

The Langley Files
File 18 – Part I
The 9/11 Survivor turned CIA Usama Bin Laden Tracker

(music begins)

Walter: At CIA, we work around the clock and across the globe to help keep Americans and others around the world safe. Secrecy is often vital to our work.

Dee: But we're committed to sharing what we can when we can. So let us be your guides around the halls of Langley as we open our files and speak with those who have dedicated themselves to this mission.

Walter: These are their stories.

Walter and Dee: This is The Langley Files.

(music continues)

PART I: SURVIVING 9/11

Walter: On the night of May 2nd, 2011, two helicopters flew low over darkened hills towards a compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Inside the helicopters was a team of US Navy SEALs. Inside the compound was the most wanted man in the world. And hundreds of miles away, those with a “need to know” watched this highly sensitive operation unfold in real time – from the White House Situation room to the CIA and the Pentagon.

Dee: But for one such individual monitoring the operation against Usama Bin Laden that night, the events had a uniquely personal meaning. Because almost ten years earlier, he had stood in the C ring of the Pentagon when it was struck by a hijacked aircraft on September 11th, 2001.

Walter: He would fight to survive his injuries and endure throughout a harrowing recovery. He would become an investigator on the 9/11 Commission, seeking to understand the events behind the attacks. He would join CIA as a targeter—a high-tech detective searching mountains of data for actionable intelligence clues. And, ultimately, he would bring those skills to the HVT 1 team in CIA's Counterterrorism Center—the CIA team dedicated to finding Usama Bin Laden. The CIA team whose work has made this operation against Al Qaeda's seniormost leader possible.

Dee: You might have heard of some of the individuals involved in the search for Bin Laden, but you haven't yet heard this story. It's the story of a 9/11 survivor turned CIA officer serving on the team tracking down the terrorist leader responsible for those attacks. And today on The Langley Files, you're going to hear it, directly from him.

(music concludes)

Dee: Hey everyone, Dee and Walter here. You know, for some time we've been aware—as many at CIA have—that an officer among us, who was serving with the Navy at the time, and working out of the Pentagon, had survived being critically injured in the 9/11 attacks. How exactly we knew, we'll get to later in these episodes. What we didn't know, and only recently learned, was that he had also been serving on the CIA team dedicated to tracking down Bin Laden when the most wanted terrorist in history was finally found. We reached out to Kevin, who left CIA after that historic operation was successfully

completed, and invited him to come speak with us on this podcast. And we were beyond honored that he returned to Langley to do just that.

Walter: The following is a three-part episode, chronicling his remarkable story, from surviving the attacks on 9/11, to serving on the 9/11 Commission, to joining CIA—and ultimately being closely involved in the hunt for Bin Laden, and the aftermath of the operation against him. You'll notice that you'll hear me and Dee a good deal less than usual here—because this is truly Kevin's story, in his own words.

Dee: So let's get started. Here's our conversation with Kevin.

(music plays)

Walter: Kevin. It's incredible to have you here. Thank you for joining us.

Kevin: Thank you. It's an honor to share my story.

Walter: In so many ways, your story, Kevin, and the story of the United States' struggle with Al Qaeda, intersect again and again from the very beginning, really, going all the way back to Al Qaeda's declaration of war against the United States. That occurred in 1998, with the bombing of two US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and that took the lives of over 200 people, and to which the US quickly responded. Can you take us back to that year and tell us, where were you and, how did you first find yourself in the middle of the United States' first real encounter with Al Qaeda?

Kevin: Back in 1998, I was a junior officer in the Navy. I was a young lieutenant, having graduated from the Naval Academy in 1994, and I was stationed in San Diego and I was a surface warfare officer. So I was serving on board some cruisers and destroyers out there. And in 1998, I was a navigator on the USS Elliott, part of the Lincoln Battle Group, and we were conducting a deployment to the Persian Gulf as our normal deployments would go. And, of course that summer the African Embassy bombings hit. And it was kind of the first real shock wave that I know I remember having anything to do with Al Qaeda, let alone Bin Laden. The response was pretty swift. We were immediately tasked, our ship and several others, to leave the Persian Gulf and, uh, steam out of the Gulf of Oman and then off the coast in the Arabian Sea. We didn't really know what the tasking was gonna be at that time. Ultimately, it came in that the Tomahawks needed to be spun up on board all of the ships, and we were gonna fire Tomahawks into Afghanistan. I was a navigator, and part of my roles then were to kind of, you know, safe navigation of the ship, of course, but also devise a steaming plan and navigation plan quickly to make sure that the information we were getting we would be as undetectable as possible in leading up to the strike. So that operation was called "Operation Infinite Reach" for those historians thinking about it. Um, it's not an operation that's talked about too much, because ultimately it was a failure. And I think it, uh, it's an important part of the the story arc of Al Qaeda and Bin Laden. And it's really an important part of the story arc for me and my story, uh, having taken part of it and in it, uh, missing Bin Laden. The fact was a series of training camps were struck just outside of Khowst area in Afghanistan. And, um, there's intelligence, I believe, that Bin Laden or other senior leaders were going to be taking part in a meeting near those training camps or at those training camps. So we launched over 70 Tomahawk missiles, our ship and the other ships with us, including a submarine into Afghanistan. And like I said, unfortunately, we missed Bin Laden, really missed any senior leaders and ended up just destroying some infrastructure, some training camps.

Dee: Can you maybe speak a little bit about your experience during that time? What was your perception of what was going on? How did you feel during that particular event?

Kevin: It's a great question. Um, the recollections are really clear because it was the first time as a junior officer was really being put into action. We had orders to carry out, and we knew they were important. My job was important as a navigator to again kind of devise a navigation plan that would keep us undetected if possible. I was on the the command bridge, the navigation bridge with the commanding officer and we were up for a long hours, uh, days and preparing and just waiting for the order to come down. So it was very clear that it was gonna be a joint effort with us and some other ships in other areas and a simultaneous strike, which was also unique. So everything was coming together. It was an exciting time. Really. Uh, and to be up there and kind of on the pulse and and a part of it as a junior officer, that's what you're there for. The launch itself was was pretty amazing. Um, the first time that we had used our vertical launch system, that I had seen in use and, afterwards, just steaming out of the area, getting back to safety and and maintaining vigilance on any type of response that might have been coming our way. And I remember being on the bridge and, uh, someone said the President was coming on to make a public address about the strikes. And so we quickly turned on the radio on the bridge and listening to President Clinton speak to the public, speak to the nation, speak to the world, about the response actions was was sobering, um, knowing that we had been the the execution arm of that. And it was also fascinating because as he described why he had decided to take those actions and a strike against Al Qaeda, strike against Bin Laden. It was the first time in our nation's history that we were actually reaching out and conducting a direct action operation against Bin Laden and against Al Qaeda. Very impactful to me personally then. I was not a terrorism expert by any means then. But, uh, we knew that we were part of the chain that was taking action. And it felt very rewarding at the time.

Dee: From your perspective of the world but also what's going on in your own personal world? What's happening between the time frame of that particular operation and then the events leading up to 9/11?

Kevin: So I was a junior officer. I was married to a a fellow officer in the Navy, and we had no children at the time. And so I was very much kind of two ships passing in the night, sometimes literally. We were on what we call sea duty and and then shore duty. Ultimately, my next station was the Pentagon. So I reported to the Pentagon in 2000, and I was part of the Navy staff there working for the Chief of Naval Operations and the branch that I was assigned to - we did strategy and war fighting concepts, basically helping the craft and adjust our strategy of the Navy into the 21st century. It was pretty heavy time to be there. I was a very junior officer, but it was exciting to be there too, um, to be plugged in. And there was a an important Al Qaeda related thread going on because in 2000, USS Cole was struck. Our Navy was on our heels briefly, for that moment. We lost sailors and shipmates. Importantly, it was again another attack by Al Qaeda on the United States. And so we were very aware of the importance of investigating that and really tracking down all the details. So I was not an intelligence officer then, but we had intelligence officers at the Pentagon. In fact, in a space adjacent to where I was working in the Navy Command Center, and their task was to continue to investigate and develop leads on those who are responsible for the Cole attack.

Walter: And it was that assignment that saw you located at the Pentagon on 9/11.

Kevin: Leading up to September 11th, we had moved into a new newly renovated wedge of the Pentagon. If you imagine the Pentagon building structure itself, it was divided into wedges. In the late nineties, there was a wedge renovation on a different wedge, and they had completed that, and they basically were gonna fortify the entire Pentagon and do that renovation by wedges. And so what that meant was they had factored in what we called ATFP - Antiterrorism Force Protection, architectural and strengthening like a full renovation from the outer ring all the way to the inner ring for each wedge. So our wedge had just actually been completed with its renovation about a month before, several weeks before 9/11. So we were in a temporary space during that time and had just moved into this new, brand

spanking new command center for the Navy. And each service had its own command center and the role of the command center was first you had a watch section there, and that watch section was to keep tabs on naval units deployed around the world, monitor current events and other taskings for the Chief of Naval Operations, basically to be the the communication nerve center for the for the Chief of Naval Operations. So our branch was located inside of that command center. If I could maybe paint a picture for the listeners, the command center was a very large, open space, kind of dominated by cubicles. We were organized by branches, so we would have little clusters of cubicles together. And, um, they had dividers that were about shoulder height, uh, for each section, and each section that the branches were in, we would have about a four man cubicle. And our branch was located almost right next to what we call the watch team. And the watch team was manned by officers and petty officers 24 hours a day, and they had a big large wall of large screen TVs. And so those large screen televisions were tuned into tracking Navy units and tuned into various Navy operations, and they're also tuned in to the cable news. And so, on the morning of 9/11, we had conducted a morning meeting earlier and we had returned to our cubicle desk, and I was at my cubicle and my my colleagues and shipmates were close by sitting at their cubicles. And we, like everyone else, became acutely aware of the horrors unfolding in New York City because of the TVs that were right there in our space. So we're watching New York City. We're watching the the first tower that had been struck - that black smoke kind of cascading up into that blue sky, and we're gathering and wondering and kind of watching. I'm watching the the watch team. They were taking notes and kind of keeping an eye on it. And then, of course, the south tower struck. And that south tower, that orange fireball that erupts. You know, that that image is burned into our collective memory. We said what everyone said. I said, this is no accident. This is an attack. We're we're under attack. This is a terrorist attack. And I remember looking at my colleagues, talking to them, and some of them returned to their cubicles because they were making phone calls to loved ones or making phone calls inside the building. And I remember standing there just unable to stop watching New York City.

I think that's a point so many of us, you know just had our eyes glued to the TVs. And there I was in the Navy command center in a fortress, really, as far as the Pentagon, no one, certainly not I, consider our location to be at risk. Never once did we get an indication that there were more hijacked aircraft. The situational awareness and communication just at the time didn't reflect that at all. So as I'm watching New York City, and I'm observing my colleagues kind of returned to their cubicles, and the whole space is silent. Everyone is, you know, focused on New York. And then, in a flash at 9:37, my world changed. Our world changed. It, the space blew up basically. And I say to people that second aircraft, that image of the orange fireball, that's really what happened inside the space. American Flight 77 that had been hijacked over Middle America and then turned and barreling back to the Pentagon, um had struck the outer ring, the E ring. It went through the E ring. It went through the D ring and it went through our C ring. So I was located on the first floor of this C ring in the center of that space, kind of with no pillars or other obstructions around me. And I was standing there beside my cubicle at the moment of impact. And so when the blast struck it, I could feel it knocked me to the ground. It came from behind and I sensed immediately that I was on fire. So I tried to roll and extinguish the flames and stand to get my wits about me. Everything around me had been blown to bits. The ceiling had collapsed, the space was on fire. There was thick, acrid black smoke that was making it really, really hard to breathe. And in that moment I had a flash. I thought of my wife. I thought of the love that we shared. I was almost literally sickened in that moment of thinking I'd never see her again. And, uh, I knew I was badly burned due to the pain. I couldn't see, uh, due to the pain. And I knew that if I didn't get out of there, I was either gonna succumb to the smoke or the flames, one or the other. And so I kind of went into a a drill sergeant mode with myself, and I internally was yelling Kevin, keep moving, keep moving. You've got to find a way to get out.

The command center was pretty unique in that it had one main exit and entrance, and it was a very large kind of blast door or large metal door that required a badge to enter. And so my mind raced to that door. I knew generally what direction I thought that door was, but because it was an electronically controlled lock and we didn't seem to have any power - everything around me was on fire and the ceiling from the second floor had really kind of collapsed into the space, I made an instant decision to go in the opposite direction or a different direction, and I just started crawling and clawing my way through, the burn rubble, calling out for help, and really to no avail. And I was crawling and clawing and all of a sudden I could see through this smoke some glimpses of daylight, and I remember my adrenaline surging, and I just really kicked it into another gear and crawled over these desks and through this rubble and I stood and walked out of what was like this freshly blown out hole on the back wall, the back kind of concrete cinder block walls of the C ring to the outside. So when you look down on the Pentagon, it's really five concentric buildings. And inside each of those rings, in between each of those rings, is a like an access road or a small maintenance road that maintenance workers and supervisors can use to, you know, to deliver things and to make repairs. And there are a lot of sometimes, you know, truck type golf carts, um, zipping around the inner corridors there. And as I walked through this hole that had been punched out, it was the first time I could really grasp how badly I was injured. I was wearing Navy CNTS, we called them. They were short sleeved khaki uniforms, pretty much all polyester, and so my uniform had melted basically onto my body and my arms, because they were exposed were were severely burned. My hands were severely burned, and, uh, it was a shock of the moment, um, walking through from this really burning carnage behind me and into this outdoor feeling of relative safety. I had this, I can just describe it as a surreal flash of memory. Um, not a photography buff. Um, I studied history at the Naval Academy a bit, and I was familiar with the Vietnam War. And, uh, when I walked through that hole kind of that threshold, an image of a of a young Vietnamese girl who had been recently burned by a bomb or napalm running down the street naked, um, in pain. That image flashed in my head in that moment, um, kind of indescribably. I I don't know how it did. And I thought I'm as helpless as that little girl when I was looking at myself. And I started screaming for help yelling for help and my my calls and screams were answered by a man who I call my guardian angel.

He's my brother. He was then a sergeant first class. His name is Steve Workman. And Steve had been working for the Army G-2 staff and was on the periphery of the immediately damaged areas. And Steve, instead of running to safety, he started running towards the burning spaces. He went into a a restroom, took off his uniform shirt, doused it with water, put it around his head and was trying to go in and out. And he was working his way around because he couldn't get into any of the interior burning spaces. And ultimately, those efforts by Steve took him into that causeway corridor outside. And he just so happened to come upon that punch out hole when I was walking out of it. So Sergeant Workman, basically, you know came upon me right as I was coming out of that threshold, and we locked eyes on one another, and I said, "help me, help me," and he said, "I got you." And he put me onto this flatbed maintenance cart that was nearby and we were off. He was driving me to the little health clinic that is located in the Pentagon. Took maybe five or so minutes to get there. And that health clinic is normally staffed by corpsmen and doctors, nurses, and it was basically empty because they had evacuated that space to set up a triage space in some other part of the building. So by the time Steve and I got there, there were really only a couple of people there. They transferred me to this gurney and they were going to work on me and looking at me. And I remember looking at this very young young petty officer, corpsman, who was looking at my arms and the look on his face, told me that he had no idea how to get an IV into my arms because they were just a burnt mess. And so after he was kind of fumbling through that a bit and I don't blame him at all, I said, "no, we gotta go, let's go, let's get me out of here," because I knew it was getting harder to breathe. I was in so much pain and just trying to communicate - "let's go, let's go." So they started wheeling me out,

and Steve, Sergeant Workman, as he was wheeling me out there was a green oxygen tank nearby, and he grabbed it and threw it between my legs, and they took me out to the parade deck at the Pentagon, where all these ambulances and emergency vehicles were responding to evacuate injured people. And they commandeered what was maybe one of the first ambulances or several to arrive on scene, and they put me into the back of the ambulance, and Sergeant Workman instead of calling it a day, he jumped in with me, and very soon we were off to the races.

And also very soon we realized that there were no other EMT personnel inside this ambulance. It had been, I think, a contract ambulance that had just been responding to the call. And so the driver, instead of taking us to maybe the what would have been the nearest hospital, because it was a coming from the military, we were in uniform, he was responding to casualties at the Pentagon, in his mind, he thought he needed to take me to the old Army Walter Reed Hospital downtown. And you can imagine how the roads have been blocked. They were chocked block full of traffic, and we, uh, we were pushing him to drive as fast as he could, literally yelling at the guy. We were on the road, off the road. We were in the grass. We were in the center berm. I know we were hitting cars, um, because we had him going. Sergeant Workman and I had him going, and, uh, I was not at the time realizing how important, but I was conscious this whole time, and and that was in due in large part, I think, to Sergeant Workman just talking to me, asking me all kinds of questions, saying, "stay with me" and and we literally talked about a lot of things. We talked about my wife. We talked about my passions. We we talked about how I love golf, how I wasn't any good at it, but I loved it. Um, and then I was struggling to breathe and the the ambulance had this alarm that was going off and and it was making a racket. And I think Sergeant Workman or I yelled out, "what's that alarm? What's that noise? Can you turn that off?" And the driver said, we don't have any oxygen. It's the oxygen alarm. There's no oxygen. Another minute passes or so, and I think Sergeant Workman realized that I was having a hard time to breathe and that green oxygen tank that he had grabbed and put between my legs, which is also causing me some discomfort, I remember that a little bit now that I'm talking about it. But he, uh he grabbed the the face mask of that and put it on me and turned it on, and that actually helped me breathe a little easier. So ultimately, we got to the old Walter Reed Hospital in downtown. And as they took me out of the ambulance and they were wheeling me up into the emergency room doors, Sergeant Workman was at the foot of the gurney pushing me, and I remember yelling out to him – "what is your name? What is your name?" Over and over. Because I wanted to burn his name in my memory. I think he had probably told me his name 20 odd times on that ride. But in the shock of the moment, I just kept saying, "what is your name? What is your name?" Because I never wanted to forget who this guy was.

So the doors opened and I was pushed in. And what seemed like this massive team of emergency room nurses and doctors who I think were expecting mass casualties, they really just descended upon me because they didn't really have a lot of mass casualties arriving there at Walter Reed. And they descended upon me and started cutting off my uniform. They started giving me some pain medications, and I heard what I thought someone say and yell out "50%, 50/50 chance" or "50%, 50/50." And that made me so angry. I remember grabbing someone by the scruff of their uniform and pulling them literally up on top of the gurney with me and kind of reading them a riot act where I kept saying over and over again, "I'm alive, I'm alive, I'm alive!" And it was just me in the shock of the moment but also me really riled up because it's not what you want to hear in a time of extreme stress. So they calmed me down. I think that nurse probably ran away. Um, sorry. And they continue to keep working on me, and I remember them yanking and pulling at my fingers, and my hands and just causing me this tremendous tremendous pain. And, uh, I heard this male doctor yell out for the ring cutters. I had my wedding band on my left hand and my Naval Academy class ring on my right hand. And when they yelled out for the ring cutters, I knew that they were trying to get him off and couldn't. And it just made me so angry again. Again I'm in this

ratcheted, adrenaline flowing state and I yelled, “stop, stop!” And they froze! And with all my will in the moment and strength, I was able to take off my wedding band on my left hand and and pull off my Naval Academy ring on my right hand, touching them now as uh, as I say this because they're both on these fingers, and I remember getting them off and handing them over to a nearby nurse or doctor and thinking to myself as I handed him over, OK, now you can get on with whatever you're gonna do to help save my life. And it was my last conscious memory of 9/11.

After I was taken to Walter Reed, they needed to do some emergency surgery on my arms. Since the burns were deep third degree over my, most of my upper body. My arms, uh, were kind of swelling and forming dangerous kind of tourniquet like effect with that burned skin. So they had to do an emergency release on my arms that night at Walter Reed. And then they flew me via helicopter to what is probably the best burn unit in the world, at the Washington Hospital Center here in DC. The burn unit there was manned and directed by a former Navy surgeon. His name was Doctor Marion Jordan. Doctor Jordan was the the head of that burn unit, and, amazingly his, his deputy burn director was a doctor by the name of James Jang, and Doctor Jang was a reserve officer at the time of 9/11 in the Navy. He was a commander. So they flew me there because they knew that was the best burn center, and that's where they flew all of us who had critical burns and injuries from the Pentagon. They took us to the Washington Hospital Center. Started a process of really the Navy, taking care of me and my family, and the Navy family stepping up in the Navy family being there from the very first hours to help me survive and help me heal and help me get back. So my wife had been out of town at the time, and she got word late on the 11th that I'd been badly injured. So they had to drive from where they were on a Navy trip up in the Northeast, back to DC. And by the time she got to the hospital, at Washington Hospital, she came to see me, and I was wrapped pretty much head to toe, she said, in bandages. And I was swelling. My head had swollen so much, I had what they says to be burns on over 47% of my body, mostly third degree. I'd inhaled a lot of jet fuel and thick black, acrid smoke, and I was in a really, really bad shape, but they told it to her straight that they were going to work as hard as they could to save my life and that the doctor knew I was in good shape. I was 29 years old at the time. 29 year old who, uh, who had that feeling of invincibility, had that feeling of a just in the moment, being in the moment, being living in the moment and all that would change when I had my first conscious memories that next day and thereafter.

Walter: What was your recovery like?

Kevin: So it was in the hands of these amazing burn nurses and doctors at the Washington Hospital Center. And because I had ingested so much jet fuel and smoke that I was on this special bed that would rotate constantly unless they were changing my dressings and or having to do something else. And so they were pumping this black sludge out of my lungs through these tubes that they inserted through a breathing tube and down my throat and through my trach, and they were pumping this black sludge out of me for weeks on end to these little reservoir tanks located behind my bed. And what was crazy about it was they had to strap me into this bed because it was rotating, and of course, I had these severe burns, and so they would, they would strap me down tight because the bed would rotate pretty significantly in each direction. And it was painful just to be in that thing. But I remember so clearly over the weeks that they also got me up moving and amazingly, just a day or two after 9/11, they they had me up and walking, and even though I was connected through my trach to a breathing machine, the machine would go in tow behind me and I would try to take a lap. And the first we started out and there's only a few feet maybe getting out of the room and and then getting back to the bed. And then I was down the hall and then back to the room. And then I was around the U-shaped kind of track that we would walk and and that was amazing that I was in such bad shape, but they they were keeping me moving. Night times were the worst. I was quiet and alone. But one of the biggest sources of strength was the fact that my wife was with me

every day. My loved ones, my family were with me. They were at the hospital. And again, that Navy family just taking care of my family being there for them, supporting them. The fact that, uh, I knew and I could feel just through the strength that they were showing me that they were being taken care of, and the Navy family being there for us made all the difference because that allowed me to focus on me and just healing and focus on really, on day by day, if not hour by hour.

I couldn't speak. So my wife learned how to read my lips within those early days. And I would remember I could get some visitors occasionally if I wasn't doing too bad. And we would have friends or loved ones come in and and they would talk to me for a bit, and sometimes they would mention what we would do when we got out of the hospital. And I would always look at Blanca and I'd kind of just mouth no, no, today, just today. And she would explain that she knew I was only focused on making it through that day. And I was really thankful to be, uh, to be conscious for most of those days. I learned later from the doctors that oftentimes severe burn patients and those with critical injuries like I had - you're taking so much medicine and you're in so much pain that really you're in a state that you're not remembering, your mind is literally blocking out the experience, and for me, that wasn't the case, and I'm thankful for that. It made it all the more hard, but it also let me fight through it, consciously, fight through it every hour and every day. So I was really thankful for that

Dee: How long were you in the hospital portion of your recovery, Kevin?

Kevin: So I was at the burn unit there until early December and had various moments. It was like a roller coaster, because my, uh, my recovery was not easy. In fact, I was probably one of the more challenging cases, I think, Doctor Jordan told me later that he had ever had I, uh, had infections developing on my arms. And I had terrible infections in my lungs from all that stuff that I ingested. So they use these kind of old, draconian measures to combat the infections on my arms. They used live maggots, and they would they would breed, actually, I think, these maggots in a laboratory to keep them incredibly sterile, and then they would apply them to these infected areas. So they're on my arms, and, uh, it really grossed my wife out, particularly. It grosses everybody out, I guess. But, uh, it grossed my wife out so much that she wouldn't let him call them maggots. The the nurse, one of the nurses and her came up with the term medicals. And, uh, this nurse had a sense of humor as my day nurse. Um, he was amazing. And he, uh, he would often, like, tease me that one of the medicals had gotten out of the dressing and was crawling up my neck and and making me, you know, slightly freak out. And so we, uh, even in the midst of all that, um tried to find humor and and light light moments. But despite the best efforts of the nursing team and the doctors, um, I wasn't doing well. And early October I took a turn for the worst, and while Doctor Jordan, I think was doing his rounds, one morning I flatlined. I went septic and flat lined and so, uh, they brought me back and got me relatively stable. And Doctor Jordan went out to see my wife and my family who were essentially living at the hospital at that time. They were in the waiting room where they had kind of camped out, and he explained it to her that you know what had just happened and that I wasn't doing well and the nurses ran back in to grab him because I had flat lined again. And so we ran back and they brought me back again for the second time. And then when he went to see Blanca and my family, um, he told it to her straight that he didn't have a lot of confidence I was gonna make it through that day, and there was paperwork waiting that the Navy had prepared to medically retire me. And uh, up until that point, Doctor Jordan had told Blanca that no matter how hard the Navy might press to sign that paperwork and medically retire me, don't do it. And he was gonna fight just as hard as I was fighting and he knew that. But he told her in that moment, I think you should sign the paperwork to medically retire Kevin, because if she was able to do that, um, somewhat backwardly the the benefits would have been greater for her if she had been able to transition me to a medically retired state and I passed, versus if I just passed straight away. Ultimately, I think they use my case and maybe some others to change that

regulation or change that law. Of course, who has that kind of special ability to time it perfectly and things. And so I think that was changed to a great benefit of families and service members throughout uh, the post 9/11 period.

So I woke up on the day after flat lining twice and and I was bounced back. They taped my eyes open, and I remember, like, kind of coming to the next day. And I was I was in this bright light, you know, staring up at the ceiling and asking what had gone on. And so it was, it was a day to celebrate bouncing back and making it through. And really, from that moment forward, I was working every day to gain my strength and and had many, many surgeries, had lots of skin graft surgeries, um, where where we first used donor graphs. And then we're ultimately able to use, uh, my own skin, uh, that they would put on my wounds. And I got strong enough to go down to what they called the step down unit. And at the step down unit, it's kind of one step closer to getting out of the hospital. So that was a, that was a big deal. And at the step down unit, I would be working on my strength and some physical therapy and and diet and things like that. And and they had a central line in me, and one day they removed the central line, and a blood clot had formed on that central line, and it lodged in my lung. And so I suffered a pulmonary embolism, and when I did, it felt like a freight train just driving right through the middle of my chest, and it knocked me down and out completely, and it sent me right back to the intensive care unit. So I was in the intensive care unit for several more weeks. And then ultimately though, I got home on December 3rd when I was released and went home to my, uh, with my wife.

Thinking back in the hospital, I was so aware of that level of support that I know that that made a key difference in in how I survived and and how I recovered. I also am thankful that I was conscious throughout most if not all that time in intensive care, because I was watching TV from my room on that rotating bed or whenever it would stop, and I was watching the news. And you bet I was watching what was going on in Afghanistan and how our military and how our our government was responding, and I was following it incredibly closely. So I I knew when we had people in Afghanistan. I knew when strikes started in Afghanistan and, um would have different visits from people at the Pentagon expressing personally to me what was going on. And, uh, for that, I was incredibly thankful I was motivated and helped me every day.

Dee: We also understand that you had a conversation with the President during your recovery as well?

Kevin: I did. It was, uh, very early on. And it for me, it wasn't a really a conversation - I was listening. I had that breathing tube breathing for me and I was in no shape. And it was only days after 9/11. But the President and the First Lady, Laura Bush, came to the hospital and they were visiting the wounded personnel from the Pentagon. And when they got to my room, it was pretty amazing because Sergeant Workman, it took him a couple of days to figure out where I've been transferred. You can imagine the security levels and things. And and on that day he had arrived to the hospital in his uniform, in his Army uniform, and he had found his way to the burn unit, and he was able to introduce himself to my wife. And, uh so he was there for the President's visit. So the President visited us. The First Lady came to my bed, and I don't remember exactly what she said, but I remember how she said it because it was so calming. There was just a lot of love I knew being expressed in support. It was soothing. The President then came over and spoke to me. And in a way, I think that just made me chuckle thinking about it. But he said, uh, I remember he said to me, "mind my mother." That was his advice to me, to mind my mother. Um, I don't remember. I was really in and out of it those very early days, but uh, when he said that, I probably laughed, it probably hurt. And then, uh, then Sergeant Workman introduced himself to the President and they had a nice talk with my wife, Blanca, and it was an incredible visit for sure.

Dee: Can I ask, only if you're willing to share this - you're talking about being conscious during that time frame, watching the news, what's going on in in your head? I mean, you're sitting there struggling for your life while watching the news and being very cognizant of what's happening with world events. Are you retrospective at that point as to what happened knowing what needs to happen going forward or what's going to be going on in the world?

Kevin: Absolutely. I think I had, you know the focus was on my healing and and recovering first. But, you know, from the very moments that the Pentagon was hit, from those very moments, I knew it was a coordinated attack. I knew that, you know, we were at war, and being able to watch the news, I took it just as a massive source of strength to to be plugged in and and again, the visitors that I was receiving. I will I will say that some of the most impactful visits I had were by Admiral Vern Clark, who was at the time the Chief of Naval Operations. He would make it a priority and find the time to visit me and be in my room and see my wife and my family, maybe on the way home from the Pentagon after a long, long day or maybe at the beginning of the day. But whenever he could, he did, and knowing what actions our government was taking and what actions the Navy was taking in the operations, that he was involved in the decision making that he was needed for, for him to take that time out and be with me and my family at the time was also incredible and and just, uh, just an amazing source of strength. I'll never forget that.

Walter: Did you ever imagine at that time that you would be part of ultimately the response to the events that day?

Kevin: No, not at all, not in the hospital. And in that time, I was just prioritized and focused on my physical healing. You kind of go through phases when you're critically wounded and critically injured, and in the first phase is you you focus on the physical and and then you have another phase where you focus on the mental and the emotional. And so at that point, I was just in the physical, but very much aware of what was going on and and very motivated, just like just like all Americans were at that time.

(Music begins)

Dee: So, this is where we leave the conversation for now.

Walter: Stay tuned for part 2 of this 3-part episode, where Kevin will share how he found himself joining the CIA and what it was truly was like during the hunt for Usama Bin Laden.

Dee: We also want to thank Kevin again.

Walter: He revisited some of the most painful memories imaginable to share this story, and we are truly grateful.

Dee: We'll continue that story in our next episode. And so, until next time...

Walter: We'll be seeing you.

(Music ends)