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Terrorist Attacks  
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Internal Transcript

INTERVIEW OF  
GENERAL MARK V. ROSENKER,  
DIRECTOR OF THE WHITE HOUSE MILITARY OFFICE  
BY CBS

Q Let's go back to the -- I mean, just the story you were just telling me, about being there on a normal day and just your recollections of what those first couple of moments were like -- on the way to the school and then into the school.

GENERAL ROSENKER: We assumed it would be another normal, routine day. We were prepared for a routine day, another routine day in traveling with the President of the United States -- as routine as it can ever be when you're traveling with the President. And about two minutes out from the arrival at the school, the Presidential Communications Officer turned around to me and said, sir, I've just gotten a call from the PEOC and an aircraft has hit the World Trade Center.

And my initial impression was I was wondering what the weather was like, that perhaps a small aircraft might accidentally fly into the building. So that was the initial perception of what had happened. We certainly wanted to make sure that the Chief of Staff knew and, as soon as we arrived, we walked over to him and told him that.

Q How did the President find out?

GENERAL ROSENKER: I believe he found out by Secretary Card mentioning it to him. And then -- again, there were not enough details to be able to say what had happened. And we went along, after the holding room and we went into the event, itself.

Q But as far as a plane hitting the World Trade Center, it doesn't immediately impact your job with the President down there, in terms of --

GENERAL ROSENKER: Not until you find out what happened and the gravity of the situation, the magnitude of the situation. We didn't learn that for another perhaps five minutes, until we were able to get additional calls from Washington indicating what had happened. At that time I had been asked to try to find a television set -- which we did, we rolled it in on one of these old TV carts, just like I remember when I was in school. And we plugged it into the cable connection and we began to see the

coverage at that point and then we realized how serious what we were looking at was.

And, of course, at that same time I think we watched -- I believe it was live -- an aircraft fly right into the second building.

Q What was your reaction to that?

GENERAL ROSENKER: Shock. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. And recognized at that point there was going to be a lot of work for us for the rest of the day and we needed to prepare for the President to get back to Washington.

Q You're watching it on TV, do you also -- at the same time, do your phones and buzzers start going off, do the people back here in your office let you know or is there a --

GENERAL ROSENKER: Yes, I had been making calls back from my cell phone and trying to find out more information as soon as we were able to see what the first aircraft incident was. We were talking to the PEOC, the Presidential Emergency Operation Center and the Sit Room. As much information as we possibly could glean to understand what was happening.

Q When you realized there's an attack like that, as far as your responsibilities and your job goes, what's your first thought?

GENERAL ROSENKER: To make sure that the President has the assets that he needs to be President of the United States and Commander in Chief.

Q Which are?

GENERAL ROSENKER: A whole host of assets, from aircraft to helicopters to transportation to communications primarily, at this moment.

Q You talked about knowing that you were going home. Just tell me that.

GENERAL ROSENKER: Well, we knew we were going on to the aircraft. The destination that the flight plan is always set for is to go back to Washington. Until we heard about the second incident -- or, I guess, the second incident, the third incident would be the aircraft hitting the Pentagon -- we assumed that we could go back to Washington, which was the appropriate place with the initial --

Q In terms of your job, finding out that there's an attack underway, seeing the second tower -- what do you have to -- what's your reaction in terms of your job and your responsibilities?

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GENERAL ROSENKER: The White House Military Office is there to directly support the President of the United States for any military assets he would need to be Commander in Chief, to be President of the United States. And my job is to make sure that he had that done. And we had that, we believed we were in a position to support him, whatever is necessary.

Q But in those early moments, there isn't a sense that the President could be in danger, is there?

GENERAL ROSENKER: Not initially, the way we perceived it. But our job is to make sure -- and we are very conservative with the Secret Service -- that the President is always in a safe position to be able to communicate, to carry out the duties of the Presidency.

Q When did you learn that the Pentagon had been hit?

GENERAL ROSENKER: I believe we were in the motorcade on our way to Air Force One.

Q And your reaction to that news?

GENERAL ROSENKER: Well, once again, shock, dismay, anger. But I must tell you that I had gotten call about, I guess another moment or two before we had gotten to the actual airport, and indicating that there was a secure call holding for me from the Sit Room. And at that point I had -- once the motorcade had stopped, I had gone up the back side of the aircraft, and gotten to my area where I took the call. And it was at that point that they had indicated that it would be best if we did not come back to Washington and that we should try to find some escort aircraft for us.

And at that point I went up to the communications area and awaited our take-off so that we could then talk to the pilot, the Mil Aide and Secretary Card and make those kinds of decisions.

Q Initially, the decision was -- the flight plan was set for Washington?

GENERAL ROSENKER: Correct.

Q At what point did that change, and why?

GENERAL ROSENKER: I think the decision was made based on the fact that the Pentagon had been hit, Washington was now clearly a target. There were a host of reports coming in that we could not tell were factual or not. Reports such as the State Department had a bomb in some way, a car bomb; some bombings or something had happened perhaps out on the Mall; indicating that aircraft were heading toward Camp David. A whole host of things that we just could not determine were fact or fiction. So,

clearly, it made sense to -- and this, again, was a consensus type of a decision made that perhaps we should look at an alternative site, clear the fog and then make the final decision on where we would be going.

Q But at the same time, the Commander in Chief wants to get back to Washington?

GENERAL ROSENKER: That's exactly right. And the Commander in Chief, I think after speaking with the Secretary and recognizing the consensus, agreed that we could take him to an alternative site. And then the objective is to make sure the American people saw the President and heard his message.

Q But the original plan was to fly all the way out to Nebraska, to the Offutt Air Force Base? |

*Fly to Offutt*

GENERAL ROSENKER: Right. And that was going to take too long. It was very important to the President to address the nation and make sure that the people could see that he was safe and in total control of the situation.

Q Who communicated that, the importance of that decision to you? I mean, how did you realize that you weren't going to Offutt, but that it was -- the President wanted to be on the ground? I mean, did he communicate that directly to you?

GENERAL ROSENKER: Secretary Card came up to the communications area. I was up pretty much in the communications deck, which is adjacent to the cockpit.

Q And what did Secretary Card say?

GENERAL ROSENKER: He said that we need to find a facility, a base that we can get to in a relatively short period of time so that the President can make a statement. And we knew within moments that these were the options, and Barksdale made the greatest sense to us. It was a highly secure Air Force base, had B-52s there; they had the capability to do what was necessary to secure Air Force One and to make sure that the President was safe, and make sure that we could provide the appropriate communications facility so the President could make his statement.

Q Coming out of Sarasota, you told us the story first and then Colonel Tillman confirmed it, there was an unidentified aircraft which had its transponder off and wasn't communicating - and that was the M.O. of all the other aircraft that attacked that day. Tell me a little bit about that; that must have made everybody a little nervous.

GENERAL ROSENKER: Well, it did. But we are clearly on probably the finest airplane in the world, so we were comforted

by knowing that we had the ability to out-run and out-climb anything that was going to get near us.

But it was just after Secretary Card had come up to the communications deck and talked to us about a series of options that we could take a look at, and indicated that it had been reported that Air Force One was a target. And at that moment, within a moment or two after that, that we had heard that, that's when Colonel Tillman had indicated to us that something was coming at us, it was not squawking, it was not turning and we had a feeling that we were going to be able to get away from it -- but for a moment you ask the question, what could it be?

Q The threat that was conveyed from the White House, I think originally the Vice President contacted either the President or Secretary Card, that using the code name for the aircraft and saying: angel is next, that the plane had been targeted. Again, the fog of war, but what's everybody's reaction when that information comes on? It goes from being the abstract to the very specific. AF1

GENERAL ROSENKER: That's true. What we train for is to make sure that we have the ability to get out of harm's way. And we have the best pilots, the best aircraft in order to make sure that the President stays in a very secure -- in a very secure environment. And I think we succeeded in doing that extremely well.

Q Did you ever for a moment worry that this -- that something could happen? Were you -- I mean, Scott asked the President, were you ever concerned for your safety? Were you concerned for your safety and those on the aircraft?

GENERAL ROSENKER: Not really. Simply because I know we have the finest aircraft, the finest pilots; the capabilities were there. This is a very, very unique situation in that trying to take another aircraft down with an airliner -- with an airliner -- is extremely difficult to do.

So I was comforted knowing that and recognizing that the fighter aircraft were going to be coming upon us relatively shortly.

Q Was there a sense of -- a little bit a sense of -- I mean, outrage or anger, like, if this was an attack, how dare they, in some ways? I mean, did your back go up? Or is it just automatic pilot at that point?

GENERAL ROSENKER: I think it's automatic pilot, in the sense that we have to do the jobs that we're trained to do, to make sure the President gets to where he needs to go safely, maintains the communications and control that's necessary to be Commander in Chief. And that was done.

Q There were some problems with communications that day. The President has told us he got frustrated, the phone was kicking in and out. And at one point, he says he pounded the desk and said: Goddammit, this is unacceptable. Get me the Vice President -- he didn't say "Goddammit." He said: This is inexcusable. Get me the Vice President. Comms

That's your bailiwick, along with, obviously, Colonel Tillman and the folks up in the communication hub. But tell me a little bit about some of the communication problems.

GENERAL ROSENKER: Well, part of it perhaps was in the publicly switched network, in that once we get to satellites, we have to get through a regular telephone network. Clearly, when these kinds of things happen, unfortunately, they jam and overuse the structure.

So we were able to keep secure lines up by satellite, and for the most part I believe the President had the ability to do what was necessary to be in control and have command of his forces, and talk with his national security structure.

Q What was the feeling on the plane? I guess, because you were picking up intermediate TV signals, you got to -- the President, his staff, and you got to see, really, almost the aftermath. The towers had fallen, or were about to -- did you see the towers fall?

GENERAL ROSENKER: We wouldn't have seen it live. We would have seen, perhaps, tapes of it as they continued to rerun it. But it was extremely difficult. Watching terrestrial television, land television, from 30,000, 40,000 feet is not an easy task. And you get bits and pieces of it; it was not a good signal. And we now have the capability of seeing satellite television, and it gives tremendous situational awareness now. TV.

Q Was there an awareness for what was -- other than the communication, was there an awareness from the television signal, however faint, of the scope and -- I mean, when those towers came down, the scope of the tragedy changed dramatically. I mean, did that feeling get into the plane?

GENERAL ROSENKER: I think so. Clearly, you know, when you continue to just hear things over the telephone and talk with people -- the old saying, a picture is worth a thousand words; this was a million words.

Q Do you remember what your feeling was when you saw that the towers, or realized that the towers had fallen?

GENERAL ROSENKER: I couldn't believe that something as great as the World Trade Center buildings could be taken down, by anything. And when you saw the initial strikes from the aircraft, you knew that there would be significant damage --

significant damage. But I never believed that they could take the buildings down.

Q What's your interaction with the President at this point, during this time period? I mean, you're --

GENERAL ROSENKER: Most of my interaction was upstairs, making sure that the communications were as -- that the connectivity was as much as we could possibly get from the aircraft, which was good for the most part; and primarily trying to find people that the President and Secretary Card were looking for.

Q As you're coming into Barksdale, as Secretary Card tells us, it was supposed to be a secret decision. And, yet, at some point it appears on the television, shots of Air Force One landing at Barksdale. What was the reaction to that?

GENERAL ROSENKER: We were somewhat disappointed. We had been making all of our conversations with Barksdale on the secure telephone, on the secure lines. And we had indicated to Barksdale clearly that this was not a public arrival, nor was it to be televised in any way, shape, or form.

But you know, the media in their ingenious fashion were able to figure out that we were going there, and perhaps intercepted a message -- whether it be by land line or whether it be by two-way radio on the ground -- that we were on our way.

Q And there you watched your own arrival.

GENERAL ROSENKER: We did watch the arrival, yes. From outside -- they were not on the base, I can tell you that.

Q You get to Barksdale and the President gives his address. Where are you at that point what did --

GENERAL ROSENKER: I stayed on the aircraft to continue to work the communications aspects of the connectivity part of what we were trying to do.

Q Is there some discussion -- are you involved in any of the discussions about whether or not, when he's finished at Barksdale -- are you in the loop there as to where he's going? Give me a sense of that decision-making.

GENERAL ROSENKER: We still believed, based on -- this was only still hours after the Pentagon had been struck. Other aircraft had -- although the aircraft, we were bringing down by grounding them from the FAA, we still didn't have a good sense that this would be a secure place to take the President.

So I think we still believed we were going to have to go somewhere else until we could make sure that it was safe for the

President to return to Washington. And we believed, clearly, his ability to remain in command and control with all the technology that was necessary for him, that the best place was STRATCOM.

Q But the President is getting increasingly frustrated?

GENERAL ROSENKER: Yes.

Q It's no longer, okay, I'll rely on you guys. He's actively chafing at the bit. Tell me a little bit about your sense of --

GENERAL ROSENKER: Well, he still believed that the President should be back in Washington. And I can understand that. But the authorities, the command authorities within, that were sitting down at the White House -- the Vice President, Dr. Rice -- they all believed it was best to continue on until we could find out exactly the magnitude of what had happened and what potentially was still out there.

Q Around this time, or before you land at Barksdale, the White House, itself, is evacuated, because Flight 93's approach is such that the Secret Service has got to get everybody out except for those in the PEOC.

Do you guys -- are you aware? Are you informed of the fact that the White House, itself, has been evacuated?

GENERAL ROSENKER: Yes. I heard it -- again, I was up primarily on the flight deck, and --

Q What was your reaction to that news?

GENERAL ROSENKER: Once again, shock, hard to believe that someone would dare take a shot at the White House with some type of either an aircraft or a weapon. It was a day that you will never forget.

Q Did you fear that you wouldn't see the White House again?

GENERAL ROSENKER: No. I always believed that building was going to be protected, that building would remain, and that the President would be going home that night.

Q The President gets on board and goes to Offutt. And the fighter escort -- tell me first about the fighter escort joining up. To your, the best of your recollection, when was that?

GENERAL ROSENKER: They had gotten in just -- right before we were getting around Barksdale. And they were clearing the way for us -- because, again, you didn't know what might be around us. Of course, no one knew that we were going to Barksdale until

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perhaps maybe 10, 15 minutes -- maybe 20 minutes before, but still not enough to have executed any type of a plan.

But the fighters did an outstanding job of clearing the area and to make sure that we were safe in coming in.

Q What was your reaction when you saw them? You're an Air Force general in the Reserves. What was your reaction when you saw some of your own come right up on the wing tips?

GENERAL ROSENKER: Pleased, proud. A feeling of security, knowing that they did a wonderful job.

I was particularly pleased to know that those great F-16s were part of the unit that the President, himself, served in only 25, 30 years ago.

Q We talked to both of those fighter pilots down in Texas, on board, with Colonel Tillman. And they made it very clear to us that they were fully loaded and ready for a mission that might include shooting down civilian aircraft. That's got to be an awesome responsibility. And at this time, the President, himself, is making the decision, in consultation with the Secretary of Defense, of giving an order that any military pilot running CAPs could, in fact, engage and shoot down a civilian aircraft.

That's just got to be the hardest decision a President could make. Were you aware of that going on, and were you part of that?

GENERAL ROSENKER: No, I was not a part of that. We are the support mechanism to the Presidency. The policy areas clearly come from places in the Sit Room and via senior policy advisors, and the President, himself, makes the final decisions.

Q If you can tell me, tell me who called in AWACS, as well: What's their function, and where do they operate?

AWACS

GENERAL ROSENKER: They give you the big picture in the sky. They're able to identify what's a friend, what's a foe. So that was a wonderful asset to have up there for us, it tremendously helped us to be able to guide for where we needed to go, to what potential problems we might encounter.

So it was a good call, it was a great asset to have, and it was an important part of what we needed to do to guarantee the safety of the President of the United States.

Q At one point, I understand from the fighter pilots, that they had to break off to investigate a crop duster that was flying its little, measly route right around Barksdale. That must have been one scared crop duster.

GENERAL ROSENKER: I think any aircraft that comes upon an F-16 or an F-15 should be scared.

Q Were you aware that one was breaking off to go --

GENERAL ROSENKER: No. No, I wasn't.

Q That's directly between the pilots and --

GENERAL ROSENKER: And AWACS, and Colonel Tillman.

Q And Colonel Tillman. So we're at Offutt. Do you stay on the plane in Offutt, or do you go with the President?

GENERAL ROSENKER: No, no, at that point, we still didn't know for sure that we were coming back to Washington. But knowing how the President felt and what he wanted to do, I was believing that we were going to be back that night. So I had indicated to Colonel Tillman that we had a very, very good shot at going home, and that he shouldn't shut the airplane down and send the crew off for crew rest.

Q We were brought down into STRATCOM and did a stand-up down there. Give us a sense -- did you go with the President down --

GENERAL ROSENKER: I went into the bunker, and what we did was, I was more worried about taking care of the rest of the staff. The President was going right into briefings. And what I needed to do was make sure that the rest of the staff was kept informed and making sure that they were able to do what they needed to do to support the President. So I was there worrying and more concerned about taking care of the staff at that point, because the President was clearly in outstanding hands with the senior staff of STRATCOM and working the VTCs back to Washington, talking to his national security team.

Q There was still even -- even at the end of the video teleconference still some debate about whether the President should come back. And I guess the Secret Service being conservative, as they should be, said, we don't still think it's good. The President laid down the law. Give us a sense of that, if you can, of him just making his decision that it's time to go home.

GENERAL ROSENKER: Well, I wasn't there when he said, I'm going home, but I think -- everything that I've heard, that's exactly what he said. And I was told to -- I believe Secretary Card told me, let's go, we're going back. And at that point, we were prepared to take the President back home.

Q Coming into Washington, Colonel Tillman tells us the story of being joined up by as many as five additional fighters,

F-16s out of Langley. That's a hell of an escort to get. I mean, what's your -- give us your take on that sequence.

GENERAL ROSENKER: Well, once again we -- I remember seeing these aircraft probably about 30 to 40 minutes outside of Washington. And I was looking out the window, the left side of the aircraft, and one of the F-16s came up to us. And I don't think he was any more than perhaps 50 to 75 feet away. You could pretty much see that he hadn't shaved that day. But there was a tremendous comfort feeling, if you will, to know that that aircraft was there and a whole host of his other colleagues were around us to guarantee the safety in making sure that when we got to Andrews, we could land safely and move the President on to Marine One and back to the White House as quickly as we possibly could.

Q What's your reaction to seeing an aircraft that close to Air Force One?

GENERAL ROSENKER: I must tell you, short of being in an airplane in some kind of a formation, I've never seen anything that close, and I'm not sure I want to see it again.

Q When the President is on Marine One, traveling back, he gets his first look at the Pentagon. And you get your first look at the Pentagon, the first damage -- real assessment of damage from that day. What's your -- again, as an Air Force General in the Reserve, what's your reaction to seeing the mightiest building in the world, as the President said, on fire and damaged and broken and knowing that many people -- many fellow soldiers, airmen, had lost their lives?

GENERAL ROSENKER: Angry, shocked and feeling that this will not stand. And as the President has indicated and as later shown, it did not stand.

Q You talked about a quality of disbelief, it being the Pentagon of all buildings that had gotten hit.

GENERAL ROSENKER: It's the symbol of America's might. And to brazenly attack it with a civil aircraft is inhumane. Those people are not warriors, clearly cowards. Terrible, terrible.

Q Great. Anything else we want to talk about?

GENERAL ROSENKER: Well, in the -- just the -- what I saw with the President and just even in the beginning, when he came into the holding room, there was a -- throughout the entire day, a sense of calm, a sense of discipline, a sense of resolve. And the essence of the Commander in Chief. I think I saw that the entire day. And I was so proud and so pleased that I was a part of his team, and hoped that I could support him and make the contributions necessary to make him successful in what he was doing that day and the days following.

Q As you look back, it's a year later. What's the one moment -- I mean, there's a flood of memories and images and memories -- but what's the one thing that jumps out from you that day that you'll keep remembering that stuck out, and said, this is unlike any other day I've ever lived through?

GENERAL ROSENKER: The recognition that the President of the United States was going to have to make decisions that would take the nation to war, and to be a small, tiny, tiny piece of his support mechanism. I never thought that even in this job that I would be required to do some of the things that we ended up doing that day.

But he was -- it was an incredibly impressive day to watch the Commander in Chief make the decisions and gather the information, assess it, analyze it and give the directions that he made. I mean, you were watching the Commander in Chief begin the process of clearly defending the homeland and assessing what had happened, to help those that were in need that day.

Q Excellent.

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