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Wings & Things Guest Lecture Series

Air Force Combat Rescue in Afghanistan

Air Force HH-60G Pave-Hawk pilot Lt. Col. Jeffrey Peterson recalls his role in the daring combat rescue attempt of a Navy Seal in Afghanistan.

Lt. Col. Jeffrey Peterson: As he said, my name is Lt. Col. Jeff Peterson and I am H-60 helicopter pilot stationed currently at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Tucson. A little bit about myself, Jeff mentioned some stuff. I don't know why I picked that picture but as I told Dawn earlier, I think it's me subconsciously strangling her for inviting me out to tell my story. I do want to thank General Metcalf and the staff of the museum here for inviting me. I was talking to him earlier today about my apprehension in coming and he said that that's a common thing. It's because I felt like I'm pounding my chest about a rescue I was involved with, but I was just a small piece in that pie, but as Jeff has talked about historically, those are things that we want to capture and keep for the next generation. So, please forgive me if it sounds like I'm boasting, but I'm just going to try to tell the story how I recall it and how it happened back in 2005.

I was a Major at the time, pinned on Lieutenant Colonel just last year and it says "Spanky." That's my call sign. You don't choose call signs when I was in pilot training and it was around a party, lots of alcohol and "You look like 'Spanky,'" so it stuck. I thought I could get rid of it but there are numerous people that don't know my first name so ... [laughter]

I was born and raised in Logan, Utah, up in the Rockies and did ROTC at Arizona State University. My father transferred down from Utah State University to Arizona State. I thought I'd give it a shot, fell in love with Tempe, met my wife of 17 years in Tempe, Arizona, and we've now got four wonderful boys that look up to dad and want to be just like me, I guess. My first assignment was in early 90s, they took pilot slots away so I was slated for a pilot slot but they took it away 10 days before commissioning, and said "you've got to pick a different career field you're never going to fly." They then came back later and said that they would allow us to fly but we've got to go by date of rank and our age. So I went to Abilene, Texas, Dyess Air Force Base and was a maintenance officer on the B-1B and it was interesting to see "Boss Hog" out here in the hangar. The last time I was at the museum it was a B-1A model out front but now one of the birds we worked on and that was in our squadron is in the museum here so that was awesome. My number came up, went pilot training at Laughlin Air Force Base, Texas. While I was at Dyess, a good friend of mine, still a best friend of mine, named Chris Stewart, was a prior Air Force helicopter pilot, and I can honestly say I didn't know at the time that the Air Force had helicopters. I hadn't paid much attention, I wanted to fly jets. But he got me so excited about helicopters when graduating from pilot training. There were about 25 of us in the class. I was number eight. There were only four fighter slots so I didn't look back

and my second choice was going to be helicopters from the get-go so I chose helicopters, tracked out, went to Fort Rucker, Alabama. The Army is the experts in helicopter training. Graduated there. I got my first choice and my first choice of base, HH-60Gs out of Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada. I was there for three years in a combat rescue squadron. I was able to stay in the Vegas area, worked some classified tests for additional five years, so a big chunk of my active duty flying was done in the Las Vegas area. I then decided to get off active duty to kind of slow down. I've since been to Afghanistan three times in the Reserves, so that didn't work. I went for a short stint at Patrick, but the west is where my heart was, and we were able to move back to Arizona where my wife's family is from, my family is from and just really enjoying it there.

Just what I'm going to talk a little bit, about a little bit of history of combat search and rescue, and then get into my 2005 deployment, a little bit about Operation Enduring Freedom there in Afghanistan followed by what was known as Operation Red Wings. It was a pretty classified operation at the time. We had no idea that it was going on until we were called upon when some of you might have remembered or what the new book that came out "Lone Survivor" by Marcus Luttrell, his four-man SOF team was compromised and he was the only one left and we were a small piece in that pie to help get him back to safety. And we'll go from there.

A little bit about our heritage or history. Like a lot of things in the Air Force, we can go back, that even though our history and heritage isn't that far deep, we go back to the Jolly Green Giant. It's always good to have a cartoon character as your motto but Jolly Green's green feet, it came back in the Vietnam era and from what I'm told and I was fearful about this audience because there is probably a lot smarter people in this audience about Jolly Greens than I am, but the H-3, the Mighty Jolly Green, was the original Jolly Green. The Super Jolly Green is the H-53 and if you're a downed Airman behind enemy lines, that's the sound you want to be hearing. Ask any fighter pilot or anybody that's ever been picked up in a pinch, is the sound of those rotor blades is a welcome sound. It was like a big lumbering Jolly Green Giant going in the jungle and snatching them and taking them back to safety.

One of the things that we're very proud of is our motto in rescue, "these things we do that others may live," Pararescuemen are very entwined in our mission and that's part of their creed. We use it. We put it on our patches, "Anytime, Anywhere," that we look at it as a badge of honor, that we enjoy the notion, "these things we do that others may live." Not very many people in modern day warfare can say their primary mission is to solely save people's lives while going at times at great lengths putting your own life and crew at risk.

That's Jolly Green. Some of the old things and it's great to see a lot of these air frames in the museum. We've got the Skyriders, the old H-3s. One thing that makes Air Force rescue different from some of the other services is our helicopters have had refueling probes that allows us to air refuel behind the now currently C-130s. I don't want to bag on them. If they dare go behind enemy lines, they can drag us as far as we need to go, or top us off right there at the [indiscernible] so we can air refuel. This also helps out in civil SAR or over the ocean. We've recently -- our squadron went out 500 plus miles out to

sea in the Pacific to rescue a -- I believe he was a Japanese sailor that was in a world of hurt that needed rescuing and to get a boat or to get any kind of resupplies to him. They needed to get him off the boat and back in we were able to do that.

These two pictures on the bottom are of the -53 that has gone through numerous upgrades and is currently being retired from Special Ops and they're going to the Osprey as their replacement.

I've got a short little video here. You've all probably seen it. I thought it was kind of cool so clipped it down to say this:

[Video playing]

That's just an awesome video. I had to cut it down but I love the mini gun footage. We still fly with dual mini guns out the -- out the gunner's window right here in external mount. They've got an external pylon now that they mount them on. We also fly with 50-cals out the very same window on the external mounts depending on what mission.

But to go on with that the Jolly Green mantra, if you will, I look at it as a very honorable career path that I've chosen. I've enjoyed every minute of it and I'm glad that I made those choices. Some things that our predecessors have been involved with just in the last 15, 20 years, very instrumental in all these; Panama, Desert Storm, both Northern and Southern Watch for over a decade, Bosnia, Afghanistan and Iraq currently. Air Force Rescue has been flying along with Special Ops, the HH-60G Pave Hawk, exclusively since the early 90s. We started retiring the H-3s from rescue in the early 90s, going exclusively to the H-60s. That's both ActiveDduty, Guard and Reserve.

Why I am here talking today about Afghanistan and the deployment that I was involved with back in 2005 I should say? We deployed down here, southwestern Afghanistan at the large base at Kandahar. As I mentioned earlier, I got off active duty and I'm a Reservist so this a voluntary deployment. The last two have been. We're running short on volunteers. I'm actually going over next week for a much longer deployment and we're being involuntarily mobilized back to the same Kandahar there in Afghanistan. On that deployment we weren't supposed to be there that long. We were just trying to in between a couple of squadrons rotating out. Southwestern Afghanistan, all this is just sand, desert. Low-lying hills here. It starts kind of getting hilly as you get to the center of the country. Low-lying sand and hills here. By the capital of Kabul there's Bagram Airfield. These are the two places that we've got air power. Primarily Army has helicopter scattered throughout the country but primarily at Kandahar and Bagram. Bagram is right in the valley with very large mountains and they start getting larger as they start heading up this way and it is the Hindu Kush Mountains. It's the start of the Himalayas and you look at charts and 23, 24, 25,000-foot peaks up here so a lot bigger than we've got here in the States. That's for sure so as a helicopter pilot, we need that thick air to go over our blades to produce lift. At those kinds of altitudes and all the equipment that we've got on, it's just not very reasonable, anything much more than 10,000 feet that we could really provide much help.

While deployed at Kandahar, combat rescue for the most part is a pretty mundane, slow time, if you will. We're there sitting waiting for bad things to happen. You and I know we make bad things happen. Bad things don't happen to us. Fighter pilots aren't getting shot down. Planes, they're not having to eject. I'm not having to go deep into enemy territory to pick up a downed Airman which is my primary mission so we started getting creative. We started helping the Army. We started doing pickups when the Army turns down a mission for when the threats too high, the weather's too bad or the illumination is too low. We'll go in and help out but those things were times where locals would step on a mine or that deployment a small Afghani kid blew part of his hand off by hitting a 50-caliber round with a rock. Numerous things but it was fairly slow. Just how my wife and my mother like it, is that I would have time to call back, email and I was looking forward to getting back before the fourth of July the summer of 2005. Our replacements had just arrived. It was the end of June and we'd stay up all night, sleep during the day. They got in during the day so I was waiting up for them but I didn't want to wait that much longer so I said "I'll see them when I wake up." Unfortunately I never did.

We got a scrambled call while I was asleep there in the middle of the afternoon. It said "pack a bag and we're heading up Bagram." We'd been up there before. We were familiar with the terrain but we didn't quite know what was going on. We'd heard they'd had some problems with a Predator over here along the Pakistani border and we'd heard the night prior that a Chinook crashed up in the mountains. So we could only assume that it had to do with the downing of the helicopter. What we did was pack a bag, fully well thinking that we would be gone only for a few days, and hopefully the C-17 that was going to pick up at Kandahar at worst-case scenario, would come up and get us at Bagram, but unfortunately that didn't happen. We flew the four-and-a-half-hour -- four-hour flight roughly up to Bagram, got there right after sunset, and was shuffled in behind the fence, if you will, with the OCF compound, we called it, the other than conventional forces. They're the guys that grow their beards out. They don't really wear the same uniforms. They're the snake eaters, if you will, the guys behind the fence that us Air Force guys usually don't play with. They've got their own air support, their own missions and we're usually sitting strip alert for combat rescue.

We got up there and they pulled us in and briefed us of a highly classified operation at the time called Operation Redwing where they were trying to get insurgents up near Asadabad which is a small town in northeastern Afghanistan up in this area here. They had just infilled a couple of days prior a four-man SOF team came and they got frantic satellite phone call that they were compromised and they needed help. One thing we take great pride in is our training at night. We like it dark because no one can see us or at least that's the theory. Night vision technology isn't as prevalent as in our service. It's out there. We've got to watch for it but we've got a forward-looking infrared that's got TV screens in the cockpit. We fly with night vision goggles and we like to go in -- go fast, real low, blacked out so hopefully if they do see us or hear us, that we're long gone before they can react. Unfortunately that MH-47 crew, we've got a frantic call. Their buds are on the ground. Eight Navy SEALs jumped in the back and said, "Let's get out of here."

At about 4:00 local time they were getting ready to infill to the coordinates up on top of the mountain, at which time they took an RPG up the aft ramp into the number one engine and subsequently crashed. We didn't know at the time but they crashed and rolled about 1,800 feet down a steep embankment so no one survived that crash but we didn't know. We had sketchy details from the lead bird -- or the number two bird I should say. So what we got there was over the last day or so we've received clicking. They didn't have any voice transmission. It was just clicking over the guarded frequency but the clicking would answer questions. Whenever we go into combat we fill out ISOPREP information of just things that I would know and things that our PJs or ourselves could ask over the radio. For instance, my first car was a 1979 four-door yellow Chevette. You can glean a lot of information from that by asking what color the car was, how many doors it had, what year -- what are some of the years, numerous types of questions you can get from that, and he was answering things, they thought. One big thing that we're very leery of is putting our crew and assets at risk to get into a SAR trap where they lure you in thinking that you're going to go do a rescue and then they take you out knowing that they just killed 16 people in that very spot they day prior.

So, this clicking was going on. What they wanted us to do was to push up here to a small town, a fairly large town actually right down here. Here's Bagram and it's right here called Jalalabad, in the main thoroughfare from Kabul to Pakistan, and sit and wait for the word. So they briefed us in and they said "go to Jalalabad." They know you're coming and then just wait on auxiliary power and we'll let you know if we need you to go and search if we can -- they were frantically trying to use all types of assets, national assets, Navy assets, all types of aircraft flying around trying to hone in, triangulate where this clicking was coming from and they came up with three points but they couldn't pinpoint it.

This is a picture of my crew at that time. I'm the short -- well, actually Dave is shorter than me so -- that's myself. My copilot is Dave Gonzalez, former Army Guard and border patrol pilot with over 4,000 hours of time. Mike Cusick here was a gunner for two tours in Vietnam, the young kid, just a college student Ben Peterson, my two PJs. This is kind of a pitch for the Reserves. My two PJs, one had just graduated from medical school, was doctor, and the other PJ had eight years plus experience in the back of an ambulance EMT type of experience so our crew times in Active Duty, if you will, bags on us Reservists like we don't know what we're doing but our combined knowledge and expertise was actually in our favor that day. This is the lead birds, Col. Macrander, "Skinny" we call him, was Aircraft Commander. JP Phalon's a southwest pilot and Jason Burger and Josh Donnelly. He was a college student at the time and he was fulltime Reservist like myself and Skinny.

We'd rotate flight lead duties. This was, luckily, Skinny's week to be flight lead and so I was more than happy to fly on his wing. He was our weapons officer and a graduate out there at the weapons school at Nellis. Here's a picture of our PJs trying to look cool, trying to grub up as much as they can but a great bunch of guys to have with you. I was talking to the staff here and they said they had 400 of them at once here in this building and that would be a little too much for me [laughter] but here there are about 10 and

that's probably a manageable size. These are some of the things that we started getting wind of before we left. US -- down in Afghanistan. These are the kind of things that the family and friends were looking for because they don't care about helicopters going down but they knew it was a Chinook and there are no Air Force Chinooks currently so they didn't really have to worry.

Another map of where it was at. The crash site, as I mentioned, was up near Asadabad. Jalalabad is down here. It was about an hour flight from Kabul to Jalalabad. We sat there on APU power through most of the night. Skinny and myself went into the small tent that the Marines had set up there on this old small airfield that was just controlled by a single CCT guy that was out there in the middle of nowhere with some Marine tents. It was pretty barebones. We landed and just waited. We took off at about four in the morning because they said they had some pretty good coordinates and they gave us, over sat comm, three coordinates of interest up in the mountains just northwest of Asadabad. The base elevation was just around 1,500 feet but shot up to 14,000 feet at about where the "D" is so we were in these tight canyons with -- it kind of reminds me of home skiing up Alta, or Snowbird, in Little Cottonwood Canyon -- is that you're in a canyon and there are these granite peaks just going straight up in all directions. I've got some pictures -- no, I'm getting ahead of myself but I've got some pictures later on that talk a little bit show some of the dramatic terrain features there in that part of the country.

So we went, and we went looking for those clicks, and we actually went searching each of the sites. It's still night, no moon and it was flight weather so it was good conditions for us and we were frantically on guard. We could hear the faint clicks and we were -- we were scared that battery was dying. We didn't really know at the time if it was a survivor off of the MH-47 crash but once we got talking to people about the crash site, we knew it wasn't probably one of them, that it was one or more of the SEALs most likely trying to get a hold of us, or it possibly still could be a trap. We went checking. Skinny was down low. I was up high providing cover and just trolling the ridge lines and just frantically saying "You need to show yourself. We need to get you out of here. We can't start running low on fuel because we had to just to go with our main tanks only and then more importantly, it started getting light, and that's our worst fear, now being seen." Less than a mile away from the original crash site that they estimated as many as a hundred Taliban could have jumped these guys. We didn't want to be seen so now we're down low and slow which is very dangerous. Trolling the hills, the sun's coming up. Now my goggles don't work because the sun's coming up but I can't see under the goggles because it's too dark so it's a bad time to fly and oh, by the way, we're in bad guy territory. We're not up in the mountains by Phoenix.

We checked and then we bingo'ed out, if you will. We were too low on gas and we finally had to go down. I just remember how frustrated I was just wishing that he would show himself or whatever because you get pretty amped up when you're going into the big rescue. We then went back to Asadabad, and overflew Asadabad actually, that had some refueling truck, said we're going to go back to Jalalabad and get gas off of the tanker an MC-130 Talon II. Well, he had already taken off. We landed with about 300 pounds of gas or less which in H-60 talk is not very much gas and then they wanted us to

fly to some PRT where they could ground refuel so we said, "Listen, listen. We're not going to take off." So there -- this is all over sat comm trying to work "Okay, how are we going to get you gas?" I want you guys go bed down now." It's daytime so it's night for us so we need to go find somewhere to sleep so we find a tent, find some cots and just crashed for the day. By the way, leaving our helicopters uncomfortably out in the open next to this road where now all the merchants are going up and down looking wow, they usually don't park there like that so we took hour shifts with our nine mills and -- anyway, it was a show of force, if you will, mostly to keep -- mostly to keep Skinny happy. We stayed there all day and right at dusk they sent a Chinook in, a slick Chinook they call a Fat Cow and he had bladders of fuel in the back and filled both of us up so they said, "Well, since you're there, why don't you stay overnight again just in case we hear the clicking and we need to send you again?" That's where I'm going to leave it for now. This was -- I'm just going to go in to a little bit about the SEALs and a little bit of background quickly on the Operation Red Wings.

This was a memorial service that we had there in Bagram, and these are the eight individuals from the Night Stalkers that lost their bird just three days prior, and they asked after we had done the rescue if they could have a down day for memorial and let some of their buds mourn the loss of their friends and close compatriots and then it was after that that we started picking up the remains of the remaining SEAL team. This was the team that was dropped in. Danny Dietz, Marcus Luttrell, Mike Murphy and Matt Axelson. I never met any of them. I still haven't met Marcus Luttrell. I talked to him on the phone, but they were put in by fast rope on top of one of the meadows up high by an MH-47 to observe, and try to get a very high Taliban leader. They were compromised by a couple of shepherds and a boy. They talk in the book that they were nervous if they should let them go or if they should kill them. They let them go and about 30 minutes later it was like a hornet's nest. Anywhere from 75 to 100 Taliban ambushed them and just bounding down the hills trying to get away. Lt. Murphy, as a lot of you might know, just posthumously got the Medal of Honor for his actions there for Operation Redwing and the other three received Navy Crosses. We got to know these guys through their ISOPREP information because we didn't know who or which one we were looking for.

This was an interesting picture I saw posted and it's Axelson, Healy, Suh, Luttrell, Patton and Murphy. It's -- the only one that lived in that picture is Marcus Luttrell. The other guys were either on the Chinook going to get their buds or the guys that actually died in Operation Red Wings. That's a high price to pay. That's from the same SEAL Team, 10, that was augmented out there from Hawaii, a big -- a major blow to that team.

This is the book that Marcus Luttrell has since wrote talking about the "Lone Survivor," the eyewitness account of Operation Red Wings and the lost heroes of SEAL Team 10 that we just discussed.

Here's some typical terrain down around Kandahar. It kind of reminds me of Vegas where I served for numerous years, about the same latitude, if you will, not much vegetation, kind of ugly, sandy and little things. This is -- this is the mountains that remind me of Snowbird and Alta up Little Cottonwood Canyon. Those guys live right

there. There are villages and little huts and trails and all types of things on the things -- I think I've got slide that you can see some houses here along and some ridge lines and you'll just see them cut into the hills, like right here this village is -- that's a pretty steep hill right there but no, they live there and farm and herd their animal. There are some terraced villages over here on this side of thing this is -- this accurately displays the LZ where we went in to they called "Barracuda," as it was on the side of a ridge line.

Let me jump back to our story. We're sitting there on APU power again for the second night waiting for something to happen. The weather's moved in and we've got thunderstorms, not to mention at zero illum there is no moon and the clouds now are covering what starlight we had. We've got a call over sat comm saying there was a person of interest up at a small Marine encampment up the river valley which we had been to previously in that deployment looking for a Marine that fell into the water and got swept away. So we'd been to the area and we're like, "Person of interest..." Said they had some information about a Navy SEAL. So we went, we landed -- actually Skinny landed. I provided cover. Basically, all I was doing was trying not to hit the mountain walls because I couldn't see the ground. I couldn't see Skinny anymore and I guess it really got bad. I probably started shooting -- it was just -- it was crazy. I was just trying to stay airborne in this tight canyon doing circles where A-10s or Navy assets were popping off flares and for two seconds it was awesome and then it would go dark and I was -- I was tempted to tell them to pop more but that will come later in the story where it was -- it was scary dark and my FLIR because of the weather doesn't like humidity in the air and so I'm getting not a good picture on my FLIR but when you don't get a good picture on your FLIR, usually your goggles complement but I wasn't getting real -- they were in scintillating we call them where you're getting kind of -- there's not enough light. They don't magically make light. They just accentuate light so if there isn't light, nothing to accentuate.

Skinny picked up this person of interest, which was an older man, and we took him down the river valley to be debriefed in Asadabad. A little bit we heard we got further briefed once we got back to Bagram was this was a tribal elder from a village up in the mountains that said he had a Navy SEAL and that they were protecting. Of course we didn't believe him. We want proof. "Oh yeah, that's right. He told me to give you this note," which had a lot of good information on it and said who it was, Marcus Luttrell. "These guys have been helping me. I'm wounded. I need help." I could have been written under adverse circumstances and they were leery at first. He even went to great lengths of sending a lineup of pictures and he picked which one was Marcus. Then without even being asked he said, "Oh yeah, by the way, he's got this big tattoo over his left breast and shoulder of a trident" that Marcus and his twin, brother both are Navy SEALs, and when standing next to each other forms the Navy SEAL trident. So they knew who they had and once we did that, they said, "Well, it's still dark. Why don't you stay around a little while?" Because we were concerned because going up to get the old man the first time we had to turn around because the weather was so bad. We finally made it up there and then we sat in Jalalabad waiting until sunrise and about seven in the morning, eight in the morning they said, "Okay, you can head back." So we did the hour plus flight back to Bagram, got cleaned up, got some real chow and then started hearing more about some of

the information but it was now night for us so they said get to bed because we're going to a meeting at about 1500 local so we went to bed, in a real bed as much as I could say a real bed, just a tent with 20 bunk beds in it but the whole three-ship package that we had up there was in there. Woke up and they told us a lot more detail about this old man and about how he got there and what great lengths he went to do that and I guess [Inaudible] - - what's the word I'm looking for? The tribal, if you will, policy is if someone comes to you or if you're helping someone, that you're almost obligated in order to help this distressed person --

[voice in the background]

Say again.

[voice in the background]

Is that what it's called?

[voice in the background]

We've got different words. I don't know what it's called but all I know is that they felt like they were bound to help this individual. Jumping back, the first night we're hearing the clicking. We're flying down low. Well, Skinny was. I was up high but we heard the clicking. We're frantically trying to find this guy. It was Marcus Luttrell. He saw as we came within 500 yards of him but he was so wounded he couldn't show himself or you think that just waving your hands that we would instantly spot you. It's a lot harder. That's why they pop smoke. That's why they got mirrors. That's why they've got -- you need to get the attention of the air crew and I can only imagine the heartfelt sank feeling that he felt when he saw us bingo out and leave, at which time -- as I said it was early in the morning -- he was on his last leg. He was shot up pretty good and he didn't know how he was going to get out of this mess. When a shepherd came up to him, he was -- he was thinking he was going to take him out at first, but for whatever reason he didn't. The guy gave him the international. He heard that Americans. Good sign. Lifted up his man dress to show him he didn't have any weapons and said -- Marcus asked if he was a Taliban and he said, "No Taliban. No Taliban. Good American," I guess, is what he said. Well, that guy saved his life and him and a friend carried Marcus, all 250 plus pounds of him down to their village, which he's like he was up there and they hiked him down to right there.

We had satellite imagery of the place, but I think the angle of the satellite made it look a lot flatter than it really was, but got him to the village. Taliban saw them taking him to the village but now they were bound to help this guy and unsuccessfully the Taliban came to the tribal elder and oh, by the way, this village is probably half the size of one of your hangars here. It's just like eight mud huts on the side of a cliff with some terraced, cultivated fields they farm and they've got some goats on one of them. So anyways, he was there. Taliban unsuccessfully came to try to get the individual. Unsuccessful, they just went out just about a kilometer, if that, away from the site. How we knew that? We

had assets airborne, a Predator like we've got in the hangar here. Was constant coverage from the starting of the clicking and they had some pretty good footage where these guys were that will come to play later in the story.

So, he's in the village, the tribal elder talks to him, gets this information. He hikes down about five to 10 miles down to this Marine encampment, lets us know. We wake up. We go to the meeting. Everything is good. It's just Skinny and myself being Aircraft Commanders but the Night Stalkers were going to take care of it. We were going to five to -- five to eight miles off providing CSAR coverage in case there was a problem with the package or whatever and so we were going through the plans and the time line. They called it H-hour. It was going to be about 11:30 local. They said, "We're going to go in and get this guy." While we were asleep, they hiked in a 20-man SOF team of Special Forces to one, validate but two, to secure the LZ for the pickup. They said, "Come back in an hour and we're going to have the specifics right before sunset, around 4:00. So we went back, told our crews the information that we've got and we went and came back, Skinny and I, at 1600 local, and there had been some changes. There had been another report of a cleanly shaven American that another tribal elder had in a village about 10 kilometers away. One, there wasn't too many cleanly shaven guys out there and two, they had a hard time discounting it because that Marine, 19-year-old, probably cleanly shaven, had just drowned a week and a half prior that they hadn't found yet and they just couldn't disprove it. The ball -- the ball was moving. Marcus needed to get out of that -- out of bad guy country so they said, "This is what's going to happen," and I remember it vividly. They said we're going to hike the 20-man SOF team, the 10 clicks, because what the plan was is to back the Chinook up, either two-wheel hover, load the 20-man SOF team and Marcus and leave. Now since the 20-man SOF team didn't need to be picked up, they're going to hiked out. All we need to do is throw them a few MREs and some water and they could be more utilized at the crash site infilling Army troops that they then by the time at about a week after the crash had over 1,000 Army troops on that mountain scouring, securing and getting the crash victims out and also why they were there initially, covertly. Now they were very overt in their intentions.

So they just looked over to us and said, "60s you got the pickup." Well, that made me a little nervous. We were thinking we were going to be just kind of back, helping out, support, but it was my lucky week because Skinny was flight lead. Up until then he had gone and got the old man. He had -- he had done everything I provided cover. He had gone down low looking for him. The great thing that helped make this whole rescue a success was, as Jeff mentioned, it was one of the largest put together combat rescue since Vietnam. There were Navy assets, other Army assets. We had the Predator, and the crème de la crème, was we had an AC-130 gunship and two A-10s, so I'll go anywhere with an AC-130 gunship and two A-10s. They tried to send us in -- I think last time was in Afghanistan, my Sandys, if you will, were F-15Es. They're not going to provide much help from 15,000 feet and they didn't even know how to spell rescue. I'm sorry I'm bagging on them, but we like the A-10 community. They'll get down. They will actually see, protect and take out threats, these pods and all that kind of stuff I'm not -- nobody's talked me into them quite yet but we had the AC-130 gunship and two A-10s at our disposal so as soon as they went away from the Night Stalkers, they looked at us and

said, "Okay, we need to know your ingress and egress routes because five -- H hour minus five minutes we're going to light that place up." One, they knew where these Taliban were bedded down. Two, it's a good diversionary tactic to get us in and get us out quickly and safely. So, I remember we walked out of CAOC or the TOC out on the wood planks there and Skinny's a weapons officer. The flight lead of the A-10s was a weapons officer so they all started talking all this weapons officer geek stuff and I remember the AC-130 saying "woah, woah, woah, woah, woah, say it in English," because they were very interested in how we were going to do it and Skinny just matter of factly said, and this is what we trained to and this is -- just floored me because it hit me like a 2 x 4 on the head. He goes, "We're going to do a trailer option, Spooky." What that meant to me was Skinny's going to fly over the survivor, mark him, go up into an orbit low. Number two, goes in for the pickup. So now I got nervous. Now I'm like, "Oh great." But I think Skinny knew it was so dark. It's so crazy. Joking aside, it was a great honor for one, Skinny to trust me to do it and two, quite frankly the biggest operation any of us have ever been in combat rescue up until that time quite frankly and to give it to number two was a -- was a pretty interesting thing.

Well, after I got my senses back, I went and told the air crew. We started getting ready told the Spectre crew and the A-10 crew exactly where we're going to come and go. We're going to go up the river valley and come up this finger and then kind of just come up to the thing and then back the same way. This isn't it but similar to that. They said "okay." I remember the mission commander on the Spooky said, "Let's go get this guy." This is when I don't think I was that nervous when we're out searching for him and the clicking and the initial call back at Kandahar, but now we knew he was there. We knew there were bad guys there and we knew just a few days earlier they had shot down a Chinook and killed 16 people and now we're going in. I'm going in with a crew of six to go get him and he wanted us to get this shepherd for whatever reason out also. So we took our trucks out the flight line. It was dark by this time and we had briefed. We talked about it and now your mind's just racing. "What if I forgot? What if I forgot? What if I forgot? Don't screw this up, Spanky. Don't screw this up, Spanky." Then quite frankly, and I don't want to get emotional, but you start thinking about your family, my four boys, my wife and you do some soul searching because you're in enemy territory going into a known hornet's nest but remember I've got the Spooky and the two A-10s so I wasn't thinking much about them at that time but I just remembered just pacing as the copilot, flight engineers, everybody jumped in the helicopter, got birds starting to run up and I had time to do that reflecting and to rehearse and run the mission over in my head.

We then started the birds and took off, followed Skinny for what was about an hour-and-20-minute flight to the objective, and there was a lot of just [hum] nobody talking and then and then we'd talk and then I tried to be the Aircraft Commander and remind everybody of their duties. I remember Ben, the gunner, the college student, "What can I shoot? What can I shoot?" [laughter] I'm like, "Ugh. We're not shooting nothing. There's a 20-man SOF team on there. Unless you're taking fairly direct enemy fire, you're not going to be shooting." "Okay, okay, okay." He usually never talks. It was funny. Dave, my copilot, the border patrol pilot, I was excited to have that wealth of -- but this was his first deployment so he was a little nervous. Mike Cusick, my Vietnam vet, he had

seen a lot worse, I think, so he was just ready to go get this guy and the PJs, they stacked in my favor, the two PJs in the picture on my crew weren't with me that day. They got the two most experienced PJs and put them on my bird, put the other guys on the other bird, because they wanted the most experienced on the ground once we hit. We went and I let Dave fly for the first 40 to 50 minutes and I just rehearsed in my head again what I needed to do from what little information we gleaned from the satellite imagery, and what that radioed back in, that we were going to come in to this terraced village and pick up the survivor. It sounds easy. We -- there's a picture right here. This is actually Asadabad. About five miles over -- or less than that. Two miles over here is Pakistan, and this is the Pech River, and it curves up in this valley right here. This is the small town of Asadabad and I remember flying up this valley.

The plan was -- I couldn't see. I had trouble even seeing Skinny it was so dark. The weather still was bad but oh, I forgot to say. I got with the Spectre guys and without going into great detail, I said, "Can't you spotlight and stuff?" They've got these big infrared lanterns and different things and he's like, "Well, it depends on what I'm doing at the time but yeah." I was like, "Is there any way you can just light the place up?" So we had -- we had an agreement that 30 seconds prior to me landing he was going to light the -- put a football field of light down on the objective so that made me very happy. That lulled me into a sense of security which came to bite me later. [laughter] But we were going up and I was concerned and I kept running. We've got a pretty good nav system. Kept running the numbers, having the FE check the numbers. Power management, power management, power management is what I was mostly concerned about. We're going high up in the mountains. I'm heavy. I wanted the bare minimum amount of fuel because that's basically all I can expend to get my fuel to get me into what I call or what we call out of ground effect cover. I wanted OGE power was my thing so we dumped gas. My plan was to go -- if I had gas I need to dump -- was to go over this river and dump but it was so dark. There were lots of houses down over here, and they sleep on the rooftops in Afghanistan during the summer, because they're just mud huts and I can imagine at 200 feet I doused some people on top of rooftops, but that was the least of my worries. I think I even said "This is for Penny and the boys" when I did it but -- because I was fearful just by going over to the river that I was going to lose Skinny that we were hugging the hills on the side. So I dumped the fuel down to what I felt was the bare minimum allowing me to get in, get out with a little bit of a buffer.

We turned up this valley. Once we turned up this valley, you can't turn around until towards the end up by that Marine encampment which is about wow, four miles up there. We're almost to the IP which is the initial point and once your IP inbound, you're committed. We're calling that over SATCOM, over the freqs, and we've already checked in with Sandys. They've been checking in with the gunships. It seems like as it gets closer everything crescendos. Everybody's voice gets louder and then it eventually turns into a scream and it seemed like -- but we heard right prior to the IP which was about two miles up the canyon, Sandy 1 screamed something about his nav system, and he said "Rolex Five," so we had to Rolex everything five minutes so now I was like, "Crap."

We flew up the canyon. Skinny started to turn but I couldn't see the walls on the canyon because now my goggles were so scintillating and come to find out my FLIR was just broke. I just assumed it was the bad weather the night prior didn't mention anything about it because after we landed Skinny was like, "Phew, glad I had that FLIR. I would have crashed." I'm like, "What do you mean FLIR? I thought FLIR was bad." He was like, "Oh no, my FLIR was good. My goggles were bad." So I didn't have either which if we would have known that, we probably would have swapped roles. It was a good afterthought but I was going to have the big lantern from on high. We turned and all I could do was try to keep his slime lights, we call them, on the back of the stablelater and his top and I just kind of just did a Whiffer deal because I knew if kind of just went up and then down, I wouldn't hit the walls but -- and I've got a RAT out so I can see how low I am and then just kind of fell back on his wing, at which time our five minutes had passed and we are called IP inbound.

That's when -- that's when it all started hitting the fan. If any of you see footage of an AC-130 gunship in action, there was a lot of shwacking going on and stuff everywhere. The A-10s were diving, and I all now I could just see was it looked like lightning, focusing on my instruments, focusing on outside and all this was going on in front of us and we're climbing up into this thing while they're doing 270 - 300 degrees of schwacking, if you will.

Thirty seconds prior -- or we round this bend and the objective was supposed to be marked by an IR strobe light, an infrared strobe light, which is all fine because we can see it with goggles and even on a dark night, it would show up wonderfully. Well, once the guys started lighting the place up, every ground member, they keep them on their helmets, turned on their IR strobe lights to say "Don't shoot me." So now I had a dozen strobe lights all over their parameter and it was just a black abyss with strobe lights so there was -- now we're getting a little nervous, but still the AC-130 was going to -- was going to mark the objective. Then I saw what I thought was lightning from on high because the clouds, just big flashes looking like lighting and it was the gunship trying to burn through the clouds and it wasn't working. They frantically screamed, I remember, "negative burn." Our call sign was "halos" and they just said halos. Negative burn, negative burn.

So now I'm trying to find out which strobe light it is. Skinny's trying to find out which strobe light it is. I don't have the light from on high which now the A-10s hear this and Sandy 1 asks Sandy 2 if he could mark the objective. His gun footage [states] "roger in hot." He had just done a pass. He does a pretty miraculous maneuver in the valley -- in the canyons, cycles through to the Objective Barracuda and lights it up with his targeting pod as if he was going to take it out but just marked it. There were clouds. He marked it. An opening came. Just as Skinny thought he saw it, I mentioned in an article, it looked like a flashlight from God because a lot's going through your head right now and just this beam just right on the objective and then five seconds later it went away. Well, there's another cloud crossed. I didn't know that until I watched this gun footage. So now my situational awareness was high. I knew where the objective was and we were going in.

We were coming up. There were mud huts. One of the mud huts had an antenna on it and we saw the tree from the satellite imagery and we were going to kick our pedals and land horizontal. Say, this is the terrace here so I'm coming in and I was going to kick my pedals and then land horizontal on this terrace with mud huts down here and a shear wall here where they terraced up for their crop, if you will. The biggest fear in helicopters in landing is browning out and that's exactly what happened. I didn't have light. It probably would have made it worse that I came in and my rotor wash started kicking up this newly cultivated field which was just probably 30 feet wider than my rotor path on each side, so I didn't have a lot of wiggle room, and I knew so when coming in and I'm turning and landing, pulling in power trying to stop down. Now I go blind. I can't see out front. I can't see anything. I've got hover cues down in the middle of the thing but you just started getting all woggly boggly staring at it. The gunner and the FE can see straight down and they're talking me where to go more like screaming. "Stop left. Stop left. Stop left." So now I'm drifting into the sheer cliff which, if my rotor blades hit, would crash so like a good pilot, I came very hard right once again just inducing huge oscillations which you can't have down low on the ground. One of the greatest things Dave did is just he just put his hand up right here because he knew I was going to do it because he's got more hours than me. I came hard right and hit his hand so I couldn't go real hard right because there still was a mud hut over there and then the 2,000-foot drop.

Right about when -- now we have things in slow motion, all that that you hear about, "Oh, everything went slow motion." Well, it was very slow motion thinking, "Okay I've screwed up." You start thinking about your family. You start thinking about, how could I let this happen? You start thinking about your crew and you start thinking about this poor Navy SEAL that was looking to get rescued and the rescue vehicle crashes. When and it was probably closer than the end of this auditorium I could see something fluttering and it was the top of that ridge line, or the terrace, that curved in front of me because my terrace came to a point and then ended in another terrace. It was longer and it looked like what I remember as a hanging pot, like a plant, like on the back of the patio that just hangs over the pot and it was hanging over the edge and just flapping. Well now, and I could barely see it, but now I had a reference left, right, up, down so that's all I needed was reference, so like my prior squadron commander down here in the audience said (He taught me everything.), my skills, if you will, kicked in because now I could bring the helicopter into a safe cover and then brought it down fairly aggressively as the FE talked me down.

Told the PJs to get out, at which time -- there was still a lot of screaming going on -- at which time the gunner was throwing out water and supplies out the left door and -- there was nothing to man. He's got a cliff right here. The FE was manning his gun. The PJs jump out where two guys dressed in man dresses started rushing to helicopter which made the PJs a little nervous. You don't do that. We trained and Airmen are trained to get down on their knees, put their hands behind their head and assume the position, if you will, be authenticated and brought in in the most expeditious manner. Well, they were both rushing to helicopter, at which time you saw an American-military-dressed individual come running up so they wait, asked where the PC, precious cargo was, and

they pointed at one of the guys in the man dress and that was Marcus Luttrell dressed up with -- I believe his name was Gulab, the shepherd.

I quickly authenticated him, grabbed him, threw him in the back of the helicopter. While waiting -- it probably took about 30 seconds while waiting. I look out my door and one thing you don't like in helicopters is to get any kind of rolling moment. If you want to land straight, if the wheel fell off here, I could easily tilt. I looked and I couldn't even see the terrace because it was so close so I was yelling at the FE, probably calling him some pretty bad words, why he allowed me to do that and not move me a little close. He just said -- and he's the Vietnam vet. He's like, "Sir, you didn't need to know that at that time." [laughter] He knew we weren't going to go off the cliff but it sure bothered me that we were that close.

We grabbed the two individuals and made our "popcorn" call, if you will, that we've got the survivors took off and then just dove off the stage here down the 2,000-foot embankment into the black abyss and joined up with Skinny. The A-10s followed us out while the Spectre continued to keep people's heads down and we went and dropped off the shepherd at Asadabad. I don't know why they -- probably -- they didn't want him back in the village right after the rescue, but talking to the PJs, that him and Luttrell did not want to leave each other. Marcus Luttrell owes his life to that man and they were embracing pretty hard and it was pretty hard to get the two apart. We took him back to Jalalabad and did a transload, which is an awaiting C-130 tail down. I landed at the tail of the awaiting -130 that had doctors and nurses on board. They can get back to hospital a lot quicker than we can. This time he wasn't running. I think he was pretty much amped up on adrenalin. PJs helped him off the helicopter and he collapsed on a cot. They then started taxiing as the ramp was going up and they're out of there real quick like. We then were able to get a second Talon. You remember before I couldn't even get a Talon to get gas. Well, now everybody's there because we're the show that night. Gave us gas so we could then, as you know, wait until sunrise just in case they need us for something else because they were still infilling Army Rangers up on the mountain top and came back to parking shut down and that's when the PJs, mostly the PJs, all start screaming and that's when it all starts to hit you.

They're back outside banging on the door. "Spanky, you're the man. You're the man, Spanky." They're all keyed up, and then I just started shaking, and just realizing how close we were -- because they had no idea. They're just in the back for a good ride -- how close we were to crashing and I've told numerous people I would even have landed there during the day in Tucson let alone in Afghanistan at that altitude and that -- it was just crazy, but the great thing about it was Marcus Luttrell was taken back to Bagram and recovered. He's out of the military at this time partly because of his wounds but he's going to live and be a success in whatever he does.

The interesting thing is that it starts hitting CNN and stuff quick as that Special Ops rescued in Afghanistan or Special Ops men were rescued, U.S. rescues Navy SEAL. Remember the first story I was calling my wife on a fairly regular basis like every day because there wasn't much going on, just getting ready to come home but when I stopped

calling, she was very upset. Now she's watching the news, helicopter crash. Jeff stops calling and I'm in bad guy country out in the middle of Jalalabad I'm not by a phone so I told Mike, my good friend, "to call Penny tell her I'm all right but I'm unable to call." He does better, has his wife call and relays some screwy message. "Jeff's somewhere where he can't call I think he's all right [laughter] So then when I came back I was able to call and the first thing out of her mouth was "Are you involved with this Navy SEAL thing?" Of course I couldn't talk about it and I'm like, "Penny, even I -- you know I can't talk about whatever I'm doing." "Okay, okay, okay, okay. Sorry. I'm sorry. Sorry. You're going to be home by the fourth?" "Probably not." "Okay. "When are you going to come home?" "I don't know." That kind of stuff. Well, then we go out because that was the morning of the rescue so all I wanted to do at that time and my friends have bagged on me for saying it but I'm sitting there shaking. I'm in the middle of bad guy country at Jalalabad just realizing how close to death we really came and all I wanted to do was hear Penny's voice and I remember telling that to Skinny in the talk when we were going over in our head what we could have done better and how we could do it and like, "Holy cow, dude. That was crazy.

One of the Marines was like, "We've got STEW in the back of the tent behind this flap and I'm like, "So I had a phone up there I didn't know about. I went in there and I remember calling my house. It was busy and I knew my mother-in-law was there and I'm like -- I got call waiting so how could it be busy? [laughter] And she was trying to do something on the phone so I called the operator back and asked to talk to my wife on her cell phone so I gave her my cell phone -- her cell phone number. We have just moved into our new house. We just got into Tucson and got finished being built. She was at the fabric store buying curtain material because she just had to get out of the house. She was nervous I hadn't talked and she'd had a very bad night the night prior and she initially asked, "Are you with Mike?" That was kind of like her code talk if I was in good guy country or bad guy country and I said, "No, but I was able to find a phone." She was like, "Okay, how are you doing?" She could tell I was shaken up. She was like, "Is everything all right? Are you doing anything with this -- ." No, no, she didn't talk about SEAL this time because she knew better but she said, "Did you just do what you've been training for 14 years to do?" [laughter] Then I started crying and I said, "Penny, not now," because there were guys right outside the flap of the tent and "Okay. Okay. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

But it was just amazing to look back and reflect on -- this was an article. They this did this last summer in the Washington Post. We made the front page. That's pretty cool. But this is the crew of Chalk 1 and Chalk 2, myself, Dave Gonzalez, Skinny and JP Phalen with his two PJs in the back, Jason Burger, my flight engineer, Mike Cusick, my gunner, Ben Peterson. This is Josh Appel here. He's a doctor, in residency right now and this is Piercecchi. That's the EMT guy. Those are the two guys that jumped out and did the rescue. This was a great picture I got from these guys from SEAL Team 10. These are the five members of the SEAL team that passed away on that uneventful day or that eventful day, I should say, that just makes us realize we take a lot of crap from a lot of people about what we're doing over there and whether it be right, whether it be wrong. These individuals are -- there's a lot more than just these guys but they paid the ultimate

sacrifice and that we luckily was able to go in and rescue one of them but it wasn't just myself. It wasn't just me and Skinny. It was a huge package that made it happen, an armada, if you will, to bring in, to go in and pick up one individual and we'll go at those lengths to do that for Americans. And that's a great thing to know because there are a lot of countries that wouldn't go to that length in order to rescue individuals.

But, that's pretty much the story. I don't know what other slides I got about the Operation Red Wings and the small role my crew and I had in that.

END