a lot of that land was held in trust for the tribes by the Government. So if there was just like a serious assault, say one person stabbed another person, but it was in this house that's on Indian land the FBI would be the investigative agency.

In fact that was the first interview I ever did in my FBI career. It was a native American who had been stabbed in an argument and I had to go interview him; do the victim interview, and they had flown him into Oklahoma City.

So that was kind of an eye opener to me because I really didn't....you know he was talking about things and he was actually talking about sniffing paint and I had no idea what he was talking about. You know he said, "I went to the Otasco" which is a department store. I never heard of an Otasco "and I bought crystal clear Krylon" because it was clear spray paint and he liked the clear spray paint so that he could....you know when they sniffed it on a rag, they didn't get the paint. You couldn't see it on your face, you know and I had no idea.

H: So he sniffed a can of Krylon(laughing).

S: (Laughing) that was kind of the Bureau plan-to take you out of your environment. That was kind of an eye-opener.

H: From O.K. City, you had three years there?

S: A little over three, and then I was sitting in the center of the country and they had passed this demonstration project in New York, which was-if you recall New York had been experiencing a lot of agents resigning when they got sent there because of the high cost of living. So the Bureau planned this demonstration project. They said, "Well let's try it in New York and see" because at that time agents throughout the country were being paid identically.

Charles B. Stern

June 6, 2016

Page 4

H: Right.

S: So an agent in Oklahoma City was making the same thing as an agent in New York and of course in Oklahoma City they had a much nicer house, much higher standard of living there. So they passed this demonstration project and it was a twenty-five percent increase and then actually a bonus if you moved.

I was not married at the time, and my parents were still living in Ventnor in New Jersey and the L.A. Office, I know was way down in personnel so I was sitting there and figuring I have to come up on my orders soon, because at that time you spent two to four years in your first office and then you would be transferred.

So my thought was, well I could do nothing and get sucked into L.A., it's farther from where I'm from and I'll get paid the same figure that I'm being paid in Oklahoma and it's a high cost of living area or I can volunteer for New York, go there, get the sign-in bonus and I'd be closer to home.

So I did. I volunteered and I immediately got my orders because even then not a lot of people wanted to go to New York. I immediately got my orders and I think it was ninety days I was living in New Jersey but pretty far from where I grew up, and commuting into the city.

I went right to, in New York; I had towards the end of my time in Oklahoma City-I had been working a number of international terrorism cases and I was assigned to the Joint Terrorism Task Force-or was it the Joint Terrorist Task Force at the time-in New York. It was three squads at the time and I was assigned to IT-2. There were two international squads and one domestic terrorism squad.

So I went right onto that squad and....

H: I'm sorry, was that International?

S: Right, International. It was two.

H: Okay.

S: Yeah IT-1 and IT-2. The way it was set up at the time was they had two international squads that were divided-one did the groups. IT-1 did the individual terrorist groups. IT-2 did the country based threats.

S: So we did the middle-Eastern countries, the North African countries that were sponsors of terrorism. It was a mixture of some counter-Intelligence work and some actual international terrorism work.

Now I got there in eighty-nine and we got very busy in ninety, ninety-one because we had the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

H: Right.

S: And then the first Gulf War. So I was on the squad that handled Iraqi based terrorism and of course there was a big concern that when we entered the war there that there would be some type of sabotage or terrorism here. So that kept us very busy.

I remember I was actually on duty in the Command Post in New York when the first shots were fired in the Gulf War, and it was kind of interesting. I mean we knew it was coming, but we didn't know the exact moment-and as I look back on it, without going into classified things, we were working on certain projects and we were told this has to be done by this certain time. and then a few hours after that certain time it ended up that's when the first shots were fired.

So it was an interesting place to be at that time. I mean we were very, very busy.

H: Now that was the Joint Terrorist, what made it joint?

S: At that point New York had the first Joint Terrorism Task Force in the country, and it was founded in 1980 with the NYPD, and that's a whole story in itself. The genesis of it was there were a lot of domestic terrorism bombings in New York City.

S: What would happen is the NYPD detectives from the Arson Explosion Squad would respond and the FBI agents would respond and they ended up, they were working at cross purposes.

You know, I'll say that. I mean there were supposedly incidents where the NYPD would squirrel away witnesses and evidence. There were a lot of hard feelings.

Charles B. Stern

June 6, 2016

Page 6

S: So Kenny Walton, I didn't know him, but I know of him. He just passed away, actually a few days ago. He sat down with the Police Commissioner, I think was Pat Murphy at the time, and they hammered out this agreement. They said, "This can't go on this way. We're working at cross purposes." So they brought over ten detectives from arson explosion and they had ten FBI Agents on the squad and they made it work.

But then it gradually expanded. But when I got to New York in eighty-nine it was still almost exclusively NYPD and FBI. After the ninety-three World Trade Center bombing, that's when a lot of other agencies came on board.

H: So that would be people like ATF?

S: Yes.

H: Okay.

S: State police, other local police, immigration. You know all those other agencies.

H: Oh boy, that really gets unwieldy I would imagine after a while. I was in New York during the Puerto Rican bombing problems, Fraunces Tavern and all the rest of that stuff. There was always room for improvement as we all know.

S: Okay, right, right.

H: Okay, so you were there in New York until when?

S: I was in New York from eighty-nine until 2005; sixteen years.

H: Okay, you were a real New Yorker then. Then you were transferred over to New Jersey, was it? Newark?

S: Yes I was-actually, of the sixteen years, I spent eight years as a Supervisor. The last day in New York I was a Supervisor of a Counter-Terrorism Squad and then in 2005 I had almost twenty years in the Bureau and I just wanted to do something a little bit different and I stepped down and I took my OP transfer-which I think they don't even call OPs anymore.

Charles B. Stern

June 6, 2016

Page 7

S: I'm struggling to remember, because the Bureau keeps changing the names, but basically the preference, a seniority based transfer to the Newark Division and then I spent a few months up in Newark and they had a couple of counter-terrorism spots in the Red Bank Resident Agency, which is down at the shore and it's close to where I live. I mean just a few minute commute and I was working long enough to get assigned down there. So I spent the last seven years of my career in Red Bank doing counter-terrorism work.

H: Okay and now you are happily retired. No more terrorism.

S: Yes. I'll tell you something about terrorism especially in New York and for all those years-you have to have been there to experience it. You might have experienced some of it if you were there during the Puerto Rican bombings.

H: Oh yeah. There was always a lot of action and much of it was at night and on weekends for some reason or another. So it was a very busy times trying to keep up with things.

Okay let's now get into the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. At this point you had been in the office for what, four years?

S: Right it was ninety-three, that's four years and at that time they had done some reorganization in New York. The JTTF, the Joint Terrorism Task Force, didn't have an SAC when I got there.

New York as you know has different divisions, each headed by an SAC. There's the Criminal Division, you had the Intelligence Division which was the Counter-Intelligence stuff, had an Administrative Division.

But the Terrorism Task Force, there was no SAC. It was an ASAC that ran the three squads and he was the Assistant Special Agent in Charge, was over the three supervisors and then the ASAC reported directly to the Deputy Assistant Director in Charge in New York who then reported to the Assistant Director in Charge. So we were kind of in an unusual situation.

Charles B. Stern

June 6, 2016

Page 8

S: After the Gulf War-and you know I could speculate on it, but the decision was made to, well there were some things that were counter-intelligence and stuff where they were re-allocating resources and they decided-you know the Berlin Wall had come down. So they were re-allocating some resources and they decided-it was kind of a controversial decision at the time. They split up the JTTF into International and Domestic. So they put the International.....let me digress a little bit.

Initially what happened is we were in that situation under the Deputy Assistant Director. Then for about a year they moved us to the Criminal Division. So we were under the Criminal SAC.

Then with the Berlin Wall coming down they wanted to re-allocate some resources. So they moved the international terrorism stuff into the intelligence division which was the foreign counter-intelligence work.

They left the Domestic Squad in the Criminal Division which is controversial to those of us that were working it because there's a lot of cross over between the domestic and the international, because as an example, you had some black Muslim groups that had close contacts with some of the people that were affiliated with some of the International groups.

So the agents were trying to make it work. The agents and detectives were still communicating, but we were now sitting on different floors and had different chains of command and stuff. So that wasn't the greatest situation in the world.

That went on for a little bit of time and as we approached-when we did that reorganization they created more squads. So I ended up on a squad that was doing kind of rest of the world groups.

We just had a lot of things over there. We did Northern Ireland terrorism, which at the time was a pretty big deal in New York.

H: Sure.

S: We had, some of the rest of the world groups. We had, I'm trying to think of off-hand some of the things that we were working on, but there was another squad that was doing a lot of work that had to do with Al-Gamma Al-Islamiyya which was the Blind Sheikh's group. And so there was a lot of activity going on with that.

S: The Domestic Squad ended up, they were using them, the Criminal Division on a lot of just regular violent crimes stuff because there was this feeling among some people, that terrorism was over.

Now people who have seen the big cases in the seventies and the early eighties...back then there was actually talk that the NYPD was going to pull the detectives back from the JTTF because they didn't feel that they were really needed over there anymore.

We were coming up on the eve of the bombing. I mean there was all this stuff going on with the Blind Sheikh and his supporters. At the same time there was the talk that terrorism was over. This wasn't amongst the Bureau people but it was, well, the Bureau people who worked terrorism always took it seriously. Some people in the Bureau, I think, who were not real familiar with what was going on, who worked different violations really didn't think it was that high a priority and I think the police department at that time definitely didn't think it was a priority.

H: Interesting.

S: So we came up to, now it's February 26, 1993 and I was on the squad that did the rest of the world stuff, and it was snowing that day and-of course I remember it vividly-and the weather was not great and I was getting up to go to lunch. I was going to go with another agent; go grab a sandwich. It was a Friday and we heard this big rumble and I said to somebody on the next squad over there was an agent over there and I said, "What was that?" You know, and they said, "Oh it must be thunder" because the weather was bad. I mean it could have been.

But then we walked out the door for lunch and we went into a restaurant that had a TV on, and of course you could hear the emergency response. I mean you hear fire engines of course all the time in New York. But then we started seeing it on the TV.

H: Wow.

S: It was initially coming out that it was a transformer explosion. That was the initial thing, so we ended up going back to the office and some people from the Domestic Squad, which in the past had handled most of the bombings, they ended up going down there with the NYPD Bomb Squad to take a look and as soon as those guys got down there, into the parking garage, which is where the seat of the explosion was, the word started coming back, "Wait a minute, there's too much damage and there's no transformer down here." I mean there's nothing that could have exploded to cause that damage.

H: Let me just pause just a moment. Where was the office, the New York Office at this time?

S: It was at 26 Federal Plaza.

So I mean you bring up a good point. I mean the office was pretty close. It's actually a short walk; a ten minute walk down to the Trade Center.

So I never went down there that day. Afterward it started coming back that things were bad. I remember I ended up in the command post trying to help out. I mean answer phones and things.

H: If I could plunge in again here.

S: Sure.

H: A Command Post, was this already assembled somewhere?

S: Yeah we....

H: Ready for whatever was needed?

S: Yeah what they did in New York, if you remember the Statue of Liberty rededication, I think that was in eighty-six. They built, in New York as an operation center, I mean it's a twenty-four hour-I'm sure it's much bigger now but it was pretty big at the time. I mean that was kind of like the nerve center of the office. It was a twenty-four hour operation. You always had support people and agents working there, answering the phones, monitoring the radios, that type of thing.

Charles B. Stern

June 6, 2016

Page 11

S: Then attached to that was a separate command post which was all set up with individual seats and you know, big monitors at the front like projection TV and stuff and it could be activated just by basically turning on the lights and sitting people down.

So that was there. We just activated it. So I was in there for a while trying to figure out what was going on and then some high ranking people came in and moved people out, including me. So I was thrown out and I went back to the squad area and I was there for a while, then I was summoned back up and I ended up being up there.

I actually wrote the teletype to Headquarters. The initial teletype, the opening teletype informing Headquarters on paper of what had happened so far and what we knew. I think I still have the rough draft of that somewhere that I wrote out on a yellow legal pad with some instructions.

Don Clark was one of the, I think he was the ASAC of the Criminal Division at the time. But he told me what he basically wanted in that and I ended up writing it.

So I think initially it was opened as a straight bombing case at the time, which would have been, I think the classification was 174 and then later on it was made into an international terrorism case.

But the way I got involved in it was there was some mis-information that came to us in the intelligence community. It was debunked, but the initial information was misinterpreted and it was thought to be a Serbian group that might have done it.

So it went to that international squad that I was on and then there was also the bombing aspect of it which, in the past, had been handled by the Domestic Squad. So they decided rather quickly that what we would do is they would make up another Task Force within the Task Force. The case was code named TRADEBOM for the Bureau practice on most of the bombing cases of using BOM without the final "b" on it.

H: Right.

S: So the World Trade Center case was called TRADEBOM. So they created this TRADEBOM Task Force and what they did is they took some people from the "rest of the world squad." They took people from the Domestic Squad and combined them and then all these other agencies immediately because people were frightened.

Charles B. Stern

June 6, 2016

Page 12

H: Sure they were.

S: Right exactly. So a lot of other agencies were pumping bodies in there, and that's when we got the State Police and like ATF, and Secret Service sent four guys over, four very good guys all playing integral parts in the investigation.

H: You stayed then in the Bureau room.

S: Yes. What they did, what the Bureau did, there was a...I'm jumping ahead a little bit but this was in the days following. But that's the way I got involved was the fact that they it looked like it was a Serbian group at the time. So they wanted to include the squad that had some of the cases on Serbian stuff.

H: Sure.

S: Although I was not working in that particular area by myself they thought that it would be a good idea to bring these different elements together, and as I said we had this break-up before-hand of the Domestic Squad in the Criminal Division and the International stuff in the Intelligence Division.

So now all of a sudden they were putting it back together and so they kind of formed a Task Force just separate for this, which they later, as time went on and all that domestic stuff ended up being moved into the Intelligence Division so that everything was back together again.

And now of course later, as time went forward they created a whole other division just for terrorism. So the Terrorism Division now in New York is huge, probably about twenty-four squads.

H: Like the tail is wagging the dog.

S: Yeah.

H: I arrived in New York in seventy-two, organized crime was a big thing and they were forming task forces and squad after squad. New guys coming were all thrown onto these squads and away we went. So it morphs over time depending on what is going on and it doesn't sound like it changed much since then.

S: Right.

Charles B. Stern

June 6, 2016

Page 13

H: So here we were we had a bombing, we didn't know for sure who had done it. There was some mis- information I gather but what happened next?

S: Well we started doing that command post, so I remember going home late that night and coming back in the morning and I guess I was in communication with a couple of the supervisors; my supervisor and a couple of the other supervisors who were working on it.

I did go down to the scene the next day just to get a look at it myself. I was told I was going to be one of the case agents. So what they did is they took me, because they were merging back the two squads, the domestic squad and one of the international squads. We had two co-case agents. Tom Donlon was the Agent on the domestic squad so the two of us were told we were going to be the case agents.

Neil Herman became the Case Supervisor for that. So Tommy and I worked for Neil.

H: How do I spell Tom Donlon?

S: D-o-n-l-o-n.

H: Is he still around?

S: He is. He's retired. He had a bunch of good positions after he left the Bureau. He retired as a Section Chief at Headquarters then he went on to be Head of Homeland Security for the State of New York for a while and then he has worked in various corporate security things. But he's still around he lives in the New York area.

H: Okay, good. So there you were. You merged now with a supervisor and you have a place to sit.

S: Things started happening very quickly.

The Sunday after the bombing, you have to remember that this explosion was in the World Trade Center in the parking garage below, and on top of that parking garage was the Vista Hotel and it was held up by these very long supports that went down to the parking garage and the lateral support for those steel piers was the floor of the parking garage.

Charles B. Stern

June 6, 2016

Page 14

S: So you could kind of imagine long soda straws stuck in sand. If you push down on them the soda straws would bend, but if you had some support going cross-wise it would add strength. Well that was the strength. The way they built that was they put those piers and they poured those concrete floors and then when everything was all set up then they built the hotel on top of it.

Well, when the bomb detonated it blew out those floors and so now you had the Vista Hotel on top of these steel beams and the Vista Hotel was actually in some danger of collapsing. It didn't. But the reason I bring this up is you had a crime scene that was unstable. It was dangerous.

So on Sunday some of our people, some ATF, some NYPD Bomb Squad guys, they went down there and they were told, "Look it's unstable, we want you to go down, take some swabbings." You know where they would take chemical swabs to be analyzed to see if they could detect the presence of certain explosives.

H: Sure.

S: So they were to go down there, do that and get out as quickly as possible. But when they went down there they saw some things and they said, "We're not gonna just leave stuff here in case the place collapses. We think it's worthwhile." So they went against instructions collected some pieces of evidence.

You can kind of quickly tell in a car bombing, just by the nature of the damage which vehicle held the bomb because, the other vehicles were not taken apart to the extent that that vehicle was taken apart.

So there were some car parts that they took out and they put them on a stretcher and spirited them out of there to the NYPD Lab. But one of the things turned out to be the left frame rail from a Ford van.

Just to show how things happen. It went up to NYPD Crime Lab. It didn't go into Bureau custody Sunday. So it sat up there for a few days while they're looking at it trying to figure out what it was. There were some numbers on it, kind of unusual markings that were, if you look at it, it's almost numbers and letters put in kind of like in a dot fashion. You know, like punched into the metal.

Charles B. Stern

June 6, 2016

Page 15

S: So they finally decided that maybe they should ask somebody who was familiar with this stuff. So a few days went by until Wednesday and they ended up talking to—you know the FBI had an Auto-Theft Task Force and Jamie Cedano and Richie Mica; they were partners, and they called them in and they showed them. It was an ATF guy who showed it to them. They had taken some tracings. Jamie works for Siemens now. He's retired. He told me that, "I told them you don't know what you have here. This is a confidential Vehicle Identification Number." And he said he got on the computer and then like in thirty seconds, there's a way to reconstruct that abbreviated number into the full Vehicle Identification Number. These are hidden numbers that the manufacturers put on a vehicle. When you think of a VIN on a vehicle, you think of the thing that's on the dashboard in the windshield. But for obvious reasons if the car is stolen and they replace that there's some hidden places where the manufacturer places the same VIN. So they reconstructed that number and they...

H: Hold on just a moment. How do I spell Jamie Cedano's name.

S: It's J-a-m-i-e C-e-d-a-n-o.

H: How were they known?

S: The FBI's Auto-Theft Task Force.

H: Okay, and the other fellow?

S: Mica, Richie Mica is M-i-c-a.

As soon as they had the Vehicle Identification Number they ran it through the FBI State and National Crime Information Center and an immediate report just popped up because it had been reported stolen from a place called DIB Leasing in Jersey City, New Jersey.

So now that was the first big lead in the case, and I think a lot of people who know something about that case, they know that a piece of that van was found with this confidential VIN number on it. But most people if you ask them, they think it was about the size of a postage stamp. I mean this thing was six feet long and a couple of feet wide and it took two people to lift it.

H: Wow.

Charles B. Stern

June 6, 2016

Page 16

S: It was a big piece. It wasn't something they found by sifting through debris. It was basically lying on the side of the crater. But I mean they took the initiative to retrieve it, although it would have been better off if it didn't sit up at the NYPD Lab for a few days, but in the end it all worked out.

So now we have this lead that it's reported stolen at DIB Leasing. So now very quickly we're on the phone to the Newark Office and they go out to DIB Leasing and they find yeah, it had been rented by this guy, Mohammed Salameh, and amazingly enough he had reported it stolen and he wanted his money back because, he had a four hundred dollar deposit- and he had been there previously and he was still pursuing, actively pursuing that he wanted his deposit given back.

So immediately the name Mohammed Salameh gets run through our systems and it comes up that he was one of the followers of the Blind Sheikh. He was in that whole group so he was definitely an identified player.

H: Blind Sheikh is who?

S: Omar Abdel-Rahman.

H: Okay and what was his claim to fame besides being blind?

S: He was the leader of Al-gama'a-al-Islamiyya which is a radical Egyptian terrorist group. In some ways it was like...it wasn't al Qaeda but I mean it had some overlaps with al Qaeda. He had been at war with the Egyptian Government and he had applied for a visa and he was granted it and came over here.

That was another whole thing that I'm not even going to attempt to go into because that's another whole other book. But he ended up here in the United States and he was in Jersey City and in Brooklyn and he had a bunch of followers here.

They were involved in-basically one of the things was financing people. He had people going over to Afghanistan to fight. So Salameh was a known guy.

So now things started happening very quickly and the first thing we wanted to do was, you know, we knew that Salameh was going to come back there to DIB Leasing.

Charles B. Stern

June 6, 2016

Page 17

S: So it got to the point-we were working very closely already with the U.S. Attorney's Office of the Southern District of New York. They are and were unbelievable at the U.S. Attorney's Office.

We sat down with them and devised a strategy to try, before we arrested Salameh, to try and elicit as much information as we could from him. So the Newark Office put two guys in the DIB Leasing and we sat down with the A.U.S.As and we made up a questionnaire for Salameh and we put two guys in there undercover from the Newark Office. It was a state trooper and an agent and they pretended, each of them pretended that he was a loss prevention guy I think; somebody from corporate headquarters of Ryder, because it was a Ryder rental van.

So they basically told Salameh when he came back for the money, "I'm from Ryder Corporate Headquarters and we'll give you your money back but we have to ask you these questions first." So they were questions kind of designed to elicit as much as we could from him because we knew once we arrested him the chances were that we might not be getting anything else.

H: Right.

S: So now he comes in. I think I was in New York at the time, in the command post again. We knew this was going on. The following morning- we were up late that night before with this whole plan. So the Newark Office wired up DIB Leasing.

So now I'm in the command post early in the morning and we're waiting for him to get there and we had a bunch of New York surveillance squads, you know with Newark's knowledge, all around the place. So the surveillance guys are reporting, "There are news trucks here, TV news trucks. What's going on?" Well somehow it got leaked to the news media. So the surveillance squads had to basically shoo these guys away and fortunately they did. They got them away.

Then Salameh comes in and they introduce themselves to him. They go through the whole thing, the list, and from that we did get some additional addresses because he was actually truthful on some things, like where were you living here, because he said he rented it for moving purposes. So we actually got a couple of locations, extra locations.

Charles B. Stern

June 6, 2016

Page 18

S: So he finishes and the tape is kind of funny because he leaves and before he leaves, they give him the four hundred dollars and he says "This is justice" and as he says that the surveillance teams move in and tackle him.

So they throw him in a Bureau vehicle and they run him through the Holland Tunnel and bring him over to New York. So now this gets kind of interesting. So I was in there and I'm told by somebody, "Go down and get him from the surveillance squad." So I said, "Okay." So I grabbed another agent Darrel Ginden I remember and I went down to the garage and the surveillance car pulls up and they basically push him out of the car. I put my handcuffs on him. They took their handcuffs off and now I got him and all his property.

So now I pick the guy up. I'm told to pick him up but don't interview him right away. So I take him up to this interview room in 26 Federal Plaza and I'm sitting there with him and I'm told not to interview him.

Well this is how things go. What happened was Sessions was the Director at the time. I was told that the Director decided that he did not want him Mirandized by a regular agent. He wanted Bill Gavin, who was the Deputy Assistant Director, to witness the Miranda warning.

So whenever I think about that I mean I can't see the logic of that. So I ended up sitting with him for like a half hour having small talk with him because I was under orders about the Miranda warning. So I couldn't question him. So I guess you could call it some rapport building time but that's about it.

So anyway eventually Bill Gavin got there and there were some other people. We had John Anticev there. He was one of the agents who was very knowledgeable in the Islamic Terrorism circles and history and stuff. He had been working on the Blind Sheikh case. I Mirandized him with Bill Gavin present. He ultimately said he wanted an attorney so we really didn't get anything from him.

Charles B. Stern

June 6, 2016

Page 19

S: So quickly after that we had the contents of his...I'll digress a little bit- you could see he was kind of a cocky guy. He was a little bit arrogant, you know. I don't think he completely understood how much we could do investigatively. And I saw-what happened was...we ended up taking him over for his initial appearance and by then it was evening time and it was not handled the way you would take a normal prisoner over for an initial appearance. I mean we took him over from 26 Fed to the courthouse but the U.S. Marshalls met us halfway and they started running alongside the car like Secret Service Agents and there were a lot of guns and a big crowd of news media and you could almost see his demeanor start to change. It's like "uh oh, this might be a little bigger than I thought."

H: It's the big league huh?

S: Yeah, yeah it was the big league. So now very quickly we started to put together the network of people that were involved, and one of the places we were able to identify was a place on Kensington Avenue. I think it was 34 Kensington in Jersey City. A few of the bombers lived there and they swapped back and forth apartments and there was a guy that the Newark Office ended up...they did some search warrants. We did a bunch of search warrants very quickly.

They got a guy; it was a fellow who was an Iraqi American named Abdul Rahman Yasin. He remains the only fugitive in the World Trade Center bombing case. They had him and they questioned him and he cooperated to a certain extent with them and he ended up taking them to this address called Forty Pamrapo Avenue in Jersey City, and that was the bomb factory and that was really the big break. That apartment was rented by Salameh and Ramzi Yousef, who was actually the bomb builder and there was a lot of forensic evidence recovered from there.

Also-we were able to identify a storage locker-that's another whole aspect of it in Jersey City. It was one of those commercial storage places. It was called A Space Station Storage and these guys had rented the locker there and they were using it to store all their chemicals.

It's kind of funny the way that came up. The guy who was the manager of Space Station Storage-if you hear him tell the story... a couple of days before the bombing these guys had these big tanks. Well first of all they had seen them coming and going a lot and they were these middle-Eastern guys, their coming and going a lot from the storage locker. So they were kind of looking at them like, "What are these guys doing?" but they really didn't do anything about it.

Charles B. Stern

June 6, 2016

Page 20

S: Then they see this welding supply company come and deliver these big tanks of hydrogen. So that was something that was a big no-no in a storage facility. They didn't want any flammable gases. So they stopped the guys. They said, "Wait a minute you can't put these things in here." So it created something that really made them stand out and they objected. They wanted to put them in there. They wouldn't do it. So then they made some calls from a pay phone there which helped us identify some other numbers and stuff in the end.

But after the bombing happened this guy who is the manager, he's thinking about it. What he did, he didn't tell anybody but he went to the corporate headquarters. He called them. He said, "Send me the master key for that locker."

So in the meantime a few days go by and the key comes and it's a pretty funny story when you hear him tell it. He had a friend who was a high school chemistry teacher. So he calls the friend up and he says, "I want you to come with me" and this is like at night. They open up the locker door. They tied a rope to it and they go down the hallway and they pull the rope to remotely open the door and nothing happens. Then they go in there and there's all these chemicals and stuff and the chemistry teacher is in there looking at it and he brought a chemistry textbook and he says, "Yeah this is like bad stuff."

So they ended up calling the Bureau. They called the Newark Office and then that's how we identified that place. There were a lot of things happening very quickly. In the end we developed...I talked about Abdul Rahman Yasin. So the Newark Office was talking to him.

There was so much information coming in at one time. He took them to the bomb factory. That's how they found the bomb factory. One of the things is by the time we really knew of his existence-he had a brother who he lived with and the brother...I can't remember which passport. He had two passports. He had an Iraqi passport and a U.S. passport. They had taken one of them away. I think they took the U.S. passport away. I can't remember which one it was. But they left him with one passport.

Charles B. Stern

June 6, 2016

Page 21

S: Well before we really knew what was really going on-they thought he was cooperating. He ended up...his brother drove him out to Kennedy, put him on a plane to Jordan but he ended up in Baghdad. So he was out of our reach but it was one of those things. The thing with the bomb factory was how did he know? I mean, he knew because he was there mixing the chemicals.

So he was the one that got away, which is a shame. But we ended up with a total of six people ultimately that we ended up trying and convicting, four on the initial trial and then the last two were apprehended overseas much later.

I actually participated in two renditions in this case from overseas. The first one was would have been in March of '93 and that was Mahmud Abouhalima. Now he was an Egyptian. He was kind of an unusual looking guy. He stood out in everybody's description because he was very tall, muscular guy, was a cab driver in New York and a black car driver. But he had red hair and freckles. So you could imagine that he would stand out; although he did have a brother Mohamad Abouhalima who looked very similar. So you have two big Egyptian guys with red hair and freckles.

But he fled after the bombing over to Egypt and the Egyptians ended up picking him up.

So in March I got a call one night from Carson Dunbar who was one the ASACs-I guess he would have been the International Terrorism ASAC at the time-and he wouldn't give me too much information. But he said, "Look get ready, you're going to travel tomorrow. You're going to be doing something" and he told me where to be and we ended up going to Mac Arthur Airport.

I went with Louie Napoli. Louie was another very well-known guy. He was an NYPD Detective. He's retired now. But he was John Anticev's partner on the Blind Sheikh related investigations. So he had a lot of institutional knowledge.

Charles B. Stern

June 6, 2016

Page 22

S: We went down to the Wall Street heliport and got on an NYPD helicopter. They flew us up to Mac Arthur Airport and when we got up there they put us on a little Gulf-Stream jet and off we went and I remember we landed in Prestwick, Scotland. It was, of course, kind of funny- they had us on like a hard stand near a closed hangar way, away from everything else and I remember the guys were speaking Scottish. I could hardly, I mean they're speaking English with a Scottish burr and I could hardly understand them because they were re-fueling the plane.

Then we took off from there and we landed in-you know we came in over the pyramids and stuff and landed at I think it was Cairo Airport and we were told we were not to leave the plane and we saw...but I think at one point I think we actually did get off and stood on the tarmac.

There were Egyptian security guys that almost looked like they were from central casting. It was warm but they were all wearing leather coats and had very large holstered firearms. They looked pretty mean and they took Abouhalima out of the car and he was blind-folded with like gauze, like hospital gauze around his head. He looked like a mummy, and they basically escorted him onto the plane, gave him to us and that was it. Louie and I ended up interviewing him on the way back. We brought him back. I'm trying to think where we landed on the way back. I think somewhere in England or Ireland on the way back.

H: That's a lot of flight time for goodness sake.

S: Yeah well there's an even longer one that I'll tell you about later. So that was the first rendition. The second rendition wasn't until the first trial was over. But Ramzi Yousef, the guy who built the bomb-we were getting reports...well I'll digress again.

There was a fire in an apartment in the Philippines and I think it was January of 1995 and what happened was there were these guys living in an apartment and there was a fire in the apartment. There's still some speculation of exactly what they were doing. But they were doing something with chemicals, burning chemicals and they got smoke. The security guard called the fire department and the police and basically they had a bomb factory in this place.

Charles B. Stern

June 6, 2016

Page 23

S: So the guys that were living there, Yousef was one of them, escaped. But they left a laptop there and some other stuff. So Yousef convinced this other guy Murad who was one of his conspirators in the Philippines to go back and get it and Murad got captured. So from him and the laptop we got a lot information about Yousef.

We knew a lot about him anyway but we found out that there had been an explosion in December of '94 on a Philippine Airliner where a Japanese business man had been killed in a bombing. And nobody knew who really did it. I mean it was done with a bomb with a Casio watch used as a timer. Well it turned out that Yousef was over there with his co-conspirators, and that became another Bureau case called Manila Air. It was a conspiracy to blow up twelve 747s at the same time which would have been kind of a devastating thing.

H: Wow.

S: So Frank Pellegrino, who was an Agent in New York on the Trade Center Squad, the bombing squad, he had been concentrating a lot on the fugitive investigation of Yousef. So he ended up being the case agent on that case and did just an unbelievable job. Basically they put together that airline bombing conspiracy from a box of records; a very, very painstaking investigation.

But anyway, so after this we started getting information of where Yousef might be and kind of a fast-forward, we were getting pretty good information that he was in Pakistan and we thought we might have a chance to get him.

Now we had sent Frank Pellegrino and a Secret Service Agent on the Task Force, Brian Parr, over to the Embassy in Islamabad months before with the idea that they would make contacts over there because they really knew the Yousef aspect of the investigation and the Trade Center case and stuff and that they would be able to establish some contacts over there and get the people on the ground familiar with an interest in the fugitive aspect of Yousef and try to apprehend him.

H: Sure.

S: So they had come back and then for a while we had people over there. We thought we might get a chance to get him and we had some fingerprint qualified people over there in case they had possibles that they could do fingerprint comparison and stuff.

Charles B. Stern

June 6, 2016

Page 24

S: At one point we had good information, "He's here," and the way we got that was, and some of this has become public, but basically there was a cooperator who gave us the information. It was somebody who knew where he was and basically walked into the Embassy over there and told them.

That's where all that prep work of having people over there previously paid off because rather than say, "Who?" they immediately knew the importance of it and really followed up on it.

So at any rate I ended up getting a call from Neil Herman-who was my boss-that we thought we had a good chance of getting him but we didn't know how long it was going to take. I mean we didn't have an exact location for him at that point. But we knew kind of where he was.

So Neil called me and said, "Look I want you to go over to Islamabad" and I needed to go over because Frank Pellegrino was in the Philippines working on the airline bombing conspiracy part.

At that point I said, "How long is it going to be Neil?" He said, "I don't know. It could be thirty days. It could be ninety days. It could be a week. We don't know."

So we talked about who else should go and Brian Parr had gone back to Secret Service because the initial trial was over. He was in the New York Field Office for Secret Service but he's a very, very good guy, very sharp and he had been over with Frank to Islamabad. So he knew some of the people involved. He knew the case and is just a great investigator.

Brian's retired now but he went on to be SAC of Secret Service in New York. So he did very well.

But I talked to Neil and I had been over there with Brian in the Secret Service Office once before and seen their SAC, who knew me from the case and he said, "Hey if you guys ever need Brian again you just let me know and we'll send him over."

So I said to Neil, "I think we really should take Brian because he knows the case. He was over there." So we made a call over to Secret Service and they said, "Yeah, we'll make him available."

Charles B. Stern

June 6, 2016

Page 25

S: So now we've got to get over to Islamabad. So we went from New York it was me, Brian, Bill Gavin who was, by that time, he still had the title of Deputy Assistant Director but he was in charge of the New York Office and he had been on that Abouhalima rendition with us too. I took a lot of trips with Bill.

We got on the shuttle and flew commercially down to D.C. and I remember we got down there at night and then somebody picked us up at the airport and drove us to FBI Headquarters and we got some very quick briefings there.

We were in the SIOC, which is like their secure command post at FBI Headquarters. We got some quick briefings of what was going on and we could tell that things were kind of narrowing; things started looking a little bit more imminent.

So they ran us out to Andrews Air Force Base to get on a government plane to go over and just as we were getting to the stairway, it was parked out on the tarmac, you know it had the roll-up steps-we got word, "Hey they got him." They actually went in and arrested him and were holding him.

So then we basically took off and started heading over there. What had happened was the Legat at the time that covered that was Ralph Horton. Our Legat system has expanded quite a bit because of a lot of these developments caused it to expand. But he was the Legat in Bangkok and he covered Pakistan from Bangkok.

He had flown over there and what had happened was they were not...I'm going to dance around this...the people that they trusted the most over there at the time was the Pakistani Army. So he dealt with the Army and they basically had Army people go in there in plain clothes. He was in a guest house there and they went in and grabbed him and I think they tied him up with bed sheets. They didn't even have handcuffs and it should be noted that they were unarmed. But he didn't know that. They went in and they locked him up.

I remember hearing the story that there was DSS people there, Diplomatic Security from the Embassy, from State, and they said, "He didn't seem so concerned when the Pakistani guys were grabbing him." But there was an American there and the guy said to him, "Hello Ramzi," and they said, "He didn't look so happy" because he knew that they knew who he was and that the Americans were involved.

Charles B. Stern

June 6, 2016

Page 26

H: (Laughing).

S: So I described that first rendition when we were on a little Gulf-Stream and flew over there. This was and again there are some things I can't go into details on, but this was, a much bigger plane with a lot more people. We had a lot of people on this plane including, we had some HRT people with us just for security purposes.

H: HRT? Help me out.

S: The Hostage Rescue Team...

H: Okay.

S:which is like the FBI's super SWAT team.

So we flew over there and we made one stop on the way over and re-fueled and then when we were coming...so we land there on the tarmac and I remember it was like early in the morning. We're in Islamabad Airport and they had us so far away from any other living thing. I mean we were far, far away from any type of commercial activity for obvious reasons.

So we're out there and I remember walking around the plane and we had HRT guys were out there and they had some heavy weapons and stuff, but they're like in plain clothes.

And then there's some Pakistani kind of like soldiers or something. But they were wearing very colorful, almost tribal type uniforms with old bolt action rifles. It was something like out of a movie.

They pulled a fuel truck up to the plane and they're pumping aviation fuel into it and like I said, we're out in the middle of nowhere and some of these guys who were like soldiers are riding bicycles past us. It was really a bizarre thing.

H: Like you landed on Mars, huh?

Charles B. Stern

June 6, 2016

Page 27

S: Yeah exactly. So we're waiting there and again, like a movie scene we see out in the distance this crowd of people approaching us on foot. They must have been in a vehicle at some point but they were approaching on foot and leading them was Ralph Horton, who was the Legat. He's a very good guy, very funny guy and I didn't know him that well at the time, but he's leading them and there were people from other agencies, other three-letter agencies and stuff who were with him. It was a big crowd, some Pakistani officials and I remember a guy came out and stamped my passport, so I have a stamp in that old passport but I never really left the tarmac.

Then there was a controversy that developed a little bit because they had a crime scene there and Ralph Horton was the Legat. He wanted me to stay and help him with the evidence and the crime scene. I wanted to do the interview of Yousef, as any agent who had worked on the case wanted to do.

H: Sure.

S: Now Brian's also on the case, Brian Parr from Secret Service. I don't think he knew the details of the case as well as I did. What we really would have liked to have had would be Frank Pellegrino. He knew more about Yousef and Yousef's family and history and the Manila part of it than anybody. But Frank was in the Philippines and we were trying to get him back. He was en route but he actually got stuck in Karachi, and we wanted to get out of there because this was one of those things where, you know, it was a rendition rather than an extradition, where a rendition is kind of an extra legal; basically the country just says, "Take him." There's not really any formal legal process, so we wanted to get out of there as quick as we could.

So there was a little bit of a controversy that went on between—you know we had Bill Gavin who was the head of the New York Office and Ralph Horton who was the Legat and they went back and forth a little bit over whether I would come back on the plane and do the interview of Yousef with Brian or whether I would stay there.

Now the other thing was there was actually an FBI Agent in Islamabad at the time, a guy by the name of Brad Garrett and he was the case agent on the Kasi case. If you remember Kasi was the guy who shot up people waiting in line to turn into the CIA facility. So he was the case agent on that. He was an agent from WFO.

Charles B. Stern

June 6, 2016

Page 28

S: Brad, he had been over there. So what they did because he was there, they had him do a preliminary interview of Yousef before we got there and basically Yousef admitted to doing it to Brad. But there were some problems.

First of all Brad didn't know the case and so there weren't too many questions he could ask him about it and the other thing is he Mirandized him from memory. He didn't have a Miranda form and I forget exactly what he left out of the Miranda warning but ultimately the interview couldn't have been used anyway. We didn't realize it at the time.

So Brad ended up coming back with us but you know it's hard to do an interview of a guy where you don't really know the case...

H: Sure.

S: ...and you could basically say, "Did you do it?" and that's about it. It was kind of a, you know when the 302 was written it was kind of a short 302.

So anyway we decided, Bill Gavin made the decision that I would do the interview. We couldn't wait for Frank Pellegrino anymore. He was stuck in Karachi. We really wanted him to do the interview.

So Steve Hughes was another Secret Service Agent who was from New York who was on the plane with us. He also eventually became SAC of the Secret Service in New York after Brian. He was told to stay and help with the crime scene and the evidence over there, basically all the stuff that was in Yousef's apartment where he was apprehended.

So now very quickly, the engines are fired up. We hop on the plane. A truck comes up and some Pakistani guys bring Yousef out. At some point I think HRT brought an orange jump suit for him and put him in that. But he was blindfolded and they took him and they bring him onto the plane.

Beforehand, we were able to actually reconfigure some of the stuff in the plane and we made like a little interview room where we had two rows of bench seats facing each other. We turned some stuff around and with duct-taped and tarps and stuff we made a little interview room.

Charles B. Stern

June 6, 2016

Page 29

S: So we get him in there and it was Brian and me and an Agent by the name of Charlie Rasner (R-a-s-n-e-r). He was one of the HRT guys, so he basically sat with him so that Brian and I didn't have to deal with the physical security part of it, like taking him to the restroom and all that other stuff. And then they would swap back and forth, you know the HRT guys.

So we Mirandized him. He agreed to talk to us and he said, "I'll talk to you but you can't take notes." So we figured okay, we'll start talking to him and then we can maybe ease into taking notes. So we talked to him for a few minutes and I take out the notepad and he says, "I'm not talking to you if you take notes."

Okay, you know I put the notebook away. So now what we did was we interviewed him in about two hour increments-and it was difficult-and then Brian and I would take a break and we'd go to the front of the aircraft. We were interviewing him in the rear. We'd go to the front of the aircraft and we'd sit down on the floor with a notebook and we'd write the notes. It was not the easiest thing to do but it worked, it worked and we were able to, between the two of us, do a pretty fair 302 if I say so myself.

You could actually-because it was at some point, put into evidence it's available on-line. It's kind of interesting if you could see it. But it's a long 302. It goes into a lot of detail.

So we flew back with him...just a couple of humorous incidents; at one point he draws-I was asking him about the positioning of where they parked the Ryder van. So he drew basically the Trade Center, the position of the two towers and the parking garage and he puts an X and explains why he parked it where he did, why he wanted it there and stuff and by that time I had gone to the Bureau bomb-tech school, so I could speak intelligently about bombing and explosives and things. So he draws this and I'm looking at it and he says, "Let me see it again," like he was going to add something to it. So he takes it and while we're watching him he rips the whole center out of it and eats it (laughing).

So we're like dumb founded looking at him, and the HRT guy-Charlie Rasner-he looks at him and shakes his finger at him and he says, "Don't you ever do that again." (Laughing).

H: (Laughing).

Charles B. Stern

June 6, 2016

Page 30

S: So I mean it really didn't make any difference. He thought it made a difference so he ate it.

So now we flew back. We were on that plane, other than when we got off at the tarmac for a brief period of time which was probably like thirty minutes or so in Islamabad. The whole trip end to end was forty-four hours.

H: Oh boy.

S: So if you could imagine some people started to actually smell on that flight.

It was difficult doing the interview because in an airplane there's noise.

H: Oh yeah.

S: So we're facing him and you had to really lean in to make yourself be heard and to hear him and he had a cough which, for a while after we came back they were monitoring us for tuberculosis because they thought he had tuberculosis. I think it ended up...

H: Now let me ask you something just very quickly. You're sitting in these sling seats like in a military aircraft?

S: It was-I don't want to go too much into what it was.

H: Okay.

S: I'll put it this way-it was a government plane and you know some government planes are set up different than others. This had more like commercial type airline seats in it to make it comfortable. So we were not in sling seats. It was more like sitting in a commercial type airliner but we had to reconfigure things so that we could face each other.

H: Sure.

S: Because when you think about it on an airliner how are you going to sit and interview somebody?

H: No, that's what I was wondering about.

S: So now on the way back there was a big worry that if we landed somewhere, because this was a rendition, if we landed somewhere and he made himself known to any other government and said, "I want political asylum" it would create a problem. It could create a legal problem where that country felt that they might be obligated to at least consider it. So the decision was made on the way back that we would not land.

So we were flying-like I said we were in a military plane. We were flying always with at least two tankers. So when we were taking breaks from the interview, you'd go up to the cockpit and joke around with the pilots and stuff and be talking to the crew.

Sometimes there were three tankers with us and then one tanker would drop the rest of its load into one of the other ones and then they'd take off and another one would come. We got re-fueled in the air. I think it was five times. I know it was multiple times and the number five is stuck in my mind.

It's very interesting and I got to go up there and watch the process and they lower the boom you could actually see the guy flying the boom in and attaching it. It gets very rough because you're in the airstream of the tanker and I don't love flying. It's not something that I really love to do. None of it bothered me because we were so focused on what we were doing. So there were people getting airsick because of the turbulence. If I'm on a commercial plane, believe me, I'm not a lover of turbulence and flying and everything else. But in this thing I never even thought about it because we were just so focused on interviewing him.

So we flew all the way back. You know you wonder-like what does something like that cost? I was told that the military billed the Bureau because they didn't want to pay for it. You know, it's a Bureau case. For that whole flight thing, thirteen million dollars.

H: Wow!

S: So it was kind of an interesting thing. So we flew back and we did this long interview with him in three parts and we landed; now this is another interesting thing.

Charles B. Stern

June 6, 2016

Page 32

S: The way that the court rules are written in a case like this, the jurisdiction was explained to me. One of the things that determine the jurisdiction is where the person is first brought when they're rendered because you have to remember in this case there was ultimately a charge against Yousef of killing that Japanese national on the Philippine Airliner which occurred over, I think it was the Sea of China. But the U.S. could prosecute it because we're signatures' to an airline type crime, crime on aircraft convention. You know a type of treaty.

So we can prosecute him but the question is where the jurisdiction lines. So one of the things, of course the Southern District wanted to do it, so one of the ways they would have jurisdiction in that case is where the body of the person is first brought.

So what that means is we had to land in the Southern District of New York. Now there are few big airports in the Southern District of New York. One of them was in Newburgh; Stewart Air Force Base.

H: Right.

S: So that's why we went to Stewart Air Force Base. Because where the wheels touch down; if we went to Kennedy or LaGuardia...

H: That's Eastern.

S: It's Eastern, right. So that's why eventually when more and more of these things got done during the years-Mary Jo White was the U.S. Attorney-they nicknamed the Stewart Air Force Base the Mary Jo White International Airport because all the renditions were going there.

So we landed there and there was a Port Authority helicopter that took us from there to...and we had a blindfold on him when we let him out because for certain reasons we didn't want him to see the exact plane and all this other stuff. So we kept the blindfold on him. So we get into this Port Authority helicopter and they flew us down to the Wall Street heliport.

It was a pretty dramatic thing because by that time you could imagine the top brass from the FBI in New York, they all wanted to be there and be part of it so they were on-it's a very nice helicopter, the Port Authority helicopter. I mean it's like a luxury type helicopter.

Charles B. Stern

June 6, 2016

Page 33

S: But anyway we're in there with him and a lot of the top brass and it was a very clear night and Brian Parr and I were with him and we had developed a pretty good rapport with him because we had spent a lot of time with him, and we're going down the Hudson and it's real clear, and you see all the lights and the skyscrapers and stuff and we came down and we're approaching now the World Trade Center, you know the Towers are all lit up.

So we all kind of had the same...this story has been told a lot of times but we were kind of keying to the scene and thought, it's kind of like-you know, we want him to see this.

So I can't remember exactly who said it, but Bill Gavin, who was head of the New York Office-he kind of made a motion to us, he nodded to us, like "yeah go ahead."

So we took the blindfold off of him and one of us said, "Ramsi look; there's the Towers. They're still standing," and he said, "You know if I had more time and I had more money I would have taken them down. I could take them down."

H: He didn't care if he told you what he did or where he was. He was proud of his actions.

S: Well the way that we approached it was-I'm sure you've done a million interviews in your career and we did-we had overwhelming evidence against him. So we presented it to him that way. Look we have your fingerprints everywhere. We had him dead to right. We really had the strongest case against him of any of the defendants.

But we were interested in how he did it, and he had a big ego and he wanted to talk. He didn't tell us everything. He held some things back but he told us a lot. But you know that was a good story for a number of years you as him saying, "I could've taken it down." I don't know if you're aware of this but the mastermind of Nine-Eleven is his uncle.

H: That I didn't know.

S: Yeah Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, who was also one of the conspirators in the Manila Air case, the airline bombing conspiracy.

Charles B. Stern

June 6, 2016

Page 34

S: So what really happened was, if you look at this, Nine-Eleven was a combination of those two cases. It was a combination of the airline bombing plot which involved using, you know they were going to blow up aircraft but if you looked at the way they did it was a methodical thing where they would have their operatives get on different planes at different times and put timing devices in and then get off that plane; you know multi-leg flights.

So a lot of the coordination and people getting on and off the planes and the bombing of the Trade Center in '93-they kind of combined the two ideas.

H: Yeah, yeah.

S: And that's why what was a good story then was not such a good story when you get to the end. I know I'm taking up a lot of time. I mean we haven't even gotten to the years after that where we get to Nine-Eleven, you know the lead-up to Nine-Eleven and Nine-Eleven.

H: All right. Can we pick this up...

S: Sure.

H:in a few days.

S: That's fine. I appreciate the fact that you're interested.

H: Well I'm sure lots of people will be interested and it's important to collect this stuff now. There's a lot of guys that are still alive that were involved in it but give us another ten years and these people won't be available.

S: Right.

H: I won't be available. Hopefully you will be. That'll be the end of it so then its history and I think if we can have more history that's done by the people that actually lived it I think it's the way to operate.

I'm going to turn this off.

**FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION
Interview of Former Special Agent,
Charles B. Stern
Interviewing Agent
Brian R. Hollstein
June 15, 2016
Part II**

Brian R. Hollstein

(H): My name is Brian Hollstein. I'm talking to Charles B. Stern (S-t-e-r-n). This is the second part of our interview. Today is June 15, 2016 and the Copyright is held by the Society of Former Special Agents of the FBI.

Okay everything we talked about before still pertains concerning classified information and things of that type. But let's get started here Chuck.

S: Sure, I remember one, just one anecdote that I felt was interesting from one of the renditions that we did. I had spoken with you about the Mahmud Abouhalima rendition where we picked him up in Cairo and brought him back on a little Gulf-stream aircraft.

So one of the things that I left out was we brought him back and we landed at Stewart Air Force Base and now we had to get him... that's in Newburgh, New York. So it's a good distance from the city. It's probably about an hour drive with limited traffic.

So the plan was that we were going to be flown by a State Police helicopter down to the Wall Street heliport and then from there to the office. But we were told that the weather conditions were not good enough and that the ceiling was too low and we couldn't land the helicopter. So we had to drive him down.

So this was the first of the subjects that was rendered back and of course it was kind of big news at the time. So it ended up as these things sometimes happen. We were in a van with him and some SWAT guys and we headed off in this motorcade. The number twenty-six cars sticks in my memory but I don't know much about that.

H: Oh boy!

S: So it was this tremendously long motorcade with lights and sirens and everything. While we're doing this, because now it's going to take us like an hour to get down, so we're in the midst of doing this. So we see the news helicopters are flying over the top of us. We could never figure out why the weather conditions were too bad for the State Police helicopter. But I guess those other helicopters were following us.

So we come down and we got to...there's a point where the highway coming into New York comes to, I think it was on the Henry Hudson Parkway; there's a toll booth right as you're entering I guess maybe it's Yonkers there. I really hadn't thought, of it for a long time.

So now this whole motorcade-and we're only a few cars back from the beginning. We weren't the first vehicle. We had some escorts, some squad vehicles ahead of us and then a whole bunch of vehicles behind. So now we're coming up to this toll booth and it's probably within the early evening by that point, I think.

If you've ever...and I know you've been in the New York Office, if you've ever experienced New York traffic and we get there and people are trying to cut off the motorcade to get ahead of us to get through the toll booth; as unbelievable as it could be.

H: (Laughing).

S: I mean you know it was pretty funny. So it actually ended up that the SWAT guys had to kind of brandish; they had some, I think they had (unintel) MP-5 sub-machine guns, that they kind of had to brandish at the people who were trying to cut in to get them to let us go through the toll booth. In New York that may not always work.

So we made it down to the office then and everything was successful. We really hadn't, I mean of course that was not the first rendition that's ever been done in the Bureau but it was probably one of the major ones that had been done up to that time.

So it was kind of an exciting thing....

H: Oh yeah.

S:and we were happy to have him back in one piece.

H: Did you spend any time talking to him in the office there? Where were your discussions held?

S: I'm trying to remember. I mean once we got back he was represented at one point. So we ended up dealing with his attorney and there were... I don't want to go too much into that.

H: Okay.

S: But we did talk to him several times.

H: Okay moving along through the years.

S: Right.

H: That was what '93, was that?

S: Yes that rendition was March, '93 and then we had already gone over the end of Trade Center case. I talked about the rendition of Yousef and then of course we had the trial which was five and a half months long which was of the first four subjects and that was a pretty big terrorism trial.

We had over two hundred witnesses in that trial, and as I said it lasted five and a half months and the convictions came in just about-I think it was one year and one week after the actual bombing of the Trade Center. So we really went very, very quickly. I mean if you could imagine doing the whole investigation and prepping for the trial and going through the trial and getting the verdicts.

H: You know we could get things done if we're pushed enough I guess.

S: Yeah, yeah very true, very true. It was quite hectic.

H: Cause you'll hear these modern cases just going through trial and it could take an awful lot of time. So that's kind of interesting. What happened to you after this?

S: After that I went, you know we had some follow-up stuff. I mean we had Yousef was still a fugitive then. So after the trial we were tracking Yousef as a fugitive. We were still doing some clean-up of some leads and things and I was back on that squad that was made like an ad-hoc squad, the TRADEBOM Task Force after a few months that morphed back into a real squad and most of us who had worked on the case stayed on that squad.

So it was kind of a combination of the old Domestic Terrorism Squad, Neil Herman's old squad. He became the permanent supervisor. He was the supervisor over all the cases.

Then I was there for a while. I was the principal relief on that squad for a while and we brought Yousef back. Then we were getting ready. Then there was another rendition which was Eyad Ismoil who was Yousef's old friend who had been living in Texas and he was over in Jordan and I actually went over and made a couple of trips with Tom Donlon, my partner. We knew he was in Jordan. He had gone over there the night of the bombing and we were trying to get him back. So it was a lot of leads and prep for the next trial.

Then the Manila Air case I helped out on. So I stayed on that squad for a while and then there was TWA Flight 800, that happened and I worked that. I was a bomb tech at the time. I went to Hazardous Devices School down in Alabama and became a Bomb Tech.

H: Who ran that school?

S: That's a combination of the Army and the Bureau. I think recently the Army has turned it over completely to the FBI. But that's the only civilian school really that trains bomb techs in the United States. I was in a class, I think we had three FBI Agents but most of the people were police bomb techs from throughout the country.

H: So there's a lot of work to be done with that particular training then?

S: Right. I was down there for that and came back and then I ended up going down to the Olympics in '96, yes '96 and I got down there and I was down there as a bomb tech because they had teams of bomb techs working the different venues because of this threat of a terrorist bombing.

S: What happened was Flight 800 crashed and I got called back. I had only been there about a week and I got called back and as soon as I got back to New York and went out to Long Island where we were doing basically the recovery of the aircraft and re-assembling and examining all the aircraft parts as they came in. We had a big operation out there.

But as soon as I got back there the Olympic bombing took place. I remember I worked all day and fell asleep with the TV on and I woke up and I see on the news it was the crime scene there. So it was a very active time.

We had the Flight 800 which they initially thought it was a terrorist act and then the Olympic Park bombing. So while all that stuff was going I spent months and months out on Long Island. You know, we were actually living out there in temporary quarters and working on TWA Flight 800.

Then an opening came up on one of the Terrorism Squads because Joe Billy who was one of the Terrorism Squad Supervisors ; he was promoted to ASAC so that created an opening on the squad and I put in for it and I ended up getting it, so then I was a new supervisor. That was in '97. So I was a supervisor from '97 until I left New York in 2005. The things my squad handled changed over time, but initially I think we had Hezbollah, Iraq, Iraqi terrorism and a lot of the rest of the world stuff.

H: Going back to Flight 800 in terms of what were you actually doing? They started pulling debris up, right and brought it to a place in Long Island somewhere?

S: I was in the, I think it was an old Grumman Aircraft factory out there which had been closed and it had a lot of big hangars and closed runways and stuff. What was happening is we had crews that were out with recovery boats. I think they were scalloping boats, and they would drag for the aircraft parts debris and then they would lower it on the boat.

We had Agents on the boats because we had to maintain chain of custody and they would bring the stuff in to the docks and then we had trucks bring those into this hangar and we had all kinds of different teams doing different things. but I was one of the bomb techs there.

S: It was us, and then we were assisted by NYPD Bomb Squad, bomb techs in Nassau and Suffolk County and what we would do, as the load would come in we had people that would unload the trucks and they would lay out all the debris in this huge hangar.

Then because we knew, we were the authorities on what explosive damage looked like, and then we would have to examine each piece to see if there was anything that was evidentiary in nature. So cause the stuff came in in drips and drabs that went on for months.

Then there were some other people working who actually put up a framework and they reassembled part of the plane, the main part of the fuselage. I mean they just hung the skin on it. There are actually some photos of that now in the media you see. And it's really interesting.

If you remember Rick Hahn, was one of the senior bomb techs who came in. He had been an examiner in the Explosives Unit at Headquarters and his thought was he wanted to see, he said, "I'm more of a blacksmith. I want to see this thing assembled so I could see the relation of everything to everything else."

You could really see when-that center fuel tank in that 747, I mean it's the size of a big room. You could, I mean it's a big area.

When you assembled the whole thing you could actually see where the seat of the explosion was. You know, above it the ceiling was pushed up to the outside, the walls were pushed out below it, the floor was pushed in. You could actually see; you can visualize where the seat of the explosion was.

That's how they came up with the cause that it was most likely, it was electrical. I mean there were fumes and a lot of things that happened; usually meaning there were many different failures happening at one time that lead to that. It was an old plane. The wiring was very low voltage wiring that ran down into these fuel sensors into that tank and that wiring did not carry enough current to initiate an explosion but those wires crossed over higher-powered wiring and over the years they rubbed together and the insulation wore off.

H: So you could see all this or deduce it anyway.

Charles B. Stern

June 15, 2016,

Page 7

Part II

S: Yes right. I never saw the actual, those frayed wires but that was the end conclusion; that what had happened was that some higher current was sent into that where those fuel rods were, like a sensing mechanism to see how full the tanks were.

H: Jim Kallstrom was the Assistant Director at the time, right?

S: Yes, yes he was.

H: I worked with him and Charlie Christopher years before that and Rick Hahn also actually in Organized Crime there on 69th Street.

So you had no problem with the final conclusions then of this; that it was not an accident but it was, how do we put it? An act of God I guess?

S: Yeah I mean it was accidental. I mean it was not intentional. I mean initially there-when you started to really look at the witnesses. There were so many witness accounts that said they saw a trail from a missile.

Well you know that plane was, I think was ten miles out. I don't remember the exact distances but it was very far away from the shore and very high up.

My question would have always been, "What were you seeing?" If you ever looked at the CIA animation, a really good computer graphic simulation of using all the facts as we knew them of what happened, they were able to see, the debris field was very carefully mapped. The Navy did a lot of that. The Navy salvage people and using GPS and stuff. So they had a big chart showing where everything landed and you could see that the nose came off first because in the debris field the nose was located first and then other things were located farther along the debris track.

H: Because of its moving? Everything was moving, yeah.

S: Right, right and they were able to figure out what exactly happened is the nose blew off because the fuel tank exploded. There was an explosion and the nose blew off and of course it makes it very nose-light. So then with the engines still running you had the rest of the aircraft pretty much go straight up trailing fuel. So if somebody saw that they might mistake that trail for, like a vapor trail what they thought might be a missile.

S: It was a very emotionally difficult case because among the other things we had to go through, as bomb techs, the clothing of the victims looking for explosive evidence and we had to go through luggage and it really brings it home-you know the case was very personal because you've seen all their possessions and stuff. It was a pretty...

H: Well plus Charlie Christopher's wife was on that aircraft....

S: Yes that's right. That's right.

H: ...as part of the crew so that was even more difficult to deal with. This time or shortly afterwards then you became a supervisor.

S: Right that was in '97 and so that was also a busy time. I mean because by '98 we had the Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania and I went over for that for a few weeks. You know around that time you had Bin Laden had then become a very prominent name and al Qaeda-and shortly after that there was a squad that was working primarily Bin Laden and the al Qaeda. It wasn't my squad.

You know they got an indictment. I think it was sealed in the beginning. So they really started to become; New York became very much in the forefront of the al Qaeda investigation. It eventually led to Bin Laden being on the Ten Most Wanted list.. But certainly a lot of the expertise on al Qaeda was in New York at that time.

So I mean it was a busy time.

H: I'd say so.

S: My squad had; we did a lot of kind of the rest of the world stuff but we also had, when there was the bombing in Bali, Indonesia and I'm trying to remember what year that was. That actually was after Nine-Eleven. But Americans were killed. The FBI had jurisdiction and opened the case so we had the case. We had people over there participating in the investigation. But that was after Nine-Eleven.

So many things going on.

H: Now just kind of interesting in terms of ATF does a lot of work with bombings or at least has anyway in the past. How come they didn't have jurisdiction for things like this?

S: Well, the thing with ATF is ATF did not have- they would have jurisdiction in a bombing if it was not deemed to be terrorism because the FBI was the lead in terrorism cases. But we worked with them.

We had some really good relationships on the JTTF with ATF representatives that they sent over. We did some really good work together. But I think traditionally that probably was always a sticking point outside that situation. We had a JTTF and everybody was working in concert.

I think ATF's complaint was if it was an important case it was always terrorism or almost always terrorism and then the FBI was going to be the lead and we're not going to be the lead. So I think that was always a bit of a sticking point with them.

But after Nine-Eleven they moved them over into Justice from Treasury. They were one of the few that didn't go into Homeland Security. So they were over in Justice with the FBI.

H: Okay so this has been a whole series of things one after another not leading up to Nine-Eleven but not necessarily part of Nine-Eleven is that right?

S: Well you saw how related it is of course. We talked a little bit last time about the tie-in between the Trade Center bombing in '93 and the Nine-Eleven plot and one of the big tie-ins is Ramzi Yousef who built the bomb and was really the true mastermind, but he was really the organizer and the brains behind the '93 bombing.

Then after the bombing he went over... He ended up in the Philippines and was working on this airline bombing conspiracy. We called the investigation Manila Air. Well one of the conspirators there was Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. who is his uncle. It's his mother's brother. But they were also co-conspirators in that case.

S: Then we eventually apprehended Yousef but Khalid Sheikh Mohammed was a fugitive. So I remember Frank Pellegrino was the case agent on Manila Air and the fugitive investigation on Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and so there was a lot of effort being put into trying to get him, to figure out where he was and apprehend him. Of course nobody knew at the time that he was plotting the Nine-Eleven plot.

S: You know, I'll kind of fast forward a little bit to now, the Summer of 2001. Just on a personal note what had happened I had been single most of my life but at that point I was, I guess forty-three. I had just turned forty-three and I met someone and all of a sudden; everybody thought I was a confirmed bachelor. I fell in love and wanted to get married and so I asked her to marry me and that was in March. I met her in August of 2000, that's my wife Eileen. I met her in August of 2000 and we got engaged in March of 2001 and the morning after we got engaged I went into work late. I took a couple of hours off and I called in and I told a couple of people on the squad, "Hey I got engaged last night." They said, "Congratulations." I said, "I'm going to come in a little bit later."

Well it was raining and I'm in the Bureau car going down the Garden State Parkway towards New York and I hear a squeal of tires, a van comes across the front of me, hits my Bureau car. I go into a hundred and eighty degree spin, go across the highway and snapped off a telephone poll which hit right above the driver's door of the Bureau car and went about a third of the way into the Bureau car. It kind of pinned me in the car. I ended up crushing the steering wheel with my hand, broke my left hand, broke my finger on my right hand. The seat kind of tented up because the car got compressed, went up between my legs, and fractured my pelvis. So I was out of commission for about six weeks.

Some people used to tease me about being a confirmed bachelor before I met my wife. They thought I might have intentionally steered into the telephone poll but that wasn't the case.

So when Nine-Eleven happened I was working. I was back at work but I was technically on limited duty at that point. I mean I was carrying a firearm and stuff but I hadn't really been cleared for the full-to go and participate in raids and stuff.

So that summer I had come back-I said I was out about six weeks. That was the end of March so now its mid-May and by the time I come back it's the Summer time and if you ever read the Nine-Eleven report there's a section in it where they quote George Tenet, who was the CIA Director, and he said that "the system was blinking red."

S: Well we were just getting barraged every day with intelligence and I'm talking about June and maybe part of July, "There's gonna be an attack, there's gonna be an attack, there's gonna be an attack!" There were never any details and the inference was that it was gonna be something overseas and I remember every squad had to have a couple of people on like seven hour stand-by with their bags packed and stuff, and ready because everything that had happened previously had been overseas attacks and the thought was that it was going to be overseas.

I have no idea what the intelligence, the actual intelligence was. I mean I think we were probably seeing a bit of a watered down version of it but clearly they were seeing something or hearing something that there was going to be an attack.

H: Now from a un-classified point of view but so many times I've been reading that just before some of these things go down there's a lot of telephone chatter back and forth like when....

S: I mean, well there's a variety of things and of course when you're dealing- and I'll stay away from classified stuff...

H: Yeah, yeah.

S: We didn't need to know exactly how they were getting the information. We just needed to know, I mean I'm sure if there was something actionable they would have let us know. But you know it was just enough to...as bad as I had ever seen it. I mean it was like something's going to happen, you know imminently.

So I remember maybe the week before there was a Terrorism conference up in Boston for some stuff that we were working on and I went up there. We actually took the train up from New York and went with some people and Ken Maxwell who was my ASAC. He was the Terrorism ASAC. We went up there and I can remember there were even threats of things going as we were coming back. You know, not related to Nine-Eleven but there were always lots and lots of threat information.

H: Unbelievable.

S: Yeah. Oh it's just a lot of stuff. I'm trying to think of...I was talking about that the system (unintel) was pointing; I mean there were all these warnings.

Charles B. Stern

June 15, 2016,

Page 12

Part II

S: So that was June and maybe part of July and then it just stopped. It stopped. There was nothing. The warnings stopped coming. All this intelligence that we were seeing that something was going to happen and it just stopped. I don't know why it stopped but it did.

And then probably in August, the end of August I remember going up to that Terrorism conference and coming back and there was a lot of local stuff, like you say a lot of noise. You know threats to a bridge here, a tunnel here and things like that. But that stuff seems to always come up and has to be run down.

So now we get up to nine-ten, and we had been working-my squad had a case that we worked together. We were actually Office of Origin on it originally but we were working on it with Washington Field Office and it had to do with...one of the things my squad did was handle some countries that were... We also handled some of the Counter-Intelligence stuff if it was related to a terrorist sponsor-because it's hard to split the two, and so we were working on an Espionage case and the subject-that had gone to trial now and that's over but the subject in that case had been up to New York and had been seen by surveillance going into the woods out in Long Island way out off of the highway, because he was from there originally. He was up here visiting some family and stuff. But they see him go into the woods so of course the thought was perhaps he was hiding some classified material or something like that.

So the surveillance people and we had some case people go out there and look. They could never find anything. So now we're at nine-ten and the Washington Field Office was...they felt that there had to be something out there.

So I was in Ken Maxwell's office on nine-ten, 2001. It was like five o'clock and I was talking to him about this and he said, we were thinking about maybe he and I would go out there and just look ourselves and try and scope it out and see what we thought if there was anything possibly missed. So Ken says to me, "What's on your schedule for tomorrow?" I said, "No, nothing. I'm free tomorrow," and he says, "My schedule's clear too" and you know that Nine-eleven was the next day.

Charles B. Stern

June 15, 2016,

Page 13

Part II

S: So we agreed we would meet at the office and we were going to try and miss the traffic a little bit. So I was going to come in a little bit later and that night I remember there was a bad, bad thunderstorm here in the area. But in the morning it was beautiful. You'll even hear people say that today it looked like Nine-eleven because there was literally not a cloud in the sky that's how clear it was.

Now of course, at that time I hadn't gotten married yet. But my fiancée was staying with me and I was a supervisor at the time so I used to wear a suit every day. But that day I dressed in soft clothing, like khakis and a shirt.

So I left because I was going to go out in the woods and so I left and I get in the car and I drive up the Turnpike, and I get down to the entrance to the Holland Tunnel -which is in Jersey City-and I was probably about maybe the third or fourth car back and it just moves very slowly as I'm sure you can attest. And I had the newspaper, and when I was stopped I glanced down at it and then you'd inch up and then you'd go back and forth. I mean it just took forever.

Now by that time it was right around a quarter to nine in the morning and I noticed a couple of lanes to my right that was an SUV and the driver had opened the door and he's pointing ahead like over the toll booth and he's talking on his cell phone. I was thinking, "What the heck is he doing? What's that all about?" I mean 'cause you just don't get out of your car at the entrance to the Holland Tunnel.

H: Not likely, right.

S: So I look up and when you're in that position you're looking right across the Hudson River and right in front of you are the Twin Towers of the Trade Center.

H: Right.

S: And you could just see a hole at the top of the north tower and you can just see a little wisp of smoke just starting to come out of it. The first plane had just hit.

H: Wow.

Charles B. Stern

June 15, 2016,

Page 14

Part II

S: So I had on me the good-time radio, the A.M. radio in the car and they started to broadcast that a small private plane had hit the Trade Center. So I had a cell phone and I called Ken Maxwell who was the Terrorism ASAC and who I was supposed to be meeting and I said, "Hey Ken did you hear the news?" He said, "Yes I did." He said, "Come down meet me." I forget exactly where he told me to meet him. It's all fuzzy now. but he told me to meet him down there at the Trade Center and we would set up a Command Post because he had worked on Flight 800 and we knew that the FBI, at that point, would have some involvement in it.

H: Sure, sure.

S: So traffic stopped. The Port Authority Police stopped everything from moving into the tunnel. So I'm still waiting there in line and you could see emergency vehicles started going through; Port Authority, fire trucks and police cars and stuff.

There were two Port Authority uniformed police officers who usually worked the bus lane going into the tunnel. You know the times I would go through in the morning they would be there and they would keep people that weren't supposed to be in those lanes there and you got to know their faces. I didn't know them by name but you got to know them. I watched those two guys get in a marked radio car, a Port Authority radio car and I watched them go down and disappear into the tunnel. They were (I'm sorry) they were two of the Port Authority policemen who were killed in the Tower collapse.

H: Oh boy.

S: So it's kind of tough when you see something like that. But anyway, so everything stopped and they went through and I'm guessing that the Port Authority realized that they had to move the traffic that was there to get the other emergency stuff through. So where they had stopped everybody, now they started to wave everybody through and I hopped on the cell phone quickly and I called my, now my wife, but at the time she was my fiancée, and she was actually scheduled to go pick out flowers for our wedding that day. That's where she was going and I called her. She was still home. I called her and I said, "Hey look, you know they're saying a small plane hit the Trade Center. It's going to get busy very quickly. I just wanted to let you know and everything's okay and I'll talk to you later."

Charles B. Stern

June 15, 2016,

Page 15

Part II

S: So then they're letting traffic go through so I go through the tunnel and I went down to the Trade Center site and I pulled up behind Seven World Trade that's one of the buildings that collapsed. It was a smaller tower. I parked there and that's probably where Kenny Maxwell wanted to meet and I remember I was on the Bureau radio and I was trying to find out if there was a muster point but I remember talking to the dispatcher and they said, "We're waiting for a supervisor to get down to the scene," and I said, "This is Chuck Stern. I am a supervisor and I am here at the scene." So they said, "Go to Church and Vesey." Barry Mawn was the ADIC at the time and I believe they said, "ADIC Mawn wants people to muster at Church and Vesey Street," which was kind of a couple of blocks away because it's a big complex.

So I got back in the car and I drove and I put the red light on and there were a lot of people in the street, you know kind of blocking things. The people moved out of the way and I went all the way down to I think Fulton Street and made a right and now I'm facing the Trade Center complex and as I pulled up there was a gigantic construction dumpster across the street from the towers and I parked the Bureau car because there were a lot of fire engines coming down the street behind me.

So I pulled the Bureau car up behind that big dumpster up on the sidewalk. I threw the FBI and the police identification plate on the dashboard, locked it and then I started walking up the street to Church and Vesey. Well actually it would have been Fulton and Church right there. Vesey was a like a half a block over.

S: But I get up to Fulton and Church and I see the jet engine which is about the size of a Volkswagen in the middle of the intersection and standing next to it is a guy I know from the NYPD Bomb Squad, Kevin Barry. I looked at him, I looked at the engine, I look up at the Towers and now the South Tower is blazing in flames and I said, "Kevin what's going on?" and he says, "What's going on? A second plane just hit."

Well the second plane hit in the time it took me to go around the block.

H: Wow.

S: So then it was very, very chaotic as you could imagine. I remember getting on the cell phone and I called my squad and I talked to one of the guys on the squad and I said, "Please"- because it was not that far away. The office was maybe a ten minute walk. I said, "Bring me down a raid jacket and an HT," you know a handy-talkie radio.

So I met up with, it was Ken Maxwell. But before that I'll just tell you my impression of what was going on. If you've ever seen, and believe me I'm not trying to make light of this, but it's really what it reminded me of.

There was a 1950s movie with I-think with Gene Barry in it-the original H.G. Wells "The War of the Worlds." You know it's a sci-fi movie where the Martians have these spacecraft and they have these rays and they're blowing up skyscrapers and laying waste to the world. It actually reminded me of that. It was kind of like the end of the world.

I mean being in the FBI-and we worked on a lot of terrorism investigations -and I'm sure you feel the same way. You're so proud of the FBI and its capabilities and all the good work we've done and I know I felt like I was about a half inch tall because there was nothing you could do at that point.

H: No, no.

S: I mean here we knew we were under attack and I mean you could just try and do the best you could. But there was nothing immediately that could be done. But at any rate so I talked to Ken Maxwell and he and it's a little hazy, I'm finding it a little hard to remember exactly how we picked this place but right across, like catty-corner from the Trade Center complex is a building at 99 Church Street and that is on the...I think it's attached to the back of the Woolworth Building.

And we went in there and it had like a glass front that led to a hallway and we went in and it looked like marble floors I remember and somehow we went into an office there that was a windowless office and they had some cubicles and stuff in there and we basically commandeered the office and I got on the phone. I got a yellow legal pad and Ken said, "Okay let's get an open line to Headquarters." I forget who I was talking to at Headquarters and we started to just try and take notes and try and figure out what was going on and at that point it was very, very chaotic.

S: We were hearing from the radio and from Headquarters and other people that Independence Hall had been hit by a plane, you know Philadelphia and the Sears Tower had been destroyed. The information was very, very sketchy at that point. So a few minutes went by, maybe longer and we were trying to figure out what was going on.

A guy burst in to the office and he was like a workman for a utility or something. He had on like a fluorescent vest and a hard hat and he yelled to everybody, he said, "Everybody get down, get down." And you know you hear sometimes that they say that a tornado sounds like a freight train. Well this sounded like a freight train. I mean it was loud and we were in this interior, windowless office and you could just hear this tremendous roar and Kenny and I dove into a bathroom and I remember we were both old enough that we remember the nuclear "duck and cover."

H: Oh yeah.

S: And that's what we did. We kinda got in the corner and covered our heads the best we could because we thought it was another plane coming in. That was the logical conclusion, that tremendous noise.

H: Sure.

S: Well what it was it was the South Tower falling. That's what was going on.

So when it stopped we went out and that was a very-you could imagine, an emotional time when we figured out what had happened.

H: Oh yeah.

S: So we went out into the hallway there, outside the office, and I told you it was marble, like a lot of lobbies are, with a long corridor and it fronted onto Church Street with all glass. You know high ceilings. So it was like a big window at the end. It was a very bright sunny day out. When you looked out those windows it was as black as midnight because of the cloud of dust.

H: Sure.

S: I remember trying to figure out what to do next and the door opened and Dave Kelley came in from the U.S. Attorney's Office. I'm trying to remember what his exact position was. I mean he was high up in the U.S. Attorney's Office. He had worked on a lot of Terrorism prosecutions. I think he might have been the acting U.S. Attorney at the time. But he was wearing a suit and he was covered completely in white. He looked like the Pillsbury Dough Boy, like he had been dipped in white paint. I mean when he opened his eyes, you could just see his eyes.

H: Wow.

S: People were coming and going. We were trying to figure out what to do next. So someone made the decision-because we were in radio contact at that point. Cell phones, forget it, all the cell phones failed. So now the Bureau radio system was working which was good. Land lines were still working.

So the decision was made to take the Bureau people and move them from there to the area right around St. Andrews Plaza, which is where the U.S. Attorney's office is. You know it's where the court house is, across the street from 26 Fed, because there was a worry that 26 Fed was gonna get hit. So they moved us over there temporarily and it was like around that time we were trying to account for everybody and people started saying, "You know Lenny Hatton was at the Tower and where is he?" Lenny was one of my classmates at Quantico in New Agents Class. Lenny was killed in Nine-Eleven.

H: Right.

S: And John O'Neil who had just retired as SAC for Terrorism and Counter-Intelligence, he was also killed.

But they moved us to that St. Andrews Plaza and the sky was so thick with smoke you couldn't see anything. So they had us all standing out there waiting for the next instructions and now you hear the roar of jet engines. I mean very low and approaching and everybody was completely silent. Everybody was just looking at each other.

Well what it was, it was our jets, the military fighter jets. But you couldn't know that. You couldn't see them.

H: No, no.

S: So it was a lot of uncertainty. So then from there we had to try and decide, and again it was a bit disorganized for a few hours there, where some of us were told to go up to the Bureau garage which was up at 26th Street-and that was a big facility up there-with the idea, that we would start setting up a command post up there. I hitched a ride with somebody and we went up there. Then I got a call, "No we're going to set the command post up at 290 Broadway on the tenth floor which is the building where my office was located. That was right across the street from 26 Federal Plaza.

So I ended up coming back there and we set up kind of a hasty command post and we were still trying to figure out and trying to find Lenny Hatton. It was very, very confusing. I mean there was just a lot of information coming in. We were manning phones, and trying to figure out what exactly was going on.

Now once we figured out the four flights and I think this is being done simultaneously at Headquarters and a few other places, the airlines faxed the passenger manifests to us. And there was an Immigration Service Special Agent on my squad, Jim Grathwohl and we gave him the manifest to take a look at. Very shortly thereafter he came back to me and he said, "Chuck something's going on here. There's four or five guys in each plane that have all been attending flight schools here." So that was the beginning of figuring out exactly what had taken place.

H: At this point did you know what had happened out in Pennsylvania and down in D.C?

S: Yeah later that evening we knew and then what was happening is because of all the damage at the Trade Center, and we were downtown, things started to fail. The phone grid started to fail and the power grid started to fail.

I left right around midnight because we knew when you have an incident like that you have to start sending people home because you gotta bring them back.

H: Right, right.

S: We knew we were going to be staffing twenty-four hours a day. When I left they were preparing to move up to the garage on 26th Street. So I ended up going home. I jumped in with another agent on my squad, Rich McCarthy, and we go outside and I could see he left the flashers on in his car or something. The battery was dead, so then we had to get a jump and the Holland Tunnel was closed downtown but they would let emergency vehicles through. So we went down there and his car had a lot of dust on it. I didn't have a car now because my car was at the Trade Center and presumed destroyed.

H: Sure.

S: But actually it wasn't. Like three days later one of the guys from my squad was down there and said, "Did you have such and such a newspaper lying on your front seat?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "I found your car." It's down there and you know there were only two small scratches on that car because it was parked behind that dumpster.

H: (unintel)

S: Yeah it was covered with that white dust, several inches of it but when I finally did drive it home the Port Authority guys at the Tunnel had fire hoses and they just hit the car with the fire hose and washed all the dust off of it.

So we went home that night and when I came back the next day the command post had moved up to 26th Street and our electronics guys and support staff, they were just unbelievably outstanding. They basically wired that whole place. I mean it had a little bit of an infrastructure. They had some computer lines and stuff, Bureau lines coming in there because it was a Bureau facility. But they had like one computer up there for the guy who ran the garage. They ran fiber and everything else and they set up these-you know it was a big open area, brand new Dell computers. Somebody said, "We don't care what it costs, get it down there."

So that was all put in and then we were there. We were working twelve hour shifts and we did that and my squad was put in charge of the leads desk. You know we had a lot of agents covering leads as they came in. We were kind of the in-take. We would not necessarily be getting the phone calls. Some we did but we would basically cull out the leads and write them up and then see that they were assigned to the groups of agents that were handling the leads.

S: And that was very hectic and I'd have to say that as in most of the situations like that the majority of the leads that we were dealing with had nothing to do with Nine-Eleven. It still had to all be gone through and looked at, so that lasted a while.

H: Sure, sure. Although usually in these things a lot of crazies show up.

S: Yes (laughing).

H: So you get these calls and you can't be sure.

S: Yeah, right and people would phone in with helpful suggestions. Somebody wrote in that they had an idea that there should be deployed some type of mechanism that would engulf the top of skyscrapers in a cloud so that if somebody was trying to steer a plane into it they couldn't see the building. I mean stuff like that.

An interesting thing that came to mind...we had the twentieth anniversary of JTTF the September before, because it was September of 1980 so we had a big reunion in New York for all the people who had worked on the Task Force through the years and we had a dinner. It was a couple of night affair but the big gala part of it was black tie dinner. It was very nice. We had it at Windows on the World in the Trade Center.

H: Wow.

S: And Joe Valiquette was the press guy for New York. He's still around. I think he works for NBC. He works for one of the networks.

H: Yeah I see him every once in a while.

S: Great guy. Joe was the emcee, and he saw Neil Herman standing in the back of the room and while he's emceeing he said...he was talking about you couldn't...it was cloudy that night and you're at Windows on the World and but there was no view because everything was just black. So you couldn't see out. So he was making a joke and he said, "Oh there's Neil Herman. For those of you who don't know Neil Herman he could bring down an audience. For those of you who don't know Neil, "he always has a black cloud following him, and that's why you can't see out of the windows because the black cloud following Neil around is now over the building." He said, "If you don't know Neil, Neil could bring down an audience faster than Osama bin Laden can bring down a building."

H: Oh boy.

S: You know you just think about kind of the foreshadowing of stuff and you know-everybody who had been in the Task Force, including a lot of high ranking people, the police commissioner and everybody else, all at one time, that in itself would be a big target.

Yeah. So that went on for a few months. I got married in the middle of it. My wife and I got married.

H: So she didn't have any qualms?

S: Well we got married the next month and she said to me, "You know do you think people will still be at the wedding?" I said, "Well I've never known the Bureau to prevent anybody from getting married. But we'll have to see." But Kenny Maxwell gave me like five days off and we got married in October and by that time things had relatively calmed down a little bit and he let me take the time off and we got married and a lot of people from the Bureau were there. It was a little bit of a break for everybody and they needed it.

H: Well everything was so intense after that.

S: It really was.

H: You know working that pile and then just everything that was going on was enormously busy. Were you involved in any overseas investigations at that point then?

S: No-that dealt with Nine-Eleven, no. I mean the Nine-Eleven investigation...there was a case squad that handled it and actually what happened was Director Mueller had just taken over as Director right before Nine-Eleven. I think, and some of this stuff I'm guessing at, some of its things that you heard-but he was frustrated by the fact that all the expertise was on al Qaeda and Bin Laden was centered in New York. Not all of it. I mean there were people at Headquarters of course who were knowledgeable, you know and supervising some of the New York stuff.

So what happened was, they basically moved the people that were working Nine-Eleven in New York down to Headquarters and that case was worked out of Headquarters. So those of us-and I'm talking about the actual Nine-Eleven investigation itself....

H: Right.

S: ...was really done by those folks down at Headquarters. Then we went back to...you know you're into...there were a lot of leads that were non-productive leads that we had to handle while those folks worked on the actual investigation. That's just how it has to be done, you know?

H: Wow, what a story. Just in passing I'd like to get this on the record in some way, anyway if you don't mind my doing this.

A few months ago I was at a meeting up here, a luncheon for the former agents and an agent got hold of me and we were talking and he said, well he had an experience with Nine-Eleven in which they were out of New Haven and they had heard something had happened and were dispatched out to talk to a person here in Connecticut. And they got there and the man said, "My son just called me from a plane that's been hi-jacked and it's being taken to Chicago." And while they're standing there he had the television on and while they're standing there, a plane and it turned out it was the plane in which his son was located, hit the Trade Center. So I wanted to interview, you know do it formally like this and record it and I couldn't get hold of this agent and I just found out a couple of weeks ago that he had just died. So I'd just like to mention this incident at least sketchily anyway and unfortunately we won't get a chance to talk to him about it.

But there's so many stories like this that we have a group up here in this town, New Canaan where I live, which is the survivors of Nine-Eleven have representatives and I guess they do what they can to keep the story alive and it's been...and we really haven't recovered from it. It's been quite a while now but there's still plenty of information going on.

So I'm sorry I broke in like that.

S: No, no. I mean I'd just like to add something myself and that's after Nine-Eleven there was a lot made of the fact that now the FBI is going to be more oriented towards preventing terrorist acts instead of waiting til they happen and then investigating it and hoping to prosecute it.

Charles B. Stern

June 15, 2016,

Page 24

Part II

S: Those of us who had worked Terrorism for quite some time before Nine-Eleven really took offense at that because that was-of course was always the number one priority, prevention. And part of the problem, my personal opinion is there were parts of the government and parts of the FBI that knew how grave the threat was and I mean were very focused on it. But the government as a whole really was not focused on it. It was focused on a lot of other things and because it really was not happening here. We had had the '93 bombing. We were very lucky that the death toll was not more than it was.

H: That's true and it just kind of proved that you couldn't blow the place up. It was so strong...the underpinnings of the buildings.

S: That's true and the engineers who designed that building said that explosion in '93 basically did nothing structurally to the Tower. They said, and this is another thing...because I used to do case presentations on that before Nine-Eleven. The engineers told us that those towers were meant to withstand a hit from a fully fueled 707 aircraft without being structurally compromised, because that was the biggest commercial plane that was flying at the time that the buildings were built.

But what they really didn't count on was the fire.

H: Right.

H: The building actually did survive the crash itself but the fires compromised the steel work I guess and it eventually buckled. Well shall I shut off here?

S: I think you can sure.