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BG John Nicholson Interview by Gregory Smith History in the Making

This interview was conducted in October, 2008 prior to Brigadier General John Nicholson's posting to NATO Command in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. The interview was originally designed to be an emphasis on leadership, actors, and COIN operations. With a very small bit of reengineering what materialized is a candid and up to date snapshot of the intricacy of COIN operations in southern Afghanistan. The intricacy is still very much alive and this interview is now available for public consumption. The interviewer, Gregory Smith is a former Army Paratrooper who served with the 82nd Airborne Division at FT. Bragg, NC and the 10th Special Forces Group in Bad Tölz, Germany. He is currently a freelance journalist and on the list of eligible consultants listed by the Library of Congress and the National Archives. His research consultant efforts contribute to variety of clients, organizations, and universities worldwide. Mr. Smith is based out of Madison, Wisconsin, USA. As this interview was originally orchestrated for audio release, its transcript format and text are reflective of that format. Mr. Smith can be contacted at Bad_Tolz@yahoo.com



Smith: Today is Saturday, October 18, 2008. My guest today is Brigadier General John Nicholson. General Nicholson, Welcome.

Nicholson: Hello Greg. Thanks for having me on the show.

Smith: Happy to have you. General Nicholson, can you tell me just briefly; you are to be posted to the Afghanistan in the near future, what exactly are your duties in Afghanistan?

Nicholson: Yeah Greg, I'll be the Deputy Commander for Stabilization and Regional Command South of ISAF, the International Security Assistance Force. Regional Command South encompasses the sixth southern Provinces of Afghanistan. Those Provinces are characterized by most of the poppy growth in the country occurs down there and is also the heart of the Taliban. Now the insurgency where the Taliban got it start as a movement many years ago. So,

many challenges down there in the south as respect to the enemy and the drug and corruption situations. It is a NATO command in that area, so my boss will be a Dutch Two Star General, General De Groot and we will have British, Canadian, Dutch, Romania, Australian, American and others in the sector. (2:03)

Smith: Your posting will be strictly under NATO command then?

Nicholson: That is correct. I'll be there as a NATO Officer, not as a U.S. Officer per se, but as a NATO Officer and member of the Alliance. So, I will serve on a staff this is populated by Officers from all the different countries that I mentioned. I will be working as a stabilization arena. I'll also be working closely with many civilian agencies, both from those governments that I mentioned, but also from non-governmental organizations, and of course from the Afghan government as well. It will be a job that entails working primarily with foreign governments, allied governments, and civilian agencies. The task that I will be responsible for implementing will be the governance in southern Afghanistan as well as economic development and we'll get involved with many of the other issues down there that include law and justice, counter narcotics, and some other aspects of the operations in the area.

Smith: General Nicholson, this is not your first posting for Afghanistan and by no means can anyone understand that this is your first time out there??? What was your last posting and can you tell me what your duties were from your last posting?

Nicholson: Sure, I was assigned to Afghanistan as a Brigade Commander in RC east? So, my unit was the Third Brigade of the Tent Mountain Division, which was renamed, as Task Force Spartan When we arrived in country was responsible for 10 Provinces of the eastern part of the country. This would be right up along the Pakistani border. We had about 570 miles of border with Pakistan running from Nurestan, which is in the northeast portion of the country and the Himalayan Mountains, from Hindu Kush down through Pakita Province, which was opposite Wazuristan. The two areas that we were opposite were called the Northwest Frontier Provinces and the (FATA) Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan. These are Pashtun Tribal areas. They are areas within which our enemies have established sanctuaries and from where they conduct operations into Afghanistan. That operation without assignment lasted 16 months roughly from January, February 2006 to June of 2007. The Spartan Brigade did a great job in conducting counter insurgency in that area. Our soldiers did a great job and were followed up by other U.S. units. As we increased presence in the area, we were replaced by two Brigades occupying the same area that we had previously occupied. So, that 16 months ended in June of 2007, came back here to Washington, D.C. and I have been here about 15 months, and I will be heading back next week for another year this time in the Regional Command South. (5:10)

Smith: Excellent. When we had spoken previously, you had mentioned some soldiers that were near and dear to yourself, as all of your soldiers are I am sure.

Nicholson: Right.

Smith: You had mentioned one soldier that was up for the Medal of Honor. I wonder if you could just briefly tell me about him?

Nicholson: Absolutely Greg, and I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you because it gives me an opportunity to tell folks about their soldiers out there and what these young men and women are doing on their behalf around the world. It is very impressive and it really is about them and not about me. With their sacrifices on the services they're providing to their fellow Americans is just phenomenal. This particular young man that you are referring to is Sergeant First Class Jared Monte. Sergeant First Class Monte is a member of the Third Squadron of the 71st Calvary, which was our reconnaissance squadron and the Spartan Brigade. This particular unit was operating in an area of Afghanistan; it is just hard to imagine how difficult this terrain is. They are operating two to three miles above sea level in mountains that are the Hindu Kush. They are an extension of the Himalayan Mountain that runs on the southern portion of China all the way down into central Afghanistan. The tribes in the Hindu Kush have never been concurred. When Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire went into Afghanistan all the way to India. When he got to this part of the world, in the Hindu Kush, the only way he could subdue the tribes or get them to align with him was to marry one of their Princesses, Princess Roxanne. We did not do that in this part of Afghanistan, but instead we sent courageous men like Sergeant First Class Monte into these areas and they lived with the population and gradually gained their trust and then helped the people to then reject the enemy and no longer provide them sanctuary. Sergeant First Class Monte was part of a team of about 20 soldiers that were moving into the area to occupy an observation post for a larger force that was going to move into that same area the next day. His team moved in at night, stealthily, the climbed an extremely high mountain to get to the top in the hours of darkness. Within the course of the day weather rolled in and delayed the insertion of the additional force. The enemy in the area became aware of their presence and attacked the team. The team was well supported by artillery and mortars and air strikes. Sergeant First Class Monte as the fire support NCO was the one who basically called in these air strikes and artillery and mortars in such an effective manner that he broke this attack. This attack went on by the enemy for several hours. They were outnumbered probably three to four to one. Monte's effective use of fires affectively stopped the enemy, but at one point, the enemy became very close to over running the group. At that point, Sergeant First Class Monte handed off the radio to one of his other soldiers and went out to recover a wounded comrade. One of his soldiers that he had trained and he had raised had been shot while attempting to bound back to attempt to join the rest of them. Monte, with total disregard for some safety, got up and ran out to try to rescue him. Enemy fire drove him back. He hit the ground again, organized the guys around him to suppress the fire and ran out again to save this soldier. When he went out the second time, he knew the dangers, he knew the enemy firepower advantage so he didn't get to Bradbury; that he would die. So, Monte out there again, thinking of only his fellow soldier, and was hit by a RPG, which greatly wounded him. Nevertheless, he continued to try to reach the soldier, but died in the effort. He willingly laid down his life to save his fellow soldiers lives. His actions before he went out to save Bradbury were instrumental to saving the rest of the group. So, Monte was the kind of young man that is out there just doing the hard work of the Nation. Willingly laying down his life for his fellow soldiers and really deserves this recognition. His nomination is working its way through the system. I believe it's left the Pentagon and moved on up for the higher-level approval process. We'll see what happens, but we have had a number of other soldiers who have done phenomenal things while they were there. Another one, Anthony De Caro. From Florida who is one of our medics in the First Battalion of the 32nd Infantry was awarded two silver stars for bravery under

fire. Each time going out to rescue fellow soldiers and to drag them out of the line of fire and treat them. He was killed during the same thing for another soldier, yet again; he constantly risked his life for his fellow soldiers. (11:02)

Smith: The same operation?

Nicholson: This was in a different operation in the same area. This was in Kunar Province in Afghanistan in a place called the Korengal Valley. Anthony De Caro was a medic in Alpha Company, First Battalion of the 32nd Infantry. He earned two silver stars and then was killed while attempting to get a soldier in another act. So this guy routinely displayed uncommon valor in the conduct of his duty.

Greg, there is many more stories of these phenomenal performances of these young men and young. These are two of our heroes who gave their lives. We also had phenomenal performances by those who came back. Although we had 45 soldiers killed and 350 wounded in our 16 months there, which is indicative of the willingness of these young men and women to put themselves in dangerous situations to accomplish the mission for the country and not to hesitate at all to do what is done to get the job done. They are doing tremendous work for the country. (12:13)

Smith: I agree with you sir. As a former Army Paratrooper myself, I definitely realize when you get out into areas where you are put in harms way you understand why you are there and for your country and for your fellow soldiers to the right and to the left (Nicholson: Exactly) and I am reminded everyday, I don't think there has been a day in my life where I have not remembered who is on my left and who is on my right.

I would also like to ask you then, you have successfully empowered yourself to succeed and have been educated into a successful leader and mentor of men and women. As a leader and a mentor, what are the most critical qualities that you would try to develop in the leaders that work under you and why would you do that?

Nicholson: That is a great question Greg. I have been in the Army for 26 years, went to West Point for four years prior to that, so this is my chosen profession. I guess the first answer is that I feel very blessed to have really found my mission in life. I think that when you talk about being successful, part of that stems from finding that right niche that you are intended for in life. I guess looking at what your God given talents are, what your enthusiastic to do, and identifying a need in the world for those talents and for those enthusiasms. I feel very fortunate to have found that niche, that mission for me. I think that when an individual is able to do that they can be successful because they love what they are doing, it's important, their gratified by it, it is meeting a need in the world, and it is really a fulfilling experience. As you mention, obviously, I have come this far in the profession, I am making contributions and those contributions have been recognized by the institution in the form of promotions and assignments such as these. I really feel like I am just doing what God intended for me to do on this earth and I have him to thank for any successes that have come my way. When I think of the qualities that are critical especially in this kind of war. These are three that you don't hear of too often, but I think are very, very important to remember. First, is humility, and why is humility important? Humility is

important because it enables us to learn. In this kind of conflict especially we do not only as individuals, but as an institution must long our way through the problem. At the beginning of this conflict, we didn't have a current manual in the United States Army for counter-insurgency. Yet, we got ourselves waging counter-insurgency. So, we as an institution and as individuals had to learn what it was that needed to be done in this particular counter-insurgency. I think we largely have done that, but if it were not for a degree of individual and institutional humility we wouldn't be able to learn. If you take the opposite if one is arrogant or believe that they have all the answers, then they enter into a situation like this, the enemy will teach them what is going on instead of them learning it. So, it is very important that one has humility. Humility is also important in terms of relating to the people of these countries where we are operating. You have to approach them with a degree of humility and respect in order to enable you to establish the kind of relationships that will enable us to work with them to defeat the enemy. So, humility is very important. I mentioned respect, respect for the people that we work with in whose countries we are guests. Even though we are fighting along side them against a common enemy. Another quality I mentioned is patience. Patience when you are working in these environments with the people of a nation with other armies, be they in our case the Afghan Army or our allies, or working with the Pakistanis, and with other agencies of the government. Each of these other entities have their own culture, their own perspective, their own strength, so you have to learn those and you have to be patient while you are learning to recognize that we as America, while we may have the greatest amount of resources and we are the leaders to a large extent in the struggle, these other folks that we operate with have important contributions to make. We have to work with them and in terms of arriving at those solutions. The patience also applies in terms of working with the local people. (17:17)

Smith: Sir are you familiar with the Greek Legend, Sisyphus?

Nicholson: (with a small chuckle) Yeah, I have heard of that. Yes.

Smith: In Greek legend maybe the audience might not know who he is. In Greek legend Christy Fix was a King condemned by the Gods to roll a huge rock up a hill only to have it fall down again for eternity. I am a subscriber and reader of Small Wars Journal and I am sure you have heard of it (Nicholson: Yes) there are a lot of counter insurgency lessons that are put out there in foremost... I also see that you were at the George C. Marshall Center for Security Studies in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany. I was wondering if you could elaborate on your experience there, what you did, and some of the lessons you might have taken from there that might help you not to become a Sisyphus?

Nicholson: Right, that is a great analogy Greg.

The Marshall Center was established back in 1994 when the Berlin Wall came down. It was one of the institutions we used to reach out to countries of the former Soviet Union and to share with them how we run defense establishments and conduct national security in democracies. As these countries transition to democratic forms of government we offer to them academic courses for leaders at various levels from junior leaders at the Captain level in their 20's up to mid-mid level officers, Colonels and so forth and then very senior officers, General Flag Officers, Ministers and so-forth. My job there as the Plans and Policy Directorate was to design of these courses

and how we would implement this plan to the outreach to these countries to get their participation in these courses and to then ensure that the courses that we were offering were relevant and met their needs and also help to move them forward. At the time, many of countries had applied for admission to NATO and many of them have subsequently been admitted to NATO. The courses were a part of that process. Now that many of these countries have joined NATO the mission is evolving at the Marshall Center to be involved with issues beyond NATO's boundaries. For example, terrorism and counter-insurgency are two of the subjects that they deal with there. They have some very good programs on that. What I learned working there was to work first within this environment, this multi-national environment, The Marshall Center, a joint German and American endeavor. Then you have participants from all over the different countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, and others now as well. It gave me an exposure to the different cultures and different militaries and different governments out there. It also exposed me to some of the inter-agency considerations in terms of working with non-military agencies that are very involved in these kinds of efforts, and frankly, today these kind of operations that we are working with today will never be entirely military in nature. The solutions are not military. Arguably, the solutions are really not military and have more to do with governments, economic development, and things of that nature than they do with strictly security operations. It is important for us as military officers to learn that only these are other actors that we are going to be working with, but also the nature of the solutions in terms of non-military factors that we have to be able to implement. (21:11)

Smith: Recently, there have been a few articles detailing command and control mission setbacks with NATO and ISAF in Afghanistan. Earlier this month the New York Times correspondents, Mark Mazetti and Eric Schmitt reported that the soon to be released National Security Estimate asserts that in addition to cross-border attacks launched by militants in Pakistan's northwest frontier region, there were some anxious problems with Afghanistan and some say of their own conjuring. Can you explain your interpretation of the tactical level of COIN and what COIN means as it applies to internal and the external actors as we were just speaking of the war on terror in Afghanistan?

Nicholson: Roger that. First I would say, yes, there are problems within Afghanistan that are not created by the enemy. One is, and it can be characterized, as a problem I suppose, is the relative weakness of the Afghan government. The issue here is fairly complex, but simply put, we are creating a government where one did not exist previously. The government, were trying to not restore a government, or to buttress an existing government, but to create a new government institution where one did not previously exist. In fact, the tradition in Afghanistan has been weak central government and sort of strong regional, and very strong social forms of government. So, the creation of a central government in Afghanistan and the institutions that comes with that is one of our challenges. So, that is one of the principle challenges even without the enemy's presence in Afghanistan that would still be a challenge. Because they are recovering from 30 years of war and trying to create a central government. So, now, the problems that I would say are those primarily involved with drugs, the production of poppy, and the corruption within the government. They come not only from the drug trade, but also just from within the government and within the society. So corruption and drugs, in my opinion, are the few things that could defeat us over there. Because they would cause the government to be ineffective and we would lose all credibility with the people. These are the things that we are

really grappling with in terms of bringing them around. Now, in terms of counter-insurgency method, something near and dear to my heart at the tactical level, it comes down to the people and a counter-insurgency that is basically a struggle for the support of the people. The Afghan people are people who have endured 30 years of war; they have an incredibly tough life. Their life expectancy is only 43. They have one of the highest levels of infant mortality and maternal mortality in the world. An incredibly tough life, yet they want a better life for their people. They are deeply religious, their faith in God in awe inspiring in spite of all of this hardship, and they want us there because they see us as their best hope for the future. Now, we are in struggle with various actors, insurgents like the Taliban, terrorist groups like al Qaeda, criminals who are involved in smuggling or the drug trade. Then there are just those kind of regional warlords who at one point had greater power and want that power back. So, there are all these people who have a stake in the failure of the Afghan government. Those are the people that we are in a competition with over the support of the people. We seek to do three things to prevail on this environment. First, we try to separate the enemy from the people. So you separate the enemy from the people physically by moving in and securing the people and their villages. You separate the enemy from the people ideologically by discrediting his ideological appeal to the people. The next thing we will try to do is to connect the people to the government. Once we have provided them some security, we seek to connect these existing social power structures, like the tribal shuras and the elders who are selected by the people. These elders have great social legitimacy, but they have no resources. So we try to connect them with the government representatives who have very little social legitimacy, but have access to resources. We try to facilitate that connection so that the government meets the basic needs of the people. This causes the people to then buy into the ideas of the government can provide a better life for them. The third thing is to transform the environment in an enduring manner. Meaning we help the government once the area is secure, once the people have this connection between the people and government has been initiated, we seek to then bring in the enduring transformation of the environment through the creation of local police forces who can take over the security mission from the Army. We seek to do it through education, through immersed literacy. Right now the literacy rate in Afghanistan is only 20%, so obviously to educate the next generation of Afghans. We seek to do it through the rebuilding of infrastructure so that they can have a more viable economy and have alternatives to poppy. We seek to do it through their engagement and involvement in a political process that they can believe in that is fair, that is transparent and provides for their needs. We think that once that occurs then the people will reject whatever appeal the enemy has. More importantly, those that were formerly enemy will eventually buy into this process and come in from the cold if you will and join the political process as fellow Afghan citizens. Ultimately, end the civil war which is what they have been involved in for many years. That reconciliation will be important to the solution of thereafter. (27:30)

Smith: I would like to give a little background real quick, is of an understanding of the arable land use in Afghanistan is mere 12.13 percent of the arable land use, poppy cultivation is said to increase 70 percent to a record opium crop in 2007. You know this as well. (Nicholson: right). The drug trade in opium has been there for hundreds of years. It is a huge source of instability and is a chief supplier of the world's heroin market which is, you know as well as I do, is used by the Taliban to finance some of its insurgency operations. How would you make a difference in drug interdiction and how will you promote to reward the current poppy farmers who are paid

very well by such groups as the Taliban of the Quetta Shura and the Peshawar Shura? How do you propose to?

Nicholson: Yeah, Greg, you have outlined the problem well. It is a very difficult problem. Let me comment on a couple of things. The farmers, the one's at the lowest level who are planting the poppy are not the one's making the big money from the drug trade. The advantages of why they choose to plant poppy basically come down to this. Because there is no banking system in the country, the only cash crop where a farmer can be paid in advance is poppy. When a narco-trafficker comes around and asks the farmer to plant poppy, he will pay him up front and give him money up front. You will find many small farmers in order to get cash to meet the basic necessities of life will plant some poppy and then grow wheat for their food. If we can produce a banking system or a financial system or decent market system that can enable these farmers... This will remove some of the incentive to grow poppy, number one. Number two, they do get about five times the money per acre for planting poppy as they would for planting wheat. Now interestingly enough there last year there was a food shortage. We saw a decrease in certain areas of poppy planting because of the need to plant wheat in order to feed their family. This is a result of the weather and the agricultural conditions. The farmers are not the one's making the big bucks over this thing. When you look at the actual labor required to grow an acre poppy, it is back breaking work. They actually have to slice the individual pods of each poppy plant, scrape the sap off the plant, do this dozens of times and take that sap, put it together, process it down a little bit, and package it up. It is back breaking work. If they were doing enjoy doing it. They feel like it is the only way they can get the cash they need for their families. The mandates with respect to counter narcotics on the part of the Alliance and the United States have been interesting: Is this a philosophical issue? Is this a law enforcement problem or military problem? Initially, we tended to look at it as a law enforcement problem and as a result we had some fairly restrictive rules for the military forces in the country as far as what we could do with eradication and interdiction. And the answer is we couldn't do either. Now increasingly we have identified this Nexus thing you talked about between the insurgents and the drug traffickers. This is a 3 or 4 billion dollar industry per year. Some estimates are up to 100 million dollars are going back into the insurgency from the drug trade. There is a clear linkage between the insurgency, which is being fueled by the drug trade. It now becomes a military issue because of the support to the insurgency. Where we can identify the linkages between the insurgency and the drug trade, those arguably, become legitimate military targets. The NATO countries are considering increasing our mandate in terms of what we can do in terms of interdiction. Interdiction meaning those drug labs or other parts of the drug infrastructure that exist in the country that process and move the drugs out of the country and into the international markets. So that is being reviewed now by the Alliance and I think what we will find is along the lines of the philosophy we just talked about and where we can identify the linkages to the insurgency. Those become legitimate targets. We are also working very closely with the international agencies, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency in country, the FBI, as well as other national law enforcement agencies. Working with the Afghans and their own capability to deal with this problem. So the Afghan's for example, do the eradication, there is an Afghan eradication force that does this. The Governors of the provinces do eradication and then they establish special courts and special police to arrest the drug criminals as well. (32:55)

Smith: Are you seeing any financing from places like INTERPOL or other areas into the drug eradication efforts?

I can't speak specifically to INTERPOL; I know different nations have provided different levels of support. The U.S. currently supports the Afghan Eradication Force. I believe that we use contractors to assist with that. The country of course if the lead for counter narcotics and they have significant resources that they have devoted. In Helmand Province in the south is the single province that produces the most poppy of any of the provinces in southern Afghanistan. They are very involved in this, the Americans are very involved in this. I can't speak to INTERPOL and some of those other agencies, but tracking the flow of drugs and money out of the country, those international law enforcement organizations I am sure are very involved in that. (34:00)

Smith: You have your work cut out for you in that respect. A task that I do not envy at all. I would like to talk a little bit about the political aspect of what you will be facing this time around and possibly it may have even existed a year ago. It seems to me that there is currently registered in the Central Intelligence Agencies World Fact Book for Afghanistan details as much, earlier this year there were 70 political parties that are recognized in existence and that are officially sanctioned by the Afghani Ministry of Justice who basically allows those parties to operate. Will you be working with any of these parties, if so, how will you choose which political parties to work closely with and at what extent are you prepared to work with them?

Nicholson: We will work primarily with the institutions of the Afghan Government. We try to stay away from working with a party organization. We won't do that. We will work with, of course, the government officials. They will be from the different parties. You will find that President Karzai's appointment of Governor's and districts at the provincial district level will appoint members of the different parties to be Governors. I think that working with the parties is really the Afghan lane. We work with the appointed government officials regardless of what party they are from. What we find is in incredibly complex array as you pointed out, 70 different parties, so we navigate our way through that by just working those appointed government officials since we are here to support the Afghan Government. That is the best way to deal with that. Then we don't become advocates for any party one way or the other. We simply work with the government. (36:04)

Smith: You're definitely hitting on such a rich dichotomy of that whole area and how it works. History reminds me of two days prior to 911. The supposedly warlord of head of the Northern Alliance at that time, the Great Massoud. General Massoud was assassinated by Al Qaeda terrorists posing as a camera crew. (Nicholson: Correct.) If you could elaborate just a little bit on that if you don't mind. What would have happened, speculative, if he had survived and from my understanding; he was a great leader, but not all customs are accepted by other areas, which kind of gets into the dichotomy of if you help one area the other area might not like you for doing that. Do you remember the story of General Massoud and can you just sort of how, just possibly theoretically, been like to work with this guy.

I never met General Massoud, but you are right. He is revered. He is a Tajik. He was a not a Poshtun leader within the Northern Alliance, but the reason that I mention this is that it is important to note, he was really sort of the senior or acknowledged prominent member of the

Tajik ethnicity. He successfully conducted operations not only against the Soviets and Communists, but also against the Taliban. What you will find in the government today is the different ethnic groups, the Tajiks, the Hazarachs are in key government positions along with the Poshtuns. The Poshtuns are not the majority within the country, but they are the largest ethnic group in the country, I want to say around 40%. President Karzai is a Poshtun, but for example, the head, the Chief of the Defense staff is a Tajik, General Gesmula Kahn is a Tajik. The Minister of Defense is a Postun, Minister Wardack ??? So you will find an interesting mixture of ethnic groups and backgrounds in the government. Another interesting dynamic is that you have Postuns and others who were members of the Communist Party, so they might have been military leaders in the Communist Afghan Army. They fought against some of the people they are now working with who were in the Mujahadem, the Freedom Fighters. So, General Gesmula Kahn was a ????? and he fought against the Communist and against the Taliban, but some of his core commanders were Postuns who were former Communists. They fought against the very guys who they are now serving along side, but together they both the Kaji's and the Postuns, some of these guys fought against the Taliban. You find these interesting relationships that exist. Now they all wear the same uniforms today and the Afghan Army works extremely well together, but it is an interesting microcosm of the society because you do see this, that it is possible for all of these ethnic groups from different backgrounds to work together successfully. Ahmed Shah Massoud is still revered by many of the Tajiks as a martyr for the country and for his people and it is deeply respected and by Postuns and Tajiks alike and others for what he stood for and his opposition to the Taliban and to the Communists. As long as we continue to see prominent Tjiks, Uzbek's and Hzar's in the government at a high level then the multi-ethnic dimension of the country; as long as that continues to manifest himself from the government and you don't have any of these groups feeling like they have been disenfranchised or cut out then I think things will continue to work just fine. There will always be competitions and so-forth, but it is very important to see that kind of representation at the highest levels of the different groups. But not just the political parties but the ethnic groups as well. (40:23)

Smith: Excellent, I think this is good segway into my next question. It has been reported that there is ongoing negotiations with the Taliban. I have read many things at first apparently President Karzai's brother was negotiating with the Taliban and that we denied and then all of a sudden we do find that there is some negotiations going on. Can you elaborate a little bit on the negotiations and tell our listeners possibly who is negotiating with who and what possibly can be reached by negotiating with the Taliban.

This is a great question. I think it is one that is not completely understood. Let me try to put it into a context. First off, this is a country that has been engaged in a civil war for a long time. Even when the Soviets were in there, there was a group of Afghans, who were, of course, Soviet or were Communists and believed in the communist ideology and fought on the side of an Afghan Communist Government. Now they fought against other Afghans. So, even under the Soviets, yes, it was a war against, it was called the anti-soviet Jihad, but there was an element of civil war here. From that war you had a period where the Soviets left, but the Communist Government remained for another two to three years. They continued to hold power and were finally defeated by a coalition of Mujahaden. Once they defeated the Communist, they started fighting amongst themselves. And then the Taliban came in, and even though they restored order to a portion of the country, they were fighting the Tajiks and those in the Northern

Alliance. So for the last 30 years, the Afghan's have been fighting each other. It is important to remember that. When we talk about reconciliation. Because reconciliation is a process whereby, in today's form, it involves the government talking to the Taliban. But reconciliation in the larger sense, is about Afghan agreeing to a common political process where they can peacefully resolve their differences. At some point this will require them to talk to one another. So, President Karzai has made public statements about his willingness to talk to the Taliban. He has also said, there are certain leaders, the senior leaders of the Taliban that does not wish to negotiate with or talk to. On the other hand, at the lower level, there are ongoing efforts in various provinces and by various Governor's to bring in former enemies to join the political process. This has occurred at a low level in many areas. Where these enemy leaders, be they Taliban or Hekmatyar's group, the HIG or other elements have actually joined and they renounced their previous association with the Taliban or an insurgent group. They embraced the government took an oath of allegiance and they are granted a status where by there now reconciled. This process of reconciliation is ongoing. The challenge is not, of course, have the perception that you are negotiating with the enemy; rather the difference is that you are trying to bring in former enemies to join a legitimate political process. That is a fine line and it is subject to interpretation and it can be, one does have to be careful when you are engaged in a discussion, to not appear to be empowering the enemy or giving him success, but rather seeing if he is willing to join the political process and renounce his current allegiance to the Taliban or the HEG or whoever. It is very important to be managed properly, but it is a process that needs to occur at some point. (44:36)

Smith: You did mention Hekmatyar and the HEG. One thing that I would ask you of is this, I understand his affiliation is very tightly done with the Pakistani Government. In this area of the world, could you sort of elaborate a little bit on what you feel would be an in-road with the negotiations currently going on with Hekmatyar and Pakistani Government. How that sort of effects your mission on the ground?

Greg, I don't know the current status of what Hekmatyar's relationship is with the Pakistani Government. We believe that he lives in the northern provinces, there are very remote areas of Pakistan, up north of Shetral area up in the Himalayan Mountains, up in northern Pakistan. He is a guy that we of course supported. We the United States Government funded Hekmatyar and a lot of these former Mujahaden in their fight against the Soviets. And we are the ones that we provided that support through the Government of Pakistan. We helped to foster the relationships that currently exist between some of these individuals and the Pakistani Government. That is important to remember. And then, of course, they turned into enemies of the current Afghan Government who we support. Now they are our enemies. So, it's difficult to really assess any relationship that exists between them and the current Pak Government. At the official level you will find that the Pakistan Government denies these connections. I will just say from personal experience I saw no evidence on the ground that I could tell of a connection between the Pakistan Government and these organizations. Certainly the soldiers I talked to, the Pakistan soldiers, claimed there was no connection. Obviously, that is no authoritative. I don't know what I don't know about their relationship with these guys. (46:53)

Smith: You said that the current events that are going on in that area right now on the border, Afghani/Pakistani border are that we have done some operations at the border. They are very

sensitive operations and can you sort of tell our audience, perhaps for their understanding, how sensitive is this area and why is so sensitive to the Afghani and the Pakistani Governments?

Nicholson: The issue, of course, for the Pakistani Government is the issue sovereignty. Pakistan, this is their border, the “Durrand Line” was drawn by the Minister of British Government Official, Durrand, back over a century ago that delineated the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. That line was drawn right through the tribal areas of the Postun tribes in that area. So, as a result the tribes have never really recognized the border. So, the tribes don’t see that this going back and forth across a national border because they don’t recognize it as such. Now, the Pakistan Government, of course, and Afghan Government recognize it as a border. The Afghan Government believes that the Pakistan Government should do more to keep these insurgents from coming across the border. The Pack Government asserts it’s sovereignty in these areas, meaning this is their sovereign territory and they will handle the security issues. Yet, the attacks continue. So, the frustration we have is, I had troops along that border for 16 months who were attacked almost every day in some cases by forces coming from Waziristan as an example. Three hundred out of 365 days of our first year in Afghanistan, one of my out posts received indirect fire for over three hundred of those days. A significant amount of enemy activity, so we coordinate with our Pak counterparts and say this is where the fire is coming from, do something about it. And if they didn’t, then we would do something about it. So, we worked through, because we could not allow the enemy to fire with impunity on our forces. Obviously this is extremely delicate and involved working closely with the Pakistan Military, and there were examples of cooperation with them to go after these guys. If we could reach an area that they couldn’t then we would try to work through the details of how we would do this without endangering any of their forces, but at the same time, not allowing the enemy freedom of action in those areas. The concern that we have is that through some of the arrangements that the Pak Government’s trying to work with the tribes, to arrive at some peace agreements with the tribes. In the peace agreement, the tribes agreed not to attack across the border of Afghanistan, but they immediately violated those agreements and did attack across the border. So, then we would go back to the Pakistani’s, present evidence of these violations, and eventually in one case by January, ’07 we did see the Pakistan Government cancel one of those treaties because the enemy had repeated violated it. Now, you have a change in government in Pakistan so that I think that turmoil has contributed to their sense of asserting their sovereignty; we have seen indication of. Although we have also seen the Pakistan Military conduct some operations on their side of the border in the Swat Valley as an example and some other places that have been more rigorous than the ones we have seen previously. It is a very difficult issue, it is very complex. We would like to see the Pakistan Military possibly exert more pressure, but that is an issue that is going to work at levels above me and every day by folks and it is a very complex issue. (51:16)

Smith: A very complex area too and I think most of our listeners understand that a good round of Jeffersonian democracy is going to break any time soon. One thing that I would also ask you. I would imagine that you did not get this assignment by being pessimistic or overly optimistic with the on the ground situation on the ground in southern Afghanistan. What is your military peers think about your views and perhaps your appointment, and what previously experiences that you had in Afghanistan and elsewhere will help to navigate and adapt to the changing situation on the ground in Afghanistan?

Nicholson: In my world, in the Army, we tend to look at experience as a critical factor in your ability to step into a new role like this, so I think my recent experience in eastern Afghanistan was a factor in my assignment and in south. There are many other officers with experience in Afghanistan as well who are also getting pulled into leadership positions back into Afghanistan. Of course, the American Army has primarily been focused on Iraq over the last several years, so therefore, we don't have the same pool of officers to draw from for assignments like this, but in the coming years, I think we will as we have more and more units cycling through Afghanistan. We'll have more and more officers that have the kind of experiences to these sorts of jobs. So I think that we will see more Americans stepping up into these positions in the future. As far, as in the south, Greg, I am really looking forward to this assignment. I am looking forward to it because it is an area that is very important to our success as an alliance and as a government in Afghanistan. It is a great opportunity to get in there and learn the dynamics of southern Afghanistan and then use that learning, that knowledge, to inform our way ahead in southern Afghanistan. When you look at Afghanistan at the kind of operational level much of the fighting is going on in the Pashtun tribal belt. The pashtun tribal belt extends over in to Pakistan as we just discussed and also into eastern and southern Afghanistan. So, the eastern and southern regions of Afghanistan are the areas where we are really conducting counter insurgency. In the north and the west arguably we are doing more reconstruction and stabilization activities. Where as east and south you see more fighting and counter insurgency. So, I think for America, as we possibly introduce more American forces over the coming year, as has been discussed by Secretary Gates and others and others in testimony on the hill, you may see an introduction of U.S. forces into these areas where we are conducting counter insurgency. So, learning the dynamics of the south will be very important as far as making the most of any additional forces that we can put in there. It is also important that we learn these non-military, non-security aspects of the insurgency campaign and what will work in these various areas. As they become more secure with the introduction of more forces, we need to very quickly follow-up with increased development, emphasis upon governance, and the other government systems like law and justice. Perhaps some more effective counter narcotics approach which will not just be military will really be primarily work for other agencies, but all this will entail really focusing on, from my personnel perspective on the east and the south as far as counter insurgency goes. For that reason, it is a great opportunity to get down there and learn that part of the operation. (55:36)

Smith: I think for sure you are not able to elaborate too much on this, but you are currently in a war on terror Iraq has been included to the grouping to the war on terror. Afghanistan in my view, in my personal opinion, is at the forefront and we have to keep our eyes on the prize. I am hoping that there are members and I would hope Secretary Gates also would hope also that understand the importance of not failing in Afghanistan. In such a word, to say failing, that we keep our emphasis to what's going on the ground in Afghanistan and completely see the ramifications of what can happen if we don't succeed there. I was wondering, can you see similarities between what is going on in Iraq and Afghanistan, and obviously you are going to be a little biased because you are going to Afghanistan. Can you tell me where you feel, currently right now where the emphasis should be?

Nicholson: As a soldier, of course, I am implementing the policy decided by the President and then resourced by the legislature. What is very interesting today is observing and learning from the dialogue that occurs between the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman, and those on Capital Hill, which is a matter of public record and testimony. They have talked about the critical importance of Afghanistan, but then we must finish the job in Iraq. The Chairman, Admiral Mullin has spoken in terms of Afghanistan we do what we can and in Iraq we do what we must. In Afghanistan has been an economy of forced effort because Iraq is going to be our main effort. That is a reflection of our national policy. I think I sense you listen to dialogue and the ongoing presidential campaign that there is an awareness of the importance of Afghanistan. As one who is going to server there, I am very encouraged and the things that I hear about the recognition and course of Afghanistan and the need as additional resources become available. If they become available based on improvements in Iraq that those resources would be directed to Afghanistan. So, I mean, I think that awareness is there. I know its there. I think we will see those additional resources moving toward Afghanistan in the coming year. Then, of course, the new administration whoever that is, I think you hear things in support of Afghanistan and recognize and report to Afghanistan from both of those elements and I think we'll see continued efforts as things improve in Iraq. It will be a long endeavor. The things that I think of in terms of what is required over there, it's not just about numbers of troops and money. That is critically important and Afghanistan has not had the same level commitment in Iraq there is a lack as you well know. When I had my one brigade in Afghanistan there were fifteen in Iraq. So that gives you a sense of the difference. We do have many countries in Afghanistan. I think 40. There is great legitimacy that comes with that. There are many national contributions, however, they are significantly less in terms of U.S. troops and boots on the ground. In a country that is larger and has more people than Iraq. So, that is one issue. Money is important too. Money is important to do the kind of development. Again, Afghanistan is not case of reconstruction it is a case of construction. The infrastructure is basically destroyed because of the 30 years of war that they have endured. They require significant construction effort in that country to just get basic services going. The other two components that I think are equally important are the sort of non-military skill sets that are required. Agricultural expertise, governance expertise, law and justice expertise. The things that really enable us to help the Afghans create a new government, which I mentioned before, is really what we are doing there. So, those elements of soft power or smart power, if you refer to different things, are really critical and where those people come from is going to be important. Do they come from the agencies of the U.S. Government or we attempt to contract for those services? But what we will we do in that regard is still in question. And then, the final element to describe is time. What amount of time is going to be required to accomplish our objectives? I mean, one way to look at this is, it'll require a generational effort which means educating the next generation of Afghans and sadly, because of the life expectancy, it is probably only 15 to 20 years in terms of educating the next generation of leadership with a life expectancy of only 43. So that is one approach you can look in terms of what is it really going to take for that next generation of Afghans literate, engaged, and embracing a moderate form of Islam. What is going to take to them to move into leadership positions within their society and then they will truly transform the society. Moving to that end state, we have many things that need to be accomplished. As I mentioned the building up of security forces, the building up infrasture, the establishment of those basic services that the people need, and the helping the Afghan's create a viable sense of government. There is a lot of work to be done. It would require long term

commitment and I know long term commitments are difficult, but realistically that is probably what it is going to require to get the job done. (61:54)

Smith: I have a couple of last questions for you. Recently, I have spoken with your Father, who is also a Brigadier General and has also served our country valiantly. It is said that your family may possibly be direct descendants of another Brigadier General who served in Afghanistan over 150 years ago. An author, Charles Allen, and the name of his book was "Soldier Sahibs". He writes that your possible ancestor was mentioned in indigenous stories and ballads influencing a character in Rudyard Kipling's "Kim". Are you familiar with his book?

Nicholson: Yes, I am. (61:35)

Smith: That John Nicholson lived over some 160 years ago and has been said to have impressed in many ways that he had a destiny. Do you feel, if you could just quickly elaborate on that John Nicholson and do you feel you have a destiny in south Asia?

Nicholson: Well, Greg, it is interesting that you asked that. It would seem an amazing coincidence that a potential relative of mine was the same name served in the same area 160 years ago, doing basically the same thing. So, it is kind of, to me personally, beyond coincidence. So, whether you call it destiny or God's Will or whatever you want to call it. It doesn't seem to be just coincidental to me. Regardless, of the legacy there with my possible ancestor, I believe in this mission very much. In most of our leaders and soldiers who serve in Afghanistan come away feeling very good about the mission and very good about the missionfeared??? about the Afghan people, and I am one of those. These people are worthy of our work over there. They are worthy of our sacrifice. They are God bearing people, they have endured tremendous hardship, they are gracious and hospitable. They treat us as guests in their country and they want us there. If we can help them establish a moderate Islamic republic in central Asia, it could have a very important impact here strategically. By having such a regime, such a nation, in between Iraq, Pakistan, and central Asia. So, I think it is an important mission. It is one that I am personally very committed to, but not only because I believe in the Afghan people, but because of the sacrifice of my soldiers. I want to honor their sacrifice by continuing to serve as long as I can in support of the cause for which they gave their lives. It is very important to me that we be successful in Afghanistan. As far as me personally, if that family connection can contribute to that success where that becomes a legacy that is fine with me, but it is all about prevailing in this important job that we have taken on. (65:09)

Smith: I greatly enjoyed speaking with your Father and he is quite the man himself. He definitely chartered his own destiny in what he is doing today. That being said, I remember a quote from a show that was on in syndication on cable here in the U.S. I remember an interviewer asking a question, it is usually the last question he asked his guests and I would like to ask you the same question. When your time is done on this earth, what you written on your marker and why would you want it to be written?

Nicholson: I, honestly, I am more concerned about my legacy with God than I am with my legacy with man. I certainly hope that when I stand before the Lord that the sense will be that I tried to do the right thing in my life and that served as an example for others and then all the

people's whose lives that I touched, be it my children, my family, especially my fellow soldiers that it was positive. That I made a difference. That is really what it is all about. Actually, as we mentioned upfront, I feel very blessed that I am actually performing my mission in life. The things for which I was intended and I want to do the absolute best that I can at it and make a difference when I do. (66:48)

Smith: Excellent. My guest today has been Gen. John Nicholson of the United States Army. Gen. Nicholson, thank you for your participation. It was very, an excellent interview, and I wish you the most luck, I hate to use that word luck, but you have the skills, there is no doubt in my mind, that you have the skills to make this mission successful and I wish you all the best.

Nicholson: Well, thank you very much Greg. I appreciate this opportunity to speak to you and your listeners. Take care. (67:23)

Smith: Thank you.



The interviewer, Gregory Smith is a former Army Paratrooper who served with the 82nd Airborne Division at FT. Bragg, NC and the 10th Special Forces Group in Bad Tölz, Germany. He is currently a freelance journalist and on the list of eligible consultants listed by the Library of Congress and the National Archives. His research consultant efforts contribute to variety of clients and organizations worldwide. Mr. Smith is based out of Madison, Wisconsin, USA. The interview with BG Nicholson was arranged by Mr. Smith to promote a greater understanding of Afghanistan in regard to NATO's counter insurgency operations, and specifically a biographical profile of BG John Nicholson. As this interview was originally orchestrated for audio release, its transcript format and text are reflective of that format. Mr. Smith can be contacted at Bad_Tolz@yahoo.com

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