



Drone Warrior (10/17/17)

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Noah Rauch: Good evening, everyone. It is my pleasure to welcome you all to tonight's program. My name is Noah Rauch. I'm the senior vice president for education and public programs here at the 9/11 Memorial & Museum. As always, we welcome our museum members and those tuning in to our live web broadcast at 911memorial.org/live.

Tonight we are joined by Brett Velicovich, author of the memoir "Drone Warrior: An Elite Soldier's Inside Account of the Hunt for America's Most Dangerous Enemies." It is an unprecedented insider's account of America's covert drone war, revealing how, 16 years after 9/11, technology has revolutionized America's ability to surveil, track, and eliminate terrorists.

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Velicovich is a U.S. Army veteran who served five combat tours in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia. As an intelligence member of a Special Operations task force, Brett was part of an elite group of soldiers who utilized drones to conduct counterterrorism operations. His team was responsible for the kill or capture of 14 out of America's 20 most wanted terrorists.

In tonight's conversation with the museum's executive vice president and deputy director of museum programs, Cliff Chanin, Brett will discuss his story and the reality of drone warfare in today's world. We'd like to thank Brett for sharing his time and insights with us, and we are also deeply grateful to the David Berg Foundation for supporting in part the museum's 2017-2018 public program season.

00:01:38 Please keep in mind that there will be a book sale and signing of "Drone Warrior" after the program just outside the auditorium on our atrium terrace. And now, please join me in welcoming Brett Velicovich.

(applause)

00:01:55 Clifford Chanin: Thank you, Noah. Welcome, everybody. Welcome back, many of you. And, Brett, thank you so much for coming to talk about your book, which is really a fascinating inside account of some very difficult and intense times, but ones that seem to define the new terms of war and the new capacities that the U.S. military has developed in recent years. Let's start, though... Because your story in relation to the military really does begin with 9/11. And I wondered if you would go back to... I think you're just at the early stages of your college career.

Brett Velicovich: Yep.

Clifford Chanin: And 9/11 happens, and what happens to you?

00:02:38 Brett Velicovich: Well, I think like everyone, you know, 9/11 upended all of us. For me, it was... I was 17 years old. I was a freshman in college at the University of Houston. And, you know, I knew nothing about, about this world. You know, I knew nothing about terrorism. I knew nothing really outside of, you know, my small town in Texas where I grew up. And so when 9/11 happened, it just... It changed everything that, that I knew.

00:03:05 And for me, it was always, you know, my parents said, "You're going to go to school, you become, you become a banker or a doctor. That's your path." And so, you know, that was the plan. That was always the plan. And for me, you know, just, after the attacks happened, I found myself just very curious to understand, you know, why there were so many

people out there that would... that would do this against us, and why there was so much hate against Americans.

00:03:36 And so for me, it actually took me to the library, and I just locked myself away in the library of the university and just tried to understand everything I could about Al Qaeda, terrorism, and just learn from, from all this history. And for me, it was just this call, call to serve after that that made me say, you know, this is, you know, what I was meant to do, you know-- to join the military. And since then, you know, war is really all that I knew.

00:04:01 Clifford Chanin: Did you, in joining, have a particular goal in mind in terms of what part of the service you wanted to be involved with?

Brett Velicovich: Yeah. I mean, look, for me, it wasn't... I was never really, like, the tough guy, you know, in high school. You know, for me, I always felt like the best way I could give back was to join the intelligence community and be a part of it in that way. And so I felt, you know, instead of going in as an infantry guy or a communications guy, that intelligence was what, what I would do. And I had only planned, really, to stay in for about four or five years and get out. And it ended up being a lot longer than that, because I just found, you know, so much excitement in what I was doing and just this feeling that I was at the tip of the spear, really, really, giving, giving back.

00:04:46 Clifford Chanin: Now, one doesn't sort of just stand in a place and raise your hand and say, "I want to be part of this unit" that you wound up with. What was the path within the military, some of which happened to you without your stepping forward to volunteer for it? They had found you in some ways. They'd observed what you were doing. What was your track that, at least as far as you understand it, brought you into the intelligence side of things?

00:05:10 Brett Velicovich: Yeah, so when I finished intelligence school in Arizona, I rose my hand and was one of the few people that decided, you know, to

jump out of planes. So I went to Fort Benning to go to airborne school. And I remember my mother thinking I was crazy because I was never someone that would ever do anything like that. But for whatever reason, I just wanted to jump out of planes. And what that actually did was allow me to be selected to be a part of the Special Forces organization as an intelligence support guy.

00:05:39 And so the rest of the people who graduated with me from intel school, they were all shipped off to Alaska. And they formed this new, what was called a Stryker brigade out there, which was an infantry unit. And, you know, it was one of the better choices that I made to do that.

00:05:57 And so... 19 years old, I was basically at Fort Washington... Or, sorry, Fort Lewis, Washington, supporting for a Special Forces group which at the time was very focused on the Pacific region. And so even though Afghanistan was just kicking off, I remember the Special Forces guys being really angry, because they were being told to focus primarily on the North Korea threat at the time. And you can even see today, we still have the threat out there.

00:06:25 But they were mad because a lot of the other Special Forces groups around the U.S. were getting to go to Afghanistan, and these guys had trained practically their whole lives to fight, and they wanted to be a part of it. And so finally they agreed to stop focusing on that area and allowed them to deploy.

And so I was on the first real deployment from this group into Afghanistan, and spent my 21st birthday there, you know, just, you know, thinking just how crazy it was to be there when my friends back home were all, you know, having fun and partying and had no idea, you know, what I was experiencing being in Afghanistan.

00:07:04 And so from there I just kept deploying, and after a while, I, you know, had done so many deployments, that I started getting noticed by some of these more elite organizations. And one day I got a call out of the blue to

come interview for an organization that I, you know, had no idea what I was getting into. And just, like, the same curiosity that got me into the Army in the first place was... You know, I basically signed up, and said, "Yep, let's, I'll go do it." And I was eventually was selected for, for a more elite group that was very focused on hunting down some of the top leaders within these groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS and pinpointing their location with drone technology.

00:07:46 Clifford Chanin: So let's talk a little bit about how those units function, because you have various components that are contributing to a particular mission and a particular target. So tell us first about how you begin to build a case that someone out there is a target worth identifying, following, and then sending out a mission either to capture or kill.

00:08:11 Brett Velicovich So there's a lot of different methodologies that go into it. What a lot of people talk about, and it's, you know, essentially widely known, is a method called Find, Fix, and Finish, and Exploit and Analyze. It's a cycle that takes place whereby which we are taking information from the battlefield, from fighters that have been captured or killed, and exploiting the information, whether it's documents that we've found on them, whether it's intelligence information that we've gleaned. It can be, come from a variety of different sources. And we use that information, then, to go to the next guy.

00:08:45 You know, imagine in any organization out there, they have a chain of command, or essentially a hierarchy of that organization. We're working our way to the top. We want to take out, essentially, the C.E.O. of that organization, but sometimes we can't get to them. So we start from very small pieces of information, whether it's something as easy as, you know, maybe we know that he travels to the same, you know, doughnut shop every morning. And we know that he goes there from a particular point in time during the day. So we can put surveillance on that location, and then use that information to follow that person and have them lead us to their higher, and work the way up the chain. And it's a process that can take days, or it's a process that when you, you know, see the bin Laden raid, can take years.

- 00:09:32 Clifford Chanin: Now, it's interesting. You really are seeing these terror groups as organizations with bureaucracies that within those organizations, there are people who are doing administrative stuff. There are people who are doing battle planning. There are people who are making strategic decisions. And how is it that you, from above, or from sources of, from the battlefield, how do you begin to piece together a case? Is it as simple as, you know, putting on a chalkboard, "This one does this, that one does that"?
- 00:10:01 Brett Velicovich: So, you're absolutely right. I mean, these organizations do essentially have a bureaucracy. And when you look at, like, a typical Al Qaeda cell or an ISIS cell, they all really have very similar functions within it. They'll have a guy that does their admin stuff. They'll have a person that does logistics. They'll have a military commander who's in charge of, you know, planting bombs. They'll have these really regimented structures.
- 00:10:25 So when you're missing one of those out of your group of individuals you're looking to go after, you know that there's a gap you need to fill of intelligence information. Maybe you don't know who the military commander is of that ISIS cell that you're trying to stop from conducting an attack on a particular city, and you need to find that information. And so that kind of helps us piece together the puzzles to understand, you know, who to go after, where they may be located, who they're connected to, and really, in the end, how to get to the top of that organization.
- 00:10:56 Clifford Chanin: Now, from the earliest point in your training for this special unit, it's very demanding in terms of the logic that you've got to follow and explain to the people who are training you, and then you get out into the field, and you really are put to the test very quickly. There's a quote you have from a Special Forces commander who says, "We're going to risk our lives because of your decisions," meaning you, the targeter. "You are choosing who lives or dies because you're the guy who finds the target. You're the guy who's signing a target's death warrant."

- 00:11:32 So we talked a little bit about the division of labor on the terrorist side. What's the division of labor within a unit like yours? There are people running drones. There are people doing intelligence sweeps. There are operators who are actually going out and doing the raids. There are the targeters. How does that all work together?
- 00:11:48 Brett Velicovich: I mean, so, look, the intelligence community is, is huge. There are a ton of different functions involved in that. And there's... nothing I did was ever done alone. I mean, that was, that was just a fact. But there's different moving pieces of the puzzle. There's folks that deal with imagery analysis. So they take satellite information, and they can provide us up-to-date photographs of, of locations that we're staring at. Then you've got guys that do typical on-the-ground spy work that might be looking for sources on the ground. Then you have folks that do surveillance. And all of that information is, is compiled together, and it helps us kind of paint this picture, you know?
- 00:12:23 Typically when you hear of these missions that, that occur overseas, you might hear about, you know, the Navy SEAL team that went and kicked down the door and, and captured that terrorist in a, in a, you know, far-flung country around the world. But what you don't realize is how much intelligence actually goes into that for that to happen. How does that Navy SEAL know exactly where to be at that point in time where that terrorist is going to be located?
- 00:12:51 And that's what the intelligence community does, and that's what we did from a targeting standpoint, was, our job was to tell them, "That individual that we're going after is in this house. He's surrounded by a bunch of bodyguards. They all have weapons. He has, you know, two or three children, a wife." We're filling in the picture so that they know exactly what they're getting into. I mean, even down to the minute detail of, which way does the door handle open, so that when they go in there they don't get stuck. Or, you know, where are there windows, or...

00:13:23 With drone technology, we can see a lot of things that people can't see from the naked eye. So we could literally even tell potentially, you know, what part of the house people are located, because of the type of signature they exhibit through the drone cameras. So the detail and precision involved in this type of stuff is just absolutely incredible.

And it comes down to, really, a lot of changes that happened, quite frankly, after 9/11, where these intelligence agencies came together and started sharing information, versus kind of holding it together and saying... You know, the FBI's saying, "No, this is my information," or the C.I.A.'s saying, "No," you know, "We've got this, you can't handle it." Everyone's now come together and they've shared that information for the greater good.

00:14:05 Clifford Chanin: Now, what does the drone do for you? You were there. You weren't flying the drone, but you were getting the data from the drone, and with your colleagues, sort of putting this picture together of your target. What is the capacity of the drone, and what makes it different than other forms of surveillance that might have been available before?

00:14:28 Brett Velicovich: So the great thing about drones is that they really have the ability to just loiter above an area for hours at a time, now days at a time. So, literally, we can be watching something, and, which before, you know, an airplane could maybe stay in the air for four, six hours at a time, had to leave-- it was very expensive. You have people on the plane. Now, a drone can stay up in the air for, for just an incredible amount of time and watch minute details.

00:14:57 So when I was watching these targets, I was literally, you know, watching them wake up in the morning, watching them take their kids to school, and at the same time, I was falling asleep with them. I mean, we would pipe in the video feeds from the drone cameras into our, our living quarters. So I would literally go to sleep at night watching these guys go to sleep, and so that I knew I could sleep, as well.

And so what the technology does is, it gives us the ability to go on the offensive. I think a lot of times, for years, we've always been so reactionary to attacks, terrorist attacks, that have occurred. And that's... a lot of times, you know, the reason for that is, we just haven't had the foresight to... to know where these... we know that somebody is... is threatening us. We just don't know how to find them and stop it before it happens.

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Think about the way that wars have been fought for generations, you know? Vietnam or World War II. You didn't know, necessarily, that the guy in the trench 100 yards away from you... You didn't know who he was. You just knew he was coming to kill you. You don't know who that person is. You just knew you had to kill him first before he hurt your... You know, the people around you or yourself.

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With drone technology, we can actually see who that is. We can see them from different angles. We can make a conscious decision whether or not this person should be captured or they should be killed. And I think a lot of times there's this narrative that exists that that technology takes you away from the fight. But I think on the contrary, I mean, you're seeing more than you would have ever seen normally when going after some of these individuals that we hunted down.

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Clifford Chanin: Let me refer to one of those individuals. We can talk about a couple of these cases. But it was, I think, as you describe in the book, a very significant moment for you in terms of the first of the targets who wound up being killed because you had determined that this was a target who was responsible for coordinating suicide attacks in the northern part of Iraq. And you gave him a nickname, or a codename, of Scarface. Take us through, if you would, the development of the targeting on this person, how you first learned that this might be someone who posed a threat, how you developed this case against him, and then what happened in terms of the information that you had processed and turned it over to the Special Forces operators.

00:17:14 Brett Velicovich: Yeah, so Scarface was an interesting target. And if you read the book, you'll know why we call him that, because of the way he went out in the end, which was very interesting. But the reason we determined he was a target was... It goes back to this structure of how groups like ISIS function. So we knew that there was a commander that... that generally is in charge of all of Mosul, Iraq, and sometimes south down to Tikrit, the Tikrit area.

00:17:33 So we know that there's a overall ISIS commander that's in charge of thousands of fighters. And so, because, you know, the drones that we're utilizing are some of the most sophisticated things in the U.S. government's arsenal, there's only so many of these drones that exist. So we're not going after these lower-level guys that may be implanting bombs in the road and, you know... Horrible people as it is, we're going after, like, their boss's boss's boss.

00:18:12 So this guy in particular, we said, you know, "We know this individual exists. We just don't know who it is." But we had captured what we call an administrative emir. So essentially an ISIS commander who is in charge of, like, the paperwork, and paying fighters, and dealing with all the oil profits. We had captured him, and he provided us the name to this overall commander of northern Iraq, who we codenamed Scarface.

00:18:39 And so that basically told me, "All right, this is my next target. I need to find this guy." So using a variety of different intelligence methods, we were able to pinpoint his location, just south of this area called Baiji, which is a massive oil refinery where ISIS has stolen millions and millions of oil and sold it off. And he was... he was there because... He was there to collect a ton of funds for ISIS. But we pinpointed him to a location.

00:19:08 And this was one of those cases where he was such a big target that me as being in charge of that operation from the intelligence side, this was where we determine whether or not we should actually take this person out, conduct a raid that night, or follow that individual, because he's going to be connected to the number one, the number two, the number three in the organization. He's such a high-ranking guy.

- 00:19:35 So from our standpoint, you know, I said, "Let's follow this guy around." You know, "Let's see where he leads us, and spend..." We were going to spend days, essentially, following him around and mapping out his locations. And then once we decided to go after him, we would hit all those other locations with raids, and hopefully it would turn up some of the more senior-level commanders, as well.
- 00:19:57 Well, what happened on that particular occasion is, as we pinpointed him, because we all are connected within our organizations that are targeting in different parts of the country, another group of Special Operations guys, Rangers, they were watching the same drone feed that I was using, that I was using to target, and they knew that we had found Scarface, and they were maybe ten minutes away from this location that Scarface was at.
- 00:20:28 So they took it upon themselves to go barreling through his location, his house, you know, crashing through the compound walls and surrounding the house and demanding Scarface, you know, come out and surrender. But Scarface being the, you know, evil person he is, you know, at that level, they generally go out with a fight. And so he just began... He basically sent his wife and his kids out of the house, and he took all the weapons, compiled them in, in his compound, and he just started just spraying and praying, you know, shooting out the windows and shooting at the Rangers.
- 00:21:06 And, of course, you know, these Rangers are, you know, very, very well trained. And so... but after about, you know, ten rockets shot into that house, they finally, they finally stopped him. But that was, you know, one of many... We were doing that every single night. I mean, we were, we were doing these missions over and over and over again. And that was one instance where we got, you know, a higher-level commander that we were going after.

00:21:31 Clifford Chanin: If the... If your... If a unit is in place and conducting a raid, are you still in contact with them during the point at which they're moving on a target to let them know in real time what's happening as best you can see it inside that target area?

00:21:50 Brett Velicovich: Yeah, so generally, part of... Part of what I did, essentially, as an analyst is... My job was to present information to, you know, the SEALs, the Green Berets of the world, and let them know what they were getting into. So I can do that because I'm getting a ton of information from our drone live feed. We're presenting that to them. Even on the way out, we're letting them know who might even be found with them on targets, and things like that.

00:22:17 But while, as they're, they're heading towards the... the location that they're going to strike, they're constantly getting updates from us at our command center, letting them know, "Listen, you know, these are some of the things that are changing. Here's what you need to look out for." Maybe some people showed up. So that they are constantly in contact with, with... you know, what's going on in the field.

00:22:40 Clifford Chanin: You know, it's... It's fascinating to think that you're conducting a mission like this, but in other centers of U.S. forces-- let's take Iraq or Afghanistan but wherever, really-- that there are others doing the same thing. So there are multiple missions being planned and conducted simultaneously. You talk here about drones and this intelligence and surveillance capacity as really creating a different kind of warfare. This is a new generation of war fighting. Do you think that we will now integrate into any aspect of our war fighting-- not just Special Forces and those very targeted raids, but any aspect of our war fighting-- this kind of drone surveillance capacity? Can you imagine that this is not going to be everywhere in the military?

00:23:28 Brett Velicovich: Right. Look, we will never fight another drone... Or we will never fight another war without drone technology, hands down. And that tells you how important it is. It used to be, you know, Special Forces guys, they'd go out in the field, and they didn't care about having

surveillance above them. They'd go hang out in the... in the bush for weeks at a time, and they'd conduct their mission, they'd come back home.

00:23:49 But now, after 9/11, the technology has provided so much insight to the war fighter, and it's allowed them to, you know, save lives that would have otherwise been lost had they not been able to see what was ahead of them, that they'll, it will always be used in that capacity. And these defense contractors now, they can't churn out enough drones because so many people need them.

00:24:12 You know, the first drone I ever, I ever laid my hands on was in Afghanistan, 2003, and... I think it was 2004, rather, and it was what was called a Raven. It was a little small drone about this big. It was meant to be carried on the back of an infantry guy, and essentially, you'd throw it up in the air, and you would be able to see maybe five to ten kilometers what's in front of you. And I remember, you know, the guys that I was with that had, that had this drone, they invited me over to come fly it for the first time. And I was just, you know, just amazed by the technology.

00:24:50 And that was very rare, for anyone to have, to have a drone. I mean, this was, this was... This was very rare technology to have at the time. And so, you know, I threw it up in the air. They gave me the controls. I'm zipping it around, you know. It was really hard to control at time, really loud. Just buzzing like a sound of, you know, bees out there. And I just remember thinking, like, you know, how incredible it was, but at the same time, like, if I was the enemy, I could see this coming for miles.

00:25:18 And then they said, "Okay, go ahead and land it." You know, and I'm, like, "Okay, I have no idea how to land this thing, but I guess I'll, I'll do my best." And so when I came in to land, I basically just crashed it right into... right into the concrete, and it just busted open and broke everywhere. And this is a \$200,000, \$300,000 drone. I mean, it's a pocket drone, but this is a lot of money. And, you know, I'm a young... You know, I think at the time, I was, like, a young private in the Army still. And I'm just

thinking, like, "Oh, my God, I'm going to have to pay for this the rest of my life."

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And then, you know, the Special Forces guys just... They just saw the fear in my eyes, and they just started laughing at me, because they were, like, "Look, this drone is meant to break apart upon impact. That's... it's meant to do that so that if the enemy ever finds it, they can't put it back together. They won't know how to put it back together." And so now that, now that very... That same very drone, the Raven, is, you know... Pretty much every infantry company that's out there in the Army has one of these. So it's proliferated so much now over the years that what used to be technology that was only reserved for the elite of the elite are now across the board helping do things more than simply just counterterrorism.

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I mean, you've got even Army engineers using these things to help them build bridges. So a long way... long story, but, you know, to get to the point of, we will absolutely fight every single war now with drone technology, because of how useful it is.

Clifford Chanin: That raises the question, of course... I mean, some of it's commercially available, and the technology keeps improving, I'm sure, so the other side gets drones, too. Are we, do you think, able to maintain the qualitative edge? Certainly we should, against terrorist groups or non-governmental groups, but there's also the whole possibility of other states and their development of drone capacities.

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Brett Velicovich: Yeah, it's very dangerous. Actually, a story just came out I think this week, that... It was a brilliant title that said, you know, "Are the Chinese about to start selling the A.K.-47 of drones?" And what that meant, essentially, was, the Chinese developed a Predator-like drone that they started saying they were going to sell to just about anyone that could afford the price tag.

00:27:28 We've always been... had, had as, as America, the ability to have the best, you know, U.A.Vs. out there. I mean, and people want these drones from us. They want Predators and Reapers, but we won't sell them to them because of how incredible the technology is. But now you've got, you know, these... You know, China and Russia, that can basically build them, or have either stolen the plans for how we built them or just have figured out how to create it themselves without that.

00:27:58 And now they're looking at proliferating it. So it's very dangerous from that standpoint. But at the same time, now consumer drone technology is getting to the point where it rivals some of the same stuff I had access to in the military. I deal a lot now with consumer drone tech, because of the fact that I'm adapting it in other ways, not just for war, but the fact is, like, you know, you will see these... ISIS now, they've been using drones-- consumer drones you can buy, \$500 a pop. They stick a grenade on it.

00:28:32 They've been flying them over Raqqa, or they're flying them over Mosul, and they've been dropping them on Iraqi or coalition forces. And that's, that's dangerous. When someone can pick up something that anyone can buy off of Amazon and weaponize it, we got to do something about it, because it's not going to end.

Clifford Chanin: Are there defensive measures that we can take against something like that?

00:28:53 Brett Velicovich: I think there are. I think it's slow-moving. There's a number of different countermeasures that are being developed, but we're a long way away from being able to zap a drone out of the sky, that's for sure. But there are technologies that are being developed that can determine the speed and trajectory at which a drone is traveling. They've put, in some military bases overseas now, these systems that can detect if a consumer drone is headed their way so that they could create a defensive posture for it.

But knowing what I know about, you know, drones and consumer drones, it's pretty hard right now, unfortunately, to be able to stop an attack from somebody that just simply wants to do harm. And that's, that's, I think, the scary part about it.

00:29:36 Clifford Chanin: You know, one of the things you write about in terms of the Iraqi experience you had, was the human intelligence that was provided that allowed you to flesh out pictures of some of the targets that you were developing information on, intelligence from Iraqis who were sympathetic to our side and who saw the threat from some of the people you were targeting. You came to know these folks as cougars. Talk a little bit about how that material came to you, was integrated into the profile, what risks some of the Iraqis took to provide this information.

00:30:11 Brett Velicovich: You know, there's just, just an incredible amount of people that were out there in countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, that were local citizens that you would think, you know, maybe they wouldn't be happy that U.S. troops were, were there, and yet, they wanted nothing more than to help root out terrorism within their country.

00:30:29 And so we oftentimes partner with essentially...They call them local partner forces that are out there because I can't walk into the middle of Baghdad without being noticed, you know. So these guys can go in there, and they can do surveillance. They can take photos. They can get into places that we wouldn't otherwise be able to go. And a lot of them sacrifice, you know, everything to protect their own families. And there were just a number of different people that I remember that risked their lives to really help, help the cause.

00:31:09 Clifford Chanin: You also found yourself tracking families. That was a way to get at some of the targets and understand how they move, where they might come home to, these kinds of things. It raises the question, of course, of targeting not just of an individual who might be a threat, but the risk of harm to wife, children, extended family around him. This extraordinary power that we have also has this terribly sharp cutting edge to it. And the term "collateral damage" is a horrible term, but it's

come to be described... It's come to describe civilian casualties through military action. What was your experience with this kind of, of incident? Were there casualties, family-type casualties of some of the things that you undertook? Did you deliberately not do things because of the risk of such casualties?

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Brett Velicovich: Yeah, I mean, our job was to be precise. My job was to be right. And, of course, you know, whenever there has been loss of life, it's, it's tragic. These are the things that keep us up at night. You know, we didn't, we didn't sign up... We signed up to hunt terrorists. We didn't sign up to hurt innocent people. But I cannot... I can personally tell you many times when I was hunting an individual and we let them live another day because we were so worried about a woman or child being hurt in the process.

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And I can't remember a single time that a commander made the decision to conduct a drone strike, launch that missile, knowing that a child or a woman would be hurt in the process, or a noncombatant, rather. And that still holds true today with, with how drone strikes take place. There is this, this... You know, this understanding that you have, this near-certainty that a noncombatant will not be killed in the process. But, of course, mistakes happen. But again, those are the things that, that keep us up at night. We didn't just go on with our day and say, "Oh, well." I mean, we... there's a serious amount of accountability within our organizations.

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A lot of times, you know, I have these conversations with folks that are against the drone program. And that's, that's fine, you know. You know, it's, it's understandable, you know, the opinions they have. Whether or not they're misinformed because they don't have the information, that's, that's here nor there. But a lot of times, I talk to them specifically about just how, how precise we try to be, and that, you know, what's the alternative, you know, with going after these people, I mean...

00:33:45

Clifford Chanin: What is the review like after an incident like that, where you know there have been civilian casualties? What happens internally to your group?

Brett Velicovich: So what will happen is... You know, investigations will occur to understand exactly what, what happened, who made the decision, what went wrong, why we didn't know that, you know, a child was a part of this. But this... the accountability is very strong. You know, we like to say in our organization that we had enough rope, essentially, to hang ourselves with. They gave us a lot of room to do our job, because they knew that they had some of the best people on the planet, the best people trained to do this job. But at any point you slip up, you're out. You're gone.

00:34:30

And so besides the fact that we knew we had the operators'... you know, the door kickers' lives in our hands by sending them out on these, on these raids, we also know that, that, yeah, we call them targets, but these are real people. These are human beings that we're dealing with. And we may be looking at them from, you know, 20,000 feet in the air, but at the same time, these are real lives that are being affected. And so accountability is very important there, and there's just, you know, an investigation that occurs, and if there was fault, you know, then the person's gone.

00:35:05

Clifford Chanin: The other side of the coin is a story you tell-- and I won't come to the conclusion, just set you up to tell a little bit about it-- of a man you were tracking who had two children in a car.

Brett Velicovich Yeah, so, look-- I saw a lot of terrible things. I mean, when you're watching people all day long... Like, think about all the things you do when you don't think other people are watching. You know, like, that's what we saw, so, uh...

Clifford Chanin: All right, we're going to stop the program right here.

(laughter)

00:35:30 Brett Velicovich: But in this particular case, it was... It was a terrible ordeal. We, we were following a guy that we knew was tied to Al Qaeda in Iraq. And one day, we saw him go, you know, pick up what we believed to just be his children, a little girl and a little boy, and put them in the back seat of his car. And it was just another day.

00:35:53 We were going to follow this guy around and figure out, you know, maybe if he could lead us to other, other targets. He pulls up in a neighborhood, and basically, a massive market, with the vehicle. He gets out, gets out of the car, children are still inside, and he runs, basically... Well, he walks, essentially, through the market, and, you know, we think, you know, he's going to the store to pick something up.

00:36:17 And, you know, a minute later, the car explodes. And what he had done was, he had basically driven that vehicle into that market, and he used the kids as a diversion so that the security forces wouldn't check his vehicle for explosives. He used them as a mechanism to get away with murdering, you know, a lot of other people. And those are the people we hunted down. I mean, these weren't... These weren't people that robbed a, you know, liquor store or stole a pack of cigarettes from the corner store. These are some of the most evil people on the planet, and they deserved everything they had coming to them.

00:36:51 Clifford Chanin: Were they aware, or did their awareness grow over time, of their susceptibility to being surveilled and watched from above?

Brett Velicovich: Yeah, I mean, we made them paranoid. I mean, our teams made them paranoid. We had... we would get information that everyone, everyone in ISIS needs to... You know, if you're driving around in a vehicle, you need to get one with a sunroof so you can go look up in the sky and see if there's a drone overhead.

Or, you know, if you're driving for a while, you know, in Iraq, get out of the car and stop and look around to see if you can hear the drone. And, you know, we know this. So we're not flying right over on top of them, you know, staring at them, or flying low enough for them to hear us. We understand their methodologies to the T.

00:37:31

At the same time, I remember at one point, we were, we were capturing so many of them, that they were... They were telling themselves to stop wearing wristwatches into their meetings because they thought we could track them somehow by their Seiko, you know, time watch, you know? But that's, that's a good thing. That's a good thing that we made them so paranoid and afraid of this that it makes them slip up. And it makes it so that they can no longer hold meetings as casually as they would before.

00:38:01

And so every time they make a mistake, we're there. And the U.S. government doesn't forget, you know? For decades, all these fighters that are over there that think they got away with it, they're on a list somewhere. And they'll eventually be found, whether it's, whether it's this month or years from now.

Clifford Chanin: So, I mean, stimulating paranoia or concern is also a way of limiting their effectiveness.

Brett Velicovich: Exactly.

Clifford Chanin: If they're looking behind themselves, they're not looking forward.

Brett Velicovich: Exactly, it's a pre-emptive measure to stop them from being able to move freely.

00:38:26 Clifford Chanin: Now, you alluded to it before in this moment you talked about, going to bed with the soundtrack of your drone tracking who's sleeping elsewhere. But you describe life in the box, which is the name that was given to the command center that you had. And it was, to say the least, very intense. And I think your tours were four months long because, obviously, someone decided it was really enough just to be in there for that long. Because it sounds like four months were pretty much 24/7 with some sleep, when you could get it, stuck in. So describe what that environment and that atmosphere was like and what it did to you.

00:39:08 Brett Velicovich Yeah, I think it, it creates this, you know, psychological... When you're... we were at the... We were hunting these guys down every single day. And knowing that I had this, this power to do something about terrorist attacks or all these threats that we face as a country, that keeps you up at night—you never want to stop.

00:39:35 And that can be... you know, just wear on you over and over again, doing that for days. I would go for days without sleeping because I just didn't want to miss a thing. You know, when you think about the box, it might be as big as this room, you know, where we'd have ten TVs on the wall. Think about walking into a Best Buy and seeing a ton of TVs on the wall. That's essentially what the box was.

00:40:00 We had multiple drones up at the same time following multiple targets. You know, there was never a moment's rest. If one guy, you know, went, you know, stopped at a market and went inside and was having tea, we had another drone following another individual, and maybe he was doing something different. And so after a while of doing that for months on end, they literally forced us to go home, because doing that for four, five months at a time is just, just wearing.

00:40:29 I would come back from these deployments, you know, 50, 60 pounds lighter. People would barely recognize me. They started calling me Casper because I was so white, you know. And, like, my family didn't recognize me, you know. And then I'd come back home and I'd want nothing more than to go back over.

Clifford Chanin: Right, you weren't very good at coming home.

Brett Velicovich: No-- I hated it, you know? And I loved every minute of what I did, and I wanted nothing more than to be a part of that. And you kind of lose friends and family in the process, because, one, you can't tell them... You can't tell them what you're doing, you know, at that time.

00:40:59

And you can't... you can't... The only people you can really talk about this stuff to are, like, the people that are doing this work with you. And so they really become your family. So you can't even hold a normal conversation with, you know, your girlfriend or your mother. It's, it's, becomes this just boring conversation, because they had no idea what you just experienced.

And in your mind you're just cycling through all these targets and you're thinking, "How can I get to the next one?" Like, " Oh, I just..." You know, in every deployment, there's one guy we missed, so that's the one you're always thinking about-- the next deployment, how can we get him? And so you do that for years. It can change you.

00:41:34

Clifford Chanin: You went out at a certain point, and then you went back in. And so what was the... I mean, you were trying to break, and yet you couldn't break at that point. You wanted still to stay in the fight. I mean, it sounds like, from your descriptions of the relationships with your colleagues, I mean, this is a brotherhood—or family-hood, if you will, because there are women who were also in the box who are part of this-- that at some point seems unbreakable to you in terms of where your first commitment must be.

00:42:07

Brett Velicovich: Yeah, for me it was always, you know, put the needs of the country over my own. I... but at the same time, seeing every single day the, you know, the benefits of what you're doing, that's... Not many people, I think, in the intelligence community nowadays get to see...

When they create a report or they, they find maybe a threat or a terrorist that we need to go after, a lot of times, that information, they write the report, and it just goes up into the big brain that is the U.S. government, and maybe, you know, the president or a congressman or whoever, they look at that and they use it, you know, for some of the stuff that they do.

00:42:47 What I was doing was, every single day, we were capturing or killing, you know, people... Some of the most evil people on the planet. I was seeing that over and over. And so even though that's... you know, every, every... A lot of businesses, they say, you know, "Come work for us. You'll see how great you're, you know, you're doing, and what you're achieving." And then after a while, you know-- I found this in the civilian sector, was that, you know, I looked back and I'm, like, "What am I... what am I accomplishing from everything that I'm doing here?" And that was the one job that I could see my accomplishments firsthand.

00:43:21 Clifford Chanin: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Now, there's one who got away, who we still read about in the news, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who is the emir of ISIS, and who had been reported dead, but turned out not to be dead. You were tracking him at one point, and so you had a bead on him, and then he disappeared. Tell us that story.

00:43:41 Brett Velicovich: Yeah, so, at the time... So the current leader of ISIS right now is a man named Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. A lot of people associate him as, you know, the original founder of ISIS. He actually wasn't the original leader of ISIS. The original leader was a guy named Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. And he kind of shared the group's leadership responsibilities with a guy named Abu Ayyub al-Masri, who was this Egyptian Al Qaeda in Iraq guy.

00:44:07 So my job, along with other, other folks that were working this mission set, was to capture or kill those two individuals, the leaders of the Islamic State. But at the time, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, he was maybe number three or four in the overall organization. And we discovered him because of... We started just, you know, just getting all these interrogation reports and all this information about this guy, you know, this guy who's come on

the scene very quickly, got out of prison. He seems to have a lot of command and, you know, wasta, essentially, which is very rare.

00:44:41 A lot of times when Al Qaeda or ISIS fighters got released from prison, they always kind of were put on ice for a while because they thought they were turned somehow by the U.S. government. So I knew that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi likely had a lead to finding the number one and number two at the time. This is 2010-- March-April 2010. So we started hunting Baghdadi in hopes that he would take us to the original leaders, who had not been seen for almost four, five years. Well... We, we find a number of different leads to him, including some of his family members.

00:45:19 So we arrest his brothers, and we put them in prison. We interrogate them. We get all this information about... about kind of filling in the details of who Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is, and what we realize is that he create... He actually created this courier network that allowed him to pass letters to the number one and number two. And only he and a few other guys understood who were the individuals that actually physically would take those letters to the number one and number two, wherever they were hiding around Iraq.

00:45:51 And so we figured, "Let's find him, and we'll, you know, find Baghdadi, and we'll find the number one and number two." So we found a location for Baghdadi, in Baghdad, and we conduct a raid at his location thinking that... We believed he was in the house. We get there, and he's not there. But this individual is there that's... This guy that was a kind of a former Iraqi officer, intelligence officer. And he turns out to be one of these couriers, one of these three couriers that filled a long chain that led to where the number one and number two were. And we said, "Where's Baghdadi?" And he said, "You just missed him. He was here ten minutes ago." So, you know, we literally had the chance to get Baghdadi in 2010.

00:46:39 But what that raid actually allowed us to do was, we used that courier, and we turned him to follow him, used drones to follow him to the next courier. And Baghdadi set up that network, you know, fairly cleverly. He didn't tell the first... He only told the first courier who the second courier

was, but the third courier didn't know who the first one was. So we had to spend... The only way we could have got to these guys literally was with drones. I mean, I can't think of another way we could have done it, because they didn't know each other.

00:47:10 So what we did was, we took that letter that that courier was holding, that Baghdadi had written for the number one and number two, and we put drones over the courier, and we said, "Go meet your next guy." And sure, you know, a few days later, he went and met him. So we followed that guy. Once he handed off the letter, we followed him. Then he handed off the letter to another individual. We followed him. And eventually, out of the three couriers, the last one, you know, took, took a half-a-day trip out into the middle of the desert, just north of Tikrit, Iraq, and to a small little tiny hut. And we said, "That's, that's got to be where they are."

00:47:47 So we conducted a mission, and the number-one and number-two leaders were hiding in a hole like Saddam Hussein was, in a spider hole. And they got into a massive firefight. The two leaders had suicide vests on, so they actually pulled the cord on their vests during the firefight, blew themselves up so they couldn't be captured, killed their own child in the process, that was there. And that was the end of them. But what it did was, it allowed Baghdadi to fill the ranks. And now, you know, we have ISIS and what it is today, with him being number one.

00:48:21 Clifford Chanin: But ISIS has been greatly reduced. We see about the fall of Raqqa just yesterday or today. And the methods seem to have carried over in terms of the things you've been describing in Iraq-- Afghanistan, as well, but we've been focusing on Iraq-- but the same technology seems to have been very effective in terms of extending this war into Syria and reducing ISIS's footprint there.

00:48:44 Brett Velicovich: It's effective to an extent-- I mean, this is... When I, when I left Iraq, late 2010, we had brought ISIS to the brink of extinction, so we thought. We had put thousands of fighters away in prison. You know, good soldiers lost their lives putting these fighters in prison. When

we got, when we left, and U.S. forces were told to pull out, the Iraqi government-- Prime Minister Maliki at the time-- said, you know, "Release all the fighters."

00:49:09

They basically called... They basically called our operations center and they said, "Who are the top 50 guys that are in prison right now? Because we're going to release all the rest." And I said, "50?" I mean, we were capturing 50 a week. There are thousands of these guys. And so those same fighters, you know, went straight back to what they did best.

And we at the time thought we had brought them to the brink of extinction, and we pulled out thinking, "Iraq's safe, don't worry about it." And, obviously, you saw what happened. So I worry that, yes, we've captured Mosul. We captured Raqqa. ISIS is getting again to... It looks like they're getting close to their demise. But, you know, Baghdadi is one of the smartest terrorists I've ever hunted. I mean, this guy knows how to adapt. I think, if we don't get him very soon, we'll find him on another battlefield, like in North Africa. And so we have to be very, very careful that we don't sit there and say, "We're done, we've won."

00:49:59

We have to, we have to go after, you know, till every single one of them is gone. And we can't, we can't, you know, walk away from that fight and stop supporting, you know, these forces out there that we're working with.

Clifford Chanin: You describe, in the environment in the box, it's a very flat hierarchy. And you were not a senior officer in terms of your rank within the military, but it came to you to make targeting decisions that were not the province of your superior officers. I mean, how did that work? Because it doesn't seem like the military hierarchy was really fully in place in that environment.

00:50:36

Brett Velicovich: Yeah, I mean, look, the organization I was in, you know, rank was relatively immaterial. We didn't wear rank. We didn't walk around saying, "Listen to me, I'm an officer," or "You're a sergeant." It

didn't matter. All that mattered is, is what, you know, how you operated, how you thought. You were only as good as your last deployment. You had a reputation that you built because of that. And typically in the military, you think of this hierarchy structure, you know. But we didn't care about that because it didn't matter. All that mattered was going after these guys. And so if you, you had what it took to do that, then you had what it took to, to hunt them down. Just, rank, rank didn't play a role in that because it was, it was a distractor from the mission.

00:51:21

Clifford Chanin: What was your interaction like with the Special Forces operators, the guys who were going out and doing the raids? Were they coming in and trying to track the intelligence with you, or did you give them a complete package of information and then off they went? How did that work?

Brett Velicovich: Yeah, I mean, these are... These are a great group of guys. They're funny to work with. But some of them liked to understand the intelligence. They liked to understand every little detail about the targets we're going after, down to their family and hair color, eye color, all that stuff. Other guys, they didn't care-- they just wanted... They just wanted you to tell them, you know, where he was and are there... Are they going to walk into that house and find a bunch of guys with A.K.-47s pointed at them?

00:52:02

And I remember... You know, one... I remember, the first time I went drinking with one of them... You know, they'll tell you a lot of very interesting stories. But one of the things that I'll never forget is, this operator said to me, he's, like, "I don't care... I don't care about who we're going after. You know that better than I ever will. My job is to hunt them down. But all I care about is getting back to my family alive." And that stuck with me, because that was another thing that, you know, speaks to, that these people's lives are in my hands, because I'm the one saying, "This person needs to die today," you know? And so they're trusting in me that I'm telling them the right information.

00:52:40 But a lot of them like to, you know, you know, not deal with the intel, and just like I would never tell them how to kick down a door. I'd never tell them how to shoot a weapon, because they're, you know, these guys are the best of the best at that.

Clifford Chanin: You did leave. And what was the decision behind going out and leaving this behind you? Because it is compelling. You did have a strong sense of mission. You had accomplishments there, and, obviously, building a reputation and career. And yet you decided to stop.

00:53:11 Brett Velicovich: Yeah, I think there are a lot of things. For me, mostly it was, I took a step back, and I looked and I said, you know, "Am I going to be doing this the rest of my life?", you know. I went to this funeral of one of the guys who died overseas, and I remember thinking... just seeing, like... just that I had no emotion at all. I mean, I just... you know, it was just, like, doing this for months and years at a time, I just became so desensitized to this life.

00:53:43 And I just wondered kind of, you know, who... You know, does my family even know me anymore? Do they even remember me? And so I joined... you know, again, I joined, also, at a relatively young age. I mean, but at the same time, all I knew was war. So I was worried about the civilian world and how, how... If they would understand some of the things I went through. So I said, you know, I decided to give it a try, and got out and went, got my degree, and started trying to find my place in this world.

00:54:11 And I found, obviously, that I had a lot of knowledge eabout drone technology, and at the time, it was becoming... starting to be used a lot more in the civilian sector, in the consumer space. And so I got approached by some really incredible folks that wanted me to basically teach them how I could use the same technology for war and use it for wildlife conservation. So, and I was... you know, me being curious, I was, like, "Of course. Let's go figure out how we can do this."

00:54:40 So we flew out to Africa and spent months out there trying to understand how drones can be used to save endangered species. And what we found was that, you know, these guys out there that are poaching these animals and killing these elephants and selling their tusks and killing rhinos and smuggling out their horns, they're just like an insurgency, just at a rudimentary level. They're not... they're not ISIS with RPGs and all these fancy weapons, but, you know, they're out there, you know, hunting down, you know, these, these animals and crushing this ecosystem that exists.

00:55:15 And so for me, I really found a lot of... I found a passion in being able to help people through my knowledge of drones and use it for, you know, greater good.

Clifford Chanin: Has it had a material impact on certain areas where the drone protection plan is in place for some of these animals?

Brett Velicovich: Yeah, well a lot... what's great about... In the military, we were using drones a lot of times... We didn't want people to see where the drones were, all right? We didn't want them to know we were following them. With something like this, it's actually good that the poachers know that they're walking into a conservation, and drones are flying around. We want them to hear it—we fly, then, lower. And it's, it's a deterrent.

00:55:50 And so, so that's a good thing. But, you know, it's Africa, so everything moves very slow. And so part of the... part of the thing that we finally convinced the Kenyan government to do was get them to actually legally allow drones to fly out there, which was just... For years they weren't, they weren't doing that, because they were worried about something hitting one of their planes or hurting a tourist or whatever. And now they finally, as of February, said, "We see the benefits of this technology." And so now a number of conservations are getting drones and doing the same thing.

00:56:24 Clifford Chanin: So is that really where the bulk of your activity is now, in sort of these civilian applications?

Brett Velicovich: Yeah, I spend pretty much all my time now doing the humanitarian space. So we just, last, last month, my wife and I, we went out to help with Hurricane Harvey and Hurricane Irma. We brought a bunch of drones out there to help some of the first responders fly over some of the floodwaters, help people understand the damage to their homes. So I'm always looking for these projects that I can kind of lend my time to, and really help them understand the benefits of the tech.

00:56:58 Another, another group we work with is... essentially a Doctors Without Borders group, that goes into some of the cesspools of the world, the more dangerous spots, and they provide medical aid, and they need drones to help do surveillance around their camp because they're in some pretty dangerous areas. And we built a drone program for them, so that... And we gifted them drones. And now they're, they're using them regularly, and so... 2.3 million drones were sold last year alone. They're talking about three million this year. We're going to see a lot more of these things in the sky.

00:57:30 Clifford Chanin: Remarkable. Let's see if we have a couple of questions from the audience before we wrap up. And I will ask you... Starting over there, Michael, but hang on one minute. We'll get you a mic, and ask you to take it and stand up when you get it. So we have one mic that's not working, it seems. And now Dani will come with the mic from the other side.

00:57:54 Man: Thanks. And that last point you were making about the number of drones that are in the sky, can you just talk a minute about the dangers that are involved with civilian and commercial aircraft?

Brett Velicovich: Yep.

Man: You know, drones getting in the way?

Brett Velicovich: Sure, yeah. It's a great point. A lot of folks... Well, for a while-- for the last, probably, year-- I've been saying, "Well, you know..." People are always worried about a drone hitting an airplane. And I've been saying, "Well, that's never happened, so why are we all, you know, freaking out about that?" But literally this last week, a drone crashed into an airliner in Canada, and a drone hit an Army helicopter two weeks before-- actually over New York City-- that was flying for the president's U.N. speech.

00:58:41 And so it's brought a lot more people saying, like, "How can we make this technology safe, but at the same time useful to help people?" And so there are a number of different companies out there that are building tech to ensure safety. One, a lot of consumer drones now are made by a company... A lot of the ones people buy are made by this company called DJI, which has what's called geofencing built into it. So if you flew that drone around an airport, within a few miles of that airport, the drone wouldn't even take off, wouldn't even be able to launch. Or if you were flying a drone into the airport, it would actually act essentially as a virtual fence, and it would stop it from flying in there.

00:59:19 Now, the problem is, not every drone manufacturer has that technology built into it, but that's one way that I think people can help with that. There's also a lot of counter, what they call counter-U.A.S. solutions that are being developed, as well. I was on... literally on the news talking about a gun that can shoot electromagnetic waves at a drone and basically make it think that... spoof it to make it think that it needs to return home to the operator. There's just so many interesting things that are out there.

00:59:50 NASA is building an air traffic control system that would be able to determine where drones are located, who's flying them, where the operators are. You know, there's a lot of very great people out there that are using the technology in the right way, but there's always going to be that bad actor out there that's doing something stupid with it.

You know, like these wildfires in California. People have been flying over them and making it difficult for first responders to put them out. And those are the people that I think the technology has to be developed for to where either they're held more accountable for flying in these areas, or at the same time, you know, they understand the consequences that they're getting into when they're using them.

01:00:29

The other thing that we keep hearing about now are these... People are taking drones and they're flying over prisons, and they're dropping contraband in these prisons because, like, you know, you can fly these things, you know, miles away now, and just drop... You know, drop something in there, and... So with every great technology, there's always, you know, bad actors out...

Clifford Chanin: Someone's going to figure something out, yeah. Another question-- maybe back there.

01:00:58

Man: Hi. So how large are these drones? How much do they cost? And are they armed? The ones that you were using, were they armed? And if not, why weren't they armed? Like, why would you send in a team rather than just... If the drones are armed, like they make it seem in the movies, why not just send in an armed drone to eliminate the target?

01:01:19

Brett Velicovich: So one of the reasons... What you'll find, actually, in the book is, we... We really don't talk about drone strikes a lot. And that's because terrorists are worth more to us alive than they are dead. We would rather capture them because they can provide us a ton of information. If we just, you know, launched a Hellfire missile at that terrorist, like, he goes away. And that, okay, that's great, but we don't necessarily... We can't necessarily glean information from that. And so a lot of the stuff we were doing was, we were there to try and capture them.

01:01:47 That's why we'd send guys on the ground to kick down the door with the intent of capturing them. But, again, a lot of the people we were going after, they want to go out with a fight, and so there's that situation to deal with. But, yes, all the drones that I had were all armed. They were all armed. Because it's all about making a decision, you know, at the right moment, of what you need to do. If that target's going to get away, or if that... if we can't... if it's going to put the guys on the ground in jeopardy by going after it, then we will choose to conduct a strike, because in the end, that will save lives.

01:02:19 But there are reasons for also having flying drones without Hellfire missiles on them. And a lot of times, like, one of the reasons... Sometimes, we would take... Well, a good example was in Baghdad. At the end of 2010, we weren't conducting drone strikes in the middle of Baghdad. It would be crazy for us to do that. So we'd remove the missiles from our drones, which allowed, which allowed us more flight time in the air. So it gave us, like, four to five more hours of flying that drone in the air because we lightened the payload on it. So little things like that would be reasons why you don't have it. But we pretty much always had the pick of the litter when it came to drones. And they're probably about as big as, I don't know, about two-thirds of this room? I mean, they're big aircraft.

01:03:01 Man: And how much do they cost, one of those?

Brett Velicovich: Predators, you know, I think the black market rate maybe is a million, a million apiece. And you can't just buy one, you've to buy three. You know, so... U.S. government rules. Reapers, I think, are around, like, \$4 million, \$5 million. You know, they've got that stuff online.

Clifford Chanin: Wow. Let's come to right there in the middle. Just, we'll get you a mic. Do we have another mic? Right here. All right, just stand up and speak loud.

Man: First, I want to say thanks for your service.

Brett Velicovich: Thanks.

01:03:33 Man: And thanks for your willingness to speak about a controversial issue these days. Can you speak to the sort of separation of duties between the intelligence community, like the civilian intelligence communities-- the C.I.A. and NSA-- versus the D.O.D.? Like, there's been some controversy as far as, like, should the C.I.A. have the ability to conduct weaponized warfare? So what do you see as the trend? Like, are sort of, the responsibility of weaponized drone usage, is that going to be in the D.O.D. sector going forward, or do you think C.I.A. is still going to maintain that responsibility?

01:04:08 Brett Velicovich: I thought, probably about a year ago, that the C.I.A. would lose the responsibility for conducting drone strikes because they're a collection agency. I mean, that's the intelligence... they collect. So people say, like, "Why are they taking out these targets?" But recently in the news, you'll see that the current director keeps talking about wanting to increase their use of them.

01:04:30 So I don't know if they'll ever give up that control, necessarily. But D.O.D. has always had the most assets-to-drone... You know, drones that are out there doing these things. I think D.O.D. is probably... Probably more proficient at it because there's a larger amount of people that are involved in it, more funds available, also, for them to do that. So I don't necessarily know if we'll ever see the day when both those organizations are not, in some capacity, using, using drones.

01:05:04 But, you know, the NSA, NGA, you know, C.I.A., those are largely collection agencies. Those are the guys that would feed people like me information, and then I would put it all together and make sense of it. And maybe I would go to them and I would say, "Hey, I need... I need a certain piece of information-- figure out... Can you figure out how to get it for me?" And they'd come back magically with that information, which

was great. And then I would be the guy that had to do something with it. But without each of those organizations, without them working together, also, I mean, we wouldn't be where we are today with, with all this counterterrorism work.

01:05:41

Clifford Chanin: Well, it's really remarkable. And as you describe it... Well, let me quote General Hayden-- who will be here, by the way, in December, so I'll plug an upcoming program-- but he says, "A must-read for anyone who wants to understand the new American way of war." And it really is. And it does take us inside these extraordinary technology, the integration of this technology into the battlefield, and the work of all the agencies you mentioned.

So I want to thank Brett Velicovich. "Drone Warrior." And he'll be outside with his books, and really, thank you very, very much.

01:06:13

Brett Velicovich: Thank you.

(applause)