

9.11

10-YEAR
ANNIVERSARY

FIRST-RESPONDER COMMANDERS REFLECT 10 YEARS LATER

LESSONS FOR TODAY AND TOMORROW

By Ron Carlee

SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, was a date that changed the course of history and shaped much of what happened in the world during the first decade of the 21st century. The details are well known: in New York, 2,752 innocent people were killed; in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, 40 people died; and in Arlington County, Virginia, 184 people.

Each site was unique, and the emergency response was different at each site. This article explores the observations of the operational leaders who oversaw the response at the Pentagon: the military, the FBI, and the Arlington County Fire and Rescue Department:



JAMES JACKSON was the commander for the U.S. Army's Military District of Washington, D.C., and assumed command on behalf of the Pentagon.



CHRISTOPHER COMBS was weapons of mass destruction coordinator and a member of the National Capital Response Squad. He became the FBI's point person at the Pentagon.



EDWARD PLAUGHER was the Arlington County fire chief who delegated field command to the assistant fire chief for operations.




JAMES SCHWARTZ was Arlington County's assistant fire chief for operations; he was given the assignment as incident commander at the Pentagon.

This assembled dialogue is based on individual interviews and a group discussion by all four of the leaders earlier this year.

AN EXPANDED VERSION OF THIS ARTICLE AND AN ACCOMPANYING VIDEO WILL BE FEATURED ON PM'S WEBSITE AT ICMA.ORG/PM DURING THE MONTH OF SEPTEMBER.



A large American flag is shown waving in the wind against a sunset sky. The flag is the central focus, with its stars and stripes clearly visible. The background features a calm body of water and a distant shoreline under a golden, hazy sky.

TAKEAWAYS

- › Who is “in charge” in a crisis depends on the mission to be accomplished. The operational leaders at the Pentagon on 9/11 established unified command in a highly complex environment with overlapping responsibilities.
- › Effective interagency emergency responses require the pre-establishment of working relationships, not just at the top of the agencies but also at the working level.
- › Local leaders need to ensure working relationships with the FBI and other federal partners in the community, especially the heads of such major federal facilities as military bases.

Q & A

Q: Who was in charge at the Pentagon?

Responsibilities for the Pentagon response had the potential for confusion and competition for command and control, given the different agencies involved. One of the first questions that people ask about any emergency is “Who’s in charge?” Who was in charge at the Pentagon?

Schwartz: It is not a simple question. First, we have to start with the idea that no one is in charge of everything. The real question is “Who is in charge of what?” There are many people in charge of many elements of the response. The key is to figure out how to unify that response so that it is coordinated.

As incident commander at the Pentagon, my focus was on dealing with casualties, both those outside the

Combs: People ask me how a local fire chief can be in charge of the crime scene for a major terrorist attack. At the FBI, however, we break the incident down into phases. The first phase of any terrorist event is usually life/safety and the only organization that can really do life/safety and rescue is the fire service.

Schwartz: We need to acknowledge that at the beginning of every incident there is some level of chaos. Our first job is to bring order to the chaos. We can do this better if we know one another and have practiced and trained together.

Combs: Doing field and tabletop exercises is really important so that your command staff have operated with the other agencies. We had been through numerous exercises together so that at the Pentagon we all knew each other and the capabilities of each agency. We knew the roles and responsibilities.

Plaugher: I think all of the partners performed extraordinarily well, so that anything that would be said could be construed as a criticism, and I have no criticism for any of the partners there. Communications across all the different players, however, could have been and should have been better.

Schwartz: I would not have stayed in the command position as long as I did. The first hours were so impactful, so stressful, that I didn’t recognize it. Leaders in stressful situations like this don’t understand the toll it takes on your effectiveness.

This is easier to say in hindsight, harder to do at the time. Looking back, I think an incident commander really needs a break after four to six hours just to get perspective.

Plaugher: I agree, but it is really hard to do. When I went home, I wasn’t really at home, so I changed clothes and went back to work.

Jackson: There’s nothing that I would have changed dramatically. Around the edges, we could have done better. We could have put up site security more quickly. I could have tapped into military joint assets more quickly.

Combs: I wouldn’t change a lot of things. Post 9/11, however, the FBI has made major changes. We’re still investigation focused, but we’ve created a number of response elements that operate with local first responders day in and day out. This is an extremely positive development.

Q: What are the most important 9/11 lessons for the future?

While the events on 9/11 are historically important and interesting, more important is whether or not anything was learned. Agent Combs in the earlier answer outlined some ways that the FBI has changed based on lessons learned. What are some of the others?

Jackson: You don’t have to have a concrete plan for every eventuality, but you generally need to know what you have to do and who is supposed to do what. I remember being asked at a press conference if we had a plan to deal with an airplane crash into the Pentagon.

“ . . . you have to have competent people in the appropriate places, and you must trust and have confidence in them.”

– EDWARD PLAUGHER

building and those trapped inside, and getting control of the fire itself, ensuring that there weren’t additional hazards on the incident scene that might have been brought by the terrorists.

Plaugher: The philosophy of the incident command system is that you have to have competent people in the appropriate places, and you must trust and have confidence in them. My role on 9/11 was to support Jim Schwartz and to provide him and others with a view of the overall incident so that we could contain it. I needed to make sure that all of the key players were laced into the process.

Jackson: Command should be based on the people who have the best capability to deal with the immediate problem. My role was to be the conduit to get the fire department’s incident commander into the Pentagon and get him whatever military assets he needed to maintain control of all DOD assets.

Compare this with showing up and meeting each other for the first time at a major event. That’s not a recipe for a good scene.

Schwartz: You have to give people responsibility, and you have to count on them to act, not in their self-interest but in the interest of the greater goals demanded by the incident. We talk a lot about unified command, but you can only command people who give you the permission to command. And the only reason they will give you permission to command them is if you have established a bond of trust.

Q: What would you do differently?

The *9/11 Commission Report* on page 314 described the response at the Pentagon this way: “While no emergency response is flawless, the response to the 9/11 terrorist attack on the Pentagon was mainly a success” Looking back 10 years later, what would you do differently?

I looked at the reporter quizzically and said “no.” You can’t build a plan for every eventuality. What we had were general plans that were easy to adapt to the specific situation. And that is what we did. The biggest lesson is having the right people and the right organizations together that can adapt to the situation.

Combs: The ability to work together by establishing relationships is a critical lesson. It wasn’t just the relationship with Arlington County but all of the local governments in the Washington, D.C., area and their ability to work with multiple federal and state agencies.

These relationships often do not exist. There’s both suspicion and hesitation. We

Schwartz: Collaboration is most important when you’re facing something that you did not anticipate and you’re looking at an incident for which you do not have a plan. You have to figure out how you’re going to get something critical done through someone else.

Q: Are we spending too much time and effort on terrorism?

Since 9/11, there has been enormous effort put into antiterrorism activities at

We can’t prepare for everything equally, but we have to prepare for everything at some level.

Combs: My job is specifically to focus on terrorism. What worries me is that we have to be perfect every time, and the terrorists only have to get lucky once. I’m concerned that if and when a terrorist gets lucky, the whole system will be perceived as having failed.

We can’t prevent everything. We should, and we try 24 hours a day, but we

“...we have to be perfect every time, and the terrorists only have to get lucky once.”

– CHRISTOPHER COMBS

“It is generally better that people know one another one or two levels below the senior staff because that’s where the work gets done.”

– JAMES JACKSON

still have places where fire personnel don’t talk to police and police don’t talk to the FBI. This is going to get someone killed.

Jackson: It is generally better that people know one another one or two levels below the senior staff because that’s where the work gets done. I didn’t personally know all of the actors at the Pentagon, but the people on my staff did, and I knew that our military personnel had working relationships with the fire department and the FBI.

Combs: Everyone can tell a bad story about a relationship of one person who wasn’t cooperative, who didn’t share, who had too big an ego, or who botched a relationship with others. It’s all of our jobs to work against the wrong perception and give everyone a fair shot at working together.

Plaugher: The essence of effectiveness is having the confidence and competence to do the job you have to do. The test for our organizations is whether or not we are building the confidence in our team and ourselves. Are we building the competencies necessary to perform effectively when confronted with a situation that is not for the weak at heart?

all levels of government. There was the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, Transportation Security Administration, and Urban Areas Security Initiative that have funded millions of dollars in local capabilities.

The most devastating impacts in the United States, however, have not come from terrorists over the past 10 years. Have we been too focused on terrorism?

Plaugher: Even though I had prepared specifically for a terrorist attack in Arlington County prior to 9/11, I am concerned that we have spent too much effort on terrorism since then to the detriment of the all-hazards approach. It is not if, but when, we will have a major natural disaster or another terrorist attack.

We need to build capacity for all events. It isn’t what happens to you; it is how you respond to what happens. We have to build the infrastructure that provides a base to respond to whatever happens.

Schwartz: Each community has to assess what are its most likely risks, the most likely events that they are going to encounter and build their system to be able to react to those most likely events.

can’t. Unfortunately, one day something will happen that we will not be able to stop, and I don’t think that will mean a failure of the entire system.

Jackson: Complacency bothers me. As we get further away from 9/11, as things change, lives go on, and we forget. As Chris said, the bad guys only have to get it right once, and we’ve got to be right all the time. Otherwise, we’re reacting and we’re into consequence management, which we’d rather not do.

We’d rather be in the preventive mode. From senior government leaders all the way down into the community, complacency will hurt us. We need strong leadership to make the case and spend the money at the right time and do the training that we need to do.

Q: On what should we be focused?

Combs: We need to continue to make improvements in information sharing. More specifically, we need to focus training more on small explosive attacks and small tactical attacks like we’re seeing around the world. These are the threats we are seeing every day and are most likely what we will see in the future.

Plaugher: We need to do more on managing mass care casualties, mass evacuations, and others.

Schwartz: On a macro level, we are not sufficiently integrating the three levels of government—federal, state, and local.

We are not adequately recognizing the roles of the private sector and the non-profits. Intergovernmentally, there is still paternalism in the federal government toward state and local governments.

There are still not enough senior people in the federal government who understand local government. And there is no one group or organization that represents the private sector. Who is

know how to react to a situation on the ground in at least a basic framework of working together.

Combs: While it is the responsibility of the FBI to reach out to local government leaders, local leaders—local fire and police chiefs, emergency managers, as well as senior appointed and elected officials—need to take the initiative to know the key FBI personnel in their

Jackson: My military career kept me pretty well grounded. I've been in the contingency business my entire career, so the eventuality that something bad would happen was always expected. Dealing with rapid change and problems is what we do as a way of life.

Combs: The events of 9/11 rededicated me to my mission. It makes me understand why I have to work so hard so that it doesn't happen again. I feel that my work isn't just a job; it's a calling.

Plaugher: I don't think it's over. We gave so much of ourselves in such an event that it never really ends. It's always there, but it doesn't define my 34 years in the fire service. So it's mixed how 9/11 affects me personally. I tried to give my best, and I think that I did. I think our department gave its best.

Jackson: What 9/11 opened up to me is how many people outside of the army, like the Arlington County fire department, are doing extraordinary work. I met so many people from so many places who have dedicated themselves to the community.

Getting to know these people was extremely rewarding to me personally. I just wish I could have gotten to know them without having such a tragedy where so many people died.

Schwartz: I have a hard time answering this question. My life has been very different for the past 10 years. I feel a deep responsibility to represent Arlington County and the fire service overall. I also really appreciate more the importance and support of family—who I did not see until day 10.

Neighbors would come up and give me a hug. I wrestle with people seeing me one way and seeing myself a different way. What we did at the Pentagon was a big deal, but a lot of people have done much bigger things. **PM**



RON CARLEE was county manager, Arlington County, Virginia, in 2001. He is now chief operating officer, ICMA, Washington, D.C. (rcarlee@icma.org) and adjunct professor of public administration and public policy, George Washington University, Washington, D.C.

“We need to acknowledge that at the beginning of every incident there is some level of chaos. Our first job is to bring order to the chaos.”

— JAMES SCHWARTZ

responsible for securing so much of our national infrastructure that is owned and operated by the private sector? How do we build redundancy so that we do not have single points of failure?

Q. What specifically should local government leaders be doing?

Looking specifically to the local governments, what should managers be doing today to ensure that their communities are appropriately prepared for whatever may happen?

Schwartz: My first recommendation to city and county managers is to make emergency management a priority even when resource limits require that emergency managers have to wear more than one hat. They also need to work with their elected leaders to prepare them for an emergency. The role of the elected leaders is critical and it can be extremely helpful, or they can get in the way of operations and inadvertently communicate incomplete or incorrect messages to the public.

Jackson: Local leaders and the leaders of military installations need to create solid relationships. Installations bring a lot of capacity to the local governments where they are located. All of the key players on a military base and in the local government—police, fire, public works personnel—need to know one another.

They need to develop a common language at the operational level. Communities and military bases need to

area: the FBI coordinator for weapons of mass destruction, the Joint Terrorism Task Force, and the FBI special agent in charge (SAC) in their area.

Plaugher: Local leaders need to be asking questions: Have they done succession planning? How deep are their preparedness levels? How much time should their locality be spending on disaster preparation and training?

Also, do their elected leaders understand their roles? They need to make sure that they know such basics as the “declaration” process, and what it means. Do they have the core capabilities that they need?

Schwartz: More broadly, we need to work on building more resilient communities. Individuals are the true first responders, and we have to help prepare average citizens to take care of one another in a crisis. This is not only important for a large event but even during a snowstorm, when there's a neighbor who needs some help down the street.

Q: Did 9/11 change you personally?

In addition to the tragic loss of life, many people, including responders, experienced serious physical and psychological injury from the events in 9/11. While the scene was especially horrific in New York City, responders at the Pentagon, including the four of you, saw things that no one should ever have to see. Did the event affect you personally?