

Mark Nutsch

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Someone has to be the first. When the U.S. military is faced with an international conflict, some soldier has to be the first to lead his unit into combat. That soldier is like the tip of a dagger, bravely entering a life and death conflict. Today we'll learn the remarkable story of a young man from rural Kansas who served his nation in this amazing way. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Mark Nutsch is the former commander of the first Green Beret unit which went in to Afghanistan after the bombing of 9-11. His harrowing true story would become a major motion picture.

Mark Nutsch grew up near Washington, Kansas. Today his family farms in Wabaunsee County near the rural community of Alma, population 783 people. Now, that's rural. Mark came to K-State where he joined the college rodeo team.

After graduating from K-State, he joined the U.S. Army and became an officer in the special forces. He was captain of a unit called Operational Detachment-Alpha 595 and led missions to Uzbekistan and Kuwait. In early September 2001, he joined the battalion staff.

Then came September 11, 2001. Terrorists hijacked planes and crashed them into New York's Twin Towers and the Pentagon. Like many people, Mark Nutsch watched it happen and tried to make sense of it all. He was with his six month pregnant wife and their two young children at the time.

The U.S. military immediately began planning a response. It was called Task Force Dagger. Captain Mark Nutsch was reunited with his unit. They would ultimately be designated to be the first to go fight the Taliban.

Mark Nutsch's 12-man unit was an experienced, mature crew. "We averaged 32 years old, had eight years' experience, and most of us were married with two kids," Mark said.

The unit faced the tallest of odds. They would be outgunned and outnumbered forty-to-one, in unfamiliar enemy territory with uncertain allies.

On October 19, 2001, Mark and his unit were helicoptered into Uzbekistan. There they connected with local Muslim soldiers who also opposed the Taliban. They began the campaign to retake Afghanistan. But instead of jeeps or tanks, the local Afghan fighters used an unexpected type of transportation: Horses.

Fortunately, farmboy Mark Nutsch knew his way around horses. He gave some quick riding lessons to his fellow soldiers. K-State President Richard Myers, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recalled receiving the unprecedented request to airlift saddles, saddle blankets and hay to the site. The military did so.

The Afghan and American fighters would eventually go through the desert and the mountains on horseback to accomplish their mission. Against the odds, all 12 men in Mark Nutsch's unit survived. Operation Enduring Freedom ended with the overthrow of the Taliban, as jubilant Afghans celebrated in the streets.

This amazing story was recounted in a best-selling book named Horse Soldiers. After the files were declassified, the story was made into a movie named 12 Strong. Mark Nutsch's character, named Captain Mitch Nelson in the movie, is portrayed in the show by actor Chris Hemsworth who also plays Thor in the Avenger series.

In real life, Mark Nutsch received a Bronze Star with valor for his courage and leadership. He is now a consultant for Army Special Operations and has opened a whiskey distillery business. He also remains supportive of his family and their home in the Flint Hills of Kansas.

Mark was recently named by the Flint Hills Discovery Center Foundation as National Honorary Campaign Chair for the Foundation's Next Vistas fundraising campaign to benefit the Flint Hills Discovery Center. For more information, see www.flinthillsdiscovery.org/foundation.

Someone has to be first. Some soldier has to be the first one to lead his unit into battle on behalf of his nation. In the aftermath of 9-11, it was Captain Mark Nutsch from rural Kansas who led his team on that initial mission. Now he is continuing to serve his state and his nation as a volunteer with the Flint Hills Discovery Center Foundation. We commend Mark Nutsch and all soldiers, families and veterans who are making a difference with their service. I appreciate these brave young men and women who are putting duty first.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.