



Former Agents of the FBI Foundation Oral History Heritage Project

Subject: 9/11, Anthrax Investigation

Interviewee: Timothy Berezney Oral History Interview on February 23, 2016. Special Agent Service Dates: 1976-2007.

Assigned Locations: FBIHQ, Washington, DC

Interviewer: Leslie Szwajkowski, Special Agent Service Dates: 1980-2003

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Summary:

Special Agent Tim Berezney served in the FBI from 1976 to 2007. This interview took place on 23 February 2016. Interviewed by Les Szwajkowski.

When the first plane hit the Twin Towers, SA Berezney was serving as the Section Chief of the Espionage Section at FBIHQ. He had stepped into this role on the previous Friday, so this was only his third working day in office. As soon as the Pentagon was struck, he was sent to the Washington Field Office. There was nothing they could do from the office, so Berezney and the ASAC headed to the Pentagon to help literally put the fire out. As soon as the Pentagon was released as a crime scene, the WFO took over investigation, bringing in agents from Baltimore and Richmond as well.

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**Federal Bureau of Investigation
Interview of Former Special Agent,
Tim Berezney
Les Szwajkowski, Interviewer
February 23, 2016**

Les Szwajkowski

(S): This is Les Szwajkowski and I am in conversation with Tim Berezney. I will begin right now.

What was your position on Nine-Eleven?

Tim Berezney

(B): On Nine-Eleven I was still physically assigned at Headquarters but I'd been promoted the Friday before by the new Director, Robert Mueller. I was the first SAC he appointed. So he appointed me on a Friday and Nine-Eleven happened the following Tuesday.

So when the first plane actually hit the World Trade Center in New York I was, at the time, Section Chief of the Espionage Section at Headquarters. So I had seen that in my office and I saw the first plane go into the World Trade Center. So I immediately was thinking this isn't right. Something is wrong here.

So when the second plane hit about a half-hour later I immediately went upstairs to see Neil Gallagher who was the Assistant Director at the time. so I went up to Neil and I said this is clearly terrorism after the second one hit.

His office was on the seventh floor right facing Pennsylvania Avenue. So I went back downstairs to my office on the fourth floor and the phone rings and it's Gallagher and he says, "Get back up here." So I go back upstairs and he's standing looking out his window and the smoke is coming up from the Pentagon and he says, "You're out of here. Go to WFO and report as the SAC." At the time it was the CT and CI that was under one SAC.

S: So that was an empty desk when you got there?

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B: Yup. I left Headquarters and I'll never forget this. As I'm trying to get out of the building there are FBI Agents who I recognized and who I knew who were running from the building. They were literally leaping over the turnstiles to get out of the building because they thought for some reason that the Bureau was targeted and the next plane was going to hit the Hoover building.

So I walked from Headquarters over to WFO which is about six blocks away on Fourth Street and I can remember walking there and it was just eerily quiet. There weren't very many people out and about on the streets and I got to the Field Office, walked up to SIOC's equivalent at Washington Field Office Command Post and reported for duty.

S: So you just had to introduce yourself to your ASACs and get a cup of coffee?

B: Yeah that was it. It was eerily, it was surreal. I mean people were just standing around watching the television monitors and you had, I wouldn't call it a crime scene. I don't think it was a crime scene. It was a disaster scene.

S: Had the supervisors and everybody taken action on their own or showed some initiative (unintel)?

B: Everybody was in shock. I think the first responders....it was a (unintel) so the Bureau didn't take actual responsibility for the site and getting the certain jurisdiction until the following day. The top priority was to get the fire out.

So I probably reported for duty somewhere around ten o'clock and so by one o'clock nothing was happening at the field office and so I said, "Let's go" and we grabbed the ASAC who was Bob Kerrey at the time. I think that's his name, if I remember right.

S: Let's (unintel) too much background noise

B: So we drove a little from the field office over to the Pentagon and met the fire chief (unintel), the fire department chief. He told us what was going on and he said, "The building is unstable. Nobody is going in the building. It was still a fire scene."

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B: So we proceeded to try to identify where we were going to start housing people and where we were going to stage everything because it was going to be a couple of weeks (unintel) the bodies (unintel).

They were inside the building. They got outside on their own. I'm pretty sure if they were inside and chances of them being alive were remote. So we identified a spot at Fort Mc Nair where we could easily put an on-site command post.

So the next day that's where we set up and that's where we started evidence processing of the crime scene. So at the time there was three SACs from WFO, there was (unintel) from the Criminal side, Bob Everhart from (unintel) from the CTI side.

So Art, he came out of Atlanta and had a forensics background. So he was made the on scene SAC physically at the plant. I was assigned at Fort Mc Nair where we had the joint law enforcement, fire; every agency assigned to Fort Mc Nair and Ellen (unintel) was assigned physically at the airport, Dulles. That is where the flight originated from. So that was kind of the break-out of how Van Harp who was the ADIC at the time and that's who said, "All right you do this, you do this," and that's what we did.

S: So did they shut the Mc Nair operations? Was operating for only a week, or two weeks?

B: They ran it until we physically released the Pentagon as a crime scene back to the Pentagon (unintel).

S: So WFO agents responded to the crime scene and did the identification?

B: Right probably for the first twenty-four hours and then it was a combined effort between WFO, Baltimore had folks brought in, and folks came up from Richmond. I mean it was a big deal. It was much more than just WFO could handle. We brought in folks from all the surrounding field offices to help us and a response team was provided and all the field offices sent their evidence response.

S: Did you notice anybody in particularly heroic or were there any real outstanding stories about the responders?

B: There was one guy and I'm trying to think of his name. I knew him from New York when I was in New York. He was in the FBI Washington Field Office main liaison in the CTC Squad for first responders.

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B: So he had a personal relationship with the chief of the fire department from Arlington because before he came into the Bureau he was a fire-fighter. So he had developed an excellent rapport, not just with Arlington but with all of the local fire departments. He was there on scene working jointly with the fire department with the knowledge that his brother was in the World Trade Center, and that he died in the World Trade Center and he knew it and yet he was there, did his job for the next three or four days before he finally left to go to his brother's funeral in New York.

So did he do anything heroic other than just do his job and do it well? I don't think so. But I don't think I could have done what I saw him do. If I could remember his name, Les and I ran into him later on when I was with Raytheon. He was running SIOC over at Headquarters.

S: Maybe I'd known but...

B: Do you know who he was?

S: Resuming our conversation, Les Swajkowski and Tim Berenzy. Thank you.

So how did you set up the command post? How did it work to break it down administratively? How did you handle all of that evidence and move it to another place?

B: Before I get into that I did remember the guy's name, it was the liaison guy with the fire department whose brother died, it was Chris Combs (C-o-m-b-s) and the last I heard he was at Headquarters. Actually I thought he was back at the Washington Field Office is, I want to say he's an ASAC or an SAC. This would have been in 2011. He was back at WFO and he's the one that married the photographer we talked about earlier, Jennifer, and I can't recall her last name.

So basically how everything was set up for the first three or four days, nobody went near the Pentagon because it structurally wasn't sound. So they had engineers actually stabilizing the building. After about a three day period when they stiffened up the exterior and the interior of the supporting structure and then we started sending evidence to the response teams with the main focus being to retrieve bodies and there was over a hundred and eighty people who died which included the majority folks that were on the airplane, including the terrorists.

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B: So the first work was to get the bodies out and the second focus was to recover any pieces of the plane that survived and there was very little of that recovered. It was a total inferno in there and everything was pretty much destroyed.

Several or maybe a week into it, we were visited by some folks from the Pentagon that said, "We need to get into it and we need to get into this room and we need to recover;" they were looking for war plans and I remember telling the general, "You're not going in there. You can't go in there. It doesn't exist anymore. The room is not there anymore."

S: You had a good map of what was destroyed and what wasn't?

B: We knew where it had hit. We knew the rooms because it didn't quite penetrate through A through E (unintel) Pentagon. It made it through four and it was resting against the last one which was where a hole; everything that was on that plane when it hit the building slid to the front and so as we worked our way into it wasn't until we got to the very end of it which is where the vast majority of the folks on the plane were recovered. Folks that we were finding in the outer rings were people who were working in the building who died when the plane hit.

So it was sporadic recoveries of bodies until we got to the very inside and that's where there was just a mass of human remains. That plane hit and it squished and everything kind of slid to the front of the plane as it continued to make its way through the Pentagon and by the time it stopped we had a whole pile of deceased bodies (unintel) in the front of the plane.

S: If you were working at the Pentagon on an inner ring you were fortunate that it didn't get to you?

B: Yes that's correct.

S: So the morgue was set up, you said, out at Fort Mc Nair?

B: The morgue wasn't...the bodies...I don't recall exactly where they were taken. It may have been another military facility. It could have been in Belvoir. I just don't recall specifically where they were taken.

S: So after this settles down how did that affect your transition into being a new SAC?

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B: Well about two weeks later the first anthrax letter arrived at the Capitol Building so then we transitioned from a recovery situation at the Pentagon and we're going to pull out of the investigation and try to figure out who was mailing anthrax letters to the Capitol.

So we transitioned from one crime scene, major crime scene, the biggest crime scene and pieces of a scene and we get to move onto the next crime scene. So the next part of my SAC-ship was to deal with that.

S: So how long were you in that job?

B: I was the SAC for only about six months when I was picked to become the Deputy Assistant Director for counter-intelligence and was transferred back to Headquarters under Dave Zayas, a job that I didn't ask for, I didn't apply for and nevertheless, received the promotion to be the Deputy.

S: So personally, what is the most memorable thing that occurred to you throughout all of this?

B: It was a blur. I guess other than seeing Chris Combs do what I think was heroic activity at the Pentagon, I mentioned Arthur Eberhart earlier who was on scene physically at the Pentagon and ran that full recovery at first. Everhart also played a major role in running the anthrax case because of his experience from a lab respect. He understood the evidence collection and processing and especially when you're dealing with something like anthrax.

He had been overseas on a number of occasions where there were crimes, and where there were civilian massacres in Kosovo. So he had experience in processing these types of recovery scenes. So he did a fantastic job. He was very important in both of those investigations from the evidence recovery aspect. So Art was invaluable.

He was also a Senior SAC at WFO. He was the Admin., guy and did a lot more than just admin stuff and Van Harp. Van Harp was the Assistant Director of the Washington Field Office. All of this fell on him. He was fairly new at WFO as well. He had probably less than six months at WFO when these two events occurred.

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B: My biggest memory was my wife is a Bureau employee. She is an analyst in the Baltimore Field Office. She was part of the Baltimore Evidence Response Team that went to the Pentagon and she was one of those who was pulling the human remains out of the Pentagon and if you thought about messing with someone's head, it was not a very pleasant task for her to do or any of those people.

So what I take away from all of that is that the Bureau despite the circumstances has people who were willing to do whatever it takes to get the job done, whether that job is to have liaison with the fire department despite the fact that your brother died, whether it's that your wife is pulling human remains out of the Pentagon. You just realize your thankful that the Bureau has people that are willing to sacrifice and put themselves in emotional harm's way.

Those are the things that I take away from (unintel). The fact that we had people that were willing to go in and recover and sample anthrax out of these facilities, or are willing to collect the evidence containing the anthrax and put themselves at risk, to sickness, contracting the anthrax virus and the fact that they do it and they do it professionally and they do it right.

These are all things that I take away. It makes me proud to have been proud of the Bureau and proud to watch these people do what they did under horrible circumstances.

S: Well thanks very much.