



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Beyond Black Hawk Down – Part 2

Guest(s): Jeff Struecker

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Dr. James Dobson: Welcome everyone to Family Talk. It's a ministry of the James Dobson Family Institute supported by listeners just like you. I'm Dr. James Dobson and I'm thrilled that you've joined us.

Roger Marsh: It was October of 1993 in Mogadishu, Somalia, an elite group of American Army Rangers and Delta Force operators were dispatched to execute what was meant to be a one-hour extraction mission. What followed though was one of the deadliest battles in American military history since the Vietnam War, this battle is now popularly known as the Black Hawk Down Incident. In fact, the story of Black Hawk Down is portrayed in a film of the same name that came out in 2001. I'm Roger Marsh and you're listening to Family Talk, the listener-supported broadcast division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.

Today on Family Talk, Dr. Dobson will continue his conversation with decorated retired Army major Jeff Struecker, who led a squad of soldiers in Black Hawk Down. On that day when two Black Hawk helicopters were shot down in hostile territory, U.S. Forces found themselves taking heavy fire with no way out.

It's important to note that the U.S. Forces were there in 1993 to do what the American military has done countless times since the birth of our great nation, they were fighting oppressors to win freedoms for others. And that bears mentioning anytime you see the greatest democracy and defender of liberty in the history of the world in action.

Well, today's guest on Family Talk is Jeff Struecker. He enlisted as an infantry man in the army when he was just 18 years old. He went on to serve actively in the military for 22 years and retired as a major and an army chaplain in twenty-one. His story is incredible and inspirational. He's a walking hero, but also a grounded good guy. If you ever get a chance to hear him speak or see him in person, do not miss that opportunity. Jeff Struecker holds a Ph.D. from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and is the award-winning author of six books. On yesterday's program, Dr. Dobson and Dr. Struecker discussed some details that Jeff remembers about Black Hawk Down. Let's listen in now as they continue their conversation.

Dr. James Dobson: I really think that Americans owe all the people who have fought for this country the understanding of the price that was paid. I am an amateur military historian. I haven't had any academic training in that area, but I'm fascinated by the price people paid to protect us. It's one of the things that frustrates me greatly today where the American people are whining and groaning and complaining and dividing this country and hating each other, and I don't understand all that because of the price that somebody paid to make this stability, this greatest country in the history of the world. I mean it is. The founding fathers gave us a constitution like none other, and we're about to destroy it. We're about to. I mean, civil war is even a possibility out there. So that is one of the things I'm interested in hearing from you on that occasion where you said there's no way out we're all going to die. What was occurring then?

Jeff Struecker: Well, I was a combat leader at this point. I had a squad of men, about 10 men on two Humvees that I was responsible for, and immediately my next thought was I'd already lost one of my men, several of them have already been wounded. My vehicles were already shot to pieces at this moment where I just basically surrendered my-

Dr. James Dobson: You have a superior army against you?

Jeff Struecker: Yes, sir. Well, the intelligence was sketchy that day. It's not that we didn't know this was going to be bad, we just didn't know how bad was this going to be. So we put on the ground about 200 guys and in the air about another 100 in helicopters and somewhere between 10 and 20,000 armed Somalis were who we were fighting against. That math, it doesn't matter who your military is and what your technology is, you're not going to win. And about 45 minutes into this battle, all of us realized how bad the math was and we were all saying, none of us are going to see the light of day. I had the unfortunate experience of losing the first man in that battle on my Humvees, sitting in the seats right behind me when Dominick Pilla was shot and killed instantly, and I had to make this radio broadcast telling everybody that one guy has just been killed.

And everybody on the radio when they heard that broadcast understood, oh, it could be me next. In fact, it could be my buddy standing next to me. It's this bad. And when the moments came that I really surrendered eternity, I didn't surrender my faith, but I really surrendered my life here on earth. It no longer belongs to me. If I survive, it's going to take a miracle from God. From that moment forward, I was absolutely convinced that I was going to die, but all I could think about was the rest of my men. And I'm ashamed to say I didn't share my faith with Dominick Pilla like I should have. And immediately the Lord started to give me this desire to want to be able to share one more time, my faith in Jesus with my men.

Dr. James Dobson: Are the seeds of your later chaplaincy training and commitment found in that moment?

Jeff Struecker: I think it all comes to that very moment where I felt like, Jeff, it may be because of you that Dominick Pilla is not in heaven right now and I don't know his faith, so maybe he is, he's not. I hope if his parents are listening today that he is, but I don't know that and I'm embarrassed to say because I didn't share my faith with them like I should. And I started to feel like all of my men are going to get killed tonight. So my prayer for the rest of that night was, God, give me one more chance, one more chance to tell them about my faith. And if we all die in Mogadishu after that, so be it. But just give me one more shot at sharing my faith in Jesus with these guys. And we went through a lot of battle that night. I don't have time to tell you about all of it today, but the next morning my men were shot to pieces, but none of them were killed. And most of us should be dead. All of us really should be dead. And I think if you were to ask any of us that survived, we would all say, "There is no explanation for why I'm still here other than God supernaturally protected me."

Dr. James Dobson: Is that moment depicted in the movie *Black Hawk Down*?

Jeff Struecker: A very brief scene of it is between me and one of my soldiers. When I come back from the battle the first time and I'm dropping Dominick Pilla off, and one of my soldiers who came back with me, he understood that we may be killed in the next few moments and we're about to get on the vehicles and to go back out into the city streets again. He walks up to me and he says, "Hey Sergeant, I can't go back out in those city streets. I know I'm going to die if I do this." And it took a lot of courage for him to be able to say that to his boss. Rangers generally don't say that to each other. Definitely not to their boss.

And I looked him in the eyes and the movie *Black Hawk Down* depicts this scene pretty well. But I looked him in the eyes and I said, "I'm scared too, man. I know you are and I am, and all of us are, but those men that are stuck out in the city streets are fighting for their life and if we don't go back out there, there's no chance at survival." And I told him, I need you to get on those Humvees. He got back on those vehicles absolutely certain he was going to die and spent the rest of that night on those vehicles with me. And for the rest of that night, I was thinking that guy essentially said, "I'm going to go out there and die tonight so that somebody who's out there has a chance of coming back alive." And he was married and had a lot on the line. And I can tell you to this day, I don't think I've ever been more proud of a soldier than that guy who was on the back of those Humvees with me and Somalia. He stayed in the army by the way, and became an incredible warrior for many years after that.

Dr. James Dobson: I was not in that a combat situation, but there was a man that I went to see in the hospital who was going to have open heart surgery that night, and I was quite sure he did not know the Lord, at least he didn't profess it. And I spent some time with him. He was in the process of dying. He was throwing up. I mean, it's really hard to share your faith when you're talking to people who are looking eternity in the face. And I didn't do a good job of it. And he died that night and I've thought about him ever since. Did I miss the last opportunity to keep him out of hell? And I'm sure you-

Jeff Struecker: I feel that way.

Dr. James Dobson: Felt some of that.

Jeff Struecker: I think that sense of urgency should be on the heart of every Christian in the world. We should feel like, is that person in my neighborhood or that guy that I work with, is he going to be in eternity tomorrow? And if he, is he going to be in heaven? And if not, is it going to be because of me?

I don't know that I've ever read this story, but you may be familiar with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's famous dream right before his death in the concentration camp in Germany. Dietrich Bonhoeffer knows that he's going to die. He's been in prison for quite some time and he has a dream that he's about to stand before the Lord. And Bonhoeffer, when he was a pastor, had the opportunity to meet with Adolf Hitler for five minutes. And Bonhoeffer was terrified that the question that the Lord was going to ask him as soon as he stood in his presence was, "Were you with Adolf Hitler for five minutes and did not tell him about my son Jesus? And Bonhoeffer said he would feel like he would have to hang his head in shame and say, "I didn't. I didn't talk to the Fuhrer about Christ when I could have. I had five minutes with him." I don't know if that event really happened in his past, but as much as I understand Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life, that was a dream shortly before his death.

Dr. James Dobson: He would have been one who would worry about that. What a man he was.

Jeff Struecker: He's one of my heroes in the faith, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Dr. James Dobson: His story is just unbelievable. It's another of the great heroes. I've been told this many times, read it many times that men particularly who are involved in combat do it for one another. It may not even be primarily for country. It is love of one another. Can you describe that to me?

Jeff Struecker: Young men and women sign up to serve our country for a whole lot of reasons. And most of them are very noble reasons, but they run through bullets and gunfire knowing that they're going to die for only one reason. And everybody does it for the same reason. It's love. They love the people that they're running through bullets for more than they love their own life.

And on Memorial Day, I think our country needs to remember our freedom is very cheap. If it wasn't for that life. And America, God forbid we ever become a country that has very cheap, very narrow view of our freedom.

Dr. James Dobson: Did you feel that love?

Jeff Struecker: Those men would do anything for me. And they proved it repeatedly, not just in one combat tour, but more than one combat tour. That they would do anything

to include, give their life, if that's what it took for me. And they knew I would do the same thing for them. Happily do it for them.

Dr. James Dobson: I appreciate what you shared with us and what it cost you to serve your country. Because the American people have not been on seen it, they've seen it in Hollywood, which is irrelevant almost. What would you say about that price that we've been talking about?

Jeff Struecker: Well, I will tell you a quick story, a true story. We came back from Somalia, just a handful of us in October of 1993. In November, we were invited by the mayor of New York City, me and five other men to go there and to officially represent the U.S. Army and to march in the Veterans Day Parade down Lower Manhattan. So we were carrying America's colors, we were carrying our unit colors, we were in full dress uniform and we were going through the subway to the start point of the Veterans Day Parade. And we were accosted in the subway in New York City. Spit on and yelled at. And there's a couple of things that the media portrayed in a very ugly light about Somalia. One of them was that there were a number of women and young children that were killed in this big battle in October 3rd and 4th.

So this young ignorant, for lack of a better word, guy that's accosting us in the subway in New York City starts calling us baby killers. And the guy that's standing to my right, I literally watched the switch flip in his mind. And realized this man, this ranger who's standing next to me is about to kill him for what he's saying to him. And we had to basically drag him away and he kept screaming at this guy you don't know because you weren't there.

So when we finally got alone before the parade, the Veterans Day, Parade started in 1993 in New York City, all of us looked at him and we said, "He doesn't know. He will never understand what you did. And there's no amount of explaining it or trying to describe it that will help him understand. He'll never get it. And this is one of the things that you did for our country that our country will never understand." I don't believe any warrior should be treated the way that we were treated in the subways of New York City, but I learned something from his response, he doesn't know and they will never really understand. And probably it's good that America's sons and daughters will never know what a lot of warriors went through.

Dr. James Dobson: What would you say to America on this Memorial Day, it's actually yesterday now, but what would you say to them that'll give them a little more understanding of those who paid that price?

Jeff Struecker: It represents a handful of real men that I will never forget for the rest of my life. They're no longer with us, but I made a vow to God, until my dying day, I will not forget them. And I'll try to not let my children or my children's children-

Dr. James Dobson: These are guys you just haven't seen or people have died.

Jeff Struecker: These are men that died for my freedom and. I don't want America to have this cheap view of freedom. We are one generation. Every generation of Americans are one generation from losing this gift of freedom that was paid for with a lot of blood. And all it will take is one generation rising up and saying, "I'm not willing to fight and to die for it." Thank God that for more than 230 years, there have been Americans who said, "If it cost me my life, this thing called freedom in America is worth dying for." And many good men and women died for it.

Dr. James Dobson: Do you worry about the millennial generation?

Jeff Struecker: I shared a lot of criticism and a lot of concern about future generations until September 12th, 2001. I saw a lot of men and women show up and sign up for no reason other than I am so angry at what happened to my country and I love my country so much, I just literally, I sold my company, a very, very lucrative business. And I am now a private in the U.S. Army because of my love of country. And America, I want us to remember something, the longest declared war before Afghanistan was the Revolutionary war. We have far surpassed that, doubled it. We've not had to draft anybody because there's always been a handful of young men and women, this millennial generation that everybody likes to criticize, who show up and say, sign me up. And yes, I understand the fine print means I may die.

Dr. James Dobson: You believe when push comes to shove, they'll be there?

Jeff Struecker: I believe that America's parents today need to raise the next generation to be willing to do the same thing.

Dr. James Dobson: Did this generation of parents fail at that point?

Jeff Struecker: No. In fact, Dr. Dobson, I think what you're seeing among the 20 and 30 year olds of America's warrior class, I hate to use this term, but the warrior class of Americans, you're seeing the second-greatest generation in our country's history.

Dr. James Dobson: Oh, really?

Jeff Struecker: I think Tom Brokaw is right. The World War II generation is hands down the greatest generation in our country. But the fact that these men and women have signed up after 9/11 says, I know you're going to send me to war and I know I might die and I'm signing up in droves. And never have we had to even consider a draft because this second-greatest generation of Americans have said, "Sign me up and if it cost me my life, so be it."

Dr. James Dobson: You're telling America to be proud.

Jeff Struecker: That's right. You have in your midst a lot of great warriors. But you have at Arlington National Cemetery, and in national cemeteries all over our country, a lot more who have given the ultimate sacrifice, don't forget them.

Dr. James Dobson: Let's turn a corner now and talk about your personal situation because after being a warrior for a long time and serving in many of the battles, and not just battles but combat operations, you decided to leave the military because God was talking to you.

Jeff Struecker: Yeah.

Dr. James Dobson: Let's make this very personal.

Jeff Struecker: Okay?

Dr. James Dobson: Tell us about that experience.

Jeff Struecker: Well, early in the morning of October 4th, 1993. So the battle is almost over with. And I, for the first time in this all-night battle, realize I might survive. I'm driving out of the city and I have this very vivid memory of seeing the road in front of me littered, literally like a ticker tape parade, littered with brass bullet casings from all of the bullets that we've shot that night. And I was thinking to myself, how could anybody still be alive in this city? How could any of us or any of the Somali militia still be alive?

And as I was driving away, I got this overwhelming sense, God, I walked away from this without a scratch. That can't be explained. This is supernatural. So as soon as I got back to our base that morning, I started processing. Okay. That also means it wasn't a coincidence that I walked away without a scratch. Obviously, you preserved my life. Why did you preserve my life? I don't understand it. I am no better of a warrior. In fact, some of those men that are dead were better warriors than I am, and I'll be the first to admit it. I should be in Arlington National Cemetery. They should still be alive.

So this was a very vivid experience that happened to me the day after the battle. And it's actually a moment in time where it was an overwhelming sense of God's call to ministry. Guys just randomly started showing up and asking me questions about heaven and hell and about their faith. They were asking me questions like, "Why did this happen to us? I thought we were the best military in the world. How could this happen to us?" They asked me questions about, "What happened to my friend who just died on a helicopter or a Humvee?" But more than a couple of them said, "Jeff, there was something very different about you than me last night. I listened to your voice over the radio and I heard a sense of peace and calm that I didn't have." And they said, "You have something that I don't have. I want to know what it is." And for 24 hours-

Dr. James Dobson: They saw it, they could hear it.

Jeff Struecker: They woke me up in the middle of a dead sleep saying, "I have to talk to you right now about your faith, because I could tell there's something different about you." And it was as if the Lord was saying, "Jeff, this is what I want you to do with the rest of your life. You see you were ready for eternity. These guys aren't. And what happens inside a man's soul, that goes on forever in eternity. Jeff, I want you to spend the rest of your life helping men get ready for eternity." Came back from Somalia and I asked the two people that I trusted with this question. I asked my chaplain and my pastor, I said, "I feel like God is calling me into the ministry. What do I do next?" Without hesitation? Very first words out of their mouth is, you need to go to school and you need to get an education so that you can minister and do whatever it is that the Lord is calling you to do next.

And I really feel like God left me on planet earth so that I could impact men, but specifically, the tough manly men who feel like church ain't for me. That may be okay for my wife, but I don't need that stuff. I want to be able to say to them, look, I've been where you are. I've got the T-shirt. I can run with the toughest men in the world. And I can tell you that Jesus that I serve is much tougher than you may realize. And I'm privileged to be able to serve right outside of Fort Benning, Georgia in one of the best communities in America.

Dr. James Dobson: So you did in fact resign from the military?

Jeff Struecker: Yes, sir. I spent 10 years-

Dr. James Dobson: You were a sergeant at that point?

Jeff Struecker: That's right. I was a sergeant. I went to college. I finished seminary. I came back on active duty and spent 10 years as an army chaplain. I went many times to Afghanistan and Iraq or in those 10 years. As a chaplain now, with all of this combat experience, having competed and won the Best Ranger Competition, the notoriety of being one of those soldiers that actually survived Black Hawk Down and Mark Bowden's book and the movie Black Hawk Down made those of us who survived a bit of a celebrity in the army. When I was a chaplain and I showed up, my soldiers gave me unprecedented respect. In fact, they trusted me with questions that I think some chaplains would spend months developing kind of the rapport that they would be able to hear those questions and counseling-

Dr. James Dobson: Because you had experienced?

Jeff Struecker: Because of all of this experience. And many of my soldiers said, "Chaplain, because of what you did as a soldier, I have to ask you this question now." I'm proud to say, the leaders in my unit said, "Chaplain, will you come with us on this combat mission? Because we are afraid that it's going to get really bad, and I would like to have you along. Not as a lucky rabbit's foot, but if it gets really bad and soldiers are being wounded or killed around us, I want you to be there."

And I took that responsibility very seriously and as often as I could, I went with my men out on missions so that I could be with them.

Dr. James Dobson: Did you lead a lot of them to Jesus Christ?

Jeff Struecker: I had the privilege of baptizing a lot of guys and seeing a number of men come to faith in Christ. And generally, the way my conversation started is I know exactly what you're going through because I've been there.

Roger Marsh: You've been listening to a special conversation here on Family Talk featuring our host, Dr. James Dobson and U.S. Army veteran Jeff Struecker. Jeff of course, served as a staff sergeant in the famous Black Hawk Down firefight in Mogadishu, Somalia. Jeff and Dr. Dobson have spent the past couple of days here on the broadcast discussing his recollection of that battle, as well as Jeff's military service and his ultimate life mission of telling others the good news of the gospel. Now to learn more about Pastor Jeff Struecker, his ministry and his autobiographical book called *The Road to Unafraid*, visit our website at drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. And remember, you can also give us a call as well. We're here for you Monday through Friday from 9:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M. Mountain Standard time, and happy to answer any questions you might have about the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute and the Ministry of Family Talk.

The number to call is 877-732-6825. Please keep in mind there are just a few days left in the month of May, and we have been blessed by some special friends of our ministry with a May matching grant. Now this gift is \$300,000 total and we are nearing the end of the special opportunity for you to have every dollar you donate to Family Talk doubled. So to make a tax-deductible donation online, simply visit drjamesdobson.org. That's drjamesdobson.org. Or give us a call at 877-732-6825. And please know how grateful we are for your prayers and your faithful financial support.

Well, I'm Roger Marsh thanking you for making Family Talk a part of your day. Be sure to join us again next time right here for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.