

National Park Service (NPS) History Collection

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



Brenda Ritchie
January 23, 2002

Interview conducted by Janet A. 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

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
SEPTEMBER 11th ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with
BRENDA RITCHIE
Shenandoah National Park

Conducted by
JANET A. MCDONNELL, Ph.D.
January 23, 2002
Shenandoah National Park

START OF TAPE

Janet McDonnell: Today is January 23, 2002, and I'm here with Brenda Ritchie to talk about the Park Service response to the September 11th terrorist attacks. And maybe to start if you would just explain a little bit about your position here.

Brenda Ritchie: We have the communications center, and then we have the coordination center, and the coordination center is a center that mobilizes all resources in the Northeast Region.

Janet McDonnell: And we're in the coordination center right now.

Brenda Ritchie: Right.

Janet McDonnell: Okay.

Brenda Ritchie: And the communications center is mainly for Shenandoah National Park, and for emergency notifications for other agencies such as FEMA, higher levels of DOI officials, of crisis situations, and mobilizations that are about to take place. And then the coordination center takes over and does the mobilizations and the demobilizations. And what we were involved in to start with, DOI had provided us with a satellite dish and TV, and we were the first ones to see it on the TV before we ever got any calls about it. And as it turned out, people in D.C. were not able to call. And they couldn't get out because all the satellite systems in that area had all been shut down.

Janet McDonnell: Were you in the communications center?

Brenda Ritchie: Yes. I was over there. And we ended up needing to call in so many more dispatchers that we set this operation up here. And one of the first things that I dealt with was determining the safety of the DOI officials that I worked with, and notifying all of our representatives that are in FEMA where to go, and determining the status of all of our units first of all in the Northeast region, and assessing the safety of the employees, if they could be accounted for, and then feeding this information to the DOI officials who then decided which, or if teams - incident command teams - where they would be needed, and where I should send them, and then I would mobilize these teams and send them to the appropriate places.

Brenda Ritchie: Then once the teams got in place, we had a team in Philadelphia, and then we had the team in D.C. But those were our basic NPS teams that we had that were generating orders to us. Aside from

those two teams that were like Philadelphia was handling sending like the New York parks, and locating employees to assure that they were safe, and sending in resources that were needed for especially the downtown monuments and those areas. And so, we were getting orders for those. We were getting orders for FEMA in New Jersey, and FEMA in New York, and there was another Type-1 Team that Boise, NIFC, had sent into D.C. that we were supplying resources to. And then we had our own team in D.C., the Skippy Brooks' team.

Janet McDonnell:

The NIFC -

Brenda Ritchie:

In Boise, Idaho, there is a National Interagency Fire Center.

Janet McDonnell:

You covered a lot of ground, and I'd like to just go back over it a little bit, over some of those early activities in just a little bit more detail. At what point was the coordination center here actually established? Was this - or was the trailer brought in, and if you could give me a little background on that.

Brenda Ritchie:

We operated in the did you see the communications center over there?

Janet McDonnell:

No.

Brenda Ritchie:

Have you been by there?

Janet McDonnell:

No.

Brenda Ritchie:

You should just go around. It's a little house that they call a Mission 66 house. Do you know what they are? Well, there's one of those. And at one time I had - and the rooms are about this size, maybe a little bigger, and I had as many as 12 people working in each one until this was set up.

Janet McDonnell:

So even back before that, I mean, you must have called in a lot of additional staff very quickly. How did you do that?

Brenda Ritchie:

I called in rangers and anybody I could find, and I placed orders through the fire system. I'd go out occasionally to help other agencies and incidents as coordinator, and I called in my markers, and all the people I had helped. And I had a lady that I had helped in Florida gather together a team for me.

Janet McDonnell:

So, you brought people in from outside the -

Brenda Ritchie: Yes, from all over. And from other agencies. And she was able to create a team for me to bring them in as supervisors of different functions. And then I was able to gather as many local resources as I could to do some of the clerical duties, and the copying, and that kind of thing.

Janet McDonnell: How difficult - I'm recalling that planes were grounded.

Brenda Ritchie: Absolutely.

Janet McDonnell: How difficult was it to bring in—

Brenda Ritchie: —really slowed it down. Forty-eight hours, the first 48 hours were really tough.

Janet McDonnell: So, you must have seen early on that the mission was -

Brenda Ritchie: Oh, I immediately made those calls. That was the very first thing I did. The first thing I did was make contact with all of the officials that I work with in DOI to try to locate them and determine their safety, and where they were going to go. Because many of them could not work in their offices anymore.

Janet McDonnell: I'm sure that you can't give names, but is there anything you can tell me about where - I have a hard time phrasing this - if not where or at what level, how do you coordinate with DOI?

Brenda Ritchie: Mainly in the Department of Interior building, people in that building at various levels of DOI, on up to the director.

Janet McDonnell: And your link is direct, right?

Brenda Ritchie: Right, and their link is direct to the director and the secretary.

Janet McDonnell: I understand we might be getting into a sensitive area.

[Tape interruption]

Janet McDonnell: Where we left off, you were sort of talking about some of those very first phone calls.

Brenda Ritchie: Right, locating the people, trying to establish communications, and what I found was that they couldn't call out. We could call in to some, like Dennis Burnett, and no cell phones were working. So, once they made the decision to move a great many people, some of

them they moved out, and most of them they moved down from the top floors of DOI into other offices.

Brenda Ritchie: What I did at that point, mostly all - I mean, they couldn't call me, so we had to call them every 15 minutes. But what I decided to do at that point was call in a satellite truck, a mobile satellite, and brought it here, and Verizon and Sprint, [I was] able to get them to coordinate for the first time ever. They have never, ever, ever coordinated. Because each had to provide something to make it work here. So, they brought in what they call a COW, cellular on wheels, and set it up here, and brought me about 150 cell phones that we were able to issue to Skippy Brooks' team that was going down. They would stop here and pick up a cell phone, and then go down. And with that satellite system, it restored service to most sections of the people that we were talking to, and they were able to once again use their cell phones. So, as they went about from this office or wherever that they were having to relocate to, even though the phone system didn't work, we were once again able to work on cell phones.

Janet McDonnell: Because they were linked to that specific satellite.

Brenda Ritchie: Right. And that made a huge difference.

Janet McDonnell: And we're talking the first few hours?

Brenda Ritchie: First eight hours.

Janet McDonnell: That's quite a feat to get a satellite dish in here so quickly.

Brenda Ritchie: Yes.

Janet McDonnell: Did you have some sort of plan that you were following? It sounds like you were really improvising.

Brenda Ritchie: Yes.

Janet McDonnell: And drawing on your experience with other emergency responses.

Brenda Ritchie: Yes. And once we got that in place, it helped smooth things out a great deal. It really did.

Janet McDonnell: Now, you mentioned the teams, both the Type-1 Team and the Type-2 Team for Northeast region. Did the activation of the teams come from here?

Brenda Ritchie: Yes.

Janet McDonnell: The calls to all the listings.

Brenda Ritchie: –listings [crosstalk]

Janet McDonnell: And what guidance were you given, or how was that determined?

Brenda Ritchie: Rick Gale says, "Mobilize this team."

Janet McDonnell: And what was involved in doing that, and what were some of the challenges involved with that?

Brenda Ritchie: Well, once again, they all had to drive, so that's what took a lot of time. But we know who are on these teams, and that wasn't such a big problem. It just took time for them to get in place.

Janet McDonnell: Well, I know about the Type-1 Team in Washington, and the Type-2 Team in the Northeast, but you mentioned that there was another team.

Brenda Ritchie: Well, we had other incidents like FEMA itself was in New York generating orders, and FEMA was in New Jersey generating orders. So, we were also filling orders for other incidents. It wasn't just these two teams. We fill orders for everywhere in the Northeast region.

Janet McDonnell: I guess I had not realized that we provided support to FEMA.

Brenda Ritchie: And five of the "icon" parks were in this region that we were directly supporting - Boston, and Independence, and Sandy Hook.

Janet McDonnell: It's the sort of side note, but I've always wondered about that term "icon" park, how that determination is made.

Brenda Ritchie: I think they just decided that with this incident. It became a noun.

Janet McDonnell: That's right. Okay, is there anything more that you can tell me at least about the kinds of support we provided to FEMA? I mean in a general sense.

Brenda Ritchie: They placed orders for not so much Park Service. We were just ordering through the system the resources that they needed. That was mainly EICC doing that, not actually the Park Service.

Janet McDonnell: So, I guess, just to make sure I understand, it sounds like the communications center was really performing the role of an Interior Department communications -

Brenda Ritchie: Absolutely.

Janet McDonnell: That I didn't understand.

Brenda Ritchie: After that, the first, say, 24 hours of determining safety and setting up communications and passing on information about the different critical sites, we set up a national intelligence function here where we had every unit in the Park Service call us, or fax us, however they could communicate - it was different in different areas, because many of the CC mail type addresses were down, and they had various ways of contacting us, and they would all call in and give us an update of their closures or their special events that were going to happen that might have a lot of people concentrated in a particular area.

Janet McDonnell: And then the Center generated a status report?

Brenda Ritchie: A report, yes.

Janet McDonnell: Based on that? And how did - the individual park units reported that status information here, and then how was that - obviously, the report was done, but then how was that disseminated?

Brenda Ritchie: We were acting at that point, once the intelligence section got into place, we were acting like an arm of the Type-1 Team. So, we would compile the report and fax it to the Type-1 Team and they would take it to the director's office meeting and provide the briefing at that time.

Janet McDonnell: Did the process work the other way as well? That request would come from the headquarters to you saying we need this kind of information, and you would go out to the -

Brenda Ritchie: Yes, and it changed it.

Janet McDonnell: And how well did that whole process work?

Brenda Ritchie: Once we got everybody online a -? to when they called in, the time zones was the biggest thing. Meeting a deadline with all these time zones. And once we have had a routine set up to where we would work each time zone, we could have them call in at a particular

time, then it was organized pretty well and we were able to do it pretty efficiently. And that went on for quite some time.

Janet McDonnell: You mentioned something about the size of the rooms, and that you had 12 people in a room, and I think you were leading up to explain to me how and when the trailer was brought in. How large did your staff grow?

Brenda Ritchie: We had an intelligence function and then we had the coordination function, and each function had probably six, seven intelligence, and I had probably 10 in coordination. So, it was about 20 altogether, because I had supervisors there.

Janet McDonnell: And those were both separate from the communications function?

Brenda Ritchie: Right. Right. So, we had three different large functions going on there.

Janet McDonnell: And so finally, at some point did you say well, these two functions have become so large, let's find another facility for them?

Brenda Ritchie: Yes. And the Type-1 Team approved getting this in and then I was the one that brought it all in and set it all up.

Janet McDonnell: Was this with a few days, or the first week or -

Brenda Ritchie: Yes, well, we had a problem with the power. The power company couldn't come until about 48 hours had passed. That became a problem. But other than the power company, we could have been set up within two days. But it took about a week then, waiting on the power. And, of course, you can't move in until you get power.

Janet McDonnell: Maybe some of what you have already said is part of the answer to this question, but the Interior Department's Continuity of Operations Plan, how does, or does the Center - your function here fit into that plan at all? Does it make a difference to you if the plan has been activated, or is there anything you can tell me about how -

Brenda Ritchie: We're a part of that plan, and we would immediately -

Janet McDonnell: When the plan is activated, then your portion of it -

Brenda Ritchie: Right. We would do whatever was asked of us at the time. We are NPS Communications here, and whatever is needed, certainly from Washington, we would provide.

- Janet McDonnell: Well, I saw in the documents that it was 8:36 that morning or something where Burnett called out here or sent a message out here activating the Center. That is in the public record, so it was very soon.
- Brenda Ritchie: Right.
- Janet McDonnell: Tell me a little bit more - you mentioned the kinds of information you collected from the Park Service was information about closures. Was it also information about resources, say how many rangers they had? As I understand it, during this particular operation, that there was cross-leveling of resources, shifting of resources, that rangers were - in some instances they were pulled to, you know, support the Bureau of Reclamation, or pulled to support these incident teams or whatever. Can you tell me a little bit about the process of shifting resources?
- Brenda Ritchie: We were receiving a large number of orders for law enforcement rangers, and we were trying to use the national fire system at that time to place these orders. And because of this incident, all units of the National Park Service were very uneasy about letting any of their resources go. And we weren't getting these orders filled very much at all because of that. And there were many, many national conference calls, trying to determine where the resources were, and what the priority was. Which were the "icon" parks, and where did BOR fit in this, and what is our responsibility and our priorities as to what should be secure at first. And those were questions that people just couldn't answer at that time, and they weren't willing to let their rangers go because in this day and time, there is a shortage of personnel in all parks, especially law enforcement. So that was our priority.
- Janet McDonnell: So, the priorities were being set, I presume, by the Park Service leadership team in Washington.
- Brenda Ritchie: But not everybody was letting their resources go.
- Janet McDonnell: Right. Even when those or were those priorities then conveyed?
- Brenda Ritchie: But they didn't know where the resources were. It had never been a national -
- Janet McDonnell: Like a database.
- Brenda Ritchie: No.

- Janet McDonnell: A database that would tell you how many rangers, and what kind of equipment. Any other -
- Brenda Ritchie: Or vehicles, marked vehicles was a big issue.
- Janet McDonnell: So, was that something that you ended up doing here, creating a database like that?
- Brenda Ritchie: We have had several, but they change quickly. What they have may not be what they have available. It came down to perhaps closures of different areas in order to free up resources, and those were hard decisions that the regional law enforcement specialists had to meet and decide.
- Janet McDonnell: That's how those decisions were made, not by the park superintendent.
- Brenda Ritchie: No.
- Janet McDonnell: At the regional level.
- Brenda Ritchie: Right. Those were my contacts, these people here, and they eventually formed a multi-regional coordination group to make these decisions. And what happened as I was placing these orders through the national fire system, they were not getting filled because this priority system had not been in place, and no one was making the rangers available. So, I had to create my own data base of available resources, and all of these regional law enforcement specialists would have their parks in their region call me with availability. So, they would each give me availability and it worked beautifully.
- Janet McDonnell: And did they do this on a daily basis?
- Brenda Ritchie: Oh, yes. It worked beautifully. I had the orders here, I knew what was available, and we could immediately reach right out and touch these people and have them mobilized within 24 hours. It worked really, really well. But then they established this MRC group, and they wanted to be able to try and use the fire system.
- Janet McDonnell: That's the multi-regional coordinating group.
- Brenda Ritchie: Right. They wanted to be able to use the fire system and not have two systems, and because of the fact that there could be a time that all the agencies would have to make these determinations together, not just these regional law enforcement specialists. And so, they

tried to get it back into the fire system ordering channels, and it's been very difficult.

END OF SIDE A

START OF SIDE B

Janet McDonnell: The problem - I guess when you're talking to someone who doesn't know anything about the fire system.

Brenda Ritchie: But what I have to do now is I have - the orders that are generated for our region that I send through the normal fire channels, and I have the availability that we have in our region - so right now I'm just functioning as our regional coordination center, and I send in the availability through the fire channels, and when it gets to Boise, through the different channels, at that point, there is someone in Boise who decides which rangers go to which order, and then they send it back through the fire channels to me to place my local resources wherever they want them to go. So, it's a lot of passing.

Janet McDonnell: And the priority is established in that system.

Brenda Ritchie: Right.

Janet McDonnell: Whereas the system that you had to construct didn't attach a priority to -

Brenda Ritchie: Well, we would have a conference call daily where they would tell me that.

Janet McDonnell: With these regional representatives.

Brenda Ritchie: Yes. And they would meet and do these priorities and call me and tell me what they were.

Janet McDonnell: And when was that set up, that coordinating group, that regional coordinating group? Very early on in this process? I don't expect you to recall an exact date.

Brenda Ritchie: Probably not until - well, they weren't called that. They were set up early on when I was determining and developing intelligence. And then they sort of melded together to become that, and I guess probably later in September was when they began to be called - they named themselves and came together as a unit.

- Janet McDonnell: But from the beginning, though, you had this -
- Brenda Ritchie: I had that same group. I was prioritizing -
- Janet McDonnell: They just supported you in determining - you weren't having to make the calls here on what goes where, and what the priorities were.
- Brenda Ritchie: No. They would decide the priorities, and then I would do the mobilization.
- Janet McDonnell: You mentioned a little bit earlier that there was a reluctance by some of the parks to release resources because they were stretched, and particularly because - I would suspect because things were still so uncertain at that point.
- Brenda Ritchie: And they have these special events coming up, and there suddenly was a need to decide whether they should have them, whether it was safe to have them, or whether they could use the resources to have them, and what should be canceled. It was just a lot of decisions to be made.
- Janet McDonnell: I guess my question is how did you work around that? How did you make sure that those orders, those requests got filled if, on the other hand, there was this reluctance to release resources?
- Brenda Ritchie: Well, that's when I set up my own system and worked directly with these people to make resources available in their own region, and each region would give me a certain number so it wouldn't impact one region too badly, and that's how we did it.
- Janet McDonnell: Did that process - it seems to me that you probably gained a lot of good insight as to where some of the - what some of the resource limitations are throughout the Park Service. Is there anything you want to share?
- Brenda Ritchie: There are just some - way too few rangers, law enforcement rangers. Absolutely. To this day, there's very few. I still have a great many orders that are ongoing here. I have more than this right now. I just did this report Monday and since then I have about 20 more open orders. I've got about 35 open orders right now, and I have about 60 that are in place, and that's just for our region.
- Janet McDonnell: But the orders - were most of those coming from park units in the Northeast region, or were you getting orders from around the country?

Brenda Ritchie: Yes, I was getting orders from the dams and the nuclear sites and all over the country.

Janet McDonnell: Missions that the Park Service hadn't really supported in the past.

Brenda Ritchie: Right. But they suddenly became a very high priority in DOI.

Janet McDonnell: How much did that request to provide protection for Bureau of Reclamation dams complicate your task in terms of drawing resources?

Brenda Ritchie: Well, the first complication was determining their status, and BOR is not used to giving a status outside of their BOR chain of command.

Janet McDonnell: What do you mean by determining status?

Brenda Ritchie: What their needs are, any threats they might have gotten, and they were very, very secretive about that, and were very uneasy to develop a communication on the phone at all. And they would have to check you out to see if you were who you said you were. And it took probably two full days just to develop those contacts that would actually give you a report of what their needs were and what their concerns are.

Janet McDonnell: So, they were telling you we want rangers and maybe even we want X number of rangers, but they weren't giving you much information about why and where. Is that what you're saying?

Brenda Ritchie: Well, then we were making these requests at a higher level. But in order to fill any requests -

Janet McDonnell: You needed more information.

Brenda Ritchie: - we needed information. And to get those contacts to give us that information on a daily basis was quite difficult. So, we made a lot of headway there.

Janet McDonnell: Were there any questions about the authority to do that at all?

Brenda Ritchie: Absolutely. And not until they knew I had a top secret clearance would they give me information. Because you could have been anyone. You could have been a terrorist calling to see what their needs were, and when they were mostly short-staffed, what shift would be the best to cause trouble.

- Janet McDonnell: That's right. Well, what about funding issues? Is there a designated pot of money that you can tap into?
- Brenda Ritchie: They had hoped there would be, but I understand it wasn't approved. And what they have had to do is - of course, I work and fill orders directly for the watch center in D.C. - you're familiar with that probably.
- Janet McDonnell: No, I'm not.
- Brenda Ritchie: Well, that's the center that DOI [Department of the Interior] set up. It's called a watch office, and it's - they've been operating that 24 hours, providing security to the DOI building, and after we - they took over eventually the intelligence function from all the units. And they come directly to us for any resources that they need. And they have an account that they use, and so each unit has their own account, and I am not so sure, it very well could be their own operating accounts, because each unit has had a different account that they've given me.
- Janet McDonnell: But you don't have an account that when you do activate the communications center and, for example, when you started up the coordination center, you don't have emergency funds that immediately kick in.
- Brenda Ritchie: They have to come up with an account number to give me, but so far it hasn't been addressed that it should be in place all the time, and we don't have funding without an emergency.
- Janet McDonnell: So how were you keeping things running? Using park funds?
- Brenda Ritchie: Just the best that I could. But they gave me an account. They set up a fictitious account. Of course, many of the office weren't staffed, even accounting offices. And so, they just gave me a fictitious account and I had to do what I had to do and use that account.
- Janet McDonnell: And so, the resources you brought in from other parks, you must have to reimburse them somehow. Say if you bring a ranger in from Florida or something, is this out of this account you just described to me?
- Brenda Ritchie: If I use a payer, it would be this account, but each unit has their own account, like Independence has their own account, Sandy Hook had their own account, Boston has their own account, and the Watch Office has their own account.

Janet McDonnell: Is that the way the process works when there is a fire?

Brenda Ritchie: Yes.

Janet McDonnell: It seems like we've learned a lot from the fire response system that has been in place.

Brenda Ritchie: When there is an order for fire personnel that comes through the channels from Boise, I have a block of account numbers here that I can assign to send out people. Well, with these, with all risk, that's not in place. I don't have that block of account numbers that I could immediately assign and handle that emergency.

Janet McDonnell: So, you're somewhat - it's slowed down.

Brenda Ritchie: Yes, it is. It really is.

Janet McDonnell: Where is the center now - do both centers - I mean, obviously the communications center still exists, and you're still here. So, are you ramping down now, are you phasing out?

Brenda Ritchie: What we have, in the winter I have been trying to handle it as much as I can myself, but it's still a seven-day-a-week job, and very soon - I brought in someone over Christmas so I could have the holidays, and I've been trying to do it myself for the last pay period, and I'm not going to be able to do that much longer. I'll do it one more pay period, and then I'll bring in more help, because we're trying to run 7 to 7, seven days a week here. And then at the end of the 7 p.m., I transfer the phone over to the communications center in case there were an emergency, and they would be able to page me, and I would come immediately right in.

Janet McDonnell: So, there is still somewhat of a level of alert.

Brenda Ritchie: Oh, yes, absolutely, we're still in place, even if it's just me. But I hope to have someone by next pay period – at least one to have in place so that when something does happen, I'm able to do the cell phone, you know, the large equipment, and getting the teams, and the coordinator duties, and have the other things handled by a support dispatcher.

Janet McDonnell: But for most of the response, you've actually been here in the coordination center and not in the communications center.

- Brenda Ritchie: Right. I'm still the supervisor of the communications center, and I have a girl, Karen Gochenaur, who is acting as a lead, and we still meet daily and discuss schedules, and coordinate it all.
- Janet McDonnell: And maybe it's a little bit too early still to address this, but how do you think this event will affect your day-to-day operations in the future? Will there be some sort of coordination center now permanently?
- Brenda Ritchie: Well, we are in place by name permanently.
- Janet McDonnell: Okay. It's just that the trailer -
- Brenda Ritchie: Right. We just didn't have the space, but it's been recognized for years that we need more space. And what we've had to do every time we have an emergency is set up a new place to run it, with every fire, or every large search, or every plane crash, whatever it is, we have to get more phone service, we have to find a place to have it, and set it all up with computers, and rent all the equipment, and everything that's necessary to run this with every incident. And the one thing that I think that should be done out of this incident is to recognize that you need this in place all the time, ready for whatever emergency, mainly because it's fiscally irresponsible not to do it. It is so expensive to set it up with every emergency, and use emergency accounts to do it each and every time, whereas you could just have a center in place with the basics that you need at a very minimum level, and then add to it with dispatchers and personnel as you have incidents. But you need to have the place to have it.
- Janet McDonnell: I suppose it might also save some precious time at the beginning too?
- Brenda Ritchie: Oh, yes, absolutely. Just like with the power company, that cost us valuable time.
- Janet McDonnell: Well, given your experience in responding to other operations, I'd sure like to hear you talk for a few minutes about how this one compared and maybe what some of the unique challenges were. You've addressed some challenges as we've gone along.
- Brenda Ritchie: Well, the difference is that the national issues that we were dealing with whereas usually, it's just regional issues. The national contacts, and the national intelligence, and the national mobilization that I was dealing with, and not just bringing them here. Of course, we had a large number of the incidents in our

region since it was New York and D.C., not necessarily our region, but our span of control. But there were also others like the Pacific West had a great many with the dams, and that was interesting to see how those priorities were determined.

Janet McDonnell: Priorities for which dams to protect, you mean?

Brenda Ritchie: Or which icon - which were icons.

Janet McDonnell: That was interesting.

Brenda Ritchie: So, the difference was it was a national incident instead of just providing resources from our region.

Janet McDonnell: So, did that mean at some extent you were dealing with different players than you do in a - I was going to say typical emergency.

Brenda Ritchie: Typical fire system, yes.

Janet McDonnell: So how smoothly do you think the coordination worked with these people that you hadn't necessarily worked with before whether they were at the departmental level, or FEMA?

Brenda Ritchie: It went really well. It really did. Obviously, there was a great deal of attention to the incident, and everyone was more than cooperative. And I personally felt like I got a great support from DOI as far as them issuing directives to give me this information. They were real proactive in helping with that.

Janet McDonnell: Did you ever feel that requests for information coming from the Main Interior Building, whether from the Interior Department or from the Park Service were sort of overwhelming? I understand there were briefings twice a day in the Main Interior.

Brenda Ritchie: There were a lot of different players wanting the information, like the Secretary's office had their own aides that would call and want the information, and the team would want their information, and the DOI officials would want this information, and they would all meet together, and everybody wanted the information first. And that was a little uncomfortable because they were all very important people and you were trying to gather the information so that they could all have it, and it was just a bit political. I would say that the politics would be the most difficult thing.

Janet McDonnell: So how accurate do you think the information was, and I guess what I mean by that, it seems to me that if you're getting

information from the parks at different times of the day, and at the same time you are getting calls from various people for that information, that the figures are going to change, depending on at what point in the day you call.

Brenda Ritchie: That's exactly right. And there were parks that did not - of course, there are a lot of small parks, and there were a lot of parks that would just not call in when they were supposed to, and then there would be players that might have information, and this information would look wrong that we were sending because we weren't getting the new information like players that were in D.C. that came from some area where we had different information than what they had been told from someone that they knew. So that was some problems from that. We were only as good as what we were given.

Janet McDonnell: You mentioned the satellite, and you mentioned your staff, and you mentioned funding codes. I guess my question is do you feel that the center was adequately resourced? Is there anything that you needed that you didn't get?

Brenda Ritchie: Only space. And at the end of this fiscal year, this is going to be evaluated, and may very well be shut down due to lack of funding, which will be a real shame.

Janet McDonnell: I would be interested in hearing you talk a bit about what you think you learned. You did mention that you learned that it probably needs to be a permanent facility rather than ramping up every time. Is there anything else you would want to share?

Brenda Ritchie: That's the greatest thing.

Janet McDonnell: That's the biggest thing.

Brenda Ritchie: It really is because each incident is different. Like the team that was in D.C., we were sending supplies and resources to them, whatever they needed, so we supplied them as well in setting up their operation. Now, the one in Philadelphia, they had most everything.

Janet McDonnell: Do you mean in the South Interior Building?

Brenda Ritchie: Yes. Because they had just basically just the very minimum of things to work with, I think. And they couldn't just go out on the street and buy things because nobody knew where things were.

These were all people from other places, and it was almost easier for us to gather it together and take it down there.

Janet McDonnell: This is Skip Brooks' team, is it?

Brenda Ritchie: Yes. So, we would send them whatever they needed, but in order to support these other incidents, wherever they are, you have to have support yourself to be able to function. And you can call in people to help you when you need it, even local park people. But if you don't have the facility and you have to start from scratch, then you're behind the curve to start with.

Janet McDonnell: Phones, computers.

Brenda Ritchie: Yes. If you don't have your own communication set up, it's very difficult to be a communication or coordination center.

Janet McDonnell: Right. And particularly, I suppose, cast in the role of supporting the entire department and not just the Park Service.

Brenda Ritchie: Exactly. And I would think that this would be a fairly high priority.

Janet McDonnell: Yes.

END OF SIDE B

START OF TAPE TWO

Janet McDonnell: I'd just like to hear you talk a bit about - well, maybe what you are proudest of with this response, what accomplishment do you look at?

Brenda Ritchie: What I'm proudest of is that when the fire system did not work, and orders were not being filled, and they did not know where resources were or what priorities to assign, we were able to pull together a program that worked. We were able to provide one central location that could find the resources and mobilize these resources in a very short time. So, we were able to pull it together and do it ourselves because there was nothing else in place that was working. So, I feel like that we could do that with any incident that we came across, that we could improvise enough. That was a tough one. And it did task me in my abilities as a coordinator to look beyond our span of control and develop a national program that would work, because you didn't know where the next incident might be, and you couldn't take resources from any one particular area, and you needed to determine what was still out there. I'm

proudest of that, that when there wasn't anything that worked, I was able to create a program that did work.

Janet McDonnell: Can you give me a rough percentage of the requirements, the requests that came in, what percentage of those were you able to fill?

Brenda Ritchie: Once I developed a program, I filled them all.

Janet McDonnell: That's quite a record.

Brenda Ritchie: I would have them mobilized within - and they represent 24 hours.

Janet McDonnell: That's amazing.

Brenda Ritchie: It worked really well.

Janet McDonnell: Does that say something about the responsiveness of park people, too?

Brenda Ritchie: Yes, once they knew who I was and they got the directive to supply this information, and these guys were the ones that made those determinations within their own region as to what they would do, I got real good response. And I think that the other thing that I'm most proud of is what we were able to accomplish in the first 48 hours of this emergency. And I don't think that it's recognized that that's what this center does, or can do, or will do with the next national emergency. A lot of it is our proximity to D.C., and our ability to develop these instant programs that need to be developed for a particular emergency, and it could be any kind of an emergency. So that's what I'm most proud of, being able to function and do what's necessary in the first 48 hours of any emergency. I feel like we could pull that off.

Janet McDonnell: But as you pointed out, without the communications center, the dispatch center I guess it is also called, there wouldn't have been the ability to communicate with the land phone system down.

Brenda Ritchie: And that was from calling in the satellite on wheels, you know, that was a real important thing that I did, I feel.

Janet McDonnell: How long has the communications center existed?

Brenda Ritchie: I was here in 1974, and at that time I was a dispatcher, and I wasn't called a dispatcher, I was called a clerk typist. So, I created it. The EICC, the Eastern Interagency Coordination Center, I created that,

and I created that in about 1980, and at that time it was mainly for fire and local emergencies, and then we grew to become the regional coordination center, and it has been that ever since.

Janet McDonnell: But it has a national coordination center function, too, or was this the first time?

Brenda Ritchie: Nationally, it was, yes. And it had been in place because I was given a top-secret clearance, and these things were written that in the event of disasters, I would do these things, but no one ever really believed that it would occur.

Janet McDonnell: That's interesting.

Brenda Ritchie: I think this was a blow to the nation.

Janet McDonnell: Yes. It's fascinating to me that this - that the communications center grew to such an expanded role.

Brenda Ritchie: And it's because of my abilities to perform in those first 48 hours.

Janet McDonnell: Sure. And there was obviously a need there that had not been filled.

Brenda Ritchie: Exactly.

Janet McDonnell: So, in terms of operational plans, it sounds like there really was no plan, that there was a lot of improvisation for this event.

Brenda Ritchie: Exactly.

Janet McDonnell: Do you see a need for some changes in the operational plans?

Brenda Ritchie: I see a need for it to be recognized that there needs to be a center physically in place, and a method of having account numbers at our disposal. What if no one was in D.C. to be able to give me some fictitious account. You still have to be able to perform and provide service, regardless of at whatever level it might be, and that could be quite high.

Janet McDonnell: You can't sign contracts to lease equipment without the account number.

Brenda Ritchie: Exactly. I mean, the local people or any company is not going to provide service without pay. And probably the other thing is I have

a very low - I have a credit card just like everybody else has, with a \$2,500 limit, and that probably needs to be changed.

Janet McDonnell: Is there anything I haven't covered?

Brenda Ritchie: No, I think we've covered it pretty well.

Janet McDonnell: I appreciate it.

END OF TAPE