



The Horse Soldiers (5/2/17)

00:00:21 Alice Greenwald: Good evening, welcome. My name is Alice Greenwald. I'm the president and C.E.O. of the 9/11 Memorial & Museum, and I want to thank you for joining us tonight for what I imagine will be a very fascinating and important program about the horse soldiers.

I want to extend a special welcome to our museum members who are with us tonight, and also to those who are tuning in online at 911memorial.org/live. As always, I encourage all of you to share your experiences this evening via social media using our hashtag #911museumtalk.

00:01:05 Tonight's conversation focuses on America's immediate military response to 9/11. As you know, six years ago today, Pakistan time-- it was May 1 in the United States-- the U.S. military executed the successful raid on a compound in Abbottabad that resulted in the death of Osama bin Laden. The Abbottabad raid was the culmination of over 13 years of intensive work by military and intelligence professionals to track down bin Laden and search for leads and information about al Qaeda.

00:01:42 In many respects, the hunt for bin Laden had begun in earnest in 1998, when he was placed on the FBI's Most Wanted List following the bombings of U.S. embassies in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and Nairobi, Kenya. Immediately after the attacks of 9/11, that hunt intensified, and within weeks, special operations forces secretly arrived in Afghanistan as part of Operation Enduring Freedom.

- 00:02:12 Former Special Forces commanders Major Mark Nutsch and retired Master Sergeant Scott Neil were members of this elite contingent, tasked with carrying out unconventional missions, often atop horseback because of the rugged terrain. They were quite literally the first hooves on the ground. We are incredibly privileged to be able to host and to hear from Major Nutsch and Master Sergeant Neil tonight. Allow me to introduce them briefly.
- 00:02:43 Scott Neil is a retired Special Forces veteran with significant executive, operational, and combat experience. He served as a senior adviser to several general officers, senior civilian policy makers, and national members of interagency task forces, as well as several House and Senate committee members. After 9/11, he conducted numerous successful special operations combat missions as part of the commander's In-Extremis forces. Scott survived an I.E.D. incident in Iraq and numerous exposures to high-explosive events.
- 00:03:21 Following treatments for traumatic brain injury and cognitive therapy, Scott became a prominent voice and an advocate in the veterans community. He has worked with numerous charities and on many events, and after retiring from his deployment in 2002, he cofounded, with NYPD detective Rich Miller, the Post-9/11 Foundation, an organization that united military veterans with law enforcement organizations to address shared concerns and interests. In November 2014, Scott was featured here at the museum in a Veterans' Day tribute sponsored by Google.
- 00:04:01 Major Mark Nutsch served for 24 years as a U.S. Army infantry, Ranger Regiment, and Special Forces officer in active-duty and reserve capacities. Just weeks after 9/11, then-Captain Nutsch led one of the first Fifth Special Forces group teams tasked with infiltrating Northern Afghanistan and spearheading armed resistance against Taliban and al Qaeda forces. Mark's team, O.D.A.595, is the inspiration for the design of the America's Response Monument which now overlooks the 9/11 Memorial.
- 00:04:41 In addition to multiple deployments in the Middle East and former Soviet Central Asian states, Mark has also worked as a Department of Defense contractor and continues to work with the Afghan community,

particularly in supporting former Afghan interpreters attempting to obtain their Special Immigrant visas. Like Scott, Mark was also featured in the museum's Veterans' Day tribute sponsored by Google a few years ago.

Tonight's conversation will be moderated by our EVP and deputy director for museum programs, Clifford Chanin. Please join me in welcoming Scott, Mark, and Cliff.

(applause)

00:05:25 Clifford Chanin: Thank you, everybody. Scott, Mark, again, thank you for taking the time.

Major Mark Nutsch: Thanks for having us.

Clifford Chanin: And I did want to note, you know, different programs bring different audiences, but we have a very good, interesting group in the audience tonight, including FDNY, Council on Foreign Relations, Team Red, White, and Blue, other veterans' groups, United Veterans War Council. So word of your presence has brought out a really interesting crowd. So we welcome all of you. There is so much to say, and Alice has given these extraordinary biographies that you have.

00:06:01 But I think we have to start at the beginning. You were both in military, in Special Forces, pre-9/11, with experience, as I understand it, in those parts of the world where ultimately the fight would be taken. Can you set the stage for us a little bit about where you were, what you were doing, what you were planning for, when word came of what was happening here in New York? Let me start with Scotty at the end.

00:06:29 Master Sergeant Scott Neil: All right, it's very interesting when I tell the story of 9/11. We were getting ready to do a rotation in the Middle East.

There was a new designation at the time for a specialized unit that would be in the area and prepare for any kind of contingency that the combatant commander needed a small reactive force for.

00:06:53 The rotation was supposed to start 1 October, and we were in our final kind of authorization. This is a checklist of deployments and equipment, and everything's ready to go. And we were in a training scenario where a major unknown terrorist organization had attacked the United States and overseas entities. And that morning-- once again, it's all a training scenario to us-- when we're in these preparations, it's called isolation.

00:07:25 And isolation, you do not have any contact with the outside world. Your family thinks you're already gone. You're given important information and intelligence on the region, and they weave in this training scenario inside of it. And our reconnaissance element had already deployed somewhere in the United States, and we were receiving information overnight as they were watching a training target and scenario. So we were going through this certification.

00:07:51 And I remember a young intelligence sergeant's coming in and writing on the board that said the World Trade Center had been hit. And we really didn't know what that meant to our scenario. Once again, we weren't watching the news. We had no outside contacts. So we started generating requests for information. "What does that mean?" Maybe that's just a different angle to our scenario. And about an hour later, another person came in and wrote on the board that the Pentagon had been hit.

00:0819 So now we're into complex terrorist activities in the United States, and our intel sergeant just starts generating this self-look on what all it meant. And at the time, once again, we still think it's a training exercise. And it wasn't until four hours later that Colonel Mulholland at the time, the Special Forces group commander, came in and said, "No, it's real." And at that time, we stopped our training exercise, and we went to the mess hall and saw CNN for the first time to understand that it was actually real.

00:08:55 And honestly, the second half of this story, it was Mark's team that was acting as our proctors in that rehearsal, that had flown out and emplaced our reconnaissance element at the same time.

Clifford Chanin: Mark, would you pick up the story about what your group was doing at that point?

Major Mark Nutsch: Yeah, in the context of that, my team, the 595 team, had been working with Scott and his teams in this exercise to utilize the resources, help cross-train on other tasks.

00:09:26 So we... my team, part of our mechanism was to help infil... infiltrate the reconnaissance team that was working with Scott in the context of that exercise. I had just been moved off my team literally just the Friday prior, or just a few days prior. A typical Special Forces detachment commander, you get one to two years. I had been fortunate. I hit the two-year mark, and was being pulled off and rotated into a staff officer's position within our battalion organization.

00:10:01 So I'd helped plan that exercise, but my team chief and my sergeants, as they're more than capable of doing, went and executed that training event with Scott's, Scott's team. Those guys were actually caught on the river the morning of 9/11. It was a riverine insertion. And as they were coming back, they were off post, and so they were trying to fight through traffic and hear on the radio what's going on, as they shut down Fort Campbell, and-- as they did many military installations that morning. And so the guys worked to get back on post and figure out what was going on.

00:10:41 I do want to note, as a precursor, my team had spent over six months working in Uzbekistan, a former Soviet republic that had... Part of that breakaway event that had occurred prior. But we went over, and we were working closely with the Uzbek spetsnaz, or their special operations forces, who were already in a fight with Islamic terrorists, Islamic

Movement of Uzbekistan, that was an al Qaeda-sponsored affiliate in Northern Afghanistan.

00:11:17 And that terrorist organization had been conducting large-scale attacks in the former Soviet republics north of Afghanistan-- into Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, that region. And so my team had got probably one of the closest introductions to al Qaeda and what they were doing on the battlefield, and how they were helping sponsor other terrorist organizations.

00:11:42 Clifford Chanin: Let me ask, in terms of the training scenarios, and the situation that you were, hypothetically, at that point, preparing for, was it focused on groups like this Uzbek Islamist group, or al Qaeda, was it focused on that kind of problem, or was that one of many kinds of problems that you were training to respond to?

00:12:05 Master Sergeant Scott Neil: It was a mixture of both. So terrorist organizations, as we know now-- and it was really limited back then... We, we didn't understand the... kind of the nuanced social relationships of a terrorist organization, the financial relationships of an organization. Our look was mostly in case there was an incident sort of like a embassy seizure, or some kind of hardened activity that we've always seen in the past.

00:12:33 If you look at a lot of the, the Palestinian conflict activities, and other precursor, the S.A.S., and the embassy with the British, you know, those were our ideas of how we would respond as a country to some hardened facility that was overtaken by an extremist group, and then we would use critical tactical skills to overcome them. And we were the tool set at the time, using techniques that we thought were appropriate to use.

00:13:03 Clifford Chanin: So you had a very different scenario in mind than the one that emerged. And Mark, if I understand correctly, it was your group's prior experience in Uzbekistan-- knowing the region at least a bit, having worked with government forces, having confronted this kind of enemy--

it was that experience that brought your group to the front of the line in terms of ultimate deployment.

00:13:28 Major Mark Nutsch: Yes, our team was selected due to a number of factors-- the maturity of the team, the experience, the training, the qualifications. And at that point, the group, Fifth Group, and each of the Special Forces groups, was to have 54 of these 12-man teams. The reality was, we only had enough men to man roughly 45 teams at that time. And my team was picked to be the first deployed from our group.

00:13:57 Clifford Chanin: Let me ask, in terms of the scenario of, you're no longer in training, you're seeing what's actually happening, are you expecting to be deployed immediately, or as the front line of this, or are you actually waiting to see what's said and what the strategy is? Or is it an expectation in that world that you guys will be first?

00:14:18 Major Mark Nutsch: I would say both. There's the expectation that you are going to be first. But what is first? You know, what is that going to be? I will tell you that by the 14th of September, I got a phone call. My wife was seven months pregnant, and we were in Nashville in a Babies "R" Us picking out furniture and some things, as every couple does, about to have their first child together.

00:14:47 And I got a phone call from my team sergeant. You know, I'd been tracking this, working in the staff position. This was going on. Something's developing, something's going to happen. We don't know exactly what that is yet. But some people, key leaders, had started to disappear. We know they're, suspect they're off planning somewhere to help provide options for the policy and decision makers.

00:15:09 So we know something's brewing, something's happening. And I get a call of, "Hey, you're back on the team, get back here, and bring all your gear." And so we wrapped up and got back and went in, and reported within hours, and we were prepared to deploy within hours after that. And then it was just waiting on an airplane to come and get us. So we knew we were going to launch overseas to a then-secret base where we would

receive-- just get us moving into the region-- and we would receive further instruction as to what exactly that mission was going to entail.

00:15:43 Clifford Chanin: Once you were there. Was that a similar expectation for your group, Scott?

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: It was-- you know, once again, we were already scheduled to be in the Middle East, at a kind of location that was easily accessible to the entire region. So believe it or not, we were semi-priority, because all of our ducks were in a row, and our equipment was staged and ready to go.

00:16:06 What we started to find out, though, as, after 9/11 progressed, is, what was the right tool in the toolbox? And there wasn't a strategy for this kind of event. There was no great, you know, blowing off the dust of, you know, Afghanistan 101. And it took a while for leaders and decision makers...

00:16:29 Apparently, as we've learned, later on in our careers that, you know, they were presenting options to the national security apparatus, and saying, "Yes, no, maybe, could be," and there was an impatience from the president about taking action sooner. And that's when the option of Special Forces were presented as ready to go, language-proficient, regionally oriented, a solution to begin America's response.

00:17:00 Major Mark Nutsch: We were very left in that process. They were trying to figure this out, right? Discuss-- there's no existing contingency plan that says, "This designated unit with the following resources are going to go do these things." We knew very little. The intelligence community had an existing relationship with some of the resistance factions, or the Northern Alliance group under Ahmad Shah Massoud, that had been actively fighting against the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan, had been seeking... had been requesting support for years. And as, you know, the intelligence community, you know, identified, it's al Qaeda, it's bin Laden's organization, it's Afghanistan, so there's still... Everyone's scrambling to figure out information and learn what that is.

00:17:54 So Special Forces, as we became that unit, larger unit, became the main effort, and the immediate solution and option is to get teams in on the ground, we knew very little about what we were going into. My team had 48 hours from the time we actually received our mission in a former Soviet base in Uzbekistan that we were to be prepared to insert into Northern Afghanistan.

00:18:20 Now, we'd been able to do some of our own study in the days and weeks that were going on there, and we'd been able to identify most likely strategy. But we were so far left in that, that our, our questions and our study of the problem set was, was helping generate the intelligence community questions, and provide this information, and they're going to be needing this, they need that, other items-- maps.

00:18:43 Little common... You know, common maps had to be produced. And so some of the agencies were working to provide maps that didn't exist and get them printed up, you know? So we literally were... If you read about, some of the books about that period, you were literally... You're reading "National Geographic" magazines, and you're grabbing everything that you can, self-study, and you're grabbing tourist maps, and you're looking through any news articles that you can find.

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: There was no Google of things.

Major Mark Nutsch: Yeah.

00:19:13 Clifford Chanin: Let me ask, you know, what does it do in the morale of this small group, where you're all so reliant on each other, you've trained together, what's the response to being in a situation where you know you're going in because of the enormity of what happened, yet you don't have a real picture, and no one can really provide it to you? Is that something that pulls you back a little bit, and you say, "Whoa, wait a minute"? Or is that something that sort of inspires, the kind of thing that draws you into the Special Forces in the first place?

00:19:42

Major Mark Nutsch: I would say both, undoubtedly, you know?

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: It's interesting. When we... I was describing earlier what it takes to become a Green Beret. And the selection process is different than what you may see in other special operations units. It really focuses on the creativity and the cleverness and the resourcefulness of the individual. And a lot of the scenarios in the three weeks during selection are impossible odds.

00:20:08

You and your team are to push a jeep with only three wheels through North Carolina sand, and you must do it in less than such amount of time. And then they'll switch leaders. "Okay, you are to take these 45-gallon water cans and carry them ten miles to this location." All of these test your ability to be adaptive and quick-thinking.

00:20:32

And what was unique about Special Forces back in the day is, there wasn't the budget that there was today. We did a lot with absolutely nothing, and we were just fine with it. So we had to create our own information intelligence. There wasn't the cooperation that there was today. We didn't rely on technology and ISR platforms and everything else. We really, you know, accepted things. And I think everybody understood that, "Just get me on the ground and we will sort it out." And that's what the commanders expected of us, was to have a half a plan and just get in there and start asking for things and sending information back.

00:21:12

Clifford Chanin: Now, you described before, the whole point of this Special Forces deployment is to get small groups of teams in place in advance of whatever else is coming down the road. So let's talk about that first moment of boots on the ground, your arrival, each of you separately. I think Scotty was, your group was second, after, after Mark. So let's start with Mark. If you can give us dates and places, and how that happens-- you get in a helicopter and you just land somewhere, and you're met? How does this work?

00:21:44 Major Mark Nutsch: Yeah, I'll jump back a step. When we deployed, we flew my team over, because we had three false starts where you've said your goodbyes to the family, you've had this introspective moment of, "Yes, I'm going to get to go do this historical thing"... We knew we're going, but we're, you know, we're volunteering to a man of, We want to be the team, send me, send us," to put us in there. So we're very honored and proud to know that we're that team.

00:22:13 But you're in isolation, so no one else... They're feeding you a little bit each time. So we don't know what Scott's team's doing, we don't know what other teams are doing. But...

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: And we did that in case any of us were captured. Nobody would know what the entire plan is.

00:22:30 Major Mark Nutsch: Yeah, this... You know, Special Forces roots are in World War II and the Office of Special Services. And that team, when they would send guys behind the lines, there's a high probability of them being captured in Europe or in Asia, Pacific, as well. And so to not compromise that mission, you know, you're fed very little information about what's going on around you, the bigger picture. But we were Chalk 7 to land in Uzbekistan, meaning, meaning that is the seventh airplane to land in Uzbekistan.

00:23:01 We walked off the ramp, and I was immediately greeted by a former Uzbek Special Forces officer, captain, that I had worked with less than a year prior. And we slept on the ground for the first few nights. There wasn't an existing apparatus or mechanism. You know, we didn't check in to the local Holiday Inn Express. You're sleeping on a, on a ramp-- unlike other countries.

(laughter)

00:23:26 But... so we received that mission. There's other teams that we know are going to go in, into different areas of the country. The weather impacts, it delays, kind of, the plan. And there's immense political pressure building from the White House and the national security apparatus, the senior defense community, calling down to our commander, going, "Get them in on the ground, get them in." And so there's a lot of quarterbacks about how to, how to do this in severe weather.

Clifford Chanin: And you guys are the ball.

00:24:01 Major Mark Nutsch: Yeah, we're the ball, we're it. You know, brilliant ideas, like, "Well, you can't fly them in by helicopters, because we have the best special operations helicopter crews in the world, but the weather's so severe, those guys have had to turn back." So other people had the brilliant idea of, "Parachute them in," you know? So anyway, we fly in, we finally land on the night of the 20th of October, early morning. And we are met the next morning by the main guy we are supposed to work with, General Dostum, and...

00:24:34 Clifford Chanin: Who to this day is a very prominent figure in Afghanistan.

Major Mark Nutsch: Yes, to this day, he is the current elected first vice president of Afghanistan, so... As are several of the main faction leaders that we went in to link up with. Because there was this huge demand for information, we've got to get a team in on the ground, get teams in, and match them up with the right local folks here or there.

Clifford Chanin: I believe that's you and General Dostum.

Major Mark Nutsch: Yeah, General Dostum in the center. Yep, that's General Dostum...

Clifford Chanin: In the middle.

Major Mark Nutsch: In the middle, yes. And a younger version of myself.

(laughter)

Clifford Chanin: I did recognize you.

00:25:07 Major Mark Nutsch: Yep. But anyway, our mission was to link up with these different faction leaders, you know? Understand them, assess their capabilities, can they work together, will they unite together, and can we build this army? The higher commanders, general officers, expected to see us in six months, come, you know, winter out in Afghanistan, in the Hindu Kush mountains, build this army, come down out of the mountains in the spring to support, you know, regular U.S. forces moving on the objective. Because their plans were, it would take four to six months to deploy large American forces into that, that region.

00:25:48 None of us wanted to winter out in the Hindu Kush mountains, and the Afghans, from their perspective, the different ethnic commanders had essentially won the lottery. You know, they have a U.S. intelligence community rep with them, they have American Special Forces and teams with them, and through that, then, you know, now they have access to a lot of resources and material to help fight against the Taliban and al Qaeda. And they had already been in that fight, living it for, for years.

00:26:17 Clifford Chanin: So your group is assigned to sort of assess and mobilize...

Major Mark Nutsch: Yes.

Clifford Chanin: ...the indigenous opposition to this, and build its strength over what was then projected to be a period of months. Scotty, how does... what was your group, and how did it sort of connect into that?

00:26:31

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: So I'll also step back for those that try to understand Army Special Forces-- Green Berets. We have five missions and a couple of sub-missions. You know, direct action is your traditional shoot-'em-up ambush. We have unconventional warfare, link up with a guerilla army and oppose.

You have foreign internal defense, where you take a friendly government and you train their host nation's security apparatus. You have weapons of mass destruction. You have counterterrorism. So at any one time, your mission could be any one of those missions or portfolios, right? It just happens that the mission docket handed to Mark was unconventional warfare. The mission document handed to us was already going to be what we were there to do, which was direct action.

00:27:16

So the strategy for us, as we soon learned, we weren't the priority, even though we were supposed to be the... going into the Middle East and reacting for the commander anyways.

What we discovered early on in the conflict, in the momentum of the unconventional campaign, is that the al Qaeda leadership and Taliban leadership were abandoning their forces and were returning to their compounds to reorganize and refit. And the unconventional teams, as they're shepherding this ragtag montage, you know, army across the battlefield, that they needed more of a scalpel that would come in under the cover of darkness and disrupt this leadership and take them off the battlefield.

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Either we kill them or capture them, or basically take away their sanctuaries, where they felt safe. That way, it created this instability within the command-and-control of al Qaeda and the Taliban. So that was our mission.

Clifford Chanin: So it was intended to be a longer-term buildup, but it didn't turn out like that.

Major Mark Nutsch: No.

00:28:22 Master Sergeant Scott Neil: They had a vote, right? And so Mark will explain it, but once again, about the unconventional, you go in there with unknowns and untruths and assumption and all of these problem sets, and it really is that small team, the leader... team leader and team sergeant and all those capabilities that are the apparatus for, you know, the generals and everybody else. They are the ground truth. They are the witness of the feelings of the commanders around you that you're trying to rally. And it really... You know, Mark's had to play it by emotion and ears, the momentum that those commanders wanted.

00:29:03 Clifford Chanin: Now, Mark, were you watching something that took you completely by surprise in terms of the capacities of General Dostum and the other forces, or did it become clear quickly that this is going to move much sooner than you had anticipated?

Major Mark Nutsch: Yeah, it... There were several things that we were looking at. But if... do you mind if they go to slide 13?

Clifford Chanin: Slide 13, then.

00:29:26 Major Mark Nutsch: This is actually a mission slide I was given that showed... The area in the central orange spot there was the area we were to go in and link up with this guy, General Dostum, that's the factional Uzbek leader, the other gentlemen being Atta-- is Tajik, another ethnic faction-- and Mohaqeq, that's the Shia faction leader. So each of these three guys, we didn't really know the history that all three of these individuals had had, or the issues and grievances between their ethnic factions.

00:30:01 But we went in and we sat down with each of them and, over several meetings, got to understand kind of what are they thinking, what do they

advise, and are they willing to work with the U.S., are they willing to work with the other factions and the leaders that are in the area that they have things in common with?

Because they're all... All three of these factions were individually fighting against the Taliban and al Qaeda. So as we assess their capabilities, they have different motivations. Some of them want cash, some of them want arms and equipment, some of them want arms and equipment and, "Please get out of the way, we've got this." So there were a lot of things that we looked for in these groups.

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And as they agreed to come together, we raised an army. An army of horsemen. We had over 2,500 horsemen and 500 infantry from these three factions. This force continued to grow with Atta, who pledged another 1,500 fighters in another area further to the west. And so then, additional Special Forces teams came in to cover down specifically with Commander Atta and his force.

Clifford Chanin: Can I just ask, when you're reporting back to your command, you know, "We have 2,500 of these, and 1,500..." I mean, what is the reaction to that? Are they pretending that they knew this all along, or is this, "Holy cow"?

00:31:25

Major Mark Nutsch: No, we're, we're... Again, there were a lot of assumptions, but we're verifying ground truth. Like, I am counting 300 fighters the first day on horseback. You know, in the first meeting, we had 50 guys on horseback with General Dostum show up to our meeting. General Dostum had a sound tactical plan, he had this incredible hand-drawn map with the enemy graphics in Russian symbology, of the Taliban forces, showing where the enemy was at.

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But it's their backyard. They can all tell you, "The enemy commander is this, he is located here, he has," you know, "the following resources." And so that just became a firehose of information that we were gathering

to then type up in a report and send up to our commander. So their demand for information and the number of questions increased exponentially every day with every meeting. So as you're literally riding horseback, as this picture depicts, you know, spending your day in the saddle to then get off, have a meeting with different tribal leaders, village elders, you know, what's their take, what's the enemy's situation?

00:32:32 You're just assessing everything that's going on around you and, you know, making some notes and then trying to write that up and send it out in... you know, sit down at night, then, on a field laptop, and crank out messages after message after message after message and encrypt it and send it out by satellite communication to our headquarters. I don't think they really believed what was going on. I learned that after a few days. And we went through several battles, we went through smaller-scale battles, where these horsemen wanted to attack against...

00:33:07 You know, General Dostum was very aggressive, wanted to attack against Taliban and al Qaeda armored and mechanized forces that were in the area. And so we coordinated the close air support to do that, and, you know, as I reported things, I learned the power of an image. You know, we were not sending out images of what was happening on the ground until finally, one night I got asked of, "Hey, you guys need to do more. Need to do more."

00:33:39 Because of the political pressure that was building. And it was late at night, and I sat down and wrote out another, yet another, more detailed report, that I realized, I wasn't painting the picture clear enough. And I learned then, over the subsequent days, that that report was going all the way to the White House. Secretary Rumsfeld, President Bush, and the national security staff were reading those reports. So then it came back to, "Hey, young captain, you need to clean up your language."

(laughter)

Major Mark Nutsch: "Watch your commas and your spelling and explanations, and everything else." But...

00:34:13 Clifford Chanin: It's never right.

Major Mark Nutsch: It's never right. But as... I took... We did something unusual with my team that was focused on unconventional warfare. We split up, okay? From the very first morning, the 12 of us that flew in, 12 Green Berets, we split into two six-man teams. C.I.A. team that was on the ground with some of the intelligence community reps, they were there with us.

00:34:36 We split up, they split up, because we each were focused slightly differently, but working together for the common goal, sharing information and intelligence right there at the point of collection. But as I split my two six-man... two six-man elements, again, then we adapted within another 24 hours after that. We split my six-man team into two three... three-man cells as we went into our first battles.

00:35:07 So I would ride with General Dostum, as this picture depicts, with some of us moving with him. And he's the gentleman on the gray horse there in the right of the picture. I'm on the upper slope, above him. But during one of these moves, we realized, "We can do this, but I've got to get another cell deeper with another commander on the battlefield." Because we're going up against tanks and armor and artillery, and who does that, right? So, Special Forces, we do that.

(laughter)

00:35:38 Major Mark Nutsch: So... but we split down. We split my team into... as we got two... A few weeks after we'd been on the ground, we got two Air Force special operations soldiers that came in, two joint air controllers. I needed two more satellite-capable radios, and with their presence, getting them finally on the ground, that gave me five, and I was able to split my 14-man team into four three-man cells, and then, by then, I felt comfortable with just moving with one other of my sergeants with

General Dostum. And we moved around the battlefield in that manner.
But..

Clifford Chanin: Let me ask you, Scott... yeah.

00:36:19 Master Sergeant Scott Neil: So in all of this, once again, what was the plan going into Afghanistan? There wasn't one. Send in Green Beret teams, make contact with the locals, get an understanding of the battlefield, and remember, Green Berets fight by, with, and through our indigenous partners. They wanted to move very quickly, and you had to go along for the ride with them.

00:36:40 And, you know, at that time frame, what was unique and different than my experience, but, you know, we're all looking back at this, is, everybody did everything to support those small teams. You know, all the national efforts and powers, and just think about the bundles of supplies and equipments and... You know, after a while, there was no questioning of a resource or request, because everybody felt that, you know, all of our actions were so important at the time. Whereas today, it seems to be, you know, a bit reversed, where it's a lot of pulling and units and motions and big command strategies and super jirga powwows. And it's kind of reversed itself.

00:37:26 Major Mark Nutsch: We were driving that from the ground up, basically. You know, we're... The Americans there, we represent, you know, American policy makers to the Afghan people. We're the direct link for them to American resources. So we're bringing in lethal aid of air drops. We're bringing in non-lethal aid. We're bringing in humanitarian aid on top of our specific mission equipment gear that we needed.

00:37:51 But we had every manner of inter-service aircraft, U.S. and allied, that were launching off of two aircraft carriers, that were flying out of the Persian Gulf states. You know, stealth bombers flying from Missouri around the world to drop ordnance for those Special Forces teams that were on the ground.

Clifford Chanin: So the cliché is the tip of the spear, but you guys are literally the tip of the spear.

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: Very pointy, pointy, point, yeah.

(laughter)

00:38:23 Clifford Chanin: And I'm just wondering, Scotty, in terms of your group sort of following up and acting on some of this intelligence, I mean, what was your sense of what you were getting as actionable? Did it seem like what you expected, or once again, we're in a whole new world here?

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: It was a whole new world, you know? A lot of this... Techniques that we were bringing to this new fight were... came out of Bosnia, it came out of some other counterterrorism partnerships and activities. To understand... to understand a network and to really peel back its layers, you have to hit the lair, you know what I mean? You have to see what leaders are thinking, and what they've written down, and how they communicate.

00:39:04 Back then, there wasn't a lot of sensitive technologies that led to discoveries through the electronic spectrum. It was all on the ground, looking through files, capturing people, understanding an objective. So when we first started looking at where the leaders were we're disrupting, and going to, you had to make it up—you basically... We relied a lot on, believe it or not, some of our reservists that were NYPD officers and other detectives that understood criminal networks.

00:39:38 And, you know, how do you go onto a site, and you only have less than 40 minutes before the helicopter had to leave, or you stayed there for 24 hours. So, what was important for us to discover on an objective and take off and carry with us, and what was going to be left behind, as well? So

not only the individual that you want to kill or capture, it's everything that surrounds them.

00:40:04

We discovered things that were ingenious at the time-- computer stations that were using Thuraya cell phones and car batteries to power themselves in remote conditions. Factories not for... Printing factories, basically, for false documentation. All of this sophistication, once again, you think, "It's a terrorist, they're unsophisticated, they use terrorist activities and blow themselves up," but what you were finding was a financial powerhouse in remote...

Clifford Chanin: Very sophisticated.

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: Very sophisticated operations, and it was up to us to discover and determine what was a necessity in those operations and bring it back to others to evaluate.

00:40:53

Major Mark Nutsch: In the weeks, you know, right after 9/11, the weeks and months, and certainly the years since, there was a merging of the Special Forces, the special operations community, there was a merge with the intelligence community, and a merge with the U.S. law enforcement community, as well as various... You know, the forensic investigators that can follow the money trail, you know, are just as critical now today.

Clifford Chanin: So this all sort of emerged from this battlefield.

00:41:23

Major Mark Nutsch: But I'll tell you, in the two-and-a-half months that my team was on the ground in there, the intelligence we generated was 100% human intelligence, meaning I'm having a conversation with someone. It's not the electronic surveillance, it's not aircraft overhead, like we've come to know of now, or expect.

- 00:41:44 We utilized probably one of the first unmanned aircraft that came onto the battlefield that was talking to one of my teams of sergeants, and helped us identify the precise location of an enemy position, and then helped to strike it. But that was one instance where, unlike now today, the assets are overhead, you know, and they're, they're providing video feeds to commanders and decision makers around the world, and everyone's in your hip pocket, and now there's GPS, and they've got you, they know right where you're at, you're here or there.
- 00:42:20 Yes, we had GPSes, but we didn't have anyone that was tracking us. And so we had to be cautious of where we went, we had to inform them of where we were at, so that they wouldn't bomb, bomb us. We had... In my instance, we didn't wear body armor. We didn't have the armored vehicles that you now... Most of the public believes that we all utilize, or that's the image of an American soldier.
- 00:42:45 Clifford Chanin: Let me come to the actual horse soldier aspect of this, because this concerns your movements... Not yours, Scotty, but, you know...
- Master Sergeant Scott Neil: I had a black horse that was all steel and flew at night.
- Clifford Chanin: Better, I'm sure. You know, you actually grew up in Kansas. You rode, you were familiar with horses. But did you have the expectation that you would be getting on a horse as quickly as you did when you arrived?
- 00:43:11 Major Mark Nutsch: Not really. Yes, I had grown up showing horses as a young kid, competing in youth rodeo. Yes, it's a thing in Kansas. We had a high school rodeo team. And I competed at the collegiate level before going into the Army. And on every deployment I had had prior to 9/11, in the half dozen countries I'd been to in the Middle East or in the former Soviet republics, I had always ridden horses-- with Kuwaiti sheikhs that was proud of his new Kentucky thoroughbred that won its first race in Kuwait, I rode in Jordan on horseback, Uzbekistan, all these countries. So

I had joked with the guys in mission planning that, "Hey, I want to get you on horseback when we get in here, and I want to play that traditional Afghan game called buzkashi." But we didn't realize that that was literally going to be within hours.

00:44:00

Clifford Chanin: And were you the only experienced rider in your group?

Major Mark Nutsch: I had another young sergeant that is of Sioux Indian heritage, so we joked about the fact that a cowboy and an Indian were leading this charge, so to speak.

(laughter)

Major Mark Nutsch: But he had grown up... He had ridden through high school, you know? But most of the guys that had been at summer youth camp, or Mom and Dad took them to the carnival, and they rode the... you know, the little pony in a circle. So it was a... how shall we say in Special Forces? It was an experiential learning moment.

(laughter)

00:44:37

Major Mark Nutsch: Literally at the gallop, with your gear banging on you, and a rifle, and there's people that want to kill you, and an animal that wants to kill you, and there's land mines, and you're riding to keep up with the Afghans that, you know, we're working through the language barrier with.

Clifford Chanin: Right, but this was... In the circumstances of the geography, the topography of all this, this was actually a better way to move around for you. It gave you advantages.

00:45:00 Major Mark Nutsch: Yes, in that terrain. Yes, it... Again, in that terrain, you know, motorcycles, ATVs, a horse, or on footback—on foot-- are the way to go. The enemy... again, I grew up with a proud Western heritage-- U.S. Calvary, cowboys, Indians, et cetera, out in Kansas. But we got to be the Indians in this case. Our enemy is sticking to the roads, they're in tanks, their armored vehicles, they're tied to their fuel supply. And we knew we could strip that away.

00:45:33 This image is the Dar-I-Suf canyon. Those cliff walls are 600-800 feet. The little specks you can see along the river is our horse herd that's picketed out. The special operations air crews, they landed a couple of helicopters down in there that brought in some ATVs and another Special Forces team to help us build up. They also dropped parachute, aerial supplies into that canyon for us. But the terrain was very rugged. And by getting off road, then I can in essence avoid some of the mines in those danger areas, and I can get in, around, behind, and amongst, and sow confusion in our enemy.

00:46:17 Clifford Chanin: Scotty, does this scene look familiar to you? That might not have been where you were, but...

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: That is all of Afghanistan. It's interesting. I'll talk about my steel horse ride. It was our first mission, and we were partnered with the Canadians. So once again, after 9/11, everybody came and wanted to support America. And we all came together immediately when Kandahar Airfield fell. We were brought into this kind of new task force organization, and that's all our partner nation forces.

00:46:52 So our first mission was a remote compound. We were to fly five hours by helicopter into this area because of... it was the largest helicopter assault, you know, in history at the time, of special operators. There was about 120 of us. And you think Mark's team was 12, and we sent in an entire Special Forces company, and a Canadian company, because there were so many compounds that were miles apart. We didn't know which compound was the one that needed to be hit, so we decided, you know, it's better to send everybody, as a precaution.

00:47:32 And so initially, going in, all of the explosive breaching. The only way to get into a compound, because you couldn't carry ladders and you don't knock on the door, was to explosively breach in there. And I remember the helicopter came, landed, and those of us that had been there, the dust is so fine, it just hovers around, and the helicopter takes off, and the dust settles down for a second, and this is under zero illumination, under night vision, and you can only see probably 30 or 40 feet in front of you.

00:48:03 And it looked like we'd landed on the moon. We had no clue where on the Earth we were. The GPSes could not find us because we had flown so far. And I remember us sitting there in a small group, you know, trying to be quiet, and we're, like, "Okay, we need to move somewhere." So we brought out our compasses, and we didn't know which direction to go.

00:48:25 And finally somebody said, "Hey, there's a little bit of high ground." So we started moving to the high ground. And then somebody else said, "Well, what about land mines?" So we stopped in our tracks there. So here we are, our first combined mission with our partners. We're the advance guard that's going to explosively breach into these compounds that would allow the rest of the special operators to sort things out. And we didn't know where we were. Our GPS couldn't find us, and we were alone.

00:48:55 So we started moving to a high ground, and luckily, a helicopter flew past us. And we figured that was the assault element. And so we started running where the aircraft flew above us, and then somebody said, "Well, what if they're leaving the compound?"

(laughter)

00:49:11 Master Sergeant Scott Neil: So it really was a comedy of errors. But you got to make a bold, decisive action. And luckily, we were on kind of a downside of a crest. And as soon as we came over, we saw the compounds. And we all sprinted there, I would say probably at a half a

mile at a dead run, at altitude, to start engaging. And that particular compound, set of compounds itself, was... What I described earlier was a waypoint for all foreign fighters coming into Afghanistan, where they would pick up a new passport, deposit their old one. Some of them would get married. Some of them were broke down into their skills as doctors or lawyers or whatnot. So it ended up being a treasure trove of information.

00:49:53

Clifford Chanin: Can you give us a little more detail on the actual engagement itself?

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: Each engagement's unique. Like, right behind us, that's our entire company. So once again, you hear about Special Forces in 12. We were a different tool in the toolbag of the commander. Afghan compounds are not like other Middle Eastern compound villa styles, where you have about a seven-foot wall, and then you have a main residence. These were 40- to 50-foot walls that have been earth-baked 24 inches deep for generations.

00:50:23

And they have repelled British, and, you know, all kind of other places. They were, you know, almost fortress-like. And just to get into them required a bit of surgery when it came to special techniques.

And then that announced that you were coming in. So you were vulnerable at that point of entry. But you could come into an area and know instantly and intuitively whether this is a farmer's location. They just... you know what I mean? You would know. You could sense it coming off the helicopter, and you could tell if it was a family with, you know, five kids and 20 sheep and everything. You intuitively knew it, and you would take precautions. Other times, it was a full-on firefight from the second you got there, and there was no turning back, because the helicopters would leave.

00:51:08

So you would fight it out, and that's where, you know, some of our, you know... The millions of dollars of training paid off in those circumstances, because we were a little bit lighter, quicker, faster. We could see at night.

We knew each other, we knew each other's actions. Some of it turned into hand-to-hand, some of it, you know, was over quickly.

00:51:31 This was before suicide vests and the last-stand activities that carried on into Iraq and later on into the war. And once again, we always knew that we had a timeline. If we weren't off of the objective within an hour, we had to stay there for 24 hours over a cover of darkness and fight it out, in case any reinforcements came.

00:51:53 Major Mark Nutsch: Scott talked about, you know, some of the challenges you're faced with. You just never know. If you'll go to, like, slide 22, our team is, as Scott's, going through Special Forces selection and training. They put you alone, they change up the circumstances, they make it nearly impossible for you to succeed, and you don't know what they're grading you on. There's no feedback-- "Did I succeed, did I fail?" Do the best you can, you know? So they're looking for that. And as we got into our situation, where we split down, we had already been through that in training.

00:52:27 My sergeants, my senior sergeants that had been through that. You know, we're having to pull out a map and a compass. You know, ask a young soldier today to read a map and a compass. You know, I hope they still can-- they'd better. But to be able to orient yourself on the terrain and sort it out and figure it out and make good decisions that don't escalate to worse situations... But we are used to being isolated, and these factors changing.

00:52:55 So my guys experienced, even in our event, where we did a 30-mile hike-- two three-man cells linked up together, and then they did a 30-mile hike to move, like Scott's team, to the sounds of the guns-- we knew there was going to be another fight up ahead at this key terrain feature, and I needed them there. And they had to figure it out. And they hiked, this is a photo of them leading... They had lost their Afghan contingent at that point, and the donkeys that were helping move our packs. And they put their gear on the horses and led them down. We had to swim streams with horse... on horseback, like something out of a Western movie.

00:53:34

Next slide, please. Anybody know what that is, that vehicle is there? A little six-wheeled John Deere Gator. We've probably made them lots of money. These vehicles float. They will float, as we learned.

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: It's not in the manual.

Major Mark Nutsch: What?

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: It's not in the manual, but you soon discovered it.

Major Mark Nutsch: It wasn't in their promotional material, but...

Clifford Chanin: So John Deere doesn't know they float.

00:53:57

Major Mark Nutsch: No, they didn't. But I know they've made a lot of propaganda off that picture that they received from us. But that's my team with some supplies recovered after an air drop, moving them around a couple of the... We had two of these Gators that came in, and we had to cross a series of streams, and we learned they float.

And at night... it started in the afternoon in a series of streams, and by night, we are swimming with my head and hands right near those tires, and a guy on a horse with a rope, and we're trying to push-pull this vehicle across an Afghan river that's a little icy.

00:54:33

But they're great vehicles, you know? But just the ingenuity of the sergeants... In that instance, both vehicles were flooded out. You know, they used the tools we had, they took the engine apart, got it to drain out, put it back together the next morning, and we drove it another 40 miles.

You know, it just... I can't say enough great things about the Special Forces sergeants across the community, and specifically the guys on my team. I had the honor and privilege of working later with Scott and his specialized unit, and after Afghanistan, I went on to another assignment to lead that troop for a couple of more years, into Iraq and Africa.

00:55:11

Clifford Chanin: Let me ask, how long were your initial deployments into Afghanistan, each of you?

Major Mark Nutsch: Ours was about 100 days.

Clifford Chanin: 100 days.

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: We lasted about seven months initially. And then, when you hear the original, you know, set of teams that went in, we immediately went home, refitted, and went into Iraq.

Major Mark Nutsch: Yeah.

00:55:36

Clifford Chanin: Let me ask, seven months, 100 days, a lot has happened in that time. The fall of the Taliban, this installation of a friendly government, bin Laden is.... We don't know where, but on the run. Did you ever imagine that we would still be, 15-plus years later, on the ground in Afghanistan?

Major Mark Nutsch: We felt it was very decisive with what we were doing with the local militias-- organizing them, forming them. As other SF teams came in around the country with other groups, and getting them to agree to work together, and they're trying to form their new government, and who's going to be in what position, you know, we felt like, at our level, in the Northern Provinces where we were at, it was a decisive victory.

- 00:56:25 And the war moved on to another part of the country. They pulled my team out with the initial explanation of, "We're going to refit you and we're going to... Because you understand what's going on, we're going to reinsert you into another area."
- 00:56:40 As I get back to Uzbekistan, that was nothing but pavement, and now it's a tent city with, you know, hundreds or thousands of troops there, and realize there's 40 other 12-man teams that want to go in and do things and get in on the ground, we realized we weren't getting retasked. But then they started to say, "Look, we're going to reset you for this other thing," that other thing being Iraq. And so these same teams, you know, rotated home. By the summer of 2002, we were preparing for Iraq.
- 00:57:11 Clifford Chanin: By the summer of 2002. How about you, Scotty?
- Master Sergeant Scott Neil: It's the same thing. They say... The unconventional campaign created momentum, and that momentum disrupted al Qaeda and Taliban leadership, right? I think it turned more from an unconventional into building an Afghan security capability, so teams were coming in to build small, you know, local security forces, and doing the other missions that Green Berets do in that foreign internal defense.
- 00:57:42 We were still very active with displaced leadership, and I also remember the time that very well-known generals had come in and wanted a battle themselves, and created or developed Anaconda, and a few other, you know, remnants of people in some very, even worse remote cave conditions, and that's when we sort of bowed out. It wasn't really a fight for us. We weren't the tool, the sledgehammer, for that.
- 00:58:21 Clifford Chanin: Now, both of you, I think, were involved in the early stages of actually briefing senior military and political leaders. You literally were the eyes on the ground for them. They did not have other

ways of finding out what was going on, what the challenges were, what the accomplishments were.

Major Mark Nutsch: Yeah. We start... as we got out of the mountains, and liberated the city of Mazar-i-Sharif and then expanded our operations to the... To the adjoining provinces-- the six northern provinces is what we focused on-- As things kind of stabilized, then, our mission changed to continuing to root out al Qaeda leadership that may be in the area, remnants of Taliban leadership.

00:59:03

But then it also shifted to doing initial assessments of, where can humanitarian aid come in? And what's needed in the North? While again, the main effort of the war has, at that point, has shifted to the East. And I'm talking about by late December, you know, our Afghan allies are in control of the country. You know, five Special Forces teams across the country helped facilitate the overthrow of the Taliban regime. About 100 operators, working with their guys.

Clifford Chanin: It's an extraordinary...

00:59:34

Major Mark Nutsch: And then the conventional forces, the rest of the Americans and the allies, blow in there to help in that exploitation and pursuit, and rebuild the Afghan Government and security apparatus. So different politicians, different generals, started flying into the region to be briefed, congressmen. And then, as they brought us out, our team got latched onto the... We called it the Flag of our Fathers Tour, where we basically then got tasked to go tell this story and brief it to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Pentagon, and most of the general officers and people that had been working behind the scenes to help facilitate, you know, these small teams on the ground, and help them understand kind of what the Afghan perspective was and what the Afghans...

01:00:25

You know, we realized we became kind of a voice also for the Afghans. What made us successful in those early period was, it was an Afghan plan. You know, they had buy-in to that plan. They're vested in that plan. And somewhere in there, I think we kind of... We took a big sharp right or

left, and then tried to get back on course several times. But I never expected I'd be going back for the last 15, 16 years.

01:00:50

Clifford Chanin: How many deployments did each of you make, both to Afghanistan and Iraq and elsewhere, as you were deployed?

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: On active duty, I did seven tours altogether, from Afghanistan to Iraq to Africa. When I retired, I went to become a contractor. It's become a dirty word, but at the time, I was an adviser for General Petraeus, and it was the commander's advisory group that was going back into the tribal area to understand, you know, their perspective of the conflict ten years later.

Clifford Chanin: In Afghanistan.

01:01:26

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: Yeah, and that was my last trip, and decided I probably need another occupation.

(laughter)

Clifford Chanin: And...

Major Mark Nutsch: I did 11 in uniform over my career. And then as a contractor or a private citizen going back, doing humanitarian aid missions, I've gone back another 15-plus times. Honestly, my wife can tell you the exact number.

(laughter)

01:01:50 Major Mark Nutsch But as I said, I've gone back in various capacities to reconnect with the people that I worked with in 2001 in uniform or in civilian clothes.

Clifford Chanin: And you guys... we're going to turn it over, because I'm sure the audience is going to have a lot of questions. You guys are involved in a very interesting enterprise at the moment together.

Major Mark Nutsch: Yes.

01:02:12 Master Sergeant Scott Neil: We've got our plug here. After I left the service and I did the rotation, I really saw a lot of special operators fall into the contractor ways, and you can make a lot of money going back and offering your skill set to the government and to others. I worked for a nonprofit that helped veterans for quite a bit, and some of the members in here know me because I shook them down for money or advice or help.

01:02:40 And then I quit that because I really wanted to re-enter society and live the American dream I've been defending. So this same small group started a distillery and decided to make whiskey, not war. And, you know, what's interesting, as we reflect backwards, I'm just as excited about the future, because I felt that we defended that American dream, and it wouldn't be honest if we didn't pursue it as soldiers.

01:03:08 So we spent about a year and a half using all the same Green Beret skills of analytical evaluation, intelligence against competition, all of these other factors, to take a stab at entrepreneurialism. And I can tell you right now, it's become kind of a rally cry against others, you know, that really...

You know, there has to be a reason for this conflict, and there has to be a recovery, as well. So I'll be coming back to see everybody slinging my whiskey, rum, vodka, and gin. And believe it or not, our very first

bourbon's called the Horse Soldier Bourbon, so it's kind of a reflection of our experiences.

01:03:44

Clifford Chanin: That's great.

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: So thanks for the plug, by the way.

Clifford Chanin: You know, and... No, we haven't finished the plug yet. What's the name of the company?

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: American Freedom.

Clifford Chanin: All right.

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: Legendary men, legendary spirits. And the reason we chose that name, it's interesting, because we don't want to be overtly military, but the name itself, American Freedom, you think Old West, Wild West, sort of themes of patriotism back in the day-- eagles and things like that.

01:04:12

So we put a lot of heart in. Believe it or not, trademarking is the challenge these days, of trying to find anything that's available in the spirits industry besides a gopher, you know? You've got, you know, the eagle, the bear, the stream, the tree-- you got everything imaginable as a name brand for a spirit these days, and somehow American Freedom wasn't chosen.

01:04:35

Clifford Chanin: And your products are coming out this year.

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: Yeah, they're coming out this year. So, like I say, we've been to Scotland and Ireland. We've... actually, just like Green Berets, we've deployed around the world.

(laughter)

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: We've tested...

Major Mark Nutsch: Research.

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: Researched and evaluated. It's interesting-- I spent 17 years in the Middle East where I couldn't touch alcohol, so I got the final laugh, and...

(laughter)

Clifford Chanin: It's nice you're catching up with lost time.

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: Exactly, exactly.

Clifford Chanin: Well, so... Now, that's the plug we were looking for here.

01:05:03

Major Mark Nutsch: We were just... Along with some others in this room, we were just in Havana, Cuba.

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: Yes.

Major Mark Nutsch: Some Green Berets participated in the first sailboat race from St. Petersburg, Florida, to Havana, Cuba.

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: We brought American Freedom to Cuba.

Clifford Chanin: That's wonderful.

Major Mark Nutsch: We had a great time meeting with...

(laughter and applause)

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: They're endless. I love all the little sayings, you know what I mean?

Major Mark Nutsch: We had a great time being tourists in Havana, Cuba, standing in the center of, you know, their communist icons.

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: Revolutionary Square.

01:05:32

Major Mark Nutsch: And the real attraction were all of the 1950s American cars that had hundreds of tourists around them.

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: And I guess a final note, what's interesting is, my father was involved in the Cuban Missile Crisis. And, you know, so the heritage of finally being a Green Beret that's liberated a country finally returning to a country that's still not liberated, you know, there's lots of symbology there.

Major Mark Nutsch: The Cuban people were very welcoming. We had a great time.

01:06:02 Clifford Chanin: Wonderful. Let's see who has some questions for our guests. I'm sure there will be some. Please raise your hand. We're going to send you a mic. So this gentleman here.

Major Mark Nutsch: Thank you, thank you.

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: And water.

01:06:18 Audience Member: Hi, thank you, gentlemen. Of course, thank you for your service. It's a fantastic story that you've been able to share with us. My name is Ravi. I work with NYPD now, so I appreciate the bit of a shout-out. My question for you is just, based on your experience, both tactically, in terms of building partnerships with locals on the ground in Afghanistan, do you have a particular perspective on the way forward in Iraq and Syria? Do you have some perspective as to what makes that conflict unique or the same to what you had seen in Afghanistan?

01:06:52 And I'd also like to offer that I, to some degree, had followed in your footsteps. I was a civilian analyst with D.O.D. and deployed to Kabul and Kandahar in 2008 and 2010. So again, thank you from... personally, as well.

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: From my perspective-- and it's a very good question, because they're totally different-- Afghanistan is very tribal-oriented, Iraq is very contract-oriented. And if you knew about tribal society, it's honor and shame. It is driven by history. It is driven by social conflicts, village to village, quite differently. They were embracing when they understood that we were attacked.

01:07:33 None of them had the news or newspapers. Most didn't even know what America was. But they knew we were there because we deserved our revenge. In Iraq, the people are different. They're highly educated. It's... it's a mix of criminal-mindedness and activities and social survival.

01:07:53 Those people... I shouldn't use the word "those people." That culture and survival in Iraq were based on whether you were politically aligned, family-aligned-- all of these reasons. They've had to survive, and they'll switch sides instantly. It's hard to get between the people and the problem. Whereof Afghanistan and the Green Beret way is really to separate both. Let's let the people who want to be villagers and live a simple life, let's shield them against the aggressors and the problems of the world.

01:08:23 In Iraq, it's very hard, because it's intertwined. And we do not have a lot of the cultural, political, all these three-dimensional understandings to separate the two. We got rid of al Qaeda and inherited ISIS. We don't, as a country at times, don't understand Shia and Sunni conflict. We don't understand the value of natural resources, black-market activities, countries that are friends and allies that will broker financial deals on the backside of some terrorist organizations, the struggle over natural resources, the value of copper that forms electrically... or explosively formed penetrators. It is just a wicked, wicked serious mess, and it's not consumable in a news sound bite.

01:09:13 And we're going to be there a long time as a country, because we are so tied to the economies of what the region has to offer. That, that good? That a good Green Beret answer?

Clifford Chanin: I need a drink after that.

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: Yeah, me, too—have some whiskey.

Clifford Chanin: I know where to get it, too. Who else? This gentleman here.

01:09:38 Audience Member: I... I wanted to thank you, also, and tell you how proud I am. And I feel like it's such an amazing honor to be in your presence. I just have a question, as someone who wasn't in the military.

So when you identify a compound, like you said, you flew in five hours in a helicopter. If you can identify the compound, and there are air... You're obviously getting weapons dropped and food dropped. Why do they have to send in ground personnel, and just not sent in a fighter plane to just destroy the compound?

01:10:08 Mark Nutsch: You're going after... Keep in mind, at that point, sir, there was still great concern about... America and New York has just been attacked, right? Are there other sleeper cells waiting, you know, in the shadows, that are going to conduct another attack? So the need for intelligence that can be gathered by sending someone in there on the ground outweighs striking it with explosive ordnance.

01:10:40 I want to gather their computer. I want to learn more about how that organization functions so that I can do some forensic analysis on it and lead me to another clues about the organizational capabilities.

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: There's an acceptance of risk. We all accepted it. There's many times when I remember the commanders going, "Just bomb it," because the risk was obvious. There was an armed resistance, it met all the factors. There was times where we would put snipers and other elements for four to five days, observing the area. And many times we detected that, no, that was just a simple compound, and they evaded out, you know, undetected and unknown.

01:11:23 There are a lot of success stories that the public will never know. A lot of the stories that you know publicly are failures sometimes, right? Great dramatic battles of being almost caught by the enemy. What you haven't seen is when things went right-- you were in there, you detected something that was not what was initially thought to be, and we safely exfiltrated, and that family went on to live, whereas if we would have explored option A, just bombed the piss out of it, we would have flown in, and we would have uncovered with shovels what we needed to uncover, and we would have got out.

01:12:00 So at the time, we knew that, and we accepted that risk. There's lots of times I would get into a major firefight in one compound, go over to the next, expecting resistance, and it was just a simple family, and we would switch it off instantly, and that was just the kind of training that we had at the time.

01:12:21 Major Mark Nutsch: These types of organizations embed themselves in the local landscape, right? In the local populace. They're not dressed differently, with a bright orange uniform that says, "I'm the bad guy over here," you know? And so there's obviously the concern to prevent collateral damage, civilian casualties, things like that. And the military goes to enormous lengths to mitigate risk to civilians that may be around those combatants that we're seeking.

01:12:50 Master Sergeant Scott Neil: Yeah, it's hard to separate the people from the problem if you lump them all together in time.

Clifford Chanin: And I do want to come back to a point you made earlier in your response. This is immediately after 9/11, and the urgency of that, and figuring out what's going on, how... Is that the key mission now for you, at that point in time?

01:13:11 Major Mark Nutsch: That was part of the mission, trying to find al Qaeda leadership on the battlefield, where's Osama bin Laden, trying to organize a force that can help... an Afghan force that can help track down al Qaeda operatives, specifically going after Taliban leadership.

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: What did they call the al Qaeda? What did your guys call them, "foreign Taliban," right?

Major Mark Nutsch: Yeah, yeah.

01:13:37 Master Sergeant Scott Neil: Yeah, there was a natural resistance for the al Qaeda that embedded themselves with the Taliban. Remember, the Taliban and the different factions had been fighting each other kind of in a gentleman's war. They would take breaks, they would have treaties, they would attend social events together, then they would go back the next day and fight. It was really the addition of hardcore radicals that came in and really dislodged a normal proxy war against each other.

Major Mark Nutsch: It upset their society completely.

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: And we were a counterforce. So al Qaeda became Special Forces for the Taliban, and then we became Special Forces enablers for the Mujahideen and the fractions to defend against.

01:14:20 Major Mark Nutsch: Al Qaeda cadres or leadership, small teams of al Qaeda, would be spread out among the Taliban units to help advise them. They were manning... In our case, they were manning the heavy, crew-served weapons, the more technological weapons, because they had received advanced training. They were hardcore fighters, extremists, but in most cases, the al Qaeda guys spoke Arabic, whereas the Taliban speak Pashto, because they're from that border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan. So there was cultural, language differences, religious differences, that were all being exploited.

01:14:56 Clifford Chanin: Other question?

Major Mark Nutsch: Question over here.

Clifford Chanin: Question over there? Sure. Here's the mic.

Audience Member: Thank you for your service. I'd like to find out, what's the state of Afghanistan today? Thank you.

Major Mark Nutsch: Go for a visit, sir.

(laughter)

Major Mark Nutsch They're ready for tourism in some parts of the country. But...

01:15:20 Master Sergeant Scott Neil: Afghanistan's very beautiful. I think, if you look at the old history photos in the '60s and '70s, when it was almost on the cusp, you have Germany, which really was the influence, economic influence. There was mass tourism in the Hindu Kush for backpacking and outdoor recreational activity, duck hunting, which... Mark's invited me several times to shoot ducks with RPGs.

Major Mark Nutsch: I'm looking for a client, actually, sir. You can bring three other fellows, and I'll take you to Afghanistan for a couple of weeks, but...

01:15:53 Master Sergeant Scott Neil: But we also say, on the same hand, maybe Afghanistan cannot be microwaved. It needs to evolve itself and its political, regional aspects. Afghanistan is landlocked. It doesn't have the industrial base. Its natural resources cannot be exported, because the infrastructure doesn't allow for sophisticated mining operations. It doesn't have refrigerated storage for a lot of its fruit production, so it relies on route lines through Pakistan, and it can't get to a large customer base in India, because Pakistan hates India, and they do not want any of their global products to, to go to other exports.

01:16:33 So once again, it's a very complicated... Afghanistan is beautiful. The people are very proud and traditional. There's been a problem with the flight of English-speaking interpreters and college-educated Afghans that, as soon as they can, will leave the country. And what you have is business-oriented men that will-- and women, small groups of women--

that will survive through entrepreneurship and warlord activities and the daily hustle.

01:17:03 Major Mark Nutsch: Ultimately, on your question, sir, it has to be an Afghan solution, you know? In my instance and experience there, I would say that they're not looking for a handout, they're looking for a hand up. And a lot of times, a lot of these problem sets that we found... The Taliban were paying local citizens ten dollars a day to plant an I.E.D. against an American, or a coalition partner. If you can create a job to give them an opportunity to feed or support their family, you know, these are the other types of alternative solutions that are necessary.

01:17:40 Clifford Chanin: Am I reading it properly to say that you... As difficult as it is, the situation in Afghanistan seems perhaps more likely to come to some better resolution than the situation in Iraq, Syria? Is that a fair comparison?

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: We can... you know, unfortunately, you can turn the gaze from Afghanistan, and it will evolve at a pace that it will come to, right? Because there's... you know, other than our interest to see Afghanistan become a better society and everything, the resources that make people fight-- you know, access to the Mediterranean, the oil reserves, other activities, you know-- keep us staring into Iraq.

01:18:22 The power play between, you know, major global powers and proxy powers and all this other stuff is a... I call it, like, knots on a kindergartner's tennis shoes. There's just so many to be unwound. Afghanistan, you know, it's, all the king's horses and all the king's men won't put it back together again It has to come out, what's sustainable for them. Is there a role for the Taliban to remain in Afghanistan? There probably is, in the regions that the Taliban provide, you know, religious resolution to conflicts, and court systems, and honor and shame, and all those other things, you know?

01:19:06 Major Mark Nutsch: They're...

Master Sergeant Scott Neil: Complex.

Major Mark Nutsch: You know, here we are 15 years later, there are groups that are still our allies. You know, these folks that we've worked with over the years are still involved in the politics. They're trying to handle these tough problems that are there, and find resolution. I've never seen a place that was so utterly destroyed. The infrastructure that we take for granted, that has been developed over the last 15 years, I would say they are better off.

01:19:37

You know, we've helped to build some roads, some bridges, some dams, some power projects. Medical, health care, education system that had been destroyed. You know, when the literacy rate was what? Less than 15% back in 2001. You know, and the average life expectancy was in your mid-40s. And when you encounter a guy that's in his mid-40s and he looks like he's probably 80 or 90... You know, so some of these things have been improved.

01:20:05

Clifford Chanin: Well, this has really been an extraordinary evening. It's very rare. But I think I can express on behalf of all of us a great feeling of gratitude and thanks to you. And thank you, of course, for coming to the museum and sharing your story with all of us. And please join me in thanking Mark Nutsch and Scotty Neil.

(applause)