

The Heart of a Green Beret

Sept. 11, 2001 — a day living on in every American heart. Twelve of those American hearts beat in tandem after spearheading the mission that led to the demise of the world's most terrifying 21st-century terrorists.

by Lindsay King, assistant editor

“On Sept. 10, 2001, I just completed two years on a mission in the middle east,” said Mark Nutsch, U.S. Special Forces Green Beret commander and subject of the Warner Bros. movie *12 Strong*. “Everyone remembers the following day, when 3,000 people were murdered.”

Nutsch opened up the second day of Angus Convention on Nov. 4 in Columbus, Ohio. He addressed a room packed full of Angus producers as the first speaker of Angus University, sponsored by Merck Animal Health.

In a Nashville, Tenn., Babies“R”Us on Sept. 14, Nutsch got the call. He let out a whoop and his wife, Amy, in her sixth month of a high-risk pregnancy, knew she would be telling him goodbye again soon.

Nutsch and his 11 Special Forces brothers, ODA 595, were chosen to go to war on behalf of an aching nation. Defeating the Taliban and their al-Qaida allies was the broad mission; the bigger-than-life task was overthrowing an entire government.

“We were chosen to work with resistance groups in Afghanistan, to advise and assist in the formation of a mounted militia, much to our surprise,” Nutsch explained, adding that the last time the U.S.

Army fought as a cavalry was in 1942 against the Japanese. “We had 19th-century horsemen, armed with 20th-century weapons, combating 21st-century technologies.”

The strategy was simple, but dangerous. Matching three Green Berets with one Afghan commander proved to be the key for rallying troops from three Afghan factions. The 2,500 horsemen and 500 foot

shoulders organized into four groups. “Ten of the 12 Berets had never ridden horses before, they were learning to ride while we were in combat,” Nutsch explained. He was the experienced horseman who grew up riding and roping in Kansas. “Since we were the new guys, we didn’t exactly get the good horses. And all of them were stallions so they would fight if they got too close. My team was dealing with that and learning how to ride. We rode for seven to 24 hours at a time, that was our unit of measure.”

The mission

The mission was to capture an airfield 100 miles away and secure a road north to Uzbekistan to allow other forces a safe entrance and rid the area of terrorists. The U.S. needed boots on the ground, eyes on the enemy.



The average age of the group was 32, and a majority were married with at least two kids. They had everything to lose, but stepped up for their country regardless. Their eight years of military experience, two as a group, made them the most qualified for this lethal mission.

“We were told they did not expect us to survive,” Nutsch said. “We didn’t expect some of the danger to come from our transportation. We implemented a shoot-the-horse SOP (standard operating procedure). I knew if someone got hung up in the saddle and dragged, they would end up dead.” Several close calls replicating scenes from the movie *The Man From Snowy River* kept the group focused on surviving hour by hour, sometimes minute to minute.

Living on a hand full of raisins and even fewer hours of sleep, Nutsch and his team battled winter



A ranch and rodeo raised Kansas native turned Green Beret, Mark Nutsch recounted a dangerous mission following the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the U.S.

in the Hindu mountains every step of the way. Wind, rain, snow and treacherous passes filled with land mines were around each corner.

They persevered.

The battle

ODA 595 united three Afghan groups and watched in awe and pride as the commanders rallied their people. Riding their stallions into battle armed with nothing more than AK47s, the factions were successful because of the hope the U.S. troops wore on their sleeves.

A gruesome battle in a quarter-mile wide by two miles long pass was the pinnacle for Nutsch's cavalry.

"We knew this would be the last place our enemy would push back, we lost hundreds of our allies in that mission," Nutsch said of the precursor to the capture of the city of Mazar-i-Sharif. "This was where

the chaos was most prevalent. But on the 10th of November, we rode into a city of 3,000 people, cheering for our victory in that pass."

The first Green Berets on the ground in Afghanistan completed their mission. Seventeen years later, the factions they united remain intact.

"They are deeply appreciative of the support from America," Nutsch said. "General Abdul Rashid Dostum who we worked with directly said 'I asked for a handful of Americans, they sent me the strength of an entire nation.'"

As expected, Nutsch had limited contact with his family over the roughly two months he was deployed. While his team traversed steep trails on horses in Afghanistan, their team of wives back home rallied around Amy when she went into labor. Nutsch's voice cracked at this point in the story as the silent

auditorium felt the weight of his sacrifice settle on the room.

The Kansas-raised Green Beret made military history using the lessons he learned growing up in production agriculture. Addressing a room full of Angus producers was not lost on Nutsch as he thanked each one for their contribution to feeding the nation.

"Our country was founded on small towns and communities, on farming and ranching families," Nutsch said. "I have been in countries that struggle to feed their people. I want to personally thank you for what you do to feed our people. You are the backbone of our country." **AJ**