

National Park Service (NPS) History Collection

NPS Oral History Collection (HFCA 1817)
September 11, 2001 Oral History Project, 2001-2004



John Dillon
December 10, 2001

Interview conducted by Janet McDonnell
Transcribed by Unknown
Digitized by Katy R. Kukulich

This digital transcript contains updated pagination, formatting, and editing for accessibility and compliance with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. Interview content has not been altered.
The original typed transcript is preserved in the NPS History Collection.

The release form for this interview is on file at the NPS History Collection.

NPS History Collection
Harpers Ferry Center
PO Box 50
Harpers Ferry, WV 25425
HFC_Archivist@nps.gov

INTERVIEW WITH
JOHN DILLON
U.S. PARK POLICE AVIATION UNIT

CONDUCTED BY
JANET A MCDONNELL, PH.D.

DECEMBER 10, 2001

START OF TAPE

- John Dillon: Our radio system, and the pilot, and the other rescue tech that were on the helicopter as well, we were conversing between each other. We were also talking on the radio. You kind of have the hum of the helicopter overhead of you. Initially, when we responded, there was a tremendous amount of fire and smoke from all of the jet fuel that had been spilled. The first couple of passes overhead, I was doing the down linking and kind of taking my eyes off of the screen and looking down to see if I was really seeing what I was seeing, because I was looking at a video monitor.
- Janet McDonnell: Through the monitor, right.
- John Dillon: And so, it's almost surreal that you're like videotaping something like that because that would be something that you would really see in a movie or something like that. It wasn't something that I'd expect to see flying over in real life. And I'd look out on the side of the helicopter, and the first thing I noticed was how small the hole was inside the building. The base of the building had a fairly small hole and all of us in the crew, all of us were kind of talking amongst each other, like there's no way this is an aircraft. This must be like a truck bomb because the hole just wasn't - there was no visible damage to an aircraft. There were no real aircraft parts readily visible. Just looking down, there were no scrape marks going into the building.
- John Dillon: Then, I think on the third pass, we came overhead of the roof and you could see the penetration into the building from one section into another and out of that section into another. And that's when you got the full scope of how much the aircraft had kind of penetrated into the building. And there were debris fields in between both or all of those corridors, the sections of building.
- John Dillon: That coupled with the amount of fire from the jet fuel, and then we started to put together that, wow, this was an aircraft that crashed. There were also some light posts that were knocked down on the road that runs along where the heliport is on that side of the Pentagon. And you could see how the aircraft had come down in low and knocked those down.
- John Dillon: The other thing that sticks out in my mind there's a phone truck that sits right next to that heliport tower. And it's there 24 hours a day and 7 days a week, and it was on fire from all of the jet fuel spilled on it. The back of it was just engulfed in flames and I just thought that was like one of those things that you pick out that sticks in your mind. Like, oh, man, that's the silliest thing. The phone truck's on fire.

John Dillon: And then there are other things that you saw, people running out of the building on fire. It didn't really seem chaotic on the scene until we landed, when we landed to go to triage to look for patients. There were just a lot of people, I don't want to say sitting, running around. They were kind of just standing around. I think it was more in shock than anything else. And then you take into account that it is the Pentagon, so most of the people are military or they're influenced by the military because they work with them as civilians. So, in that sense, there was some sort of order to the chaos. And many, many people were volunteering to help. It was just - they couldn't have picked a worse target to hit, as far as trying to cause mayhem, because the military kind of has a pretty good head about them and in a situation like that everybody tries to lend a hand to help out. So, you know, just it's a day that you'll never forget, but it's not something that I like to remember.

Janet McDonnell: So, take me on through to sort of the rest of the shift that day, and then some of the missions you were on in the couple of weeks that followed?

John Dillon: We, just after we couldn't find any patients to MEDEVAC, we ended up taking the chief of Arlington County Fire Department up with us to get an overview of the scene. And then we actually stayed back at the scene and launched to continue down linking more video for the FBI. The military aircraft started coming in with their supplies and their medical teams to evacuate, I'm sure, some of the higher ups. And we decided as a crew that there were so many aircraft flying in, the command and control of the air space is generally, it's not who it generally is, the tower, so we're going to go back and try to avoid being more traffic in the area.

John Dillon: By the time we got back, our other crew who had been here was already engaged in making arrangements to start doing patrols for the Secret Service, flying FBI agents out to Dulles Airport because one of the hijacked planes had come from there. At that point, we started to develop the plan for patrolling the area, going up every hour on the hour with one crew. We called in another crew to come in early. And then we started making arrangements schedule wise to run two crews for however long they needed us. And then we got a call from D.C. Fire and they had a shooting victim from Southeast, and that's a typical, that's a pretty typical call that we get here. They actually drove down to, it was right across 295 from the hangar, so they just drove the ambulance over here. We took the patient from our pad over to MEDSTAR.

John Dillon: And MEDSTAR was on a mass casualty alert. I think they only got five burn patients in total from the scene. This was an hour or two, well, longer than that, probably 4-5 hours maybe after the accident, after the explosion. And I just remember taking the patient in. He had three gunshot wounds to his legs and groin area. Going through the doors, I usually encounter 5-6

people on a trauma team. Here's like 60 doctors and nurses looking at you, like what have you got?

Janet McDonnell: That's right. Expecting those numbers of burn victims, right.

John Dillon: Not that it's any less important of a patient or traumatizing for the victim of gunshots, but I think they were expecting something else.

John Dillon: And then following that, the next couple of days we spent patrolling the river for, checking on the bridges in the area. There were several different lookouts for vehicles of different types that we were looking for. We were taking up the Secret Service every hour to patrol around the White House and other restricted zones in the area. And we also spent some time. In addition to the microwave downlink with that camera, that camera can be switched to a forward-looking infrared device which is called a flare. It's an infrared heat, it works on heat. What we did is we would fly over the Pentagon with one of the battalion chiefs at the scene and we would look through the roof structure, not look through it, but look at the roof to see where hot spots were. So when you looked along the roof, you'd see that white spot, or grayish or white spot, you'd be able to tell well, that's where the heat source is coming from or that's where the fire basically is inside the roof.

Janet McDonnell: Is that a unique use of that technology?

John Dillon: Well, no, I think that's been used before, I'm pretty sure. I hadn't used it for that before and I don't know if anybody from Arlington had, but it was another tool that we had that we were able to help out with. And I think that's generally, everybody here at the U.S. Park Police Aviation Section is here to help our own people, but we do a lot of mutual aid.

Janet McDonnell: Did your particular helicopter perform any evacuation missions of officials, government officials, not with patients?

John Dillon: No, we were kind of tied up with the situation at the Pentagon and so we never, we had never received word. I don't think we ever received word that we were wanted for any type of evacuations. I think we probably could have taken care of that since we did have all three aircraft in service. In a real situation or a situation like that where we weren't needed for any more MEDEVACS, the medical aspect of it kind of ended, so we were kind of sitting around and we probably could have gone over, but nobody really gave us the word that we were needed.

Janet McDonnell: How long was it before what you would consider normal operations resumed where you're sort of schedule and response rate or whatever got back to something more typical?

John Dillon: I'd say two and a half weeks after. All of the Secret Service missions didn't end completely because we still have the Presidential protection. You know, when the 24/7 kind of patrols ended, we were getting back to normal, but we're still, what is it, three months later, four months, three months, and we're still kind of doing things differently.

Janet McDonnell: You had mentioned earlier that you're staffed differently.

John Dillon: We're staffed differently. We're still working 12-hour shifts. We have a group that's on call now so they can.

Janet McDonnell: That's the third group?

John Dillon: Right. And it's generally a pilot and a rescue technician that have emergency vehicles that they take home and drive in. And what they do basically is when they drive them home, they generally will be the first people to call. So, they can get here quickly.

Janet McDonnell: Did you have any contact with the Park Service's Incident Command Team? Are you connected to that system at all?

John Dillon: No.

Janet McDonnell: Just curious. Well, just a couple of more questions. Did you find anything that was, I'll rephrase that, what was particularly challenging about this response? Maybe it was the personal aspect that you mentioned?

John Dillon: I think it was more personal than anything else. I hate to be, I don't want to say nonchalant or egotistical about it. We deal with trauma every day. Like I said before, we see people in varying states of distress. I have people die on me, not frequently I'd like to say, but it does happen. They call for a helicopter when things are really bad. And so, I'm used to seeing people in pretty bad shape. I'm not used to seeing it on the magnitude that I saw it. Everybody here has some critical distress.

[interruption]

Janet McDonnell: Actually, sort of the last thing I wanted to ask is if, it's sort of the opposite of the last question. What worked particularly well? I mean what went most smoothly through this process? Was it communications or whatever course you want to take?

John Dillon: In any sort of situation like that, the radio is going to be chaotic. So that wasn't unexpected to have several different people calling in for things. I good friend of mine is 102. Car 102 is the sergeant for the central district,

which is the downtown area. And that's where all of our monuments and memorials are so, of course, when something like this happens, our initial response is kind of like circle the wagons. Let's make sure that we have these things as well protected as we can. And I just remember being in the helicopter at some point, I don't know when, but they were calling for different people to come down and do different things and they were his units. And he's in charge of the patrol guys and the foot officers. And they asked him for a couple of people to go to a certain location, and I can just remember hearing in his voice, and he's a good friend of mine so you kind of pick that up when you know the guy, his frustration of like, "I don't have anybody else to give you." And, "I'm doing the best I can here." So, you realize in a situation like that how, like I said, chaotic and how tough times are on the radio. For us, the training.

Janet McDonnell: Wasn't it hard to get accurate information, too? I mean it certainly was from the media, you know, in that first half hour, first hours?

John Dillon: Yes, I guess, in that sense a little bit, but you realize what you're dealing with, the information. I guess the biggest thing everybody wanted to know is where these are - they reported there were seven planes out there that are unaccounted for. And when we were at the Pentagon, they had a call for one that was inbound to Washington that was 18 minutes away. And you didn't really wonder where the information was coming from, but then after 18 minutes and nothing really happened, you were kind of like, well, whatever happened. And subsequently, we think that it was the plane that went down in Pennsylvania.

Janet McDonnell: And you mentioned that you took your helicopter.

John Dillon: We got away from the Pentagon, right. We wanted to get out. And we kind of dispersed helicopters every kind of which way to make sure that somebody would be around, if one of us had to go down. But, you know, things worked well. My training worked well. You revert to your training. You revert to - our communications with other agencies. And that's generally the biggest complaint you will hear about a mass casualty incident is that we couldn't communicate with this department or that department. And our communications were pretty good with Arlington County and the fire department, and the police department, and calling in other agencies, but we're used to doing it. We fly out to Fairfax County or up to Montgomery County. We're used to dialing in to Fairfax County and talking to them or Montgomery County and talking to them, so we have an advantage over that, over a lot of agencies that don't deal with other agencies a lot, and the fact that we do.

John Dillon: And we have a really good working relationship with the local agencies. When I call up on the radio and say it's Eagle One, I don't have to say this

is U.S. Park Police Eagle One. They know who Eagle One is or Eagle Two. They're familiar with that terminology. And that's a real advantage that we had and it's real nice to have that. So, although some information you got you were kind of wondering where it came from or how accurate it was, for the most part our communication was pretty good. As a whole I think things went really well.

Janet McDonnell: Did you think, and this will wrap it up for us. Anything in the area of lessons learned that you want to put in the record here? It sounds like it all worked smoothly.

John Dillon: It's, in the sense we were lucky we had all of those crew members. You'd love to be able to support a staff of that many people all of the time, but you know it's not going to happen. Maybe we'll get a three-man crew out of this. That would be pretty nice. You know, just a terrible day. I think it's an amazing time in history that we're living through.

Janet McDonnell: It's true. I appreciate you taking the time to do this.

John Dillon: It's not a problem. I'm more than happy to take care of it.

END OF TAPE