

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center**

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with

**JOHN McNALLY**

Team Commander, Special Forces, Operation Enduring Freedom

2008

OH  
1415

**OH**  
**1974**

**McNally, John**, (b. 1974) Oral History Interview, 2008.

Approximate length: 1 hour, 35 minutes

*Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.*

**Abstract:**

In this oral history interview, John McNally, a native of Friendship, WI, reflects on his enlistment into the Army and his decision to join Special Forces, his Operation Enduring Freedom service as part of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion/3<sup>rd</sup> Special Forces Group where he worked to pursue Osama Bin Laden, and his opinion regarding the U.S.'s involvement in Iraq and military strategy in Afghanistan. After graduating from West Point in 1996, McNally attended Airborne and Ranger Schools and was assigned to the 1/23<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Battalion at Fort Lewis, WA, as a platoon leader. As a First Lieutenant, McNally underwent Special Forces training and served as a team leader and executive officer in 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion/3<sup>rd</sup> Special Forces Group at Fort Bragg, NC. He explains the challenges facing U.S. troops when collecting intelligence from the local populations and the reasons behind many tribal rivalries that plagued Afghan National Army recruitment. Furthermore, McNally describes the Taliban's weapon systems and strategy when combatting U.S. or Afghan Troops, and provides his ideas on how the war in Afghanistan could be better waged.

**Biographical Sketch:**

McNally (b. 1974) graduated from West Point Military Academy in 1996 and went on to serve nine years from 1996 to 2005 as an Infantry Lieutenant and Special Forces Captain. He completed three tours to Afghanistan in 2002, 2003, and 2004 during Operation Enduring Freedom.

**Archivist's Note:**

Transcriptions are a reflection of the original oral history recording. Due to human and machine fallibility transcripts often contain small errors. Transcripts may not have been transcribed from the original recording medium. It is strongly suggested that researchers engage with the oral history recording as well as the transcript.

Timestamps reflect the entire length of the interview, which was filmed in three parts.

Interviewed by Jeff Kollath, 2008.

Transcribed by Ellen Brooks, 2016.

Reviewed by Matthew Scharpf, 2017.

Abstract Written by Matthew Scharpf, 2017.

## Interview Transcript:

### [Beginning of Interview]

#### [Part 1]

KOLLATH: Hi John.

MCNALLY: Hey, how you doing Jeff?

KOLLATH: Good. I'm going to start out with—why don't you tell us name, rank, years of service, where you served, branch of service, that kind of thing.

MCNALLY: Okay, my name is John McNally. And I grew up in Wisconsin, I went to West Point from '92 to '96. After that I was commissioned, an infantry officer, 2nd Lieutenant. Spent my first tour at Fort Lewis, Washington and after that I went into Special Forces and spent the remaining five years of a total of nine years of service at Fort Bragg, with 3rd Special Forces group. I got out of the Army as a captain.

KOLLATH: What prompted your decision to go to West Point? Why was that appealing to you?

MCNALLY: Well, my older brother went to West Point, so I think I was in seventh grade at the time so part of the order of people marching on the plain and I had always felt I was patriotic, I guess. And really enamored with the stories behind West Point and wanted to go there.

KOLLATH: Who signed your commission papers? Who gave you the recommendation?

MCNALLY: That's a good question. Who signed—[both laugh]

MCNALLY: I should give a shout out to 'em but—

KOLLATH: Which Congressman signed them?

MCNALLY: Petri, Congressman Petri. Sorry.

KOLLATH: Oh sure. I didn't—your brother was in the military too, what did he do when he was in there?

MCNALLY: He's Infantry, he still is. He just came back from a fourteen month deployment to Iraq. And he's a lieutenant colonel now and he was in charge of liaison with some of the Iraq police forces over there and helping to get them trained up, and the supplies they need.

KOLLATH: Was that his first tour?

MCNALLY: It is, yeah.

KOLLATH: What unit is he with?

MCNALLY: He's with 1st Infantry Division, out of Fort Riley, Kansas.

KOLLATH: So one of the things that has always made your story so appealing to us here is the Special Forces angle. How did you get into Special Forces? Why was Special Forces something you wanted to be a part of?

MCNALLY: It initially—interaction—there's a 1st Special Forces group at Fort Lewis and as a lieutenant I started having interactions with a couple of the captains who were in it. And you can't even try out for Special Forces until you're a senior lieutenant soon to be captain because they want some leadership experience behind. And so dealing with these captains I saw that they were different, I guess, from the regular Army. The guys in their teams, the average age is typically in the thirties, they have a lot of experience. And at that time, peace-time Army, 1999, they were the only ones that were doing deployments all over the world. Whether Philippines or Africa, Europe. So part of the draw was, one, you would actually get to be deployed and do what you were training for and so that kind of prompted me. I wanted to use my craft, I guess, and use my training instead of just for training. And so I went through the Special Forces selection course; you have to volunteer for it. And it's three weeks of basically pure hell. Carrying about two hundred pounds on your back from six o'clock in the morning til, if you're lucky, six o'clock at night. And I lost thirty pounds in a matter of three weeks. And they make sure that you're food deprived and sleep deprived and just not operating very well at the time. 'Cause they're making objective and subjective evaluations. So, went through that and was selected, out of a class of 244 there were forty-two of us that made it through. And starting on through the Special Forces pipeline. And I realized once I got into 3rd Group that it was the right decision. I got to my team, it was a HALO team, High Altitude Low Opening. So it's like the military version of sky diving and it has its birth in Vietnam, actually. And I realized—I had two guys on the team who had nineteen, twenty years of experience in the Army, fifteen of that in Special Forces. The other guys were about thirty-three, thirty-four years old. I was twenty-seven. I was the youngest guy on the team, I was gonna be the team commander and taking them into Afghanistan when they had already done one deployment as a team to Afghanistan. So, but the maturity level comes through. Everyone, I guess, understands their lane. And pitches in and wants to accomplish the mission regardless.

KOLLATH: So Special Forces really fulfilled on that old Army promise of fun, travel and adventure for you.

MCNALLY: It did, definitely [laughing].

KOLLATH: So you joined Special Forces when we were at peace, during peacetime—

MCNALLY: Mm-hm. Right.

KOLLATH: So what did you do with Special Forces before you went to Afghanistan for your first tour? Did you go overseas?

[00:05:02]

MCNALLY: I didn't actually. It takes about two years to go through all the training. And I was in the final phase of the training - language, four month of intense French language training and that was when 9/11 occurred. And I was gonna report to 3rd Special Forces group, I think two months later and that's when everything started kicking off. So I jumped into the team and they had already done one deployment because I had been in the training at the time. It seemed to drive home all that much more so, our training at that point and you know, this was even more real, I guess, for everyone.

KOLLATH: When 9/11 happened what was your initial reaction?

MCNALLY: "Ah shit." You know. "What the hell is going on?" I don't know, I really didn't have too much of a reaction at that point. I was kinda focused on the training because I realized that within a matter of months this was gonna involve me more so than—at least immediately—more so than any part of the Army. Because that was my specialty area, was gonna be sub-Saharan Africa as well as the Afghan/Iraq area.

KOLLATH: So 9/11 happens, so basically you had an initial kind of, "It's on now."

MCNALLY: Mm-hm.

KOLLATH: "This is where I'm gonna get called in," kinda thing?

MCNALLY: Yeah.

KOLLATH: So after 9/11 describe what happened to you and your service and your training at that point and kinda gearing up to going to wherever you thought you were going to go.

MCNALLY: Okay. Um, well at that point they—5th Special Forces group, they were the ones initially slated, they went into Afghanistan first, along with elements of the CIA ahead of time and a couple other military groups. And 3rd Special Forces group got the order that they were going to be following in behind the 5th Special Forces. So I reported to my team and, understanding that I was the junior guy on the team and yet I was supposed to be the commander, one of the leadership techniques that I bring in, just myself, is I realize that I had to go to combat with these guys, I can't be a liability for them. If they have fifteen years of experience on the team they know how to shoot in a dark room and do room clearing procedures so much more proficiently than I. They have, you know, maybe a hundred, two hundred more jumps from an airplane at 14,000 feet at night, than I. So there's a lot of—I have a base understanding but I realize that when I get to the team that my first priority has to be for the guys to gain confidence in my abilities. I have to—although I'm the captain, I have to pretty much just shut up for all of our train up and just be a sponge for all of the techniques that they're throwing at me and the idiosyncrasies that they've developed for themselves that they've become proficient at because I'm not gonna critique anything. If it's working for them that's fine, I just want to jump in so that they're comfortable with me going into a combat zone.

So I got to the team and that—I mean, the three main areas that we always talk is shoot, move and communicate. So shooting, going to the range initially, with all of our weapon systems, whether it be the M-9 pistol, M-4 carbine, we have 50 caliber machine guns on our GMVs [Ground Mobility Vehicles], we have Mark 19 grenade launchers. So everyone has to be cross-trained on all of that because typically, I'm not actually up on the 50 cal machine gun but if I have to be I need to know how to operate it, have to be able to do—like I said before—room clearing, so that's a build-up phase, we do go through training going into a room with no rounds in your gun whatsoever but everyone—it's a talk through, walk through of understanding how everything needs to move once you enter a building, when you hit a hallway, when hit a stairwell, what types of rooms do you enter, how many doors there are, if there are any obstacles in the way, how you alert everyone to that, which sections are yours to clear. And so you do a walk through, talk through multiple times, a day or two, until everyone has a good feeling and there's a good flow to it and then we would start using simunitions - basically we can use our same weapons systems but they have little paint balls at the end. So we'd start doing training with that. Same thing, we'd do a walk through, talk through just with those. And you build up to where you're actually doing full speed clearing, and then you're doing full speed clearing at night with those and then you build into the—you work up to the live fire, the live fire walk through, talk through day, up until the point where you're doing it at night, you know, shooting these live rounds in a room a foot or two feet in front of guys to your left and your right. Understandably the guys need to have confidence in my ability at that point. So. Shoot.

**[00:10:17]**

Move—for a HALO team being able to group properly in the air with my guys at 14,000 feet, not tumbling and landing close together on a drop zone at night is crucial—and communicating. Understanding each other and how we're gonna do different battle dress rehearsals and how we would react to an ambush, depending on who gets caught in the kill zone, how the team's gonna maneuver out of that, who's gonna lay down suppressive fires. So it's a—for me, it was a two, three month train-up. Pretty intense, with the team, of getting up to the point and then we got the orders that we were heading over. This was the second time in 2003? March 2003. I actually went over before, without the team though, I was with the Special Forces company as the Company Executive Officer for a couple of months.

**KOLLATH:** We'll come back to that but I want to talk to you about the training. The HALO training. Can you describe that a little bit, the number of jumps you did and what that experience is like?

**MCNALLY:** Well they say one jump you use up a day's worth of adrenaline for HALO and it's pretty exciting, to tell you the truth. The HALO School, we did it out at Yuma, AZ because it's good weather 364 days out of the year and you get—we get thirty jumps out there. You get back to the team and right now I have a total of a little over a hundred and ten HALO jumps, half of those being night. So, I mean, the

parachute and the reserve weigh about fifty-five pounds. If we're doin' oxygen you have to strap an oxygen tank to your right side and that weighs twenty two pounds, you have this tube coming up and the mask over your mouth. And that restricts the movement of your head. You gotta have goggles on, you have a helmet on. So all this starts restricting your peripheral visions at night, as well as during the day, and how much freedom you have to maneuver. But typically we would jump from a C-130 or a Casa-212 ramp which is pretty fun because you get on a ramp about three guys wide, and you time it—you know, the green light goes on, the jump master has already identified the drop zone. And the technique was, the guys behind would put a hand on the shoulder and you'd rock forward once, rock back once and on the next forward everyone would just kinda lean and jump out the aircraft. Part of that's because the aircraft is going 130 knots, minimum. And even just a half second or second delay between people can just spread you out eighty, a hundred feet easily in the air, so you have to be basically on top of each other.

So you go out hands and head first, you gotta kick your feet up against your butt because if you don't the air turbulence is just gonna tumble you over, and if you do that, you lose sight of the guys around you. So you get out, normally it takes about 500 feet, you're on a plain of some sort and then you start leveling out. And then you start acquiring where everyone is around you, try to get situational awareness. Kinda do a head count in your head, I did at least, of the guys on your team and all the other ones were too. We tried to group within a circle of—you know, if it's twelve of us we're all looking at each other, 6,000 feet we start looking altimeter, left hand. This is about after a minute twenty seconds, minute and a half of free fall. And I should go back, this is just a standard—if we're just jumping combat equipment we're just trying to stay together. Sometimes we'd jump no combat equipment and we'd do a little test on each other. We would intentionally push ourselves a kilometer, two kilometers away from where our parachutes are supposed to open and that would force us to go into—we'd kick our feet out, I'm trying to think of the term for it. You see it in—

KOLLATH: They make themselves flat and then—

**[00:14:25]**

MCNALLY: Yeah, basically. You'd do that and it propels you forward at that point. So part of that training was to make sure that you had situational awareness with respect to the ground so you know where you were when you opened your parachute. So we would do some of that training without the combat equipment on. But when I got to the combat equipment we just kinda tried to group together 'cause that's the hardest thing, you can't maneuver too much. And then 6,000 feet you wave off, we're all facing each other, now we want to face away from each other. We shoot out for 1,000 feet. 5,000 feet you look around, one last check. And then at 4,000 feet you're pulling your rip cord. The reason for facing away from each other is because the MC-4 are Ram Air parachutes, canopy designed so it actually propels you forward about twenty-one miles an hour. So if you're facing each other, you open, you're going towards each other. So. Go off from each other, you open,

you're under canopy, you're only about 3,500 feet and again you're lookin' around, tryin' to find out where everyone is and you get into a stack. Whoever the lowest guy is gonna lead everyone into the drop zone and you just kinda stack up behind each other in elevation order. And you just do a pattern to try to kill air depending on—we had a standing joke, the winds were always squirrely. You could get, you know, meteorological updates from the Air Force but they were inevitably wrong. So you could get down and all the sudden everyone realizes that you're, oh, a kilometer or two kilometers away from where you should be. The winds are too strong at that altitude or they're goin' the wrong direction. And you get to a point, everyone becomes pretty proficient, you start realizing that, okay the winds are wrong, they're too strong, and you start having to compensate. Instead of dropping air up from the drop zone you start running for the drop zone 'cause you realize you need to just drop altitude over the area.

KOLLATH: What kinda spacing do you have when you're in your—when you group back up together and then when you get ready to land in the drop zone, how much spacing is there between you guys?

MCNALLY: Twenty-five, maybe fifty meters. If you get comfortable, twenty-five meters. And that was pretty good, pretty decent.

KOLLATH: Your training, did you do HALO jumps into Afghanistan?

MCNALLY: I didn't, no.

KOLLATH: You did not, did any of the guys that you trained with, did they?

MCNALLY: In the training, actual HALOs, yeah. Some guys did make some HALO jumps, yeah. And from secondhand sources I know Delta Force did jumps in. And primarily they did with with fifty-five gallon drums strapped to them, tethered to them with weapons, water, and food and they pushed that down and then the tether is attached, about twenty-five feet long and the guy that's attached to it tries to help steer it in.

KOLLATH: [Laughing]

MCNALLY: So it's a little difficult. I saw a video, one guy was actually tethered to a four-wheeler. Some guy jumped out with four-wheelers and they would just push them off in neutral off the ramp and—so that they could actually be with their equipment when they landed 'cause once it leaves the aircraft it's at the mercy of the winds if there isn't a human being attached to it at that point. So. I wouldn't have liked to been attached to a four-wheeler comin' out.

KOLLATH: You said that you were in Afghanistan as an XO.

MCNALLY: Yes.

KOLLATH: When was that and what were your duties mainly?



MCNALLY: That was in 2002, approximately from August to October. It was a short trip for me. My duties there were—that was the initial stage, you know, a couple months—the battalion actually went over in March, April of 2002 so that's four months, five months after the whole big push and when they took Kabul and Bagram so the big focus at that point for our battalion was training up the Afghan National Army. So we took over the Kabul Military Training Center and started training up the first battalions of the ANA— Afghan National Army. And my job, once I got over there, was—there was a French mountaineering battalion over there and I actually put my French language skills to use pretty quickly because I was assigned as a liaison officer to the French battalion. Trying to help coordinate logistics and training supplies and training sites for their battalions.

KOLLATH: Can you talk a little about the Afghan Army? The positives, the negatives?

MCNALLY: It was a little rough at first because you're comin' into—I mean, this is Afghanistan, thousands of years of no roads systems, it's much like the city-states in Italy when they had no communication between the different valleys. So it's the same way. You have tribes that have been warring for hundreds of years, they've been kicking the outsiders that are trying to make themselves—put themselves in the country--they've been kicking 'em out. You know, the British, the Soviets. And so the biggest problem initially was how to overcome just the inter-tribal rivalries. We would have guys that would show up from different sections of Afghanistan and sign 'em up for the battalion, we had little photo ID things, give 'em uniforms, train 'em up, start training them for a week and lo and behold two weeks later all of a sudden half the battalions gone because so-and-so. Mullah Aqbar doesn't like—he's from a different tribe, he doesn't like the fact that the commander is Pashto so he takes his guys that he brought with him and he just leaves. So it wasn't all that strange to have just ten, thirty, a hundred guys just disappear in the matter of a day or two. That kinda hampers the whole of efforts of trying to build up this national Army when you can't even overcome just the tribal rivalries.

**[00:20:29]**

We started working and by the time of my third trip everyone—I thought, my impression was that the guys by that point who were coming to be in the Afghan National Army really sincerely want a peaceful Afghanistan. They want, regardless of who they've been warring against, what tribes, they understand that what's best for the children, what's best for the future for their country is a unifying factor. Even if it is just military—the Afghan National Army—to overcome some of these war lords who have embedded themselves. So, very frustrating initially from that standpoint. Another hard thing was—the Kabul Military Training Center, it was bombed in October, November of 2001. So we were living in—it was just nasty conditions basically. It was a grazing area too for a while, for a bunch animals so you had animal fecal matter all over the place, it had to be cleaned up. There weren't—logistical supplies hadn't been really established well at that point. And there seemed to be this idea from big Army or the State Department, I don't know where it was coming from, but I even heard it

back here in the media was, you know, the Fall of Kabul, the Fall of Kandahar, the battle is won. And in counter insurgency or guerilla warfare the battle isn't won if you still have fights going on. So all of 2002 back here the media was being fed—I don't know, I imagine from the Department of Defense and whomever—the fact that it has fallen, everything is good whereas people were still getting IEDed, there were mines, people were getting shot at. And you can't establish a stable situation if you don't accept the fact that everything isn't okay. There's still resistance going on, there's still an underground, there's still a shadow government being headed by Mullah Omar and Osama Bin Laden.

KOLLATH: Can you describe an incident—with your interaction with the Afghan Army—that really stands out, kind of really defined the whole experience for you?

MCNALLY: Um, that's a good question. The best memory I have is a company commander from the 4th Battalion, this was on my second trip, and he—his name escapes me but he fought with the Mujahedeen in the 1980s. And he—it was just so, I guess, patriotic towards his country, he wanted his country—he wanted to defeat the Taliban because he realized that they were not good, not bad—I can't remember any specifics, I just—this guy sticks out in my mind 'cause he was extremely—very competent. He had a lot of good experience and he was a company commander and I was working with him in different valleys. I can't remember any specifics though for the most part right now.

KOLLATH: Were those guys—were guys like him fairly rare?

MCNALLY: Yeah, kind of.

KOLLATH: How did you—how did either you and your fellow American soldiers, or the Afghan government, how did they convince these guys to have a stake in this? Like, in the battle that was going on over there. How did they convince them that this was an important thing to do?

**[00:24:20]**

MCNALLY: Well, we talked to them—one was trying to overcome that rivalry. So we tried to show them, by way of example, United States - similar, I mean, you can have fifty different states, you can have fifty different tribes, you can still have your own identity, just as in the United States, but you still can have one country. And I think that helped a lot 'cause we heard that coming back to us different ways, through different communications I guess, of guys in the Afghan Army. And after we started making them realize this could work, there was the potential, you didn't have to necessary have this seventeen year old grudge against your neighbor, because of some murder that happened in the family seventeen years before. I think once they realized that that was a potential—I mean, for them that had been reality, you always hold grudges, you always hated your rival tribe. Once it became a potential then I think they started seeing the efforts we were making as Americans to create a relatively stable life.

Whether it be going out and water—three main things that all the people wanted, all the elders and all the little villages. One of the things was they wanted fresh water of some sort. They had been going through a seven year drought. And so we would go in and part of our job as well as the Civil Military Affairs, assess a town and try to find out if they did have a well, if they didn't have a well, did one need to be dug, how deep—and Americans we had the money. So there was a lotta money being pushed in. So digging wells, getting medical supplies. The guys on my team--two guys on my team - medics – 18 Deltas - and they go through the most rigorous training of any medics in any military organization in the world. And we would go in and do Medcaps with them and they can assess all sorts of things. So that establishes a good rapport with the people. And that also shows the Afghans that we were workin' with that we really truly care, that we aren't there just to bring destruction with us, we're not there just to capture Taliban. And we're not there to actually seize ground. We're there to actually help and we'd normally put an Afghan face on everything that we did. We never tried to accept any credit for what we were doing, it was always the Afghan National Army was there that was helping us and they were the ones that were responsible 'cause they're the ones bringing us, the Americans, into this valley. Even though, if we plan everything it doesn't matter. You know, in the end it doesn't benefit us if we're being credited and the Afghan National Army doesn't have a sense of purpose, they don't have a sense of ownership of what they're doing. And the locals don't have any sense of ownership of what's taking place because all the credit is being heaped on the Americans.

So that's one of the key things is that they had to take credit. We had to give them credit for everything that was going on. And then the third thing was the schools, trying to build schools for the children. And a school is—I mean, it's not like here in America. It's getting some mats for them to sit on, basically. Reed mats, maybe throwing up some mud walls. Didn't have to be any windows on it initially if it's the summer. If it's the winter just putting some clear plastic over the openings. And some pencils and some paper. Pretty rudimentary but that was really just kinda all they wanted initially, just to get something started.

KOLLATH: How hard was it to overcome the culture differences with the Afghan people that you ran into.

MCNALLY: I don't think we'll—and they're still there, right? We never--I don't think we wanted to overcome them, we just wanted to work—understand them and work within their parameters. So cultural dif—women, you know, that was—other than in Kabul where you would actually see women out without veils and stuff, out in the countryside it's still the full covering. And sometimes you'd never see any women. You never, ever look at them. 'Cause that would be very disrespectful. So I guess just understanding the cultural differences helped a lot. As well as how to deal with the people. Typically you don't sit down and talk business right away. There's a lot of conversation that takes place, for us through a translator. And—am I answering your question? I don't know, I'm trying to think of--no, I mean,

just trying to work within the parameters of what their culture is. And seeing if it's effective I guess.

KOLLATH: Can you think of a specific instance where the cultural gap really manifested itself?

**[00:29:44]**

MCNALLY: I think I could if I was given enough time, but—

KOLLATH: You got all the time in the world.

MCNALLY: Wanna get a drink of water while I'm thinking about this.

CREW: Wanna just cut for a minute?

**[Part 2]**

KOLLATH: Cultural differences John. [Both laughing]

MCNALLY: Well, I was supposed to been thinkin' about it the last couple minutes here. Maybe not from an operational standpoint, but from a psychological standpoint for me, I guess, the second tour that I did lasted seven months and it was interesting because most of that time was spend outside of Kabul and you don't see any women. You don't see what's fifty percent of the population, arguably, at any one point. Maybe they would go out at night, I don't know. You would see little girls under the age of maybe eight or nine or something like that. So it's—for me it was kind of a shock coming back to the United States. And all of a sudden it kinda hit me that—all of a sudden I realized there are women in the world again and we don't shut in fifty percent of our population, I guess. I mean, it's their culture, I have no bones about it. It's just—it was a shock to me to once again see everyone being able to freely move about here in the United States. And every once and awhile when I was there I kind of got a strange feeling. It's kinda strange just dealing with guys all the time. I went to a wedding where they had separate wedding parties for the men and the women so I went to the party with the men. And you got the—we call it 'The Man Dance' and, you know, the guys who get up and are dancing and stuff. I guess the guys on my team would have liked to seen me get up and dance but I wasn't ready to establish that much rapport so I held myself back. But it was kind of a shock to me, I guess. That cultural difference and how much I missed the other fifty percent of the population.

KOLLATH: Obviously the wedding party is pretty interesting. As far as, you know, food and other cultural things, how involved were you with that? Was this kind of sense of other, were you guys actually actively involved in taking part in some of the traditions and stuff that they had around in the different villages?

MCNALLY: We were eating, I mean, the local food. And so, I guess one of the interesting stories in the Kabul Military Training Center, I was working liaison between, I think the 2nd Battalion, the French training, I was training with the French. This

Afghan general, I don't know, he wanted some water for his guys and whatnot. But I had been doin' stuff for them so they invited me into their chow hall to eat lunch with them. And they don't have refrigeration. So I sat down, I'm not gonna turn 'em down. I'm eating with the Afghan general, I'm the only American in here with 200, 300 Afghan soldiers. I mean it's an honor for me to be there. And the plate of food comes and there's a bed of rice with some currants or raisins in it and a little sauce off to the side and I have some warm coke, but there's something that smells a little distinct here. And my medics had been telling me before, where they store the meat in the basement of this building was a little less than hygienic. Something smelled like rotten meat basically and I was like, This is kinda strange. I was eating, smiling and I got down about half way through my bed of rice and I saw where the odor was coming from. It was rotten goat meat that they had cooked and at that point I ordered a second can of coke and continued to eat the rest of the meal. But I don't know if they're used to that, I mean, their stomachs are definitely used to food and conditions a little bit harsher than here in America, so. But, I didn't get sick. Not that time.

KOLLATH: What was the best meal that you had - best native meal that you had, do you recall?

MCNALLY: Chicken—well, when we were in the Arghandab Valley we had a local guy that we contracted with and he would bring us chicken - I don't know how he would prepare it - cooked up. You know, they just hack up the chicken in any old way. Throw it in, cook it, cook it with some rice and maybe some fresh vegetables on the side. And that was always a treat. You get so used to just the rice and the chicken that your body starts craving some vegetables, something other. So he actually—two or three weeks after we were camping out on that hill top that I was pointing out to you before we finally had some fresh potatoes and fresh carrots that he had cooked up. And some gravy. And just because of the austere conditions we had been living in for several weeks before, that was I think the best meal that I had in Afghanistan. Local Meal.

[00:35:15]

KOLLATH: Talk about the civilians and their reception towards you and your interactions with them as far as—obviously you have somebody cooking for you. Talk a little about that.

MCNALLY: Well, typically—there are little villages all over the place, usually around, centered around rivers or water sources. For the most part people initially were receptive to the US. It's that initial jubilation, Taliban are gone. And some people, inevitably they wanna work with you. Some people, they don't. And we understood that. They just want to go along with their business. They don't want the Americans there or they're working for the Taliban. They're gonna work for the highest bidder, I guess. So it was always a conflict of—an internal conflict. You're driving down a road in a town and—say Qalat. Qalat we would stop at a market and you—your goal is you wanna build rapport, you wanna put a friendly face, we're not there—we don't wanna kill anyone, we just wanna get sense of the

lay of the land, we want to put a friendly face out there. And getting stones thrown at you from kids isn't necessarily the best thing and it's—but, you hope they're just a little bit misdirected. And I guess they're kids. But—and sometimes, it's interesting, sometimes parents would actually come and grab the kid that was throwing stones or usually they were a group of them but sometimes a parent or an elderly gentleman would actually grab the kid and pretty much discipline him off to the side. And things would subside at that point. Sometimes there wasn't anyone there and the adults were just enjoying it and laughing and smiling just as much. So that, from a personal standpoint, kinda hurt a little bit, but it's understandable too, at the same point. Everyone, they're trying to survive, who are we? You know, we've been in the country a year, maybe two years. We're an unknown quantity at that point.

KOLLATH: Did it get worse? You were there three separate times. Did it get worse over the course of the time you were there?

MCNALLY: No. Difficult question because—it got better with the civilians for the most part but at the same time the Taliban were building strength. So I have a hard time reconciling that how did interaction with the local people go better, but at the same time Taliban were recruiting more people. And I don't know why necessarily those two were goin' on at the same time. But some towns—very strange. I mean, if you don't have anything for hundreds of years and all the sudden Americans are coming in with all this technology - bottled water, they'd never seen bottled water before. If you pass through a town once and you give kids candy, that's something new to them. You pass through twice and give them candy and water, that's nice, you've done it before. You pass through three times, they expect it. And if you don't give it to 'em then they throw things at you. So lesson learned, try to only go through the town maybe every one or two months so that the kids didn't expect anything from you. You know, driving through Kabul the first summer, 2002, kids are waving at you. 2003 you drive through Kabul and kids are flipping you off with the bird. So, but that was in Kabul, a metropolitan area, too so. You go in the outlying regions, they hadn't seen Americans yet, they were still a little more receptive at that point.

KOLLATH: Talk a little bit about gathering intelligence, human intelligence and working with the civilians, working with the tribal chiefs, or how did that process go? How did it work out for you? Was it [inaudible]?

MCNALLY: It worked out pretty well for my team. So, that was pretty much intelligence gathering was run by the 18 Fox, he's the intel sergeant, and my warrant officer. And typically--you could do a couple different things. Well first of all, one of the worries is always, how do we know this guy is giving us good information? Is he giving us good information now only to lead us down the wrong road later on? Because there's always that potential. Give us some information, don't ambush us a couple times, and then give us good information that's gonna lead to an ambush.

[00:40:11]

Or, give us good information, try to get us in so that they can just gather intel on us. So there are a lot of considerations, and how do you vet your sources. In the local community, there's not the intelligence network. You know, you don't have the background checks that you have here in the United States.

So we had a couple of assets I guess. One, the MEDCAPs, we would do MEDCAPs and typically that was usually also a good source for people comin' to us and saying, 'I know where some Taliban are in the area.' So they could come to us under the auspice of getting medical treatment, but at the same time give us good information. Or feed us information. We wouldn't bite on anything initially, if it was a new contact. Because the temptation of the Americans—I saw—was to jump on intel, someone's givin' something. Well, some of the locals would do that also with the ulterior motive of telling their neighbor Aqmar, "Hey Aqmar, the Americans are on my side 'cause I just told then you've got these AKs in your basement" and sure enough the Americans come that night. So now this guy thinks that the Americans are doing his bidding, he can use that as leverage against his neighbors and stuff, saying he's working with the Americans, the Americans do his bidding. So never jump on anything right away. And typically we would always do little checks of our own, I guess. To kind of confirm whether or not he was giving us good information, what his motivations were. And this would involve a series of weeks when we could go into different communities, work it in, try to find out whether or not—just set up little tests for him too. 'Cause if we knew information from other sources we would come at it from a different angle and see if he was gonna give us intelligence that we knew for sure from the American side.

And the—the elders, you know, some of them, they wanted something in return. If they're gonna give us intelligence, then they wanted their brother who was imprisoned a couple months ago, they wanted him released. He's just a mullah, he was just praying or something like that, and he's a good guy and he was taken by mistake. And so, I would—if that was the case a couple times I actually sent up to higher and explained the situation. If we were in a new valley I wanted to develop rapport and the elders were really asking for a mullah. In this situation it was a mullah, and he happened to be the son of one of the elders. It took us about, I think about a month of going back and forth with my headquarters trying to actually locate the guy, and who he was captured by. And find out which prison he was in. And eventually we had a ceremony—he was flown in on a helicopter and we reunited him with his son and we did this with a big—we had brought all the elders in and basically built it up like, Hey, you asked for this, you know, And we finally got it for you, so work with us in this valley. Give us intelligence. We know there's Taliban in the area because we're getting radio hits. We were rocketed two nights ago. Where's that coming from? Give us some intelligence.'

I don't—you know, sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't but at least peer-pressure works in every society. So at least a couple of those elders that were there out of the fifty, they started coming to us. And they would come to us with a

kid or a grandchild in their hand for medical treatment in the morning, but really that was to give us information about what was going on in the valley.

KOLLATH: Were you ever able to ply these folks with material goods? Give them things that they couldn't get in their own supply channels?

MCNALLY: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Strangely enough the—a couple of the elders, I don't know how they heard about the miracle blue pill but they really—

KOLLATH: What blue pill is that?

**[00:44:42]**

MCNALLY: Viagra. Somehow—yeah, I never asked, but my medics had some Viagra. And some of the elders would kinda pussyfoot around it initially, and all of a sudden you'd see these Afghans just kinda like little quirky smiles on their face. And they would talk through the translator, they were asking about the pill and, you know, use certain hand gestures. And like, Alright, we know what they're talking about. And I never thought about it either. I don't know what the group medic was thinking when my medics were asking for supplies of Viagra through the supply chains but, you know, twelve guys in the valley, some desert valley asking for Viagra, but it seemed to work 'cause we got some good intelligence from these elders. And they considered it pretty important to be—what's the word—I mean, it starts with a V, can't think of the word. But, vital—very important for them to be vital and I guess a sense of their loss of manhood if they can't perform certain obligations. And we helped them in that department and they helped us with intelligence. [Both laughing]

MCNALLY: So it worked out well.

KOLLATH: Was there [laughs] was there ever a time some intelligence that you received from a native source put you into a bad spot, whether it be ambush or something like that, that you can recall?

MCNALLY: We—not an ambush but in a difficult situation. Just dealing with the locals, I guess. We were getting a lot of intelligence when I was in Nangarhar Province, Jalalabad area which borders Pakistan at the Khyber Pass area. And we were gettin' a lot of intelligence. And we knew the drug trade—it's a big poppy growing area. And we knew the location of a lot of drug treatment plants—because of strange religious codes that they have, they could grow the raw opium in Nangarhar, they could harvest it, but the raw product would then go across the border into Pakistan and, you know, the Waziri tribe or just south of the border they could hold onto the raw product but it couldn't be processed into the final product in Pakistan, or in the tribal areas. So it'd actually come back just across the mountain ranges, and usually in snow-capped areas, and it would be treated and refined there with, you know, it requires a lot of acid and a lot of supplies.

And so—and then once it was completely processed it would go back through Pakistan and kinda knew that Russian mafia and a couple other groups were



taking it from there and distributing it throughout the world. But the difficult situation—we were getting this intelligence from people that we trusted, local people we had tested, we had vetted and the border commander, Haji Zaer [sp?], was a pretty good guy, he was actually educated in England, he had a home in England. He controlled some oil fields and pumps, I think, in Afghanistan. But he understood that these drugs were no good. And the goal is, we didn't want to hurt the farmers, farmers got the money from whomever. We wanted to hit the processing plants. That was what I think was the Achilles heel 'cause you're not cutting off support with the locals if you hit those.

So here I am trying to establish rapport. Haji Zaer [sp?] pretty high up there, and there were a couple other, Governor Din Muhammad [sp?] and there were a couple other generals in the area who understood these were bad. But I was put in a tough position, I could—we had the resources to take these out but at that point it wasn't a focus of the US engagement, I guess, the mission over there. Although I didn't understand why not because that's where the money was coming from, primarily for the Taliban to recruit and do everything they were. So I was put in a tough position there of having to tell these guys who were putting their lives at risk, because we would actually give a couple of our sources little GPS trackers to actually get into the location. We taught 'em certain surveillance techniques so we would actually get good grid coordinates for some of these locations. And they were putting their lives at stake to get us this good information, this good intel, and we weren't able to act on it because any mission that I submitted to higher was denied because we weren't gonna do that at that point. But it seemed kind of counter to me. I don't know if that answered your question. Kind of roundabout maybe.

**[00:49:58]**

**KOLLATH:** Yeah. But it leads to something that I think is intriguing as well too, is this idea of, you're in the field, you see things that are going on, you see ways to make improvements or see things that should be done, yet you're kinda hamstrung, obviously, by the chain of command, the mission as a whole. Can you talk a little about that? The things that you saw personally that you could've improved upon but were unable to do?

**MCNALLY:** Unfortunately, yes. Because—I mean, twelve guys, Special Forces, you're mission focused. Everyone's Type-A personalities, you wanna get the job done. And yet for whatever—whether it be politics within the military or at the Pentagon, what I saw was Nangarhar Province, you know, right across the border, we knew the location of UBL [Usama Bin Laden]'s, several of his safe houses. And his method of travel, pretty rudimentary, we got a couple snapshots but he doesn't stay at any place more than four hours. He has a pretty good entourage of guards around him and he—and the locals they kinda like him, they adore him. So they're gonna protect him.

But using some of those human contacts that we had, occasionally we would know if he was in the area. But the military, they have—it's very strange to

explain. I'm Green Beret Special Forces, we're fully capable to do everything. And yet, there's certain—in the hierarchy of the Army there are quote unquote, I guess, what they consider guys that they were just gonna set aside to just catch the high value targets. So they were throwin' all of the resources, whether it be helicopters or planes, just—they were given a lot more. So if they don't get him, I guess, is it gonna be egg on the general's face who have thrown all the resources to these teams that they've set aside as opposed to just some Green Berets who are—'just' some Green Berets—just Green Berets who are in a valley, operating, who—we've developed the intelligence, we know the locations, we've done certain reconnaissance in the areas. Wrote up some plans, hypothetical situations to initiate missions, because we knew—I mean, we don't wanna be caught flat-footed. If he comes in the area we already wanna have a plan in place of generally how we're gonna do it.

And so I would send up a report saying, Good source: UBL is in the area. And for whatever reason we would be clamped down at that point. We would get a reply—typically we wouldn't get replies for hours, but in this situation, within minutes of sending up a report, Okay, now you guys are confined to this two kilometer area. My guys who had been developing intel are going, What's the deal? So, and maybe twenty-four hours later, this entourage of vehicles with the team that they've thrown all the resources at, they come barreling into the valley and tell us, Alright, give us all your intel. What's UBL doing? You guys are stupid, you know. One, he only stays in one place for four hours. Two, everyone in the country knows who you guys are after if you come barreling in like this. So twenty-four hours later they would come, they'd stick around for ten hours and then they'd go out into the area that UBL was operating before. And at that point it was pointless. He's already back across the border, whatever. As soon as this entourage comes flying into the valley. And me and my guys, we're left just kinda noddin' our heads, going, you know, we do all the work, the ground work to develop intel and we're the ones who probably the best able to do it at this point. You can't fly in helicopters without being noticed, the Taliban are pretty smart. They have people up on mountains and just very simple signaling devices day or night to notify people of what's going on. So it was very frustrating from that standpoint of, we do the ground work and we're the ones best capable of following through. And instead we get slapped down. And this was in—this wasn't at the full bird colonel level, this was at echelons above reality that this stuff was comin' down from. And it's frustrating, you know? The guys start questioning, Why do we even try then? at that point. But it's the mission so you just drive on.

**[00:55:08]**

KOLLATH: Is that the—the situation you just described, is that the closest you ever got to Bin Laden?

MCNALLY: Yeah.

KOLLATH: Um, how do you keep your men motivated after something like that? How do you keep them focused on the job at hand?

MCNALLY: Well, one, usually at that point there's some pent up anger, so we gotta do—gotta hit the weights or something like that immediately [laughs]. After a situation like that, 'cause, uh. And then you just start doin'—well you start doin' some little squirrely things. Like, I learned my lesson pretty quickly not to be too exact in my information that I sent up. So I started being intentionally obscure about what we're gonna go do—to not allow that to happen again. Unfortunately, couple times they did catch on and one—another story—one time we had good intel of—I don't know if this is classified—of a certain colonel from another country coming in and recruiting for the Taliban. And we had a pretty good record of this. And he was coming into a relatively close location. And I didn't put any of that in my mission that I wanted to go do and they sent down for clarification and I was just—I tried to be intentionally vague again and they're like, No, that's not good enough. And then finally I said—against the wishes of my intel sergeant and my warrant, who said, Don't do it McNally. Don't put it down. No, they'll understand. I'm sure they'll understand, they'll wanna get this guy. And so I put it all in, all the identification numbers and references to all the previous intel reports dating back months, of who this guys was. And yes, probably for international relations-wise they did not wanna go after him. And once again it was the not only no, but no and you're not going outside of this two mile area again. And the guys on my team were right. They said, See. We told you McNally. Like, Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm the impetuous and idealistic captain yet. But I was still learning.

KOLLATH: You served nine years in the military?

MCNALLY: Nine years.

KOLLATH: Are things like this, things like that, part of the reason why you eventually decided to leave the military?

MCNALLY: Yeah, part of it. You start becoming frustrated with—you're told to do a mission and yet you're hamstrung. You can't—you're not allowed to do everything you can. And you're on the ground. Yes. That and I was done with my team time so I was a captain, soon to be major, and I was gonna start occupying more desks and more office positions and I didn't want that. So I chose to go into law. I don't know how that works out. I think I'll be stuck at a desk there too. But—

KOLLATH: Um, can you talk to us—one of the first times you experienced enemy fire? A fire fight?

MCNALLY: Uh, no I'll talk about the time I didn't experience a fire fight though. Um, we were in the Gardez area and we had certain—I would call it Slot A [??] Teams, we could direct and find radios and stuff like that. And we built up a little—not a method, but a pattern. A guy who was in the area who had developed a pattern of communication of setting ambushes against Americans up and down this valley. One night Navy SEALs had gone out, they ambushed 'em, one guys was killed,

another guy seriously injured. And that kind of—they didn't like that too much. And we were operating in the same area. And so me and my team, we decided to do things a little differently.

[00:59:42]

They had been movin' around on vehicles a lot and so I told the guys, Alright, we're gonna do things on foot. So we came at this compound one night that we kinda had an idea that—where the command and control node was—we came at it from I think the east. So I set up the vehicles about two miles off from the objective. Sent in half the team to recon the area and we knew at that point—we were getting feedback that the guy was in fact up on his radio. The guys on the ground had a good feel of the compound and how to get there. So we pulled off that night and two or three days later, according to the pattern I figured that he was gonna come up again, so this time I situated a team up on the north and sent in the same four guys who had already had boots on the ground, they knew the general layout of the land. And sure enough, for some reason the battalion started ordering a bunch of teams down the roads and the guy—I think it was number forty-seven in our target list—he comes up and he starts directing, like, The Americans are moving. And this is eleven o'clock or midnight and starts directing people to put out ambushes on the roads against Americans.

And I'm close enough that we're actually getting real time radio feed from this guy. And it's not—it hasn't been over-classified at that point. So I'm feeding back to the battalions, Alright, they're setting up ambushes in these areas, on these routes. So the Americans diverted a lot of their traffic on the road. And there's only a win—you know, they're pretty smart, 'cause there's only a window that they'll come up on 'cause they realize that we can direction find some of their stuff. And so right before they closed that window, we moved up with the vehicles. The four guys went to the south side of the compound because I could approach from the north with the vehicles and we were able to cordon off the compound. And expecting some fire, at that point, 'cause this was a command and control node for the entire valley it seemed. And this guy, number forty-seven, was a medium value target. Strangely enough didn't get any fire. It was kinda strange, surreal. Because of all the places we kind of expected it, this was definitely one of 'em.

But instead we didn't, we had a couple guys that tried to squirt out from the south but they didn't realize that I had four guys on the ground that had been there for an hour or two hours already and were covering the doors. So they came out of the doors and they immediately flashed them with their white lenses and they were stunned, we got 'em. Did the initial search of the compound and after dawn broke we found a couple more guys, one of them hiding underneath a wood pile. And we found the radios and the big old spotting binoculars that they had been using. So I like—I was particularly satisfied with that mission because I felt that, one, we were in the right place in the right time to help divert Americans away from ambush points and two, we were actually able to capture the command and control group for this valley. And after that things kinda settled down.

KOLLATH: Can you talk about –

CREW: We gotta change tapes.

**[Part III]**

CREW: All set.

KOLLATH: Tell me a little bit about the enemy that you faced over there.

MCNALLY: Smart. They don't have technology but because of that they use their mind more I guess. I think as Americans, the American Army tends to rely on its technology and brute force rather than its wit and its mind. So, they're organized. From the very first deployment over there we recognized that there's a shadow government. I mean, it's an insurgency so there's a shadow government, they have different regions of command set up. They have transportation cells, finance cells, communication cells, recruiting cells, training cells and operational cells that go out. And the buildup is, they do some training and then they're gonna do little confidence targets hits, they're gonna hit little outposts that are manned by just Afghan soldiers to build up confidence and then from there they'll venture into more audacious engagements against Americans and what not. So. They're smart, they know how to use the terrain, it's their home ground. And it's hard to move into any valley without them knowing what you're doing. You can't go in on a vehicle without being noticed, you can't go in in a helicopter without it being noticed. Some teams had good success with horses or donkeys, back-packing into some valleys that were otherwise inaccessible. And it seemed to be good conditions to do HALO jumps but—what was I gonna?

**[01:05:29]**

I mean, they're smart and because we use vehicles you have to be very careful not to establish any type of pattern because a couple of the, I guess, worse ambushes that took place it was in the middle of the daylight, it was on a route that Americans were using and they had set up an ambush position with fallback positions. They had prepositioned ammunition, additional RPGs at three successive positions to fall back into. And they took advantage of one, a pattern that had been set, two, the terrain that they were using, they knew how to fall back into a river valley, to some vehicles to make a fast get-away that the Americans weren't going to be able to get to, in their vehicles initially and, I mean, that cost the lives of two guys in my company as a result of that engagement.

And simple things like overcoming thermal imaging at night. We—unable to confirm it but we think that sometimes they were using wetted down blankets - wool blankets of some sort - to help defeat IR or thermal imaging, up in the mountains and stuff after engagements so that the cameras would just kind of quickly pass over them and they'd show up as a small heat signature. So, very smart. It's a chess game I guess. You know, trying to stay one move ahead of

them and because their survival instincts I think are that much more so honed and they've been using them for the last twenty, thirty years, it's a steep learning curve as an American to go over there and realize that guys that have been facing this for how many odd years have a leg up on you initially. Just from the standpoint of mental acuity, I think.

KOLLATH: Can you talk about their weaponry? The things that they used?

MCNALLY: They for the most part, AK-47s, 74s, RPGs. We were capturing a lot of Chinese weapons as well. The Chinese Mark-17, which is their grenade launcher. H-N5s, which are these thermal bunker buster basically. They go in and suck all the air out of a cave or anything. And just very simple, anti-tank mines. There were—we saw the progression by the third tour that they were picking up a lot of techniques from what was goin' on in Iraq. And we picked up chatter, you know, there were Chechen and Russian mercenaries in Afghanistan from the very beginning helping them do training. And so, that was initially limited to what we thought was sniper training. And that began to progress into IEDs, daisy-chaining four or five anti-tank mines together using different types of detonation techniques depending on the terrain. And, you know, relatively simple compared to—they didn't have helicopters, they don't have tanks but because they have the land to their advantage, we have to go out and get them. So they have that advantage at all times. And to try to bring surprise to the battlefield, from the American standpoint, is probably the hardest thing to do. And that's the only way, in my mind, that American lives weren't gonna be lost. You can't just—our team had this—we had a group philosophy in the team, we weren't just gonna drive around senselessly. Each team, you're given a lot of autonomy.

**[01:09:37]**

I operated Nangarhar Province or Gardz area—it's a huge area the size of several counties here in Wisconsin—and it's my area to just to kind of roam around in, do with as I please. And there was—I don't—certain dynamics on some teams, they just wanted to get into the fight, I guess. And I think perhaps a little half-hazardly because they were using themselves as bait. So it was my team's philosophy that we weren't gonna do that. We were gonna be much more so methodical, we weren't gonna get caught in an ambush because as soon as you get caught in an ambush the initiative is against you at that point. They have advantage of position, time, probably weapons, probably surprise, everything's against you at that point other than the Americans fire power. You could always—usually overcome with 50 cal and Mark-19s. But why put yourself in a position where you're trying to dig yourself out? So my team's philosophy was we weren't just gonna drive around senselessly. Everything we were going to do was gonna be methodical in our approach, we weren't gonna use same roads twice, we weren't gonna set any patterns as far as times, locations and we were gonna catch them off guard. And we did, pretty successfully I think.

KOLLATH: Well, was there any one thing about them that you just found completely surprising or shocking, like a tactic or a weapon that they used or anything like that that you just thought, Wow, this is remarkable.

MCNALLY: Um, well their speed, I guess. Because we had body armor on most of the time, it's an additional thirty pounds. You know, they—I mean, they were like billy goats. I mean, they would just jump up and down these rocks, rock faces that I think rock climbers would have a hard time here in the US. And they would just, like, little toe holds and they would just do it and flip flop sometimes. And because of that they just had such agility. It wasn't their weapon systems, it was just their agility. They were able to just move around so quick that it—I thought that was impressive, in and of itself.

KOLLATH: Was there anything that you learned from their tactics or from their strategy at all that you could apply to what you guys were trying to do?

MCNALLY: Yeah, we learned to, depending on the situation, disregard orders and get rid of our body armor so that we were lighter to go after 'em. And that worked. You can't hike to the top of a mountain with this additional body armor on and expect to be able to engage the enemy effectively. At that point if you've gone up 1,000 feet, you have maybe two quarts of water on you. You've downed those by now just to try to stay hydrated and you get to the top so. We learned that at certain points we were willing to take risks that higher wasn't, so that we could be more effective on the ground. And other teams did that as well. Unbeknownst to command, they don't know. That's alright because they didn't need to know either.

KOLLATH: Did it pay off?

MCNALLY: Yes. Yeah, it did.

KOLLATH: As far as—talk about the terrain over there.

MCNALLY: The terrain?

KOLLATH: Mm-hm.

MCNALLY: Brutal. You know, there are only two paved roads in the country. From Bagram, Kabul, Bagram to Kandahar. And then from Kabul to Jalalabad to the Khyber Pass area. So everything other than that is rocky, gravelly roads. Sometimes it would take us an hour to go a mile or two because the roads are just that rough and you've—we always had a gunner too, so you had to be concerned about the gunner who was up there tryin' to just always scan. Some of the trails into these valleys—the roads were, are thin to accommodate just a Toyota Hi-Lux, I think they were using over. So at one point we had the GMVs, the military Humvee type, and we had ammo racks on the sides and a couple weapon mounds off to the right side for the driver, or for the commander. And we went through this one

pass and the rocks were so tight we just scraped all that off. We just—up and down our vehicle everything just fell off. We thought we could make it but we didn't, so we just threw everything in the back and said, 'Alright, well, we're just a little more streamlined.' Another valley, to get into we had to have—one side of the wheels were in an irrigation ditch and the other side was on a little donkey path, basically. So, pretty difficult.

**[01:14:44]**

And that was when we were lucky we had a road to get on, sometimes it was a lotta trial and error. The maps weren't that good. We were dealing with Russian maps or we were dealing with one to 100,000 scale maps with a thirty meter contour interval. Which, what that means is you could hide a ninety foot mountain or hill on this map, there's no terrain that shows up on a map if it's less than ninety meters high. That's huge. I mean, ten stories, nine stories high and it's not gonna show up. So a lot of it was frustratingly trial and error to get around on the terrain and find out what roads were there that weren't on the map. Or weren't there that were on the map. And having to deal with the guys in my team cursing me underneath their breath as I run into another dead-end road and telling them, Alright guys, we're turning around again. Uh, Captain, it's two o'clock in the morning. Yeah, I know. Let's go find a hill to go camp out on 'cause I'm tired of this too.

So for me, and having been there, it's understandable. People ask why haven't we caught UBL. There's not the road network that we have here in the US that exists over there. And the mountains are just inhospitable. It's just a harsh terrain and nothing—it's not easy to get anywhere in that country. It takes hours to get into some of these valleys that are seven miles away. Here you go thirty, forty-five miles in less than an hour. To go forty-five miles in Afghanistan, sometimes that would take two days. And for the elders, you know, on foot or something like that that would take three or four days. I mean, just for us Americans in vehicles, two days to go forty—I mean, and that's just brutal but that's all day looking out for IEDs, trying to be at a hundred percent and then at night pulling security. Pretty stark.

**KOLLATH:** What about—obviously it's a mountainous country, what about the elevation there? How did that effect you and your men?

**MCNALLY:** It didn't, not too much. We never ventured up into, like, the Hindu Kush above 10,000 for the most part. We operated in some areas in high plains, Kandahar, Bagram, you know that's 6,000 feet. Went over a couple passes that were at high altitudes but other than that, um, Tora Bora, we went up in there. That was at 9,000 feet, 10,000 so that was right at the altitude that high-altitude sickness starts kicking in but it didn't affect any of the guys on the team. So it didn't affect anyone.



KOLLATH: So you brought up IEDs. As far as IEDs go, did you see 'em—talk about how they were deployed, the frequency, that kinda thing.

MCNALLY: Initially you'd see maybe one mortar round or artillery round in the road, or an anti-tank mine and a wire leading back. You know, so—or maybe they bury the wire for a little bit but it would lead back probably to the guy that was gonna detonate it. That was initially, later on it started—you know, they started using the cell phone detonation techniques with what I talked about before, the daisy-chaining, they could actually take two or three of the anti-tank mines and wire them together so that all four of them would go off together. Pressure plate detonation techniques. They started steering away from that because—I mean, pressure plate a vehicle rolls over it, just the pressure sends it off. The problem with that is they've—the potential for a local van or local Afghans to roll over it, and that happened a couple times. We—two times on my team, we had a—I mean, luckily I guess—we had a van or a vehicle with some local Afghans that happened to be driving in front of us and, you know, it was a pressure plate IED that they put in the road for us. And literally, you know, fifty meters in front of us it goes off and I don't think it was intended for them, I'm pretty sure it was intended for us but the person that was setting it in made a couple of mistakes. But that gravitated—they realized that so they went away from the pressure plates to either wire, wire was the next stage, and then after that it was the electronic or radio detonations. And, you know, cell phones, I'm tryin' to think—remotes, remote controls, really. Anything that would send some type of signal to a receiver to kick off a current. Pretty good, gotta hand it to 'em. I mean, they're smart. But you gotta out-smart 'em.

**[01:20:05]**

KOLLATH: Can you talk a little bit about the camaraderie that amongst you and especially when you were leading your Special Forces group, can you talk a little bit about that?

MCNALLY: Pretty tight. You know. Everyone at that point in Special F—we all know what we've gone through as far as training just to get into SF. And so there's that immediate recognition of each other's capabilities, and then once you actually go into a combat theater didn't matter. We—you know, sittin' up on that hill in the Arghandab Valley for three weeks we had some pretty good [coughing]—pretty good political discussions at night. Everyone had different views of things. But the camaraderie is such that morning came around and it was, Okay, what's the mission for the day. Didn't matter what the heck was discussed the night before, how heated the argument became, it was, Alright, we need to get the job done. And I can tell—I mean, it's the closest thing to family I think you can get without—maybe even closer to family at some points, you know. Each other's lives are at stake and you're going through such intense situations where you just—at peak alert everyone is just ready. And you just go through some really tough situations together.

And those guys I will never forget for as long as I live. And I stay in touch with some of them yet and they've been going back now, I did three tours some of them have gone back for five or six tours already. So they stay pretty busy. Yeah, it's—I mean, whether it was a play at work, you know, we'd lift together, you try to run together although it kinda difficult to run in Afghanistan. You have to keep your cardio up, so we would actually go running with nine mils and stuff and sometimes just little circles inside a compound, like a hundred meters wide. You just try to run up some stairs just to try to build your heart rate up. You'd go up far enough that the guys in the compound could provide over-watch fire if something happened.

But it was a good time. I mean, overall, it was a good time to be there with the guys that you're there with. And you understand each other's strengths, weaknesses, you accept them and you know that some people are gonna be down at certain points and the people that are strong are gonna carry you through and then it'll flip flop. And inevitably, you know, on the team everyone tries to figure out what your button, your hot button is so they try to push that as much as possible [laughs] and kind of try to get your blood going.

KOLLATH: Did you take any—did your group take any casualties when you were leading?

MCNALLY: Not my team, no.

KOLLATH: What did you guys do for recreation, if you had time for recreation?

MCNALLY: You had to make time for recreation. Brew some coffee over a fire, talk. Yeah, occasionally we would go into Kabul or Bagram if—that was a nicer area, more well established, so we could take showers, use phones, watch a couple movies I guess. They had some little movie viewing areas. That was the recreation, was getting out of the valleys where we knew that your life was perpetually at stake I guess. Cause you can't let your guard down, I guess, when you're outside the wire, per say. Play some basketball. Try to make light of different situations, joke around about the different locals if they were comin' to us with some just ridiculous situations. I'm tryin' to think. Yeah, just try to make light. I mean, when you're out patrolling just try to make light of things that are or should be serious but you can't really take them serious because it's beyond your control. So that was kinda the recreation when you're out for a stretch at least.

KOLLATH: What's it like to wake up every morning and know when you're out on a mission that your life's at stake, that you're in danger?

**[01:24:42]**

MCNALLY: Intense. You're pulling security throughout the night. So twelve guys, we had—we always had two guys up at any one point, you pull an hour shift maybe on the

250 caliber machine guns with night vision. And you're—I mean, you're watching all the time, pulling out binoculars, pulling out spotting scopes, trying to figure out—it's the chess match. So you wake up in the morning going, Okay, what was their move last night? What are they trying to plan for today? How are we gonna try to counter that? And I mean, it's exciting because it seems that you're—it doesn't take much for the brain to kick in that this is in fact survival, this is your life at stake. And your senses are at their peak in a way. I don't know, it's a strange thing. All the sudden you're operating at two hundred RPM whereas back here in the United States you're operating at fifty RPM. You're focused on survival. The very basics. You're focused on out-witting the enemy. And trying to get them caught, or trying to set up feints too, we would try to make it look like we were doin' something so that they would bite off on it, you know, so that we could do a counter-move against them. So it's exciting. You wake up every morning just so focused and operating, I think, just at such a high level that you come back from that and it's nice to relieve that stress but—

KOLLATH: How hard was it to readjust once you were back home?

MCNALLY: Readjust or readjusting still? [Both laughing]

KOLLATH: Yeah.

MCNALLY: It's difficult. Yeah. You come back and you start—you know, pay a cell phone bill, just bills, little things. This is petty. This has nothing to do with survival. It's difficult from that standpoint of you were the—I was operating basically a county-wide area, trying to root out Taliban. I was the American in charge. And to come back to just a different role is hard. And to come back and—I mean, the word surreal is over used, but that's what it is comin' back. To have to worry about petty things again. Petty, civilized things, you know. As opposed to just survival.

KOLLATH: What has—you've been home for a while now, you've been in school and, what's it been like being home now and seeing how people around here react to the war and that kinda thing?

MCNALLY: I don't know, maybe I'm an anomaly. I mean, there are different reactions to the war and I can—I just wish that—my reaction is I wish people would get the right information to form good opinions. For the most part, I mean, people are very supportive. I mean, that's one of the, I guess, the differences between what's going on now and what took place in Vietnam. That even people that are against the wars that are goin' on aren't against the veterans. So that has been nice to know that that isn't going on. What was the rest of your question?

KOLLATH: As far as the, you know—well I guess this could lead into something else - what do you think about the war? Like, has—and has that changed since 2001 until now? Both wars.

MCNALLY: Both? Uh, well I was in Afghanistan when Iraq kicked off and all—pretty much all the guys on my team were of the same opinion of, you know, what the hell are we—what are we doin' over there? We saw immediate shift of resources that we were getting from Afghanistan go over to Iraq. And we thought at that point that the focus had been lost, you know, what was 9/11 about, who was behind it and let's accomplish that mission first. Since we know with certainty who was behind it. So it seemed very peripheral to go into Iraq without a clear mission statement. Afghanistan I've—I mean, I've always been behind that action. I mean, from what I'm talking Iraq I don't necessarily agree with. I never saw a clear end stated and the connections weren't made for me there. But Afghanistan I've always been behind. Just the way we're prosecuting it I have criticisms of.

KOLLATH: Such as?

[01:29:40]

MCNALLY: Uh, too many people over there. I was talkin'—I talked about it before with—you have to have a low signature in order for the Afghan people to understand that any success isn't coming from Americans, but, you know, we have over 20,000 people over there, Americans, and of those, in my opinion, the very small number are actually doing any missions and stuff. So it's difficult to pass on any credit to the Afghans if you have 20,000 Americans there. That's a large signature. And if it woulda been continued to be prosecuted as it was in the beginning with just Special Forces, small teams, all credit going to the Afghans themselves, Afghan National Army, or the government, people would be, I think, a lot more accepting. And the Taliban would have a lot less beef against us. 'Cause that's always a divisive factor for the Taliban, is the Americans are here, they have such a large signature, there are gonna necessarily be more accidents that take with Americans there, and the kids throwing rocks at you. How fast is that gonna happen if you have isolated teams operating throughout the country? It's hard—what's the saying, familiarity breeds contempt. And so, if we woulda stayed a little bit more aloof I think, but—we coulda been more effective with a smaller signature of guys on the ground. And in the end, you know, who're we tryin' to get?

KOLLATH: Moving forward what can we do to do better?

MCNALLY: [Laughs] Uh, get the commanders on the ground more, more autonomy, I guess. To do—call the missions that they need. And see fit—less armchair quarterbacking. Predator feeds, 10,000 feet, it's fed back here at the Pentagon initially unless somebody pulls some strings and it gets fed back to the group or the battalion level. Usually people view it back here and they're canceling air missions for guys on the ground from here in the United States, that doesn't make any sense. To me, at least. I don't know, I think regroup and refocus and understand that this is an insurgency. And not allow state politics to direct what's going on and say, Alright, battle's over. We're into building and civil military

affairs. Phase Four of a counter-insurgency. When in reality we're in Phase Two. If you say we're in Phase Four before we reach there then the focus of the people is going to be entirely wrong. And you won't have the necessary foundation for the nation building that needs to take place. And that'll set you back and that seems to be taking place right now. We've forgotten that the Taliban are there, we didn't entirely root them out and, they're building up strength and being a little more audacious.

And help from the media would be good too. You don't hear any of the news back here of Taliban bombing children's schools and, you know, teachers and killing them. But you always hear about the wedding party. Goin' back to the Taliban, they're smart, they know how to use the media and the news sources and you can be takin' fire from a compound and direct an air strike on it and you can bet that the next morning all the sudden, oh, those weren't rounds that were whizzing by your head, that was just a wedding party that was taking place. So people have to understand that that's going on. The Taliban's using the media to their advantage. I mean, so, I wish a little bit more accurate information was fed back to the people here in the United States and not just—there seems to be a lot of negative, in my opinion, negative information given to the US public about military actions going on. Or just pieced together, not a complete picture I guess. [Coughs] Excuse me.

CREW: I should change tapes.

**[01:34:19]**

**[End of Interview]**