



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Beyond Black Hawk Down – Part 1

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: Hello everyone and happy Memorial Day. I'm Roger Marsh. I hope that you take time today to remember those who have served and literally given their lives so that we may live in a free country, free to worship and practice our faith in all walks of life, privately and publicly. You're listening to Family Talk, the broadcast division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. On today's program, you're going to hear part one of Dr. Dobson's conversation with decorated soldier, Jeff Struecker. It was in 1993 that Struecker led a squad in the Battle of Mogadishu in Somalia. This battle was memorialized in the 2001 film called *Black Hawk Down*.
- At the age of 18, Jeff Struecker enlisted in the army as an infantryman. He went on to serve actively for 22 years before retiring as a major and a chaplain in 2011. Jeff holds a Ph.D. from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and is the award-winning author of six books. In May of 2017, Dr. Dobson sat down with Jeff Struecker to talk about his time as an army ranger, Black Hawk Down and the meaning of Memorial Day. Let's go there right now.
- Dr. James Dobson: Well, hello everyone and welcome to Family Talk. I'm your host, Dr. James Dobson, and as I hope you know, you should if you don't, today is Memorial Day here in the United States. And I have, he won't be comfortable with this, but a military hero having served with the Army Rangers in Mogadishu, Somalia and other places during horrendous battles. The one I'm referring to is called Black Hawk Down today where how many helicopters went down?
- Jeff Struecker: About five of the six troop carrying Black Hawks were shot down that day.
- Dr. James Dobson: And how many helicopters generally?
- Jeff Struecker: We had about 18 aircraft in the skies. Several of them were shot down.
- Dr. James Dobson: My goodness, I'm anxious to hear the details of that. That was in 1993.

Jeff Struecker: That's correct.

Dr. James Dobson: And 19 men were killed and 73 were wounded in 1 day. That's one of the most unfortunate or horrendous military losses in American history, isn't it?

Jeff Struecker: Well, in the modern generation, yes sir, I mean since Vietnam, those casualty numbers in Vietnam were much higher.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, I'm talking about Sergeant and later Captain and then chaplain and now retired Major Jeff Struecker. Jeff, when you look back on what we were just talking about in Somalia and what took place and the loss of many men who were obviously your friends, a lot of them, what thoughts come through?

Jeff Struecker: Well, it's Memorial Day. I miss some of those men. I still remember the pain that those families felt and really, there's not many days that go by that I don't think about some of those men who fought and bled next to me, and some of them really who gave their life for me. But I thank God for creating those kind of warriors for us because we wouldn't be the country we are today without them.

Dr. James Dobson: You won a competition that gave you the title, the Top Ranger because you were a ranger in the infantry or in the Army or throughout the military itself. Is that correct?

Jeff Struecker: That's right.

Dr. James Dobson: You've got to explain that. How did that competition come down?

Jeff Struecker: For the listeners, maybe best for you to go out there and to look at the Best Ranger Competition, just do a web search for it. But the Best Ranger Competition's been around for about 30 years. It is a three-day nonstop event. It has endurance events throughout the Best Ranger Competition and then sprinkled in, there are highly technical events. The competition is conducted with two man teams and it is all branches of the military and foreign services have been asked to compete in the past. And-

Dr. James Dobson: That team consisted of four men?

Jeff Struecker: Team is two men.

Dr. James Dobson: Two men.

Jeff Struecker: Me and one partner. And generally it's considered one of the toughest endurance competitions in the world.

Dr. James Dobson: When you described it to me earlier, it kind of reminds me of the decathlon in the Olympics. Is that [inaudible 00:04:58]?

Jeff Struecker: It's kind of like that, yes sir. It starts on Friday morning, usually at about five or six o'clock in the morning. It starts with a long distance run through the woods, an obstacle course. From there, they'll swim, they'll start jumping out of a helicopter, go to doing a number of shooting events the rest of that day. They'll spend all night long moving with heavy loads on their back, and on Sunday afternoon the competition ultimately ends. There's no sleep programmed in it. And over the course of those 2.5 or 3 days, most of those two man teams will move somewhere between 60 and 100 miles on their feet with a lot of other physical events sprinkled in throughout.

Dr. James Dobson: What kind of shape did you have to be in to do that?

Jeff Struecker: Well, I won in 1996. I was in much better shape in 1996 than I am today. I know your listeners can't see me, but I generally get disappointed with how my level of fitness today compared to what it was then. I had the privilege of being given all of the assets and all of the opportunities that the US Army had for me to train and to compete almost exclusively for about 90 days. And I competed at the same level that most Olympic athletes, in fact, this competition generally will start about 50 to 55 2 man teams and only 20 of them will still be around on the second day. So it's a pretty intense event.

Dr. James Dobson: What'd you do to train, that involved all the strength events, all the running events? Explain it.

Jeff Struecker: The Best Ranger Competition has a couple of hidden or secret events. Some of them are technical, some of them are physical, so there's no way that anybody can completely train for everything. I spent literally a year running and walking long distances with heavy loads on my back, getting ready for this dedicated training period. And then during that dedicated training period, I would usually work out 12 or 14 hours a day with sprinkling in some technical events or some shooting in between workouts to give myself a little bit of a physical break. But it was the greatest level of fitness I've ever held in my life.

Dr. James Dobson: Name the battles that you have been involved in. I guess Panama is one of them.

Jeff Struecker: Yes sir. I started in the Army in 1987. So the first combat operation I was in is Operation Just Cause in Panama in 1989. In 1991, I was sent to Kuwait as part of Desert Storm. In 1993, my unit was deployed to Somalia as part of Black Hawk Down. And then starting in 2003 to 2009, I went 9 times to Afghanistan and 5 times to Iraq.

Dr. James Dobson: The Lord obviously preserved you. You've seen a lot of combat, haven't you?

Jeff Struecker: Yes sir.

Dr. James Dobson: What did it do to you? Did you come home with PTSD?

Jeff Struecker: No, I have never lost a night of sleep over anything that I've seen or anything that I've done in combat. But I'm a very different man today than I was before Somalia, and I don't think that I have a disorder, but I have been impacted by the death and the killing that I've seen around me, and I think it's very natural for a warrior to be impacted. Many warriors who as a chaplain or now as a pastor, ask me, "How do I make the dreams go away?" I tell them, "You don't. You probably are going to live with those for the rest of your life." And then they'll ask me, "How do I go back to being the man that I was before I went to combat? Because I'm different today." And I say, "You can't. You can't unscramble eggs."

Dr. James Dobson: It will change you.

Jeff Struecker: "But you can make an omelet out of eggs and what you have to figure out how to do is to make a new normal, a different normal." And I consider myself, I think my family would tell you, I'm a bit of a different man today than I was before I went to combat for the first time. I have changed, but by God's grace, I'm maybe a better man today for it.

Dr. James Dobson: Did you and your wife survive?

Jeff Struecker: We did.

Dr. James Dobson: How long have you been married to her?

Jeff Struecker: I married my high school sweetheart. I retired from the Army in 2011, and at my retirement ceremony I said, "Of all of the things that I've had the privilege of doing in the Army, all of the awards and decorations, all of the awesome travel that I've had a chance to do, the only thing that I'm proud of is that my wife and our five children are on the bench in front of me." And I'm still married to my high school sweetheart and I have a great relationship with our five children.

Dr. James Dobson: You call her your hero.

Jeff Struecker: She really is.

Dr. James Dobson: You feel that way about it?

Jeff Struecker: I do. Yeah. I don't think America really understands the sacrifices that military families make and she is my hero.

Dr. James Dobson: You've got five kids?

Jeff Struecker: Yes sir.

Dr. James Dobson: Their ages are what?

Jeff Struecker: Our oldest son is 23. Our youngest daughter is 15.

Dr. James Dobson: And you spent a lot of time away from them during their high school years, I guess?

Jeff Struecker: I did, yeah.

Dr. James Dobson: Do you regret that?

Jeff Struecker: Yeah. I hate to use the word regret. If I were to do it all over again, I think I'd do the same thing all over again. But there's consequences for the amount of time that I've spent away from them, and I did the best that I could to be a good dad and a good husband 10,000 miles away from my family. I felt an overwhelming sense from God that as a father, I have to still show my children that I love them even though I'm on the other side of the globe and I have to lead my family even though I'm on the other side of the globe. And I didn't always do that well. I wish I would've done it better sometimes, but I'm proud of the relationship that I have with them today.

Dr. James Dobson: My father was an evangelist and he was gone a lot. My mother really raised me even though I was very, very close to him. And when he was home, he was mine. When he would come home, we'd hunt and fish together and he made up for a lot of it with me. But I remember being at a train station one time in particular when he was leaving for six weeks and I had that lump in my throat. Have you ever had an honest-to-goodness lump in your throat where you couldn't breathe, where you were forcing tears away from your eyes?

Jeff Struecker: I have.

Dr. James Dobson: I can't imagine the times you must have gone through that or your kids.

Jeff Struecker: One of the memories that I'll carry with me to my death is my first deployment as a father of children that are going to be old enough to remember that dad's going away to war and may not come back, was in 2003. I was deploying to Afghanistan with the Army's 82nd Airborne Division. And the day that my family was dropping me off to put me on an airplane, I prayed with each one of my children separately. And my oldest son, Aaron, I remember standing next to our family van and I got so emotional that I couldn't finish the prayer. In fact, I'm about to get emotional here. And he was weeping because he realized how serious this was and I really just couldn't get the words out of my mouth that I was placing my son in the Lord's hands and asking God to be his father while I was gone. And God was gracious and fathered my children much better than I could father my children at home when I was halfway around the world.

But the lump that was in my throat, I almost couldn't finish a sentence because the pain was so deep what I was about to do. And as a warrior, I knew I didn't really have a choice, but it hurt really bad.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah. What motivated you, Jeff? You could have succeeded in many areas. In fact, you have a PhD now and a master's degree and then you have been successful in, what is now a new career that we're going to talk about. So you had choices. Why this one?

Jeff Struecker: Great question. This is going to sound morbid to some of your listeners, but what ultimately led me to the Army is my conversion, my faith in Jesus Christ. From my earliest memories, I had this terrifying fear of death and it kept me awake many nights. This lingered for years, and I was totally aware-

Dr. James Dobson: Because of the combat situation or because of death?

Jeff Struecker: No, this is when I was a young child at seven or eight years old. So when I was a teenager, my next-door neighbors came to meet me and to share the gospel with me. And to this day, I don't remember that couple's last name, but I am a follower of Christ today because of a faithful couple that lived in the apartment complex next to me. They sat down at my dining room table and they explained to me about Jesus, and about sin, and about death, and about hell and heaven. And they, for the first time in my life answered questions that nobody else could answer because I didn't grow up in a family that went to church. And immediately supernaturally the night that I surrendered my soul to Jesus Christ as a 13-year-old boy, He took away this fear of death.

So as a senior in high school, I was looking for something to do with my future. I was looking for excitement. I wanted to know if I was tough enough to serve with the best. But what I wasn't really willing to tell an army recruiter or even the soldiers that I worked with for the first year is I wanted to go to war and I wanted to see if I'm really over this fear of dying. And I specifically-

Dr. James Dobson: So that stayed with you?

Jeff Struecker: I joined the Army for the purposes of going to war and seeing am I ready to die? Am I really over this fear of dying?

Dr. James Dobson: Is that related to the title of your book?

Jeff Struecker: Yes sir. I don't consider myself-

Dr. James Dobson: I thought it might be. The Road to Unafraid.

Jeff Struecker: Yeah. I don't consider myself an expert on much, but fear and dying, I have a lot of experience with.

Dr. James Dobson: In Mogadishu, Somalia when everything was on the line, people were dying all around you, you did not fear dying?

Jeff Struecker: Yeah, I don't want to give-

Dr. James Dobson: That's supernatural.

Jeff Struecker: Well, that's exactly right. I was just about to say that. I don't want to give your listeners the impression, "Oh, Jeff is this amazing warrior" because I'm not. There is a moment in the battle where I became certain I'm going to die. There's no way out of this alive. All of us are going to die. And I had this perfect peace knowing I'll spend eternity with Jesus in Heaven. So if tonight is my last night, so be it. And for the rest of that night I fought with this supernatural sense of peace, the kind of peace that the Bible says passes all understanding. It doesn't make sense.

Dr. James Dobson: It also says, "To live as Christ and to die is gain."

Jeff Struecker: "To die is gain." Yes sir.

Dr. James Dobson: I never could identify with that. I am embarrassed to say that because everything that's in the scripture is there for a purpose. But with little kids at home, the thought of leaving them, I couldn't deal with that. I could deal with death, but my job was not done. Did you not-

Jeff Struecker: I felt exactly the same way. Part of my story in Somalia is the moments where I was totally convinced that I was going to die, I literally just put my future in God's hands and said, "If you want me to survive, it's going to take a miracle. But if it's your plan that I die tonight, I know exactly where I'm going to spend eternity." And when I started looking at it through those lenses, if I go home to my family, great. If I die in Mogadishu, Somalia and go home to be with Christ, even better. From that moment forward, death really had no more hold on me. I make a statement years later that I think this life started to lose its appeal to me in Somalia when Heaven and eternity became a lot more real to me.

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.

Jeff Struecker: Yeah.

Dr. James Dobson: I have mentioned on this broadcast before, I've written about it that 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 2 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: Did you have a superior army against you?

Jeff Struecker: Yes sir. Well, the intelligence was kind of 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 Humvee, 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, "Uh-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 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 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. And that guy who was on the back of those Humvees with me in Somalia, he stayed in the Army by the way, and became an incredible warrior for many years after that.

Roger Marsh:

Well, what an incredible testimony of courage and sacrifice in the face of death. And we will continue Dr. James Dobson's conversation with Jeff Struecker about his experience of Black Hawk Down coming up on tomorrow's Family Talk broadcast. But right now, I'd like to take a moment here at the close of today's program here on Memorial Day to remember some of those who have been killed in combat while fighting for the US military. During the American Revolutionary War, 8,000 men died in combat fighting for our freedom. During the American Civil War, there were over 214,000 US combat deaths. In World War I, over 53,000. World War II, over 290,000. And in the Vietnam War, there were over 40,000 US combat deaths.

In John Chapter 15 verses 12 and 13, Jesus said this to His disciples. "My command is this, love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this to lay down one's life for one's friends." Will you take a few moments right now here on this Memorial Day and pray with me to thank God for the men and women who have paid the ultimate price for our freedom?

Heavenly Father, we come before You right now with gratitude. We come before You right now with joy and thanksgiving for the freedom that we enjoy here in the United States of America. On this Memorial Day, we remember the men and women who put on the uniform, went into battle and paid the ultimate price defending our freedom. We know that many of them were brothers and sisters in Christ. Father, we lift up their families today, we honor their memories today, and we know that there's something heroic, truly heroic about laying down your life for your friends. We are obeying the same command that you gave us in John Chapter 15, but we're also modeling the love that Jesus Christ showed us while we were yet sinners. When we were helpless and couldn't rescue ourselves from sin, you sent Your son Jesus Christ to lay

down His life for us so that we may be raised up and have new life in Him. We ask all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Now, if you'd like to learn more about Pastor Jeff Struecker, his books and his ministry, be sure to visit our website at drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. And keep in mind, there are still a few days left to take advantage of our \$300,000 May matching grant. You can make that contribution online as well at drjamesdobson.org. Thanks for making Family Talk a part of your day. And if you haven't done so already, be sure to fly your American flag today. It's a great way to honor your country and the brave servicemen and women who have paid the ultimate price for our freedom. I'm Roger Marsh, and on behalf of Dr. Dobson, his wife Shirley, and all of us here at the James Dobson Family Institute, we wish you a very happy Memorial Day and God's richest blessings to you and your family as you continue to grow deeper in your relationship with Him.

Announcer:

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