

[Transcript] Darknet Diaries / Presenting: Spycast "Black Ops: The Life of a Legendary CIA Shadow Warrior"

Hey friends, how are you getting on?

I hope you're doing okay because it is a crazy time to be alive, but it's also a wonderful time.

I'm in the middle of a well-needed mental health break.

I thought a month-long break would be enough for me, but no, I'm going to need a full three month break here to get my head back in the game.

The truth is, I'm just not able to deliver you the quality programming that you're used to with my head being somewhere else, so I'm taking some time for myself after going almost non-stop on this podcast for five years, making 120 hours of content for you to enjoy.

That's what, like, ten novels worth of stuff?

Anyway, let me tell you, this break has been transformational, but I've got more work to do and I'm far from done.

I know a lot of you are really itching for something new from me, and I think that's very flattering to see how much you miss me, but I don't have anything ready for you yet. However, there's a podcast I listen to sometimes called Spycast, and I always find it super fascinating.

I mean, the show interviews spies, and it's wild, so I wanted to share with you an episode that I handpicked that I thought you might like.

My plan is to re-emerge in April with some new Dark Net Diaries episodes, but in the meantime, give this episode of Spycast a shot and look after yourself.

Take it away, Andrew.

Hi, and welcome to Spycast.

I'm your host, Dr Andrew Hammond, the story and curator here at the International Spy Museum in Washington, D.C.

Spycast's sole purpose is to educate our listeners about the past, present and future of intelligence and espionage.

Every week, through engaging conversations, we explore some aspect of a vast ecosystem that looms beneath the surface of everyday life.

We talk to spies, operators, mole hunters, defectors, analysts and authors to explore the stories and secrets, shredcrafting technology of the secret world.

We are Spycast.

Now sit back, relax and enjoy the show.

This week's episode features one of the most renowned CIA operations officers of his generation, Enrique Rick Prado.

To say he said quite the journey would be quite the understatement.

He was born in Cuba, fled the Castro Revolution as a young boy, ended up in an orphanage in Colorado.

Later, he joined the elite United States Air Force pararesca unit.

He was a paramilitary officer living among counter-revolutionaries in the 1980s.

He went to the farm to become a case officer and had six overseas posts in his 24-year career.

He describes his only bad habit as liking fast things on wheels.

In this week's episode, we talk about his time as CIA counter-terrorist chief of operations,

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which included September 11th, 2001, his career battling communist insurgents and Islamic terrorists in multiple continents, his experience living among the Contras during the Nicaraguan Revolution and his time as deputy chief of station and co-founding member of the Bin Laden Task Force.

Enjoy.

Thanks for coming on the show.

Well, it is my pleasure, as you can imagine, for an intel officer to do his first podcast and something like this spy museum, spycast, that's a heck of an honor for me, so thank you for having me.

Oh, thank you.

Well, there's so much of your story that I want to dig into and I really enjoyed reading your book.

That's me read it twice now.

I love the fact that you were really into the movie Tombstone when you were in Shangri-La. You mentioned it in the book and I was thinking, like, my favorite quote that I can remember is the one where Wyatt Earp slaps the guy and then said, are you going to do something, boy, or just stand there and bleed?

That is a fabulous movie and for me, Val Kilmer stole the show because he did such an incredible job as Doc Holliday.

My favorite line is the old, hey, Johnny Ringo, you look like somebody just stepped on your grave.

Okay, well, let us dig into your remarkable career.

You mentioned in the book that when you were in Langley headquarters, you never walked over the seal because you had such reverence for it and I think that that's a good place to start.

Take us back in time to the day that you first walked through those doors and saw that seal and saw the memorial wall and what it felt like for you to be joining the storied Central Intelligence Agency.

You could imagine being an immigrant to this country.

I've always felt that I had a huge debt of honor to pay back for everything that it did for me.

It was surreal for me.

I mean, even though I had interviewed, I had taken the polygraphs, I had done all those things, but the first time I walked through that door to get my badge and to go in, I was literally floating across the floor.

I never stepped on that seal, not because it's any sacrilege, but it was just, it meant so much to me that I would always go around it.

I just couldn't quite do it.

Well, Bill Donovan was one of my heroes growing up, Teddy Roosevelt, Wyatt Earp and him. I've read a lot of their books and that was a big influence for me, the whole OSS portion being military and that.

It was just one of the highlights of my life walking through there, knowing that I was going to be part of something, that I was joining something very special.

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I had no idea that I was going to have such a great ride.

Talk us through the initial period because you start off as a paramilitary officer, right?

And then after a period of time, you go to the farm and you become a case officer.

So I found that part of your journey really interesting because you were in the book, you discuss how for a paramilitary officer, to a certain extent, you're like a blunt instrument. You've got to be a hard charger and you've got to just go at the problem head on.

But as a case officer, there's layers of nuance and finesse in it.

It's interesting to me, that transition that you had to make.

So walk us through those first few years as a paramilitary officer.

I was a Air Force para rescue.

I went in para rescue in 71 and in 74, when I couldn't get to Vietnam because that's what I wanted to do, I wrote the agency and they sent me back a very nice note saying, thank you but we're firing, not hiring, those were very bad years for the agency.

Subsequently, around late 79, early 80, I got the bug again and I wrote again.

And at the time I was writing with Miami Metro fire department as a paramedic because para rescue, of course, are all EMT2s, they called me back.

The agency called me back and said, look, we're not hiring staff right now, but we do have some contract work that you can do as a paramilitary medic when we're doing some training or maybe even missions that I'm going like, put me in coach.

That experience exposed me to what special activities division ground branch was called back then, which is one of the three branches in the paramilitary side of the agency.

And when the contract program, when the Sandinista revolution started getting fought against, we wrote on Reagan came in, one of the first things he did was is I want a covert action program on this.

Well, suddenly I get a phone call in Miami that from the agency said, hey, listen, we have something for you.

And at the time I was tired of the 30 day here in no hope of getting hired.

So I asked him a question.

I said, just one question, I don't care where I'm going or whatever, is this long term or is this contract?

And when they said long term, that was it.

I said, I would do it.

So it was really backdooring it into the agency through that.

And the reason was they called me was because at the time the agency capabilities were anorexic.

There had been so many firings and stuff like that after Vietnam, and they did not feel they had a native Spanish speaking paramilitary officer that could pull off not being an American. So that's why I cut my teeth for a little over three years.

I slept in a jungle hammock one day through Friday, going to the different camps.

And it was arguably the best job I ever had for my right of reasons, but primarily it was personal.

It was very personal to me that mission.

That was the start.

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I did three and a half years there and had some great operations and a couple of good scares and I have to tell them, I guess.

I mean, I think that that initial period, one of the things that I find quite interesting and we can broaden this out a bit, but you said there that it's personal.

So I found it quite interesting that you came to America as a result of a Marxist insurgency and guerrilla movement, and then you found yourself in Central America in the 80s.

And for you, this was personal.

There was a personal connection to it, and not just because of language, but because of your experience as a young boy.

You know, absolutely, Andrew.

I honestly believe that each one of us is given a God-given path.

And if you have the courage to step into it, it is your path.

You will endure and you will succeed.

I think that from very early age, because of what I saw of the revolution, the atrocities, the persecutions, what they did to my family, I had a very strong conviction about fighting communism.

Fast forward to, you know, a couple of years later, now I was able to come to the United States without my parents, came out through a program called Peter Pan.

The Peter Pan program was bringing in kids that his parents could not get out.

So lucky me, I ended up in a orphanage in Pueblo, Colorado, quite an adventure.

But by the time I got to Nicaragua, it was not only my background and my experience, it was the people I was dealing with.

Every night, I would grab a cup of coffee and I would go sit with a different group of freedom fighters.

None of them had red marks, none of them had red lead in, but each one had a personal story.

They raped my daughter.

They beat up my priest and closed my church.

They forcefully conscripted my 15-year-old son.

And the litany goes on.

There wasn't a single person that said to me, well, you know, we have to fight the tentacles of this octopus that is communism.

There are really simple people fighting for a real simple thing, which is freedom.

And I want to highlight that one of the biggest influences on me was my father, because imagine taking your only child and putting them on an airplane to a country that you've never been, you do not speak the language, and you may never see him again.

Not for economic reasons, on the quite the contrary, but for freedom.

He did not want his son to grow under that kind of regime.

I mean, on the personal note there as well, it's really interesting to me during your career, you could almost map it onto the war against communism and then the war against terrorism.

So you're fighting against this ideology, but it's quite interesting to me because even in your own family, in the book you outline how your godmother's husband was a Marxist, he tipped your family off that you were going to, Rick Prado, CIA legend, was going to be

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sent off to the Soviet Union to become a promising prospect for the other side.

So even within your family, and then your cousin as well, he comes and lets your family know that the guerrillas are going to be coming through your village and stuff.

So there's this kind of interesting dynamic going on.

I think that that was the theme with just about everybody in Cuba.

We all had, we hope that family blood is a little thicker than anything else, an ideology.

In the case of my uncle, I'm married to my mother-in-law, I mean my godmother, he wasn't a Marxist hardcore, but he was a communist.

That was his ideology.

But he understood, I mean I lived in their house for almost two years because I used to go to school away from my town, I lived in a very small town, and the school that I attended there, he was one of the professors there, so it was a private school, so I lived with them for two years.

So I was like his youngest son, and that's the reason I think that he came over.

The cousin story was my dad's cousin, and he was one of the rebel leaders in the Escambray Mountains, which is where Che Guevara actually dominated.

And he came to the house one night, middle of the night, and told my father, I said, look, we're going to take the town.

But neither you nor your wife can leave because it was my first lesson in counterintelligence. He said, if they see you and your wife leave with your kid, they'll know something is up because they know you and I are related.

And so that started the first adventure, which is leaving that town under the conditions and coming back, it was quite a growth period for an eight-year-old.

All of these places where you've found yourself, especially in Central America and South America, it's like there's these authoritarian regimes or dictatorships, and then there's a communist insurgency, and then there's a counter-movement.

So even the term Contras comes from counter-revolution, right?

And in Cuba as well, the Escambray Mountains, there's also a resistance movement against Castro and that regime there.

Yes, it's quite interesting to me how you're located within these big historical forces that you found yourself a part of.

I believe that that was just my path, that was my destiny, and you know, you can't use the sword unless you forged it first and have the right steel.

And I think looking back now, all these lessons, I would tell you, getting on an airplane by yourself when you're 10 years old, going to an orphanage in Pueblo, Colorado, which is a pretty rough town, and it was a pretty rough orphanage, that was quite a test of my survivability.

But you know, I was, again, blessed with a dad that always brought me up as the little man, your responsibilities, I wish I was as stoic as he is, was, and again, just the same thing with running the North Korean programs, you know, it was all, I kept gravitating back to these things, and in many cases, there were often.

So let's go back to your early years and the working for the agency.

So you're in Nicaragua, one of the parts of the story that I found quite interesting was there's one part in the book where you realize that you're being set up by a small group

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of contrast to be whacked, but you managed to set yourself up in a situation that that obviously doesn't happen.

So can you just tell us a little bit more about that?

I mean, I understand as well that you're the only agency officer who's in the camps for 14 months.

I mean, you're, so tell us about that experience.

It was, again, I never woke up one morning, Andrew, and said, ah, I got to go to work. Never, not in my whole career.

It was always, I got to go to work and really found a purpose there.

That incident that you're speaking is there was a, an incident at the camp where the commander had been compromised and two of his sub guys became broke and they were stealing cattle and all this other kind of stuff.

And I was sent there to bring it back and pretty long processes.

As you read, there's the two guys that I was able to bring back alive, but bring them back under, under some kind of duress.

When I got there and grabbed the first guy and send them back with one of the local captains, I stayed in the camp and it was, I was not, I was not a case officer yet.

I had never recruited anybody, but several months before this young, very young guy comes to me from one of the camps and says, ah, my wife is ill.

I need some medicine.

Can you help me out?

I reached into my pocket, gave him about \$20 worth of limpetas and he went off and got the medicine for his wife.

Well, fast forward three, four or five months, whatever it is, I'm walking with another Nika that was in the helicopter with me and literally it's almost comical because he was behind the bushes and you hear this, me, my daughter, major, major.

And so I said, what's up?

He goes, they're going to kill you tonight.

They're planning to kill you tonight.

I said, what are you talking about?

He goes, yeah.

You know, they know that you're here to get krill and karemalo and they're going to kill you.

Normally when we stayed in the camps, we stayed in the middle because that's how we were more protected.

Well, this time they said, oh, this is where you're going to be staying and who's at the outskirts of the town, of the thing.

And I said, okay.

So as soon as they got dark, as soon as they got dark, we crawled out the windows.

We walked up.

There was a substantial hill in front of it.

And there's no way I was going to try to get back to civilization.

I mean, you know, you're talking three weeks worth of walking.

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But I said, well, you know, at least here we have a fighting chance.

We set up a perimeter.

We took out a time and sure as hell around 10, 11 o'clock at night when there was pitch black, they were there with flashlights and you could see, you could hear them, you know, you could hear them arguing, where are they and all this kind of stuff.

Of course, they finally got off, they did not chase us.

I had been training most of these guys myself, so they knew that there would be in a fight if they came after me and my guys.

Walk back into the camp the next morning, just like nothing had happened.

And it was funny because some of the people were like, he's still here and the other ones were smirking.

He's still here.

And eventually I got the second guy that second day, so.

I just want to discuss the Contras, you call them my beloved Contras.

It seems to me that what you're saying in the book and that example of the two deputies to Suicida as an example is that the Contras were a group that were made up of many different types of people that had many different grievances and that were fighting the Sandinistas for many different reasons.

And if you have enough people like that, you're going to get people that are doing stuff that's not acceptable.

That seems to me what you're saying, you're not saying that every one of them was an angel, but you're not saying that every one of them was like a killer.

You're saying that they were all organically in this fight for something that was personal, that related to their life and the fact that they all got hinted in the same way for a small percentage of people is unfair to the memory of what they were fighting for.

Tell me if I've got any of that wrong.

You're 100% right.

The Sandinistas revolution started with some of the former Somoza military guys.

The person had to leave because they were being killed.

Same thing that happened in Cuba.

The persecutions were there, there was no trials, these guys were being similarly executed.

So you had the original where people that were lieutenants and captains and even someone like Enrique Bermudez, who was later assassinated by the Sandinistas, they were former Somoza officers.

But to say that the organization was Somosista, as many people threw that name out, is ridiculous. They're talking 80% at least of the forces and even more so the fighting.

They were all peasants.

They were all simple Nicaraguans fighting for the causes that I mentioned before.

I had a special love with the Miskito Indians.

It didn't dawn on me at first, but for me to be Honduras and in Nicaragua, that wasn't a culture shock for me because I am Hispanic and I know the culture with these nuances, but nonetheless, going to the Mosquitia where they don't even speak Spanish and there's three tribes there.

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You got the Miskito Sumo and Rama and that's led by a guy named Steadman Fagas.

I just talked to him a couple of days ago.

We remain friends.

I love those guys because there was even more purity because there wasn't a single Somosista or former Somosista around.

I want to highlight that these two guys that went rogue, that was the exception, not the rule and that was an anomaly.

The side of the coin that I want to focus on is the fact that we did something about it.

We did not let it go as soon as we found out that this was going on, we took corrective action.

When I say we, we're talking about the FDN, the Honduras and of course the Americans behind it.

That experience with the Miskito Indians is a really interesting one.

Almost seems to me like they don't need to go through the training.

They're like born special forces.

They just come off the shelf like that.

They really are because they are people that live off the land.

They're all incredible hunters.

They're all incredible trackers.

Some of them are incredible divers.

You read that I use some of their divers to do some serious damage to the Sandinistas.

I'm very proud of that one too.

These people were instinctively very adept at patrolling and they had a lot of support in the area too.

It was a very difficult area.

One of the reasons the Sandinistas has always tried to move into the Miskito, the natives area is because there's some gold mines out there that are very lucrative.

That's always been part of the impetus of them controlling that area and they couldn't do that with the thousands of guys we were training and arming and sending in.

I had my good experiences with them and I had one bad experience.

I think you read when there was a rift in the Misuda Sata and several commanders, I think it was like eight of them came out.

They were going to step in Fagathon trial because they were convinced that he was stealing from them because we had to stop some of the refueling or the resupply because of political things that were going up and down.

I flew into Rouse-Rouse was the camp directly on a helicopter when I found out this was going on and Stedman Fagath came in shortly thereafter and he says, what are you doing here?

I told him.

He looks at me and he goes, what are you doing here knowing that?

I go, I'm not going to leave you here.

That night I called the meeting with the commanders and they all come out and it was something

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out of the good, the bad and the ugly.

All these guys had the bandoliers with the stuff and they were not happy.

I was there by myself.

I had a browning 9mm.

What do you do with a browning 9mm against 600 guys?

I had credibility with them because I ate their food.

I slept in their hammocks.

I was the guy coordinating the resupply for them.

I had credibility with them.

I was able to parlay that into a treaty that said, look, if you want to get rid of Stedman democratically, okay, but if you harm one here on his head, we're going to get you.

We got shot at several times because Sandinistas were all over there.

But that one was one of those that, one thing is combat where your blood gets up and you're adrenaline kicks in, but when you walk into something like this and you have to keep your cool and you know that the consequences are going to be severe if you screw it up, it was quite a challenge.

Is that something that you were born with or is that something that you learned to do when you were in the Air Force doing the PJ?

To what extent as a born and to what extent as a created?

I think I get everything that we have.

You have your DNA wiring and you got your acculturation.

Like I said, my father brought me up to be a young man.

I learned to shoot when I was a little kid.

I would help him drive the cars.

I would sit on his lap and drive the cars.

I had a horse before I had a bicycle because it was a small town.

So all of those experiences, yeah, the wiring was there and the mentoring from my dad were there.

But then the trip to the orphanage and then definitely when I got into para rescue, it's been one of our special operations forces.

The training is very, very intense.

The washout radius is no less than no more than seals or green berets.

And making it through that, making it through sear school, making it through mountain climbing school.

It's a certain level of conquering your emotions that you have to do in order to do all that.

But I think that the most important thing was that I believed in what I was doing.

I honestly never doubted that I was wearing the white cowboy hat.

One of the other things that I wanted to ask before we move on to your transition to become a case officer was you speak about how in the mosquito and then camps they weren't penetrated by the Sandinistas because there were such a Thai kin group and community.

But some of the other ones were penetrated.

One of the questions that I had was, did you have to be cognizant of foreign intelligence officers being around this game as well?

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Was that ever something that was on your radar, like Soviets or Eastern Europeans? We knew that the Cubans primarily were the surrogates for Soviet Union at the time. And we knew that they were coaching Sandinistas and they were in many cases leading them, some of their pilots and stuff like that.

In any insurgency, I'll just go back to the OSS days, how many elements of the resistance were compromised because they turned somebody or they recruit somebody or they forced somebody into that.

You're talking people that it's hard to imagine immorality that you don't understand. If somebody comes up and puts a gun to your daughter's head and says, you know, you're going to help us with this like they do in these places, what choice do they really have? So it was overall, I think, believing in what I did was probably the single most important thing because that cleared my conscience and that's steel by spine.

Let's talk about your transition to become an ops officer.

Some of the other people that you were going through with were straight out of college and you say that trying to get good recruits that way is almost like trying to choose Tom Brady amongst the NFL draft or something.

So help us understand that transition from paramilitary to a case.

I had no training from the agency going into the Nicaragua program.

None.

I got some briefings from analysts about what to expect and this, that and the other, but there was no training whatsoever.

So the transition to the point is I had no idea what the agency really did and you hit on something that a lot of people do not understand.

In my business, in our business, unless you're there to do a rendition or something, the minute you grab your gun, your mission is over.

Our missions, even if the mission was accomplished, you bug that terrorist, a safe house, but then you get into a firefight, your mission is compromised.

Your government is embarrassed and you're PNG'd from a third country.

So that is for us, tradecraft and awareness are our tools.

Awareness beats fast draw every single time because the main job is to detect something and be able to avoid it.

So that subtlety of the program was something that fascinated me and of course, I had read a lot.

I've always, I was a reader since middle school.

I had one teacher that really infected me with reading.

So I was always reading about the French resistance and about the OSS and that kind of stuff.

So I understood that there was both sides of the coin, that there was a very physical, aggressive part.

And I think that's why I was so well suited for it because I really felt at home in both camps.

In the book, you outline your respect and reverence for Bill Casey.

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You say he's the best leader of intelligence since well-built Donovan.
I find Casey such an interesting figure for a whole variety of reasons, but tell me why you hold him in such high regard.
Is it his leadership style or is it his actions or is it something else?
You know, it's one of the highlights of my estate down there.
You've got to understand, I was a GS10.
And here I am.
I get called in from the camps.
No reason giving.
My colonel said, we need you to come in, Alex.
And I show up at our command post and there is this guy in pressed vest with really nice clothing on and Rolex, big cigar in his hand and I was introduced to Dewey Claridge, who was a legendary man, a wonderful friend.
He was a mentor of mine from that day on.
And I will tell you, I still get goosebumps because all of a sudden he introduces me to Bill Casey and he says, Mr. Director, this is your man in the camps.
And you talk about a badge of honor.
I was, you know, and then Casey says to me, he says, son, you know, those photographs that you take in all the camps and you send in, I keep those on my desk.
And anytime somebody tries to push back against this program, I use those photos to beat them over the bed, over the forehead, keep them coming.
So I mean, I was walking on air.
I had the pleasure, although it was difficult, because I had the best Spanish of the guys there when we had a couple of beatings with the Honduran, senior Hondurans and some of the Argentines were there at the time early on, I was his interpreter.
And as you probably have heard, he was always a mumbler.
And so I'm sitting there, we're at this one training camp, not one of the operational camps.
The camp is just outside of Tegucigalpa.
And my food, of course, was getting cold, it had flies on it.
I couldn't eat.
I was paying attention.
And all of a sudden, he kind of like does one of these and closes his eyes.
And I go, oh boy, this is going to be something.
And there was this Argentine that was kind of noticing what was going on.
So he started pressing and Bill Casey just all of a sudden looked up and gave him the most precise, articulate answer.
And the guy went like, oops.
I think the other thing that fascinated about him was that he was an O.S.S., he was, I mean, he wasn't a guy that parachuted into France, but he conceptualized a lot of great operations and he did a lot of great stuff.
And again, there's a common theme here, they're believers.
Casey was a believer.

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Dewey Clareg was a believer.

Colonel Array was a believer, Vietnam vant the whole nine yards.

To tell you the truth, this is the reason I wrote the book, because my agency is the most maligned, misunderstood agency in the whole federal system.

We're always being painted as being immoral, corrupt, maniacal assassins, what is it, American made and Jason Bourne and all these movies that are out there.

There is very few movies or books that portray the agency in a realistic light.

We don't do the James Bond stuff.

Yes, we get, sometimes you get into trouble and you've got to fight your way out.

But it is a completely different thing than what people expect from us.

I mean, people don't realize that our successes cannot be recounted.

I mean, the Nicaragua stuff, I can talk about it now because I was 1980.

How many years have gone through that?

That I am now being allowed to talk about some of these things.

I really wanted to be the voice of my colleagues as much as possible, because you mentioned when I first walked into that hall, when I saw those stars on the wall, that's a chilling effect because you know, the agency is not big in numbers when it comes to operational officers.

And you know, sadly now, Andrew, there's 137 stars on that wall and a third of them are post-911.

I would say that the successful operators in the agency, they're not looking for a job.

They're looking for a purpose.

Just when you were talking about Casey there, I'm sure you've heard this one, but the joke was that they didn't need a telephone scrambler for him because I'm sure some people say the same thing about me.

I could understand it clearly, so we're good.

Okay, so let's walk forward then.

So you're in, you've made the transition over to a case officer.

So we've got this period when you make the transition from, you know, and you go back and forward, but you make a transition from fighting communists to fighting terrorists.

And it's quite interesting because that, in the book, you outlined that one of the jobs that you went for, you later found out that you were the only person that applied because at the time the age of counterterrorism was the bastard child of the CIA.

Tell us a little bit more about that transition over to counterterrorism.

Again, it was one of my bosses that came to me and say, this is the perfect job for you.

We need to have more case officers that have paramilitary credentials.

We need to get our guys to be recognized, and they are.

They definitely are, especially now.

So I put in for this job and I waited like three weeks and, you know, I'm sweating it.

And finally, the guy that our PEMS officer, this is a personnel officer, calls me in.

He was kind of a jerk anyway.

He calls me in and he says, okay, yeah, yeah, you got the job, but I did like a high five or whatever.

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And he says, what are you so excited about?

You were the only guy who applied for the job.

And I'm not saying that, I mean, that place, as you read, was very dangerous at the time, but that was probably the most dangerous time in that country's history up to date as far as, you know, the insurgencies and the terrorism and the murders and the sabotages that were being done.

So people, you know, it discounted a lot of people, a lot of people with families that now want to go there.

The other one was the language, you know, my agency moves with this language, you know, that is our key trait.

If you cannot communicate, you cannot recruit, or you cannot develop and you cannot recruit. Quite a pleasant surprise, and I never told my wife that the guy told me this was the only guy who had applied, I know better than that.

Help us understand that transition for you personally, but also for the agency that you loved this move over to counter terrorism, because you play such an interesting role, because your mentor, Jay Clarage, he becomes the first head of the counterterrorism centre, and then you later on become the chief of operations, help us understand that gradual transition through the 90s over to the early 2000s, where the agency and you both start pivoting towards counterterrorism.

You know, counterterrorism was probably one of the biggest game changers for the agency, because most of our work was done in the diplomatic or the business circuit, recruiting foreign agents with access to intelligence, but in very socially acceptable, you know, areas and over dinners, and well, you cannot get terrorism or information or counter narcotics information from somebody in the dip circuit.

So it was a new set of skills, which it really helped a lot of the paramilitary officers, now you had individuals that had a little different grit, and I think that was an advantage.

But that was such a big deal, and I've heard the charges that, you know, we as an intelligence community took our eyes off the communist ball, and thus, omnifocused on terrorism.

And I disagree, because I know that we were still working against the Soviets and against the Chinese and against the North Koreans.

However, I will say that it was a triage of resources, you know, terrorism is the equivalent of getting shot, where communism is the equivalent of cancer.

So if to fight either one, at least with the cancer, you have some medical and you have some paths that you may be able to take, and most importantly, you got a little bit of time.

But terrorism, if you miss the cues and you lose the timing, people die.

So that we had to do a triage kind of concept of what is most important with the finite resources that we all had.

How much was your, were you focused on whatever was in front of you or the task at hand, and how much were you thinking about what was over the horizon?

And I know that help us understand how much someone like you who's rising through the ranks, who's doing this transition, how much are you focused on what's in front of you and how much space or time do you have to take a step back and look at the bigger picture?

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I think it's an excellent question.

I think it's a combination.

You know, in the agency, you don't get anywhere if you're just a blunt instrument.

It's a career of sophisticated complications.

You have to understand that intelligence operations, you're talking exhaustive collection, exhaustive intel analysis, you're talking meticulous planning, and then you're talking expert execution.

Those are things that are very hard to achieve if you're a one-trick pony.

We always kept in the big picture as part of our education, and as part of our training at the farm, it's understanding that you have to know the global dynamics in how that affects your account.

That said, as you so properly said, when you're there, Tunnel Vision, you are focusing on your stuff, and in that one Latin American country, I remember the first thing I used to do every single morning.

I used to get into the office before seven, grab a cup of coffee, and I would take the left-wing newspaper, the right-wing newspaper, and the middle-of-the-road newspaper, and I wouldn't even turn on my communications until I had read through those because I needed to know in whatever microcosm was what was going on.

So I think that, you know, again, the characteristics of an agency officer or of an intel officer is more of a jack-of-all-trades than an expert.

You know, I think that our analysts, for example, are the most incredible.

I mean, I love our analysts.

We couldn't do our work without them.

They have the luxury of coming in and picking a topic, and they can carry that topic for their whole career, and I know a guy, we EOD together, enter duty together, and he literally went from GS-10 or 11 to an SIS-er doing the same kind of work, just more and more sophisticated and more and more knowledgeable, where we have to go to different countries and learn different languages, learn different customs.

For me, the transition to terrorism was heaven-sent because I still like that part of it.

I mean, I have done the other.

I have done some great recruitments of diplomatic circuit individuals, and I do own a tuxedo till this day, so I clean up well.

But deep in my heart, I like getting my hands dirty, and I like meeting folks.

And that period in Latin America where I was literally, I literally recruited a terrorist through coercion, but nonetheless, it was something that it was easy in my character to say, hey, this is justifiable, and of course, we had the permissions to do so.

It was an easier transition that somebody that was used to Paris or something like that, and all of a sudden, now they're being sent to a place where it is a third world and people are trying to kill you.

Another thing that I find quite interesting is, it seems to me from the book that a lot of your work is South or Central America, and then East Asia, Korea, also North Africa, sorry, so there's quite a lot of ground that you cover.

I guess the question is, for many people, you find your niche, you stick to the niche because it reaffirms your sense of self-worth, because you're the person that knows about

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that niche.

So that seems to be the more typical thing, not just for people in the intelligence, but just in life, but for someone like you to go from PJ to paramilitary, to case officer, from Latin America to Korea to Shangri-La, there's a lot of lateral moves, there's a lot of adaptations and chameleon-like behavior, and I mean that in the best possible way. For people that are listening, how does one go about doing that?

Because, typically, you just find the thing that you are comfortable with, you stick to that because it makes you feel secure, and then you don't move.

Perhaps I just have a short attention span, and have to all of a sudden fight, you know, I've come to this, I've got to go do something else.

Our officers, some of them do more than three years in country because of exposure and just wear and tear.

So you are going to be moving from different accounts and different cultures to a certain degree.

For me, it came easy just because I wanted to go where the average person wasn't going. That was always my niche.

Shangri-La was a perfect example.

I was four years into my SIS rank when Cofer said, hey, I need you to get me somebody to go to Shangri-La and help us with the station that was just reopening.

The embassy had been closed for a couple of years, I believe, and I couldn't find anybody.

I made a bunch of phone calls to all the personnel officers and they all said, no, we don't have anybody that's interested, and for several reasons.

One was my wife did have a medical scare there when we were in Korea, and also because our kids were now of school age, they were in high school, different grades in high school.

We decided we were not going to take any further overseas tours, and I would continue to do my work, but do it more from headquarters and TDYs.

So when I went to my wife with the fact that I said, look, I want to do this, it's going to be probably six to eight months.

She's a trooper.

I mean, I couldn't have done anything that I did in my career without her, and you read that in the book, she even participated in some pretty cool adventures.

But it was that change, the natural, just chasing what was the highlight topic.

And there's also, I think I concluded in the book, is that I didn't do any career planning.

I never sat there and said, you know, I need to get this job in order to get my GS13, 14, 15, or SIS.

I always followed the, I hate to use the word the action, but where were the importance of the pointy end of the spear needed to be.

And there's two or three incidents in the book where those changes came to me.

I wasn't looking for it.

I was chief of the Koreas, and that's how I made senior grade, and I was the rep to

the NSG for the agency on that hard targets board, and it was a great conventional job.

I loved it, again, fighting communism.

Very sophisticated.

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I got involved in operations because I liked the lead from the front.

And that's in the book.

At least one of them was what they allowed me to talk about.

But you know, I had, Hank Crumpton, who to this day is the dear friend of mine, he called me up, and I had never met them, and I heard him, and he says, I want to talk to you.

And he's the one that I went over, we chatted over coffee, and he said, look, you know, I want you to be my replacement in a year, and I wasn't thinking of going back to the center at the time.

So all of a sudden, I find myself back at the center as the chief of international terrorism, which was everything except the Latin.

And then from there, moving to, going to Shangri-La, and coming back as the chief of ops.

And then being the chief of ops when 9-11 actually happened.

It's very similar to what happened to me in going to Costa Rica and going to Korea.

It was the chief of station that had asked for me in both those incidents for different reasons.

They had asked for me to be pitched to do that.

And there were both surprising changes because in both cases, I was supposed to already assigned to another country.

And at the last minute, you get this phone call that says, come here, the chief wants to talk to you.

And I end up in these other two assignments, which were absolutely wonderful, but they weren't of my picking.

Yeah.

It was my, you know, my mentors or, or leaders saying that's a good fit for him.

That certainly comes across in the book, like it wasn't a chess match of trying to get as far up of the hierarchies you could get, it was more where is the action on the chess board?

That's where I want to be.

Yeah.

I think that the greater majority of the agency folks, and you know, you got to really understand and you know this, the agency is not just operators, the guys who are ops officers, case officers is a finite number.

We cannot do anything without the support of everybody else from logistics to security for analysts.

It is a team sport and each one of those individuals goes into the, in that career track.

Logistics, security, whatever it is, but you do it through the agency because you believe in it.

You believe that you're trying to make a bigger difference.

So whether a DO officer or a DI officer or a DA officer, I found that the majority of the people that I worked with were mission oriented, whatever their mission was, mission oriented.

They were proud and they were very focused on making sure that they kept their end of whatever needed to be in operation.

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That said, like in any culture, I mean, in the military, you have guys who go in and you know, the billy wavs of the world that go into harm's way for four tours in a row and have eight purple hearts.

And then you have the other ones that, you know, gravitate towards the circuit and become military attachés and they all end up in the same place, but by different means.

I was blessed with opportunities that allowed me to polish myself and to grow and each one of these tours, because they were so different, when you come out of there, you have a different level of confidence because now you've conquered yet another culture or another challenging things or working at a different kind of a target.

Let's go forward to September the 10th, 2001.

I think that's quite interesting because you're there at the Counterterrorism Centre.

News has come through about Ahmed Shah Massoud, who's been assassinated by Al Qaeda operatives.

In the book, you outline how you're thinking to yourself, this is pretty sophisticated, the way that they've done this.

It seems like something else is happening.

Take us back to that day, September the 10th.

What was understand what it was like to be Rick Prado on September the 10th, 2001?

To picture a better picture, I will start with, again, one of these jobs that I was asked to take, I didn't even know existed, which was I'm a plank owner of the Bin Laden Task Force.

Mike Shoyer, a brilliant analyst, was the chief of the station and I was the deputy chief of station.

That was my first exposure to what became Al Qaeda and the Taliban and everything else.

I had that knowledge behind me of their modus operandi.

The one thing that I learned really early on in counterterrorism, especially when it comes to the Al Qaeda type of terrorism, is the guys who pulled off 9-11 had enough education to fly a 747 into a building.

One Masoud was one of the most clinical operations anybody could tell.

They went in there into the Hornets Nest in that kind of dedication.

You cannot underestimate your enemy if you want to win your fights.

9-11, every single one of us, we know exactly where we were standing and what we were doing.

I knew there was something bigger as soon as that second plane hit, my first comments to the chief of staff was, I need you to send out a cable to every station.

Telling them, number one, watch your six.

This is not a singleton act.

Number two, turn up every rock as we need to know who these guys are and where their softer belly buttons are at.

That was my very first action.

As you probably know, the agency was forced to evacuate because there were other planes and they felt that the agency was a viable target.

I would have hit it first knowing what I know, but I guess they went for the political part over there.

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The economic impact, the CTC stayed open, the counterterrorist center stayed open. Kofir Black, who to this day is one of my dearest friends and mentor, he said, I'm not going anywhere.

You're all free to go, and especially if you have kids that came out of school and all that other, you're free to go, but the counterterrorist center stayed open.

I slept in my office for three nights without going home, literally taking showers in the gym.

One of my favorite stories of that period, and I use it to show the contrast from what the media portrays our people like to the reality of the courage and conviction that my colleagues display every single day.

It was around eight o'clock at night on 9-11, and I was making the rounds because CTC was a huge open area with gazillion cubicles.

I walked up to the area where Hezbollah Branch was because my office was on the other side, and there was this young lady that was sitting at the desk.

She was the deputy of the Hezbollah Branch.

She was eight months pregnant, and I walked up to her, and I said, what are you doing here?

And she says, well, I'm not convinced that this was bin Laden.

I want to make sure that it wasn't Hezbollah.

Well, let's face it, Hezbollah had killed more Americans, 246 of them, as a matter of fact.

Before 9-11, they had killed more Americans than anybody else, and I looked to her and I said, look, I've delivered two kids in my life, none of them were mine.

I ain't about to do the third.

I forced her to go home.

I had one of our logistics guys take her home that night.

I saw her again a few years later, and she came to me and she said, you know, every birthday that my daughter has, I think of you because you forced me to get out of there.

And the moral of the story is the strongest drive in the human race is the mother instinct to protect her child.

And this woman, eight months pregnant, was able to turn that off and stay in harm's way to get her job done.

And there's a really beautiful vignette at the end of the book where you discuss, Joe Claridge phones you up and said, you need to come and you go in the two of you sit and you have this moment where you realize that he's passing the torch on to you.

I was wondering, have you thought to yourself, who's the person that I'm going to pass the torch on to?

I already have, actually.

You already have.

Can you tell us who?

Yeah.

Can I mention that by name, my old deputy for one in that last effort that ended up being extremely high rank in the agency.

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He was a guy that was always smarter than I was and just as good as anything as I was. I would consider him like one of the two or three people that I actually mentored and pass on the baton inside the agency and even afterwards.

My deal with Dewey was actually helping him post my agency career.

I was still working with the community.

This is outside of the book, so I cannot go into details, but for the next eight years after retirement, I did nothing different than run programs for the community in a very different way.

That was one of the things he wanted me to take over was some of these great thing connectivity that he had here and there.

It ended up being really sexy things to run, but yeah, it was never a career thing.

It was always a purpose.

I made some mistakes as a lot of young guys would do, being kind of a jerk, getting into fights and crap, but I believe that we can build enough good karma that it will get us to the right afterlife as far as I'm concerned.

For me, it was always that mission.

For me, it was the purifying fire.

For me, it was the agency and peri-rescue.

I'm very proud.

Very, very proud.

I would have not gotten into the agency had that been for peri-rescue.

It's been so great to speak to you.

I could speak to you all night just to bring it to a close.

I think there's another really beautiful vignette at the beginning of the book, which I alluded to earlier.

You're seven years old.

You're looking out of the window and you see this gorilla on your front porch firing into a bar that policemen used to frequent and then your journey to be where you are now.

I guess the question is, have you been back to Cuba?

Is there still that part of you inside that still longs to go home or do you feel like you've moved on now and help me understand?

Cuba is my roots.

That's my cultural roots.

That's my family roots.

I'm very proud of being Cuban-born.

I'm an American, first and foremost, that I have an affinity towards Cuba.

Of course, because that's home.

You're giving me more credit, probably, that is deserving in that sense.

I didn't plan any of this.

These things just were things that came in my way and I had to walk some of the other ones I chose to walk, but it is not that unique.

I will tell you, I have a very good friend of mine and will not mention his name because

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I can't.

But if agency guy, that's how you retire from the agency senior grade, but he was in the Bay of Pigs as a 17-year-old, he turned 18 in a Cuban jail.

When Kennedy extricated them through the trade of tractors and medicines, he joined the Green Berets and he went to Vietnam and he had tours in Vietnam.

Then he came back and he went to Georgetown, got his degree, and then joined the agency and had a fantastic career and retired at SIS something.

Just like the agency have a lot of Rick Prottles.

We will never have a shortage of warriors.

We could do better in leadership, but we don't never have a shortage of people that are willing to go in harm's way.

That was the fascinating thing for me in working with the CIA was that if I looked right or left, I saw people that I admired.

Some junior to me, some senior to me, some of my peers were people that I was extremely, extremely proud to be part of.

Then again, that's why I'm writing the book because I want the average American to see what a real CIA operation looks like at Jason Bourne, at James Bond, as many books of his as I read.

That's not what we do.

I'm still waiting from my house to Martin.

We don't.

He was a Scott, right?

Come to the spy museum.

We have one in the lobby.

I know.

I might drive it off.

But it was that trajectory that being seen, the amount of talent and conviction and patriotism that all my peers display day in and day out was humbling, very rewarding career.

I think that that's one of the things that in a humble way I am trying to do with the podcast is to humanize intelligence professionals, their regular folks in some senses, but extraordinary folks in other senses.

That's one of the humble goals I have for the podcast, just to try to get these stories out there.

That's one of the humble goals I have for the podcast, just to try to get these stories out there.

I truly appreciate your time on this and your effort on this because it's very important to me.

When my grandson was born and I was starting to read, I said, I don't want him to learn about the agency from the movies, so it's great.

The next time that we talk, I will tell you my Scottish story.

When I went to MI6, that's exactly what happened.

The Scott guy that was my counterpart taught me how to drink single malt scotch and was just getting into cigars.

I taught him about cigars, so why not do it again with a different glass?

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Thanks so much for your time, Rick.

It's been really a pleasure to speak to you.

I've enjoyed it very much and I really loved your book and I hope it does gangbusters and everybody hears about your incredible story.

I look forward to meeting you in person.

Thank you.

Thank you very much.

Thank you.

Bye-bye.

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The Spycast team includes Mike Minsee and Memphis Vaughan III.

See you for next week's show.