

Pentagon Library

A Moving Target in the War on Terrorism

Redesigned and Relocated—Still Serving,” says the Pentagon Library’s new publicity brochure. But that simple tagline belies a more complicated reality that could also be described as “Floundering, Fragmented—Still Struggling.” More than a year after terrorists crashed a jet plane into the bastion of American military security (*AL*, Nov. 2001, p. 16) and three months after Pentagon workers started returning to their rebuilt offices, the library is still in limbo.

Before September 11, 2001, there was a 28,000-square-foot Pentagon Library conveniently located and accessible to the more than 23,000 employees in the Pentagon. After September 11, there wasn’t. Water-damaged after the crash, the library had to move to off-site storage, and a new space it had already been scheduled to move into was quickly appropriated by other Pentagon offices.

Caught in a space scramble, with priority being given to those most vital to the government’s newly declared war on terrorism, the Pentagon Library and its staff have come out the losers. The bulk of the library’s collection is still in storage in the Crystal City section of Arlington, Virginia; staffers and users must shuttle back and forth from a small storefront Reference Center located on the Pentagon concourse. And that’s the way it’s going to stay for the foreseeable future, Pentagon Director of Administrative Services Fritz Kirklighter told *American Libraries* in mid-November.

Kirklighter, whose oversight also includes the Pentagon post office and passports and visas, said the Taylor Building

in Crystal City will be retrofitted to library specifications, perhaps as soon as February 2003. The Reference Center will remain in the Pentagon, but any hope of bringing the whole library back is “six or eight years down the road,” he said.

“Available but not accessible” is the way Acting Library Director Mena Whitmore characterizes the current arrangement. But up until six months ago, there was no on-site service at all, until the very visible and accessible Reference Center opened, so progress has been made in that sense, she said.

Massive renovation was already under way at the Pentagon when the attack occurred, said Army Librarian Ann Parham, but she was shocked at how quickly after September 11 the space slotted for the library was reassigned to another military unit. Parham, who suffered second-degree burns in the attack, told *AL* that a users group of about a dozen people has formed to urge the Office of the Secretary of Defense to return the library to the Pentagon, the sooner the better.

Director in dismay

Unwilling to endure the library’s displacement, former Pentagon Library Director Kathryn Earnest told *AL* she retired in May largely because she was unhappy with the way the situation was being handled. “I am at that point where I just decided I was tired of fighting,” she said. “I don’t really have any axes to grind. I was really sorry; I feel like I let them down when I left. There’s an awful lot of healing that needs to go on in that building, and I didn’t see that I was going to heal.”

“We’ve been on a real seesaw here,” Kirklighter admitted, “and the librarians bear the brunt, trying to do their jobs from a suitcase.” But the decision to relocate the library was made at the top levels of the Defense Department, he



said. “People above her and me decided and said, ‘Do we want people in that building or do we want books?’ It came down to that.”

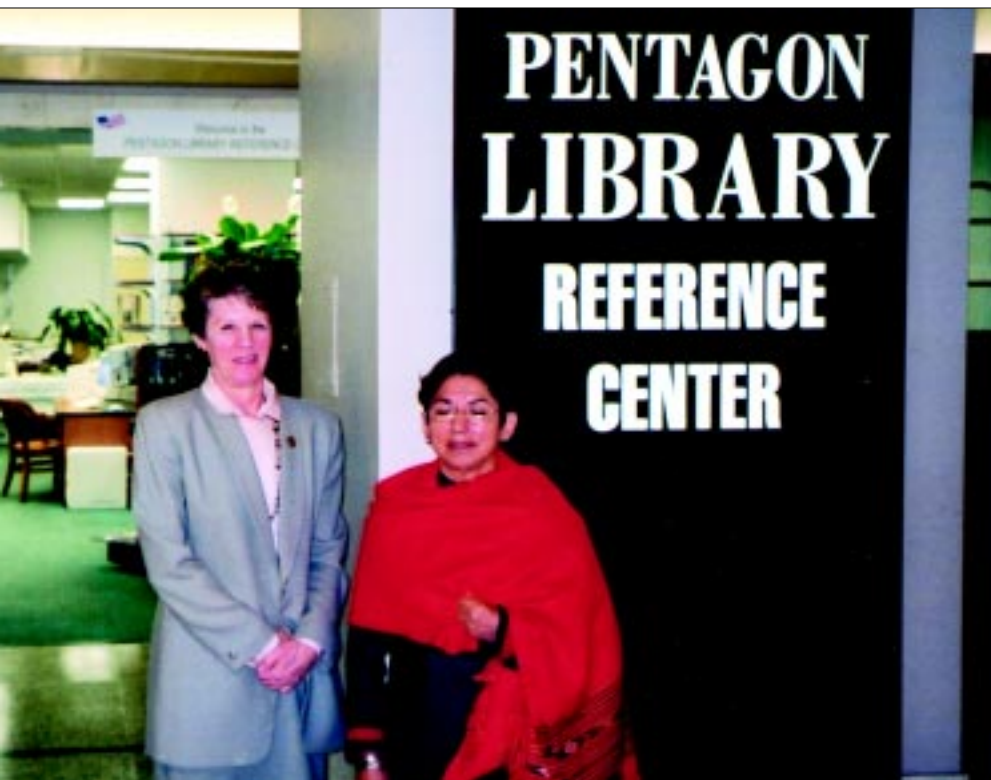
“We were very passive . . . comfortable,” said Whitmore, but “should have worked on this matter, to have influence on management to show that the library is essential.” She said the emphasis now is shifting to electronic resources, digitization, “less space, more information.” She also sees more willingness to invest in training personnel, and she calls the current book and subscription budgets “healthy.”

Earnest said she disagreed with the move to Crystal City but was not part of the decision-making process. “If you’re not where your customers are, it’s a problem,” she noted, saying that she had been demoralized by the philosophy that “it’s all on the Internet and we didn’t need to have all of those books.”

Six degrees of separation

In the Pentagon reporting structure, the library head is six degrees of separation away from the president of the United States. Ascending between them are Administrative Services Director Kirklighter; Brigadier General Lewis Roach, deputy

This report, as well as full-length interviews with Kathryn Earnest, Fritz Kirklighter, Ann Parham, and Mena Whitmore, can be found at www.ala.org/alonline/news/pentagon.html.



Army Librarian Ann Parham (left) and Pentagon Library Acting Director Mena Whitmore outside the new storefront facility.

for the U.S. Army Services and Operations Agency; Sandra R. Riley, deputy administrative assistant to the Secretary of the Army; Joel B. Hudson, administrative assistant to the Secretary of the Army; Secretary of the Army Thomas E. White; and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. When it came to the library, however, those mere six degrees amounted to “just a steamroller,” said Earnest.

Floating through the bureaucracy and trying to balance the library and the new priorities at the Pentagon is Army Librarian Ann Parham, who is responsible for policy and advocacy for the Army library program, which consists of about 275 libraries around the world, the Pentagon Library being the flagship. It can best be described as “the corporate library for the Department of Defense because it serves everyone in the Pentagon,” she said.

“The library was moved out of the Pentagon,” Parham said, because it was in the “Wedge 2” area, which “was going to be renovated so they didn’t have a choice about moving it out.” The 15-minute bus ride from the Pentagon to the Taylor Building is a deterrent to use, she pointed out, and the Reference Center of about 1,200 square feet has little room for study

but has five computer terminals, and a circulating, popular-reading collection related to government.

Part of our job as librarians, Parham told *AL*, is to prove our value, and “I’m not sure that we’ve really learned how to do that very well. We’ve got numbers. They were answering 1,140 reference questions a month before September 11.” The library is a “national treasure,” she emphasized, “a unique collection that goes back to World War II,” and “it’s the aggregate of that collection that makes it so valuable.”

“One of the things that I’ve always felt the Pentagon Library did was provide good customer service,” said Earnest, but “we didn’t go out and do a lot of publicity. . . . We really didn’t have the staff to be able to do it all.”

Currently, eight of the library’s 25 staff positions

are vacant, said Kirklighter, part of a year-long Army-wide hiring freeze that was lifted in July. “The plan is to fill those positions,” he told *AL*. “One has been advertised and we have already identified a candidate for senior reference librarian.” He said that before the end of November he hoped to get the ball rolling on filling the director’s position, “now to be called ‘chief’ of the Pentagon Library.” Asked if she was interested in the job, Whitmore told *AL*, “It’s a big responsibility, and I guess I’d have to think twice about what will be the offer.”

The newly formed users group—including historians, lawyers, and others—is helping to spread the message, said Parham. They feel strongly about the value of holding the complete library in the Pentagon, the shuttle to the Taylor building notwithstanding. The group formed out of a spontaneous meeting of the Office of the Secretary of Defense, she said, but how effective they will be in speeding up the return has yet to be seen.

“I’m a pretty low-key person,” said Earnest, “and I kept thinking that if I work with my administration and try to keep them informed about the library and its staff, that we could work together. We always had before, but after 9/11 the whole feeling within the organization changed. It was very adversarial.”

Says Whitmore: “The impact of this terrorism brought us a complex challenge, not only for our resources, for our location, but also for our personnel. We are still trying to work out the recovery. This recovery will take a long time. It’s not easy, because we never planned to see our situation going in this direction.” —L.K.



Director Kathryn Earnest retired in May after 15 years at the Pentagon Library.