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# Lost and Found in the Pentagon

Navigating the Pentagon

BY **ERIC TEGLER** - FEBRUARY 19, 2019



The Pentagon, headquarters of the U.S. Department of Defense, taken from an airplane in January 2008. Photo by David B. Gleason via Wikimedia Commons

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For your information, the Pentagon's Lost and Found room is located in the Pentagon Library Conference Center (PLC2) – Room BH885. It's a useful bit of trivia to have in hand if you work in the Pentagon, but it's not as valuable as actually knowing where you are.

People have been getting confused, crossed-up, and lost in the Pentagon throughout its 75-year history.

On the day the building opened with less than half the structure completed, its first workers – called “plank walkers” because they had to balance their way on boards of lumber snaking across mud puddles to even get to the building – wandered the long corridors and office spaces, looking without success for their desks. That was in April 1942, but it began an unintentional custom that continues to this day.

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**When Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower took his turn as Army Chief of Staff in 1946, the Pentagon confounded him the first time he tried to return to his office by himself from the mess.**

**“So, hands in pockets and trying to look as if I were out for a carefree stroll around the building, I walked,” Eisenhower later wrote. “I walked and walked, encountering neither landmarks nor people who looked familiar. One had to give the building his grudging admiration; it had apparently been designed to confuse any enemy who might infiltrate it.”**

The iconic structure has inspired countless objects, even other pentagonal buildings. In 2009, a 70-acre retail complex in Shanghai, China, modeled after the Pentagon was finished. The “Pentagonal Mart” cost \$200 million to build. But from the start, shoppers were apparently hesitant to navigate its confines. The website Gizmodo reported that it quickly became the biggest vacant building in Shanghai, while China's *People's Daily News* cited its “location and its confusing inner structures” as the chief factors in its

lack of appeal.

Of course, the Pentagon wasn't built to woo shoppers. It was constructed to be the locus of America's World War II warfighting effort. Its design is purely functional, according to the "Navigating the Pentagon" page of the Office of the Secretary of Defense website: "Within the halls of the Pentagon are five concentric pentagonal rings, intersected by 10 corridors ... Despite the Pentagon's massive size, the average time to walk between two points is only about seven minutes."

Seven minutes might be the average for a seasoned Pentagon employee or guide, but as former *Washington Post* Pentagon correspondent Steve Vogel pointed out, getting lost within its 34 acres is, and was, inevitable for anyone else. An oft-told joke about the Pentagon first appeared in the *Washington Post* on Aug. 17, 1942:

"And have you heard this one? About the War Department messenger who got lost in the Pentagon Building in Arlington and came out a lieutenant colonel."

Multiple variations of the venerable gag have been repeated throughout the years, though the original may have been ringing in Army Chief of Staff Gen. George C. Marshall's ears when he gave a tour of the building to Field Marshal Sir John Dill, chief of the British military delegation in Washington, in August 1942.

The pair ambled down a corridor with the project's chief architect and all three were soon entirely lost. A construction supervisor eventually tracked them down, ensuring that two of the Allies' most important managers got back to the war effort.

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As Vogel related, Eisenhower finally approached a group of female stenographers and quietly asked one, “Can you tell me where the office of the Chief of Staff is?”

“You just passed it about a hundred feet back, Gen. Eisenhower,” she replied.

The all-too-easy loss of one’s bearings has extended even further up the chain of command. When Dick Cheney became secretary of defense in 1989, he took the elevator from his office suite to the wrong floor and found himself lost in the Pentagon basement. After considerable wandering about, he returned to his office and a selection of nervous aides anxious to divine his whereabouts. Cheney just played it cool.

“I sort of tightened my tie and walked out like I knew exactly where I was and arrived outside,” he later said. “Nobody had the nerve to ask me where I’d been.”

A sign of the orienteering challenges presented by the Pentagon is evident in the transition information given to the new appointees that come with a new presidential administration. The incoming handbook for such appointees as part of the 2017 Department of Defense Transition has its own “Navigating the Pentagon” section. It’s all very straightforward, according to the “How to Find a Room in the Pentagon” subsection:

*If you need to travel any distance inside the building, one of the best ways to move around is to walk to the A ring, continue walking on the A ring until you find the corridor you need, then walk on that corridor, crossing the other rings, until you reach the ring that you need. Otherwise, for example, if you try to circle around the building on the E ring to get to your location, you will be walking the long way around, since the outer E ring is the longest walking distance. Weather permitting, you can also cut across the Center Courtyard to decrease the walking distance.*

*For example, Room 3B1075 means that the location is on the third floor, on the B ring, near the tenth corridor, room 75.*

The subsection points out that, rather like an airport, kiosks are conveniently located throughout the Pentagon featuring location and other related information about the facility. These may have come in handy for blogger and former Pentagon employee Mary El Pearce.

In an entry for her blog “cupcakes and shoes” on her last working day at the Pentagon in 2012, she wrote about finding the not-so-mythical Purple Water Fountain.

The Pentagon has 685 water fountains, all the same color save for one standout purple water fountain in the Air Force section of the building. No one knows the reason for the single purple water-giver, but over the years it became legend, complete with its own plaque. The text thereon recounts that “generations of Air Force leaders have made the pilgrimage to drink of its enlightening waters,” and that in 1985, the fountain was formally acknowledged as the only Air Force Pentagon navigational aid by then U.S. Air Force Director of Operations Maj. Gen. Harold Williams.

“I once got lost looking for it,” Pearce recalled, “and I asked a man to help me. I was too busy trying to impress my friend who was with me to notice the two stars on his flight suit. He happily obliged us and I felt like a complete idiot once I realized who I was talking to.”

Hers joins countless other stories of the great and anonymous, warriors and visitors, lost and found in the Pentagon.

BY **ERIC TEGLER**



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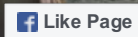

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