Interviewer:
Good afternoon. Today is 26 October 2015, and I am here in the Center for Oral History with Colonel Mark Mitchell. Welcome, sir.
COL Mark Mitchell:
Thank you very much; glad to be here.
Interviewer:
Thank you, sir. Sir, for our records, could you please spell your last name?
COL Mark Mitchell:
Mitchell, M-I-T-C-H-E-L-L.
Interviewer:
Thank you, sir. Tell me, where were you born, and when?
COL Mark Mitchell:
Born in 1965 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
Interviewer:
Okay. And what was your childhood like?
COL Mark Mitchell:
I grew up as the second of four children. Middle-class family in Milwaukee. My father was a lawyer, the first person in his family of seven children to actually go to college and earn a degree, went on to law school. My mom finished high school, became an X-ray Technician, and then got into real estate as a salesperson. So I grew up, went to parochial schools in Milwaukee. I graduated from an all-boys Catholic high school and then went on to Marquette University.
Interviewer:
Okay. Whatâ€™d you major in at the university?
COL Mark Mitchell:
Biomedical engineering.
Interviewer:
Wow. And did you do any sports in college?
COL Mark Mitchell:
Not in college. In high school, I wrestled, was a cheerleader, and ran cross country. In college, was focused on my R.O.T.C. duties, and spent a lot of time doing intramural sports through R.O.T.C.
Interviewer:
So how did you get interested in R.O.T.C.?
COL Mark Mitchell:
Itâ€™s hard to say. You know, at some point in my high school career, I decided I really wanted to go into the Army and join and be an Officer in the Army. And I had not, I hadnâ€™t considered the Academy, but my father had been in R.O.T.C. for a couple years and had been medically disqualified from actually serving, but I thought that was something I really wanted to do.
Interviewer:
Okay. So you did R.O.T.C. for all four years?
COL Mark Mitchell:
Yep. I was in a four-year scholarship -
Interviewer:
Okay.
COL Mark Mitchell:
And was commissioned in 1987. Spent about three months waiting to go on active duty. It was the peak of the Reagan build-up, and there just wasnâ€™t, you know - even though I had a Regular Army commission coming out of R.O.T.C., we had to wait for slots in the Basic Course.
Interviewer:
Okay.

COL Mark Mitchell:
And was Branched into the Infantry. Completed Infantry Officer Basic, Ranger School, and Bradley Commanders Course before being assigned to the 24th Infantry Division.
Interviewer:
Okay. And was all this in the summer of â€˜87?
COL Mark Mitchell:
From summer of â€˜87 till the - probably May-June of 1988.
Interviewer:
Okay. And you went to the 24th.
COL Mark Mitchell:
Victory.
Interviewer:
Were they down at Fort Stewart at the time?
COL Mark Mitchell:
We were at Fort Stewart. I was assigned to the 27 Infantry, the Cotton Balers -
Interviewer:
Okay.
COL Mark Mitchell:
In the 1st Brigade of the 24th Infantry Division. I want to say First Brigade Combat Team, but there was no such thing in 1988.
Interviewer:
Sure. Okay, and from there, what did you do as a young Officer?
COL Mark Mitchell:
So I was initially assigned as a Bradley Infantry Platoon Leader, and then I spent time, a brief - or then I went into being a Motor Platoon Leader, 4 deuce mortars in a Mechanized Infantry Battalion. We were Bradleys and 113s. And then I became a Battalion Liaison Officer to Brigade for a short period of time, and shortly after deploying to Saudi Arabia in August of 1990, I became a Headquarters Company XO. Had a little bit of a bloodletting in our Brigade Headquarters. The Brigade Commander after about 30 days on the ground relieved the Company Commander, the XO, and the First Sergeant, and brought in a whole new team, so I was part of that team that was to kind of rebuild the Company Headquarters before we ended up going north into Iraq.
Interviewer:
Okay. And do you know what caused the shift in leadership?
COL Mark Mitchell:
Truthfully, in the Garrison Army of the late 1980s, the Brigade Headquarters was a bit of a dumping ground. The Company Commander had been effectively relieved and dismissed out of my Infantry Battalion. The First Sergeant had been dismissed from a job in the Armor Battalion in the Brigade. And the Company XO was a great young Officer, a Signal Officer, who had not even been afforded to have the opportunity to serve as a Platoon Leader, and was thrown across into the XO position.
Interviewer:
Wow.
COL Mark Mitchell:
And the combination just - particularly being in the desert in a deployed environment - overwhelmed them, and they just - they could not deal with the multitude of challenges that we faced.
Interviewer:
Okay. And so being thrust into a new job, I imagine quite a bit of learning had to take place as you were picking up new responsibilities.
COL Mark Mitchell:
It was a real challenge. I mean I thought I had a pretty good understanding. Iâ€™d spent almost three years as a Platoon Leader, so I was fairly senior and experienced Platoon

Leader, and I had been in a Headquarters Company in the Infantry Battalion, so I had a little bit of an idea what the Brigade Headquarters did. But it was a steep learning curve, and understanding how they were organized. The biggest challenge, though, was developing relationships with the soldiers and the NCO leadership in that Company, which frankly was damaged by the prior leadership. And morale was low, and discipline was low. I remember one of the first incidents was a young soldier who decided he was going to go on strike because he had not been receiving any pay. He had had no pay due for like two months, and now he found himself out in the desert.
Said, â€œIf the Armyâ€™s not going to pay me, Iâ€™m not doing any work.â€ And after a brief discussion with myself and the new First Sergeant, he decided it was better to go back to work than to face a potential Article 15 or Court Martial for mutiny. But it was just there was a lot of challenges with these soldiers. And they I think with the new team - not just myself, but the new Company Commander, a new First Sergeant, eventually responded very positively to the new leadership. And I tell people in the end, we had nowhere to go but up. The Company was broken, and we had to fix it, and it turned out to be a really fun experience for me. Very personally rewarding to see the Company get turned around, and to look back on that and our experience in the Gulf War.
So the 24th Infantry Division did the left hook from Saudi Arabia into Iraq, up to the Euphrates River valley, and then east towards Basra. And we did it very successfully, and it was a very complex operation, particularly for an XO whoâ€™s concerned about maintenance.
Interviewer:
right.
COL Mark Mitchell:
All of our vehicles made it back out of Iraq when we left.
Interviewer:
Good.
COL Mark Mitchell:
And that was, you know, that was something I thought to be real proud of my Mechanics, my Cooks, and everybody else in the Headquarters.
Interviewer:
Sure. So a Headquarters Company is a very difficult animal, because so many different parts. Do you remember any of the techniques you used to try to forge, to rebuild the Company?
COL Mark Mitchell:
Well, you know, itâ€™s funny. The one thing that always sticks out in my mind talking about being a diverse Headquarters is that we had a Air Force Detachment assigned to us, you know a TACP, Tactical Air Control Party. And again, this was the first - and weâ€™d done - as a Lieutenant I had done like four NTC rotations, but this was our first combat deployment, and I think for a lot of us this was our first combat deployment. And I found the Air Force guys one morning, and we were doing, you know, typical Army stuff. Lean to, stand to, pulling security at sunrise and sunset, and the Air Force guys were still in their racks. And they said, â€œBy the Army-Air Force agreement, weâ€™re not required to pull security or do any of that stuff.â€ And I said, â€œOkay. you got till noon today to move your stuff out of our perimeter, because if youâ€™re not pulling security, you know, youâ€™re not going to, you canâ€™t live in our perimeter.â€
About 45 minutes later, the Brigade XO came over and was like, â€œMitch, what are you doing?â€ Iâ€™m like, â€œTheyâ€™re not going to pull security, they canâ€™t be here.â€ And heâ€™s like, â€œWe canâ€™t do that.â€ So we ended up I was overruled, and they were allowed to stay in the perimeter; but they did agree to start pulling security.
Interviewer:
Okay.
COL Mark Mitchell:
And I think the biggest thing for me in this situation was I spent a lot of time actually with -

as the XO with the soldiers in each section. I did live with the Mechanics down in Motor Pool, â€˜cause that was the area that really needed the most work, but I also spent a lot of time with our Cooks, and our Admin folks, and just day to day leadership, coaching, teaching, mentoring, to kind of get - myself and the First Sergeant, really - to get us back where we needed to be.
Interviewer:
Right. So a lot of personal leadership down at the soldier level.
COL Mark Mitchell:
Yeah. And you know, as a Lieutenant, I mean you got to be out there with the guys and the gals, and make it happen. And at that time, too, it was still segregated. It was unique we had our Brigade S2 was a female Officer, which was unheard of at that time in a Infantry Brigade. But you know, being down there with the soldiers, and helping them, sharing in their burdens, and listening to what their concerns were. Particularly getting ready to go north and into combat I think was a big - you know, help the company gel and do what we needed to do.
Interviewer:
Okay. So the threat of - not the threat, but the prospects of going to war really helped everybody focus.
COL Mark Mitchell:
Oh, absolutely. Some in good ways, and some in not so good ways. But I think in the end, it proved to be a - it was a challenge, no doubt, but again, a rewarding experience for everybody that participated.
Interviewer:
Okay. And once the ground war started, did everybody function the way you expected them to?
COL Mark Mitchell:
Yeah, everybody did. It was - again, in the old days - this was prior GPS. For me personally, there was a lot of challenges on the battlefield navigating. You know, the Brigade Headquarters was moving, but we had our field trains having to go back and pick - we did have vehicles break down, and having to move around the battlefield was a real challenge. And everybody performed well, but there was days, you know, when I felt - really hours, â€˜cause it moved so quickly - that I felt I was herding cats all over the battlefield. Having to go back and pick folks up. And even once the ground war, after the cease fire, Joe McCaffrey had declared that we would leave no equipment behind in Iraq. And in my case, we had a five ton truck that had broken down that we couldnâ€™t repair expeditiously. And we had left it without a grid coordinate, only a general time frame.
Interviewer:
Right.
COL Mark Mitchell:
And so I had to go back during the cease fire period, before we had received the orders to move out, and recover that truck.
Interviewer:
Wow.
COL Mark Mitchell:
And that was a real adventure, again in the days before GPS. We only had a general idea where it was, so here I am with a group of my Mechanics. Iâ€™m in a Humvee, no doors, no roof. General McCaffrey had, 24th Infantry Division had forbade - actually, we did have a roof. But we were forbidden to use doors on the Humvees, the plastic doors, so - and a HEMTT Wrecker. And so I think there was six of us, total, had to go out and find this vehicle and bring it back. And you know, talk about an experience of a lifetime and using your ingenuity. We found the truck about midday after driving for hours and searching this area. I mean I was amazed that we found it. Managed to hook it up to the HEMTT Wrecker, and began our drive back.

It was pouring rain. This is, you know, March of 1991 in the Iraqi desert, so itâ€™s a lot of rain. Itâ€™s cold; itâ€™s 35, 36 degrees. And as we were crossing a wadi, both the five ton truck that we were recovering and the HEMTT were stuck in the mud. The HEMTT up to the wheels, and again, no GPS, no SATCOM. Iâ€™m out of radio distance, and so I have the choice. Iâ€™m sitting there wet and cold with my guys, trying to figure out, you know, do I try and go back into the Euphrates River valley, where the Brigade Headquarters is, and find them and come back out? This is the only HEMTT Wrecker that we have, so we have to borrow one from another unit. Or how do we get out of this? And I didnâ€™t want to abandon the truth.
So sat there looking, and I realized on the back of the HEMTT Wrecker we had the outriggers. I told the guys, â€œStart finding rocks.â€ And we took the rocks and we piled them up, and we began compressing the rocks with the hydraulic outriggers, so the point where we had built pilings. We disconnected the five ton truck. We were able to lift the back wheels of the HEMTT out of the mud, backfill the holes from that with more rocks, and drove the HEMTT Wrecker off the wadi, onto dryer ground. Now the problem was the winch that was on the back wouldnâ€™t reach all the way to the five ton truck. But we were able, the five ton truck had its own winch that was inoperative, so we had to manually unroll it. We managed to connect the two cables, and we winched the five ton truck out.
And got it all the way back onto dry land, got it connected, and it was probably about 23:30 that night when we rolled back into the Headquarters, wet, cold, tired, hungry, shivering. And I walked into the Brigade Headquarters, and the first thing that my Company Commander said to me, he said, â€œMitch, you look like shit.â€ I went like, â€œI feel like it.â€ But we had successfully accomplished the mission, and had gotten out of there against the odds. And for me and my Mechanics it was really a memory that stuck with me ever since.
Interviewer:
Wow. And so thatâ€™s probably a good preview for the rest of your career, right?
COL Mark Mitchell:
Yeah, as a - I got bit by the Special Forces bug.
Interviewer:
Okay.
COL Mark Mitchell:
You know, as I mentioned earlier, my undergraduate degree was in Biomechanical Engineering. I had planned to go to Medical School, and was in fact had started the application process to the Uniform Services Health Service Academy, and was supposed to take my MCATs in September of 1990. Of course, that got upended by the war. Got back, I had gotten engaged just before we left, in June of 1990. We did a NTC rotation, came back from that, and went immediately deployed to Saudi Arabia. Came back, got married in July of 1991, and went to the Infantry Advanced Course. And while I was there, my small group - there were a bunch of Officers, I think there were 7 of us, that were either prior service SF or ended up going SF out of like 10 guys in the group. And I said, â€œIâ€™m going to do this; Iâ€™m going to go SF.â€ And my wife supported it. Ran into a little bit of opposition from the Infantry Branch guys there are Fort Benning.
One guy told me, â€œYouâ€™ll be back.â€ I said, â€œI donâ€™t think so.â€ And so I did, and that same ingenuity and unwillingness to quit served me very well throughout my Special Forces career.
Interviewer:
And as a Special Forces Officer, primarily with Fifth Group, correct?
COL Mark Mitchell:
Yep.
Interviewer:
You deployed to both Iraq and Afghanistan?
COL Mark Mitchell:
Thatâ€™s correct.

Interviewer:
And Afghanistan, you were probably among the very first Americans into that country.
COL Mark Mitchell:
So I was privileged to be amongst the very first when I went in. We infiltrated on the night of November 1, 2001, so.
Interviewer:
So barely a month and a half after September 11th?
COL Mark Mitchell:
Yeah, by just six, seven weeks after September 11th, we were infiltrating Afghanistan. Weâ€™d actually planned to go a couple days earlier, but weâ€™d been weathered out. The challenges of getting over the mountains with helicopters laden with equipment and personnel -
Interviewer:
Okay, so -
COL Mark Mitchell:
Was real challenging.
Interviewer:
After September 11th, how soon was it until you deployed to a Forward Staging Area?
COL Mark Mitchell:
I left Fort Campbell on the night of the 26th of October.
Interviewer:
Okay, so about a month, about five weeks or so.
COL Mark Mitchell:
Our advance party from Fifth Group had left probably about the 12th of October; had flown to Moron, Spain, or Moron - I never could - I think the Spanish actually say Moron.
Interviewer:
Okay.
COL Mark Mitchell:
And had landed, waiting for an agreement between the United States and the government of Uzbekistan that would allow us basing rights. Not only basing rights, but allow us to launch offensive operations into Afghanistan. And that was the long pole in the tent, if you will, in terms of getting us deployed to begin operations. But it all moved very, very quickly.
Interviewer:
Okay. And so you were among the first into Afghanistan.
COL Mark Mitchell:
Right. So I went in, again, on the 1st of November. The team that I was with was not a Operational Detachment, Alpha ODA, but it was a composite team, with a Battalion Commander. At this point, I was now the Battalion S3, and a slice of a Company Headquarters, which had been my Company the prior year, and two Air Force NCOs. And so we were the fourth team to set foot on the ground from Army Special Forces.
Interviewer:
Okay.
COL Mark Mitchell:
There were some C.I.A. teams on the ground, one that we linked up with. But I think itâ€™s fair to say there was probably less than 50 Americans across all Afghanistan when I set foot on the ground.
Interviewer:
And what was your mission?
COL Mark Mitchell:
Our mission was to link up with the Northern Alliance, specifically with General Abdul Rashid Dostum, who led the Uzbek faction of the Northern Alliance. So it was a Tajik and a Hazara faction, and the Uzbeks, and he was the leaders of the Uzbeks. Had been an Afghan General during the Soviet Occupation, and was commonly referred to as a warlord.

And our mission was to link up with him, provide advice and assistance, and to liberate Afghanistan from the Taliban and hunt down al-Qaeda.
Interviewer:
Okay. How difficult was it working with all these different factions?
COL Mark Mitchell:
So what ended up is we had a ODA with each of the factions, and then we had my team, which was over the top of those three ODAs.
Interviewer:
Okay.
COL Mark Mitchell:
I think at that time, cooperation was much easier than we had anticipated, just due to the fact that everybody was united against the Taliban. And all three factions in the Northern Alliance saw for the first time in a long time for them an opportunity to win and defeat the Taliban, and take back at least if nothing else, their portion of Afghanistan, Northern and Central Afghanistan, from the Taliban. So they were all very willing to cooperate.
Interviewer:
Okay. So that mustâ€™ve been a good situation, because your section was overseeing three other teams trying to create a unified team.
COL Mark Mitchell:
It was - you know, it was good and bad. One of the things that we did - and I donâ€™t think we have time to delve into all the reasons for this - but each of those teams was from a different Special Forces Battalion within Fifth Group.
Interviewer:
Wow.
COL Mark Mitchell:
And we had one from my Third Battalion, and one from First, and one from Second Battalion; and then the Battalion Headquarters from Third Battalion. So it was a challenge. We didnâ€™t know any of these other teams. We had not worked with them previously. And frankly, there was a little bit of - there was confusion about the true, the C2 structure. The amount of control that we had over those teams and our ability to give them directions, because they frankly were still in touch with their own Battalion Commanders. And it made for a very interesting situation. At one point, I actually had a Team Leader who said, â€œYou canâ€™t tell me what to do. I donâ€™t work for you.â€ And I said, â€œWell, then youâ€™re going to go talk to Colonel Powers and see what he has to say about that.â€ And we eventually prevailed, but it wasnâ€™t without some acrimony and dissent.
Interviewer:
Sure.
COL Mark Mitchell:
So we -
Interviewer:
Well, it was interesting, â€˜cause youâ€™re all going for the same goal.
COL Mark Mitchell:
But again, you have no history of working.
Interviewer:
Right.
COL Mark Mitchell:
You donâ€™t have - I mean these Detachment Commanders, none of us had - I donâ€™t think weâ€™d ever even met them.
Interviewer:
Wow.
COL Mark Mitchell:
My Sergeant Major knew - heâ€™d come from First Battalion, so he knew some of the guys in the First Battalion Team. But by and large, I mean for me, for my Battalion Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Max Bowers, we didnâ€™t know, we didnâ€™t have a

personal relationship with these team leaders. And itâ€™s challenging to develop that under combat circumstances, and again, we all recognized weâ€™re working towards a greater good, and a larger mission that weâ€™re responsible for. But that in and of itself is insufficient to overcome some of the personality challenges.
Interviewer:
Right.
COL Mark Mitchell:
And just practical stuff about, you know, communication, expectations, and managing. You know we all learn how our leadership operates, and when our boss says one thing, you know, the more time youâ€™ve spent with your boss, you know what he or she means when they make particular statements. And you learn their personalities, and their expectations, and we didnâ€™t have any of those opportunities. We had to do that, you know, on the ground, conducting combat operations.
Interviewer:
Right. What was the biggest challenge you had to overcome during those early days?
COL Mark Mitchell:
You know, really the hardest part I think was to synchronize the three disparate elements. I mean and it wasnâ€™t just us - the Uzbeks, the Hazaras, the Tajiks, while they had worked together, they were still independent entities answering to their, you know, the leadership of their ethnic groups. And when youâ€™re trying to conduct a combined coordinated offensive, and to get everybody to launch at about the same time, to control their advance towards your objective - which for us was the liberation of Mazar-i-Sharif - synchronizing those movements can be a bit of a challenge. And you know, Special Forces communitiesâ€¦you know, I studied Arabic, and could get by on Arabic. None of us had studied Dari, or Pashto, prior to going in there.
And so the language barrier was also a significant challenge for us, and trying to communicate with our indigenous counterparts, and resolve our challenges amongst ourselves, and achieve this coordinated effort was a real challenge.
Interviewer:
Wow. During this time, you received the Distinguished Service Cross -
COL Mark Mitchell:
Yes.
Interviewer:
Correct?
COL Mark Mitchell:
Thatâ€™s correct.
Interviewer:
Could you describe the action surrounding that, please?
COL Mark Mitchell:
So late November 2001, Mazar-i-Sharif had been liberated, and we were now turning our attention towards the last Taliban stronghold in Northern Afghanistan, the city of Kunduz, which is again in the media here in 2015. And most of the forces that had been in Mazar-i-Sharif had turned to go east to Kunduz, for what they anticipated would be a climactic battle. That morning, I think it was the 25th, 26th of November, they had a meeting engagement just on the edge of Mazar-i-Sharif with a convoy of vehicles. About 600 Taliban and a lot of foreign fighters - Chechens, Uzbeks, Arabs, and as we eventually found out, an American, Johnny Walker Lindh.
And after about a six-hour stand-off - after about a six-hour stand-off - they were trying to surrender, but were also at the same time they were â€œsurrenderingâ€ were demanding to be taken to a specific location, the airfield at Mazar-i-Sharif. And six hours of negotiations - which included a suicide bomber detonating himself, killing one of General Dostumâ€™s senior Intel guys - they agreed to take them to the fortress at Qala-i-Jangi, which is a 17th century mud straw fortress built by the Brits during their occupation, complete with

parapets, a moat -
Interviewer:
Wow.
COL Mark Mitchell:
And on the parapets on the top, thereâ€™s firing positions. And if you look through, you can see they look like slots, you know, just slits along the top of the wall. But if you stand behind them, you realize that if you laid a musket in the top one, it will fire at the far end of the moat. If you lay it in the lower slot, it will fire at the near side of the moat. So thatâ€™s, you know, thatâ€™s the era in which this fortress was built. Had been used by both General Dostum, prior to 1998 and the Taliban seizing control of Mazar-i-Sharif, and then subsequent to â€˜98, by the Taliban as their military headquarters for the north. It was stocked with arms and ammunition. Every room that was not used for sleeping or living quarters had rockets, mortars, grenades, land mines, anti-personnel mines, machine guns, rifles.
I mean you name it, and ammunition for all those systems. So after the stand-off, they agreed to take them to the fortress, and again, in context, we had not had time, and Afghans donâ€™t have a long history of taking prisoners and treating them, so we didnâ€™t have a whole lot of time to work with them. And they took these approximately 600 prisoners into the fortress. The next day, they staged an uprising using some weapons that they had smuggled in. They had not been properly searched, and remember, the majority of forces were now in Kunduz. It was the Rear Detachment that was left behind to secure these 600, and there was less than 100 Afghans in the fortress, you know, Northern Alliance soldiers, and most of them were unfit for combat duty, which is why they had not accompanied the force forward.
So the 600 prisoners were able to seize control of the fortress and its weapons stockpiles, and so I was thrust into the situation of there was a small - our C.I.A. counterparts were there, were trapped in the fortress. Had reported that one of them had been killed, which was unaccounted for initially, and then we subsequently determined that Mike Spann, first U.S. casualty in the War on Terrorism overseas, had been killed in the opening moments of the battle. And I was left with a small team to put down the uprising, you know, help recover the rest of the C.I.A. team, get them out of harmâ€™s way, and to seize control and restore order there in the fortress. Ended up being approximately better part of four days.
Interviewer:
Wow.
COL Mark Mitchell:
The battle; in the end, 85 of the original prisoners walked out of that, drove out of that fortress on their way to Sheberghan Prison. The rest had been killed in action.
Interviewer:
85 out of about 600.
COL Mark Mitchell:
600, yeah.
Interviewer:
Wow.
Interviewer:
Wow.
COL Mark Mitchell:
Came down, the turret separated from the chassis. The turret came down first, and the chassis came down on top of it, upside-down, â€˜cause it had flipped over several times. Blew all nine of my guys out into the floor of the fortress. This was on the second day of the battle, and left all nine of them, you know, unable to extract themselves. I had a small QRF and Infantry Squad from the 10th Mountain that had come in the night before, and I called them in. We were able to evacuate all those guys. But those were the only casualties in the battle that we suffered, and again, so all the Americans and the Brits that participated in it lived. I never had more - I think the peak I had was when I called in a QRF, I had about 16

guys inside the fortress.
Never more than that. A great number of the casualties inflicted on the Taliban were done and the foreign fighters were done through a combination of JDAMs - I think we dropped eight the first day, seven of which actually hit inside the compound. One actually malfunctioned and landed behind us; kind of unnerving. The one that hit us, the first one that was dropped the next day hit my position. Then later that night, after evacuating our wounded, went back into the fortress and directed AC-130 gun ships, and helped them put steel on target. And the entire time that we were in that night in the fortress, we were taking mortar fire. They knew where we - they knew the general area where we were, but they couldnâ€™t hit us directly.
So they tried to bracket us, but they were unsuccessful in actually getting the mortar rounds onto us. And that was the end of the second day, and then the next day I think was the morning of the fourth day, when we were actually able to - some forces had come back from Kunduz, and had succeeded. The Afghans had taken over the majority of the responsibilities for the fight - we were simply advising them at this point - and were able to clear out the last pockets of resistance there in the fortress. They even in the last moments, they were still blowing themselves up, and what happened was the 85 that survived were left in the basement of what we called the pink schoolhouse.
Interviewer:
Right.
COL Mark Mitchell:
Refused to come out. It was the Afghans actually had the idea to pour water in there. Being late November, they just started pumping water into the basement, and that was what got them out of there; they couldnâ€™t stand standing in the water. They were getting hypothermic, and thatâ€™s how they had to come out.
Interviewer:
So thatâ€™s kind of a creative way to -
COL Mark Mitchell:
Yeah.
Interviewer:
Again, like the rocks under the HEMTT.
COL Mark Mitchell:
Right. Right, and it was - and Iâ€™ll tell you another - so that was the end of the battle.
Interviewer:
Right.
COL Mark Mitchell:
And they took them off, and we went on to recover. And our next challenge was to reopen the Mazar-i-Sharif airfield, which had been cratered by our brothers in the U.S. Air Force, which they do a really good job.
Interviewer:
Sure.
COL Mark Mitchell:
Problem is when they say, â€œOpen the airfield,â€ we didnâ€™t have any heavy equipment. We didnâ€™t have any engineers. You know, thereâ€™s no asphalt, no rebar, no concrete.
Interviewer:
Right.
COL Mark Mitchell:
No gravel. So how do you repair 5 30-foot deep, 40 to 50-foot wide craters? We ended up getting one Air Force Red Horse Engineer, a Horizontal Construction Engineer. We hired Afghans to bring in smooth river rock. There had been a drought in northern Afghanistan, so a lot of riverbeds were dry. We didnâ€™t have crushed gravel, so it was all we could do. They filled the five of these craters with, you know, by the Toyota pickup truck full of smooth

river rock.
Interviewer:
Wow.
COL Mark Mitchell:
We bought 55-gallon drums of tar from a Uzbek smuggler, and we heated that tar over wooden fires on the airfield, and I had a couple Mechanics who were able to repair and get a steamroller running. So weâ€™d melt the tar, put it over the rocks, let it cool, run the steamroller over it, put some more rocks on it. We were able to repair that airfield, all five of those craters, got about 3,600 feet of runway, which was enough to bring in a IL-76, C-17s, C-130s, and in total we brought in over 200 aircraft.
Interviewer:
Wow.
COL Mark Mitchell:
Our two Air Force Special Ops NCOs, one of them was a Terminal Controller who also was trained in Air Traffic Control, so he provided air traffic control services, and over the next two months we had brought in over 200 aircraft, and brought in humanitarian relief supplies. That was the impetus for getting the airfield reopened, â€˜cause there was no other way to get supplies in and distributed into the refugee camps. So again, when people ask me about what Iâ€™m most proud of, having my actions recognized with the Distinguished Service Cross was certainly a tremendous honor. But as I tell people, I take - I never considered myself a hero, and the only person I ever wanted, the only people I ever wanted to consider me a hero is my wife and daughters. And I hope anybody else that had found themselves in that situation wouldâ€™ve done what I did.
But repairing that airfield and getting that open against the odds, you know, shoestring and bubble gum -
Interviewer:
Sure.
COL Mark Mitchell:
And a whole lot of ingenuity. I look back on as a moment that to me, itâ€™s what it means to be a Green Beret. You know, youâ€™re behind enemy lines. You donâ€™t have a lot of material to work with. And youâ€™ve just got your ingenuity and your unwillingness to accept anything less than accomplishing your mission, and we made it happen.
Interviewer:
Yeah, so itâ€™s creative problem-solving.
COL Mark Mitchell:
Right.
Interviewer:
Isnâ€™t it?
COL Mark Mitchell:
Right.
Interviewer:
So what are your biggest lessons learned from the things that went well, and also the things that didnâ€™t go so well?
COL Mark Mitchell:
Well, the thing that went well is that our training that we go through in the Special Forces community - we have a capstone training exercise in the Qualification Course. Itâ€™s called Robin Sage. And that exercise, this two-week exercise in North Carolina is so well-designed that there were moments when my Sergeant Major and the other NCOs on the team, we would just - things would happen with our indig force, with the Northern Alliance. And we would just smile, weâ€™d look at each other, and go, â€œIâ€™ve been through this before. This is exactly like Robin Sage.â€
Interviewer:
Thatâ€™s comforting, isnâ€™t it?
COL Mark Mitchell:

It is. It was amazing. You know, there was one incident where - and Robin Sage, what happens a lot of times, if youâ€™re not doing well, you can get kicked out of the G base, as we say. At one point, General Dostum was unhappy with us, and he left us behind on a mountain top. He said, â€œIâ€™ll be back in 24 hours. Iâ€™ll send somebody back to get you.â€ After about 36 hours, we grabbed our translator - guy named Liaquat - and he spoke English suitably - and we basically cornered him and threatened him; said, â€œLiaquat, whatâ€™s going on? General Dostum said heâ€™d send people back 24 hours. We havenâ€™t seen anybody. Itâ€™s been 36 hours. Where is he?â€ And we said, â€œYouâ€™d better tell us.â€ And he said, â€œGeneral Dostum made me promise not to tell you.â€ We said, â€œDonâ€™t worry, we wonâ€™t tell him you told us.â€ But General Dostum said, â€œIâ€™m not coming back for them. Iâ€™m going to leave them here.â€ So we were stuck on this mountain top.
We had to figure out how to get off it. We managed to rent some donkeys from the local villagers, strapped our rucksacks to it. And thereâ€™s a great photo that I took of a donkey with a couple, you know, really large rucksacks on it. And with some cash to pay the locals, a couple hundred dollars, we rented the donkeys. And walked at night, no illumination, through the most mine-infested country in the world, and managed to link up with General Dostum the next day. I think he was a little surprised to see us, but he didnâ€™t, you know, didnâ€™t say anything, and we didnâ€™t say anything, and we just marched on with our mission. So our preparation for Robin Sage really went well.
Interviewer:
Okay.
COL Mark Mitchell:
Things that didnâ€™t go well are command and control and logistics structures. We were successful in spite of them. Logistics were being managed out of UCOM. A lot of the things that we say when we train in Special Forces that these will be available to you - weapons, and you know, supplies - werenâ€™t available. Thereâ€™s no - there was no warehouse that had all this stuff. Of course, the C.I.A. had stockpiles of weapons and stuff, but we, as the Army, didnâ€™t. And we didnâ€™t have uniforms, and we didnâ€™t have - our logistics was not set up for unconventional warfare. You know, weâ€™re riding on horses with wooden saddles, which is a real challenge when youâ€™re in a saddle for ten hours. I mean itâ€™s wood with remnants of oriental rug tacked onto it. The stirrups on these saddles are too small to fit over our boots.
I had to learn how to lean over while mounted on a horse and jam the stirrups onto the front of my boots. And the stirrups were also shorter; the Afghans are generally much shorter than the Americans. So weâ€™d send in a request. We said, â€œWe need saddles.â€ And our logistics system was not able to respond in a timely manner. We had already - by the time we actually got the saddles, we had liberated Mazar-i-Sharif, had used our operational fund to purchase vehicles, and were no longer riding the horses. Many of which were actually killed in the battle of Qala-i-Jangi, â€˜cause part of that area was the stables where the horses were kept. So we no longer needed the saddles. And our logistics system just wasnâ€™t agile enough to respond in a timely manner, so. And Iâ€™m frankly not comfortable that the Army has really cracked the code on that.
But I guess weâ€™ll see the next time we do unconventional warfare.
Interviewer:
Sure. In reference to your own personal growth as a leader, what lessons did you take away from your experiences?
COL Mark Mitchell:
This is a little bit unorthodox. For me, as I look back on it, particularly when I was selected for Battalion and Group Command, I learned a lesson. I would not have been there in Afghanistan during those days had I made a different decision while I was at Command and General Staff College. I decided to go to Selection for one of our Special Mission units, had trained, and had made a - I was in the best shape of my life. They could only take four

Officers to go to that Selection, â€˜cause we were literally pulled out of CGSC for a month. I got there, and my youngest daughter was I think about a week old when I left for Selection.
And on the second day, I smashed my big toe, really - I mean to the point where I had to sleep every night with my foot in a cravat, tied up to the bunk, packed in ice, just to be able to make it through the day. I had to lance the giant blood blister on my big toe. But I persevered; I was in great shape, and had I put a lot of effort into it. But on about day 10, I called home. We were able to call home at night. And my older daughter, who was about two and a half at the time, said, â€œDad, are you coming home tonight?â€ And I said, â€œNo, Iâ€™m not.â€ And she said, â€œWhy not?â€ And I had an epiphany, and I realized at that point that I was there for my own ego, and for my own personal satisfaction, and I wasnâ€™t really concerned with the needs of my family. And as a leader, as a father and a husband, I made the decision that night to leave.
Thereâ€™s no doubt in my mind had I stayed, that I wouldâ€™ve gone on to - I wouldâ€™ve made it through Selection, wouldâ€™ve gone on to that Special Mission unit. My life wouldâ€™ve taken a completely different pathway, and I would not have been there in Afghanistan with Fifth Group. I probably wouldâ€™ve been off in a training course, or with a different unit. And so, you know, a leadership lesson that I told all of my soldiers and my leaders is in the end, you can never go wrong choosing your family. I mean we all choose to serve in the Army, and we commit our adult lives to it, but you have to balance that, your mission and your professional desires, with taking care of your family; and at some point, we all take off the uniform. And the Army is a magnificent institution. But it is also one that is designed to function in combat when youâ€™re taking casualties.
And everybody is replaceable; you know, the cemeteries of the world are filled with indispensable men and women. And you know, the Army will survive the departure of any one of us, but our families really, and our children, our spouses, our husbands, you know, need us to be there for them. And itâ€™s a balancing act, and I think for me it made for a much - made me a much healthier and aware leader as a Battalion and Group Commander of the sacrifices and what I was asking the men and women in my command to do, and to be more aware of that. And to make those - to be very responsive to the needs of the families.
And so I did things in command that - you know, I sent soldiers home to go to weddings. To be there for the birth of their children. And unfortunately, a lot of Commanders didnâ€™t, and I said, you know - you know, I know soldiers and Officers who have watched their spouse give birth, you know, on a VTC camera. And I just said, â€œYour unit will survive you being gone for that,â€ and I would send people home. And in the end, that was a small price to pay for the loyalty and the dedication -
Interviewer:
Sure.
COL Mark Mitchell:
That those individuals repaid the unit. And I found they were much more willing to work harder to do what they needed to do, because they knew that the chain of command cared for them. And again, for me, that was my leadership lesson.
Interviewer:
Wow. One more thing - youâ€™ve spent a lot of time in your career dealing with counterterrorism.
COL Mark Mitchell:
Yep.
Interviewer:
Whether being the Director for Counterterrorism on the National Security Council, or the Military Assistant to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict, or a National Security Fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. What themes have you seen over your career with how we combat terrorism?
COL Mark Mitchell:

One of the things, the constant theme is building partner capacity to do that, and we recognize the threat of terrorism has become so widespread that we - we as the United States, we cannot do this on our own. We have to have capable partners. And so we put a lot of emphasis on that, and I think the Army has, between Security Force Assistance and the various concepts in Counterinsurgency, thereâ€™s also a significant overlap with our counterrorism efforts. So I think when I look at the Army, I think about this. I think one of the things we miss a lot, though, when weâ€™re trying to build partner capacity, we tend to take the institutions that support our own capacity for granted. That produce young Officers. That produce trained and qualified Non-Commissioned Officers. That provide us a steady stream of new recruits to fill the ranks of our Army. People that are loyal not to their family, to their tribe, to their city, to any particular person, but to the Constitution of the United States as an idea, and as an ideal. We take that for granted, and a lot of our partner capacity efforts seem to fall short. And I hear people say, â€œWe spent 10 years training them. For Godâ€™s sakes, why canâ€™t they do this mission on their own?â€ And the reality is itâ€™s because we can train new people all day long, but until we help them build the institutions that will sustain those capabilities, weâ€™re building castles in the sand. And it will degrade very rapidly over time, and wonâ€™t withstand the winds of change. Especially in our departure, when weâ€™re not there to maintain it. And so again, thatâ€™s a theme that we see constantly in our counterterrorism effort, building that capacity; but it has to go beyond just training people how to kick in doors and shoot somebody in the face. You have to have a culture thatâ€™s willing to train Intelligence Analysts, and to empower a 19-year-old, you know, Specialist to search through a top secret database and to connect the dots. Or, you know, a 24-year-old Warrant Officer to pilot a remotely controlled vehicle and to fly it. To do the maintenance and to provide the logistics. And itâ€™s the complete package, and we miss a lot of that.
And so anyway, I think itâ€™s a theme that weâ€™ll continue to see here as we move forward in the 21st century.
Interviewer:
Well sir, this has been a fascinating talk with you. Is there anything that I havenâ€™t asked you that I shouldâ€™ve asked you, that you want to say?
COL Mark Mitchell:
No. Itâ€™s been a privilege to serve in the Army, and you know, to be my home for nearly three decades in my adult life, and a privilege to help the next generation of folks hopefully learn some lessons.
Interviewer:
Yes sir. Itâ€™s been a privilege talking to you today. Thank you.
COL Mark Mitchell:
Thank you very much.