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John Roberts
Furman University

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TRISH HARRIS/ U.S. ARMY SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND/PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE

TO LIBERATE THE OPPRESSED

Lt. Gen. John Mulholland has risen steadily through the ranks to become commander of U.S. Army Special Operations.

By John Roberts

Like most Americans, John F. Mulholland viewed the events of 9/11 with stunned disbelief. Then, anger.

Then he began preparing.

On October 19, 2001, little more than a month after terrorists hijacked American planes and crashed them into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and a field in Pennsylvania, killing almost 3,000 people, Mulholland, then a colonel, was stationed at an air base in Uzbekistan, just north of Afghanistan.

Using a satellite communication link, he issued commands to a small, elite group of soldiers who, along with CIA operatives, had slipped into Afghanistan with a simple but seemingly insurmountable mission: form alliances with a loose coalition of Taliban-opposed warlords and topple the Afghan government.

Mulholland's journey to the outskirts of Afghanistan to play a leading role in a major military success story began at Furman in the mid-1970s.

Today he's a highly respected, three-star general in command of 21,000 soldiers. In 1974, though, John Mulholland was just another newly enrolled Furman student — and not your typical Furman student, either.

Raised in Baltimore, a hardy, working-class city, he was the oldest of six children (four of them boys) in an Irish Catholic family. His home was a boisterous hive of activity. His father, a retired bomber pilot who served in the Korean War and was recruited to play professional football, encouraged his children to be competitive in everything they did. All of the Mulholland boys played football at Winston Churchill High School.

"We were not afraid to mix it up," Mulholland says. "We were all very competitive, but close. If you challenged one of us, you challenged all of us."

Mulholland, 6-5 and barrel-chested, was recruited by the University of Maryland before shattering his shoulder during his senior season. So his father, impressed with Furman's football program, decided to send his oldest son south to attend college.

But Furman and Mulholland weren't exactly a perfect match. His wry sense of humor, direct manner and mid-Atlantic accent did not always endear him to others.

His freshman year, however, he did find a girlfriend who later became his wife — classmate Miriam Mitchell, daughter of a Clemson University professor. And the next year he found his passion: the Reserve Officer Training Corps.



A history major, Mulholland was drawn to the structure, challenge and shared sense of purpose of ROTC cadets, and he received guidance from Furman's military science instructors, many of whom had combat experience in Vietnam.

His junior year he fell out of favor with the football coaches and lost his scholarship when, he says, he chose to attend the select Army Ranger School instead of participating in football workouts. He dropped out of college for a time but remained in Greenville, taking a job in construction for several months to earn enough money to fund his final year of education.

"I worked on [building] Haywood Mall," he remembers. "The fork lift had broken down and they needed someone strong to move the pipe." At night he tended bar at Steak and Ale on Pleasantburg Drive.

Mulholland says, "I definitely did not fit in at Furman. It was not a happy relationship, to be honest with you. I was not a Furman kind of guy, sort of like fitting a square peg in a round hole. It was character training," he laughs. "But I found Miriam there, and I loved my teammates."

After completing his degree in 1978, Mulholland was commissioned a second lieutenant and assigned to the Panama Canal Zone. In 1983, after graduating from the U.S. Army Special Forces Qualification Course (Green Berets), he decided to make his profession in the Special Forces, then a small and relatively unheralded group that focused on training soldiers for unconventional, behind-the-lines, guerrilla warfare.

Special Forces personnel are more than foot soldiers. Trained in language, culture and customs, they are part warriors, part diplomats. Their motto is "To Liberate the Oppressed;" they are frequently asked to develop relationships with natives and to mobilize allies in a shared mission.

Each "group" within the Special Forces is assigned a geographic region of the globe. The soldiers are tasked with knowing the area like their hometowns and are expected to immerse themselves in the region's topography, language, politics, history and religion.

"We were very cognizant that, in the wake of the horrendous attacks upon our country, we represented America's response to those who did us such terrible harm."

Through the late 1980s and early '90s, Mulholland climbed the military hierarchy, serving at bases in the United States, Panama and Japan. At each stop he assumed more responsibilities, commanding teams, companies, battalions and then groups. In 1990 he attended the Defense Language Institute in Monterrey, Calif. (He speaks Spanish, German and Arabic.) The following year, he graduated from the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College in Fort Leavenworth, Kan., an officer development school.

A decade later, Mulholland was invited to attend the National War College, a training ground for top military brass. After graduating with a Master of Science degree, he and Miriam moved to Fort Campbell, Ky., where in July 2001 Mulholland took command of 5th Special Forces Group. As fate would have it, the focus of 5th Group, which included 1,500 military personnel, was the Mideast and Africa.

Mulholland had barely settled into his new position when the terrorists struck on 9/11. The events, seared into the memories of most Americans, reshaped lives and global perceptions, and propelled the country into a now decade-long war on terror.

The United States first turned its attention to the Taliban-led government in Afghanistan, which supported the terrorist group al Qaeda.

Hours after the 9/11 attacks, members of the 5th Group knew their time had come. Mulholland and his staff began poring over the information they had on Afghanistan, but there was little on hand. According to *Horse Soldiers*, a book by Doug Stanton, they were relegated to reading old articles in *National Geographic* and watching programs on the Discovery Channel.

"After the Russians left [in 1989], we kind of took our eye off the country," says Lt. Col. Tom

Bryant, director of public affairs for the U.S. Army Special Operations Command.

As members of the 5th Group scrambled to assemble troops and supplies for an invasion, agents with the Central Intelligence Agency slipped into remote northern Afghanistan and tried to cobble together a partnership with the Northern Alliance, a loosely formed band of warlords who had been waging an uncoordinated and poorly supplied war against the Taliban for a decade.

A month after the 9/11 attacks, roughly 300 Special Forces soldiers launched a campaign dubbed Task Force Dagger. Transported by helicopter to remote regions of the rugged, mountainous country, the soldiers teamed with the warlords and called in precision air strikes — cruise missiles and laser-guided bombs — to complement ground assaults. Mulholland commanded the operations from an air base in Uzbekistan near the northern border, though he frequently took clandestine trips into Afghanistan to check on the troops' progress.

Despite being dramatically outnumbered, ill-equipped to handle the extreme weather, and forced to rely on spotty communication, the soldiers of the 5th Group were able to traverse the rugged mountains and chase down Taliban strongholds on horses provided by the Northern Alliance. Improvising along the way, the soldiers and their allies achieved a series of stunning victories that led to the capture of the city of Mazar-I-Sharif, a Taliban stronghold. In just 43 days they succeeded in toppling the Afghan government.

"The enormity of the task in those early days was massively intimidating," Mulholland wrote in a 2009 issue of *Special Operations*, a military publication. "There was so very much unknown, so much that at the time you didn't know where to begin, what to take on. We were all very cognizant that, in the wake of the horrendous attacks upon our country, we represented America's response to those who did us such terrible harm."

When members of the 5th Group were celebrated as liberators in late 2001, Mulholland likened the scene in some Afghan cities to the celebrations that occurred in Paris when France

was freed by the Nazis. There were, however, a few differences. Explaining the Taliban's strict social code that prohibits music and shaving for men, Mulholland has said, "There was a mad dash to the barbershop . . . and everyone began blaring music, all kinds of music."

Following the success of Task Force Dagger, Mulholland commanded a United States, United Kingdom and Australian task force that conducted the initial special operations in Iraq. He also served as chief of the Office of Military Cooperation in Kuwait.

In 2008 he was nominated by President Bush to be commander of the U.S. Army Special Operations, which brought with it a promotion to three-star general. Headquartered in Fort Bragg, N.C., Special Operations includes Special Forces, Rangers and Delta Force. Mulholland oversees approximately 21,000 soldiers and eight bases.

At the ceremony transferring authority to Mulholland, Adm. Eric Olson, the officiating officer, said, "If you've read his bio, that says what he's done. If you've spent any time with him, you know who he is. What he's done gives us a sense of his capabilities, but who he is nails our high level of confidence in him, that he will meet our highest expectations."

Colleagues describe Mulholland

as an intense man who cuts straight to the chase. "He is a very matter-of-fact person," says Tom Bryant. "He will start out with a quip to put people at ease, but after that he gets down to business. When he issues guidance, it is clear and to the point. He is not real wordy."

In *Horse Soldiers*, Stanton described Mulholland as "massively built with an intense gaze of someone who did not suffer fools."

And while Mulholland's student days at Furman may not have been all he would have liked, the self-proclaimed "square peg" has returned to campus a number of times in recent years. He has attended ROTC commissioning ceremonies, and at Homecoming 2009 he was presented the university's Distinguished Alumni Award. In October, he came to Furman to deliver a Riley Institute-sponsored speech about Afghanistan.

In his talk before a packed audience in Younts Conference Center, Mulholland painted a broad and complex portrait of the current state of affairs. Once the United States turned its attention to Iraq after 2001, he said, the Taliban and al Qaeda began to regain traction in Afghanistan. "Afghanistan got off the radar screen," he said. "Whether we lost an opportunity there will be debated for many years."

The general described how the extremes of Afghan weather (bitter cold, frequent sandstorms) and the country's mountainous terrain make transportation — and finding the enemy — difficult. Adding to the problem is the country's feeble infrastructure, as its roads and utility systems (electricity, water and sewer) have been decimated by years of conflict and neglect.

"It's very much a combination of a Mad Max movie with the Peace Corps and the U.S. military thrown in," he said. "We are trying to build anything from literally nothing."

He added that by working in villages in an effort to earn goodwill among the Afghan people, U.S. and NATO forces are "trying to clear and hold areas so that governance can take root and improve their way of life. It is quite a challenge."

On the political front, he said, the military and members of Hamid Karzai's administration are searching to find "those elements in the adversary camps that are open to reconciliation. That is what was done in Iraq. For those who are irreconcilable, the only option for us is to kill them. But we'd rather bring them over to our side." [F]



Mulholland welcomes Adm. Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to Fort Bragg.

TRISH HARRIS / USASOC PAO