Aerospace Nation: The Authors of Never Mind, We'll Do It Our...

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**SPEAKERS**

Col (Ret.) Mark Cooter, Alec Bierbauer, Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula, Dave Anhalt

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 00:56

Good morning ladies and gentlemen, I'm Dave Deb Tula, Dean of the Mitchell Institute for aerospace studies. And welcome to the release of nevermind, we'll do it ourselves. The inside story of how a team of renegades broke rules, shattered barriers and launched a drone warfare revolution, a new book on the early days of the remotely piloted aircraft revolution. The book is the story behind the origins of the armed predator program and the dawn of uninhabited warfare. A first account told by an Air Force team leader and a CIA team leader, never mind we'll do it ourselves, takes readers into the back offices and secret government hangars, where the robotic revolution went from a mad scientist idea to a pivotal part of global airpower. The book was written by Alec bierbauer, Mark cooter and Michael marks. Alex spent a lifetime conducting counterterrorism and counterintelligence operations in venues ranging from Bosnia to Yemen to Afghanistan. He was a CIA case officer with an emphasis on integrating emerging technologies into high risk special programs. And he became the CIA's point man in the development of the predator program. Mark's a retired Air Force Colonel, and his 28 year career, he served as an Intel officer with ops experience and Desert Storm the Balkans, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya ops. Mark was involved in predator ops near the inception in Bosnia through Joint Force Arif join Air Force and CIA operations in Afghanistan and beyond. Last but not least, Michael's worked around the world within the US Intel and special ops community, a career that stretches from the jungles of Nicaragua to the mountains of Afghanistan. He's also a best selling author whose books have been adopted by venues such as the FBI Academy, and the army asymmetric warfare group. Unfortunately, he's unable to join us this morning. It's also worth noting here that both Alec and Mark received the National Intelligence Defense Service Medal for their service with this program. So with that, gentlemen, welcome. And we'll start with a synopsis of the book, followed by your short remarks, and then we'll move into questions and answers. So over to you.

**Col (Ret.) Mark Cooter** 03:25

Good morning. Thanks, Joseph Tula and thanks to the Mitchell staff, especially Kamilla Gunzinger. She's a rock star. It's our honor to have this event be the kickoff for our effort. Sir, I know you've been busy with your desert storm events. So thanks for taking the time to set this up to all the attendees. Thanks for taking the time from your busy day to join us here. We are humbled, we hope you'll find the next hour worthwhile to you. I'm going to quickly go through a handful of slides and set the stage for our q&a. Slide please. You go to the first slide. Now the second There we go. You can tell by the cover of the book and Joel DevTools opening that our book is about the predator program. But more specifically the origins of the joint Airforce CIA program, which is probably the worst kept secret in America. Let us stress we don't consider it a CIA program, or an Air Force program. It was a joint effort, our story of the stories of not just the technology, but more importantly about the people that made it happen. We've tried to recognize as many people as we could. They are the reason for the program's success, not Alec or me. I know many of them are attending this virtual event today. Welcome to you all. Slide. So why are we the ones telling the story? It could be our ignorance, our stupidity, or bullheaded determination to take the task on as general adeptly alluded to Alec, Alec and I were lucky enough To be the day to day link between the CIA and the air force between 2002 1002 Alec was the program manager for the CIA. And I was a lead Air Force action officer turned Operations Officer for the Air Force's expeditionary air intelligence Squadron, which would become the first armed predator squatter. While Michael couldn't join us today, without him, we would still have just a bunch of bar stories. He helped turn our rambling stories into vignettes, then into chapters, and finally a book. Thanks, Michael. Another unique aspect of this book is we alternate chapters between Alec and me telling the story. This allowed us to both show the CIA and Air Force viewpoints, at least from the transcripts. It also permitted us to utilize the first person and telling the story which would put the security view review burden solely on us and no one else. slide please. To sets the stage, I want to go back in time before the summer of 2000. The predator operations concept was to deploy two to four predator aircraft and a robust team to an established base slide. In 2000, political constraints required us to modify that construct to having only a small launch team Ford of less than 100, a less than 10 people and an operation Team 1000s of miles away. We call this split operations. Slide. Once we armed the platform war, political realities required us to bring the mission operations team back to the United States. While this seems trivial today, this technological leap was the impetus for the revolution. We call this remote split operations slash slide. The next two stories kind of cover the period of the of the book. And you'll see here it lists some accomplishments of the joint Air Force CIA team, supported by many others, especially NEMA and NSA personnel. In 2000, we develop tactics, techniques and procedures to sneak a small predator aircraft into Afghanistan, survive MiGs and Sam's and use all sorts of analysis to meet the President's objective, get actionable intelligence on Osama bin Laden slide. Based on lessons from 2000, we linked our program to the Air Force's nascent predator weaponization program and accelerated it. listed on the slide are several new capabilities we added to the predator. None of these would have been possible without the great teamwork and tireless efforts of big Safari, Redstone Arsenal, and General Atomics and many others. I'm not sure if you can make it out. But in the upper middle picture, yes, there's a picture of snake Clark mounted on a watermelon in the back of an SUV awaiting a hellfire missile at China Lake. We didn't have the budget for ballistic gel like the Mythbusters TV show. So we did we use the best we had. We had begun preparations for another deployment when the attacks of 911 occurred. We quickly redeployed and returned to flight operations over Afghanistan on 17 September 2001. On the first night of oaf, we demonstrated our arm capability. Over the next five months, we improved our tactics, techniques and procedures, shot many Hellfire missiles, supported many operations, develop more counterterrorism and Taliban targets and took the fight beyond Afghanistan. I think we're most proud of our mission supporting the joint team and their struggle to fight and survive on top of Gar in March of 2002. Slide. Most of the individuals individuals have this combined team of officers civilians, enlisted and contractors went on to do many great things. Some are still in the fight today. I think most will say this time was their proudest and most rewarding time in their careers. It certainly was for me and Alex. While our technology hangs in the Smithsonian, in the form of tail 3030 for our stories about the people that made it happen, their teamwork, patriotism, and persistence. Speaking of persistence, while we really don't cover it in the book, a side story is what it took us to get the book cleared through the CIA and the Department of Defense. It took twice as long to get the book cleared as the operational time covered in the book. Every time we were met with an obstacle and then seem that no one would help. We reminded ourselves, nevermind, we'll do it ourselves and press the head. Had we not begun to execute a lawsuit, we still would not have a Today, over the years, Alec and I joke that we'd be smelt cellmates one day, and he did have dibs on the book of choice. So far, we've avoided that. We've been close sometimes, but still avoided it. I couldn't ask for a better cellmate. He's always covered for my shortfalls, and much, much more. So thank you, Alan. One final note to our teammates. You are the reason we wrote this book. Your families deserve to know what you did for our nation. We hope we did your story, justice. Thank you. I look forward to your questions. And Alec over to you for your comments.

**Alec Bierbauer** 10:40

Thanks, Mark. And thank you, General DEP Tula and Camilla for putting this together. And given us the opportunity to kind of highlight the highlight the book, highlight the story through the Mitchell Institute, it's, it's really a good honor for us. And looking through some of the participants, a lot of familiar names from from back in the day. on it, honestly, we think it's an important story. And we always have, but we weren't sure we were ever going to be able to tell it. There's been there's been a fair amount written. And, you know, some accurate some not piecing it all together. For a program that we didn't spend a lot of time writing things down on, we were more focused on mission accomplishment. We think this helps round out what's already out there and creates a pretty compelling picture for for the reality of how the program came to be. Just briefly. For background, I started in the army as a counterintelligence Special Agent, went to DEA worked as a intelligence officer doing analysis on terrorism facilities worldwide, after Khobar Towers and East African embassy bombings got pulled into a joint sell on the Joint Staff side, along with others from di CIA and other organizations. And really, the goal at that point was to help you leverage intelligence out of CIA and other places to support the targeting effort. So and I transitioned from there to CIA became a case officer and finish out my, my government service at CIA after after, after that, I've been working in the commercial world doing risk mitigation programs, and still touching a couple of technology programs and including some of the evolutions that these people ask why I was involved in this in this program, versus somebody else have a more traditional CIA flavor. And we joke in the book that it's because I failed to duck but I think it was really the experience that I had on the DVD in the Pentagon side to be able to, to add context, to the to the CIA pieces of this. At the time before 911, there wasn't a strong background in officers with military experience within the Counterterrorism Center. So it felt to me as as designated by my bosses at the time rich blue, Cofer black Charlie on and then ultimately, George Kennan. So the story, as Mark pointed out, it's about the team. We told it first person, we take responsibility for what's in here, Michael marks sort of what would have been a fairly dry academic approach into hopefully an entertaining one. I think the I think the period of time we cover from from 2000 to 2000 to three is really is really relevant from the development perspective. And, you know, we're eager for the feedback, we're we'll know, we'll get some, some criticisms and some kudos. And we're, and we'll welcome both and hopefully, try to try to account for our, for our times through the stories that we've told. And I'd be remiss if I didn't think friends, families, co workers for helping us put this together. I think, as Mark pointed out, writing the story was almost as daunting as as performing the function. So I know my wife Charlene would endured quite a bit, as did everybody spouse. So with that eager to get into questions and, and and help out lay out what's what's in the story.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 14:28

They will like great gentlemen, thanks very much to both of you for your comments. So let's dig into some of the points that you hit on. But let's go on into them in in a little bit of detail. I'm going to direct my questions to want to you but of course, let's do this as a discussion like as we can and jump in if you got something to add or say So Mark. First and foremost, you've conveyed excuse me your passion on the evolution of predator and Rp. More broadly, during our discussions and interactions over our careers, and why did you decide to write this particular book? And why do it as a collaborative effort?

**Col (Ret.) Mark Cooter** 15:12

Well, we knew we had a bunch of great memories and a bunch of great stories. And we knew there was a lot of stuff out there. That just wasn't, I won't say it wasn't untrue, it just didn't have the full picture. And we knew the people that were involved were great people that had done great team, great things. And the story needed to be told. I mean, we have good lessons about how airpower can be used, and some of the challenge you have with that story about teamwork, persistence, innovation and rapid technology development, because we certainly did a lot of that simple problem solving, and really, time and again, not to take no for an answer. But, you know, I never thought about it telling this story without Alec. And I don't think he ever thought about writing this alone, either. Because we felt felt it was a team from the beginning. And we knew the story would not be the complete perspective, if you didn't have the Air Force, and the CIA perspectives in it. And finally, I we just thought we had a good news story. And there's so much out there. That's bad news. We were like, hey, let's see if we can get something good out there. I'm sure Alex got some perspective on that as well.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 16:27

Well, that's great. Let me get a bit of a follow up. Well, what can you tell us about the unique title of Never mind, we'll do it ourselves.

**Col (Ret.) Mark Cooter** 16:36

It's, it's kind of been our battle cry. The Origins really started after, after we got the actionable intelligence on bin Laden. And in that the Intel was wasn't action dawn. And we certainly didn't want to have that to happen again. You know, some people would look at that title from a standpoint of arrogance or something like that. And, and we certainly had to convince our publisher, it was the right title of the book. For us. It's about persistence, and, and never taking no for an answer. And always finding the solution. If you've got a significant problem, and then telling others, if you can't help us and don't want to be part of the solution, then we'll just figure it out ourselves. And we won't give up. I'm not sure if anyone saw it on the slide deck or not. But that motto is on our unit coin. And it's just been time and again, through the whole publishing of the book process to that even today we remind ourselves to Never mind, we'll do it ourselves.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 17:41

Yeah, well, I will throw in there that many of us in the military that have been frustrated with the system, certainly associates with that title. And I just hope that many of the younger folks in the military will read it and take away some important lessons. Because without that, perseverance and persistence, there's not a lot worthwhile that will get done. That's also what happened in the planning of Operation Desert Storm. But that's another story for another day, in my book, but I'm still waiting for a couple of people to die before I write it, because I don't want to piss him off. Anyway, Alec, Mark indicated there was substantial pressure from your organization to embargo the book is classified. What was it that resulted in a 39 months security review? And how did you finally get that resolved?

**Alec Bierbauer** 18:40

Yeah, to Sir, to call it resistance or pressure would be a little bit of that a polite way to put it. We thought writing the book would be hard we thought doing the program would be hard. We didn't anticipate getting a clearer it would be as difficult as it was. I mean, frankly, we we signed in our stack of documents, when, you know, for me, when I went to CIA, saying that we had a lifelong obligation to have anything we write cleared, we could probably get away with a cookbook, not not going through the process, but probably not much more than that. And we were both hypersensitive to the fact that that obligation existed and we wanted to honor it. The last thing we wanted to do was to write something that would aid the enemy. We wanted to protect the technologies, we wanted to protect the tactics, techniques and procedures that evolved. And we think, you know, 20 years after the fact. And in talking to the timeframe that we are, and the approach that we took to writing we thought we were being pretty responsible with it. We could so we overcame I think a lot of the legitimate challenges. We couldn't overcome some of the bureaucratic or political ones. And that's what turned what should have been a 30 6090 day process into it. Do a 39 month process and the first response we got took almost a year and it was in writing. And it stated that the very premise of the book was classified. And it wouldn't be published that it was fully improperly classified. We asked for a meeting, we got that several months later. And just for dramatic effect, they brought a printed version of chapter four, with the entire chapter redacted, except for the title. And I think, Well, we've got some creative titles. Now. I think the title at that point was chapter four. So that was the only unclassified, unclassified part of it. The last thing we wanted to do was was get involved with an attorney and make this make this a legal issue. But we we didn't feel we were getting due process. Kevin Carroll from Wigan, and Dana and in Washington, shared our frustration after about a year of his effort and change of administration within the CIA for the publication Review Board helped a little bit, but it was really the, you know, do we need to take this as a public issue, which was the last thing, last thing I wanted to see was, you know, bierbauer v. CIA on a on a lawsuit? So Kevin, Kevin did a great job for us. got everybody to pay attention, got it elevated. And as a result, we got 95% of the book clear. And the last 5% was, was curious. For the most part, you know, there were there were things about porta potties that were redacted. There was some locations and some authority issues, which were appropriately redacted. And then, you know, the quotes like Alec side was for some reason classified, but that none of that net effect is the books, the books coming out next week. And we are we are crystal clear at this point as to what we can talk about and and what we can't, and feel like we've we've certainly met our obligation.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 22:06

I don't feel like the Lone Ranger Alec and Mark, because, you know, we've got a new law out there that says 25 years after an event. If something's classified, it's automatically declassified. Well, it's 30 years after Desert Storm, or four years, I've been trying to get planning documents declassified. Nobody home anyway, again, for another day mark, why should airman read this book? And what do you hope are the key takeaways?

**Col (Ret.) Mark Cooter** 22:35

Wow, I personally think there are so many things. First off, I hope that the airman will find it an easy read, and we'll enjoy the book. But we kind of wanted to just show that ordinary Americans, ordinary Americans, specifically airman for them, can do extraordinary things. As you mentioned, they just need to be persistent. And if you believe in something, find the people that will help you get to yes, be good teammates, and the credit will take care of itself. To me that airpower is more than just about airplanes. It's a mindset about finding innovative solutions to your complex problems. And it for me, it's kind of a warning to those young Airmen out there that you never know when the call will come to you. And will you be ready?

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 23:27

Very good. Nice a succint message there. Find who will get you to "Yes." That's kind of key. Because there are a million people out there that are going to say no. Alec, what do you do during the period that's covered by the book? What What do you view as some of the biggest successes as well as some of the biggest failures?

**Alec Bierbauer** 23:51

Well, failures, failures, we had a few and some successes as well. But you know, it just echo you know, Mark's comments. It's it's it was critically essential that we learn from our failures. That we not take no, not in a disrespectful way, but we not take no as our as our end state and move forward. Briefly, some of the biggest success operationally was we were charged with, you know, in nine months or less, find in fixed bin load and put us eyes on target. And we did it. And in September of 2000, and in the there's a screen capture in the slides at the beginning of when we found him at tar Knight farms and just outside of Kandahar in September, huge success. but bear with that a failure that we couldn't close we couldn't close the finish. Part of that fine fixed finish loop, which which emphasize the title of The book even more, back on success is, you know, the putting the team together. And, you know, certainly at the time I was a, gs 1314. You know, I come from a non traditional path and organizing on a day to day basis 12 different organizations from the US government, as well as industry partners. And was was a phenomenal challenge and a huge success. It's not something that is traditionally done, certainly at, at CIA, there's, there's oftentimes some organizational resistance to, to bring in an outside elements, but and we had, you know, we had hundreds of people supporting in one form or fashion. And, from my perspective, I often didn't know what organization that we're from, they were just part of the team, they were there they were, they were doing their piece and, and I also I, you know, for, for some bureaucratic reasons, we, we didn't allow anybody to wear uniforms, while they were in our workspaces, and it was part of our operational security practice for, for the program. But I couldn't tell you who the junior people versus the mid grade or senior people were on the team, they were all just part of the team. So that team was a phenomenal success. And, and frankly, we should really see more of that in a more detailed sense, lethality, you know, Hellfire was was not my first choice. I'm glad to see that I was wrong on the on the weapon, but we had some serious issues with with lethality and, and, and a huge success was sketched out on a cocktail napkin and implemented in very short order. And then remote split Ops, which I think is probably at least within the business, it's a household term these days, but there were failures along the way and putting that together. And there were some comms voodoo magic in there that that made that possible. Huge, huge success that continues today. failures. Just a couple other real quick points. You know, our first flight was a was a failure. And there's a reason that checklists exist in the airforce. And there's a reason that the CIA shouldn't try to alter those. Our first functional check flight at our deployed location crashed or hard landing by Air Force terminology, I think is the right way to put it. Nevertheless, it didn't fly again. But it could have been the end of our end of our program. That was that was a that was a failure and a learning point, certainly for us not to not to mess with the checklist. We did have to brief the director on that. And I tried to ease the pain I said good news, bad news. Bad news is we we crashed good news as the pilots. Okay. And we were in we were allowed to continue and, you know, live to live to fly the The only other bird that we had, I think the next night. And then the last failure issue. You know, it's a whole government one, but 911. You know, had we as Mark said, we were prepped to deploy, and we would have been operational, you know, in September 2001. At 911 1011, or an 1111, things might have gone different. But yeah, sometimes we weren't, we weren't early enough, don't get that to get back into the field

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 28:49

Well that's very good and great segue to what I'd like to ask mark to elaborate a little more on right now. And that's what drove you guys to split ups and then remote split ups.

**Col (Ret.) Mark Cooter** 29:03

Well, as I kind of described in the slides, you know, we obviously couldn't put our ground control station in the middle of Afghanistan, kind of like we had done in Tuzla, Bosnia and other places. I just the Taliban wasn't going to invite us in. And the host country that we did get didn't want a large military presence. And we had to be as clandestine as possible. So we had to, had to come up with some way to have a very small team forward without a without a military presence and, and that's what drove us to that split operations and move our ops team to somewhere else. Then once we arm the platform, some more reality said in that general counsel and others came in and said that we would have to inform our host nation for our operations team. That were a bit we were basically launching missiles from their country, even if the aircraft launch from another country. And that obviously wasn't going to work that drove us for looking at many, many places. And we kind of outline that process in the book from looking to putting it on a on a ship, which wasn't my preference to other locations, and then finally, figuring out what the best location would be back in the United States. And that's what, that's what God has to remote split operations.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 30:36

Oh, very good. Alec, it seems like some of the CIA restrictions necessitated the development of the ops concepts that we just discussed. What were the CIA's biggest challenges to this ops concept? And how are those policies and technologies balanced?

**Alec Bierbauer** 30:56

Well, I'll put on my CIA hat. And thank you and take credit for the evolution of remote split offs on behalf of the agency. Although, yeah, it as Mark noted, it was it was from a technology perspective, we put incredible burdens on the system. Because of just it's it's an institutional challenge of, you know, what the agency is doing is supposed to be quiet, it's supposed to be clandestine, it's supposed to be behind the scenes, it's not supposed to be a large footprint. The whole concept of having a clandestine airfield is probably a little bit of an oxymoron. But, you know, we we had to put that challenge in on, you know, it was probably a very arbitrary 10 people or less, but it was driven by the fact that we couldn't we couldn't put that full capability forward. And we had obligations to our host to keep keep this clandestine. And we certainly had obligations along that, that pipeline, when some of the foreign relationships that governments that we were interfacing with, to the extent that they were clued in at the time, we, you know, the those were critical paths for us, that drove some of the technology. You know, the, the, the the mantra at CIA is, you know, what is the blowback potential? What is the what is the consequence of things going going wrong? And how are we going to overcome those and that, that, in some cases, you know, there's a risk continuum there, as you assess the the blowback and at the time and 2000, that that risk, there was a fair amount of aversion to taking substantial risk, and that, and that drove it, you know, as Mark noted, we look for every possible opportunity to put we, you know, the concept of putting, putting that dish on a ship didn't, didn't get legs for very long, thankfully. But that that would have been from our perspective that would have taken, you know, one of our host challenges out of play. So you know, that the the ability, though, to pull back that real time video, not just somebody saying that something was so but to put real time video into CIA headquarters into the Pentagon, frankly, at times into the White House was, you know, that was that was the, I think the convincing factor that that this, the this whole cycle was was viable.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 33:52

And no, thanks for that. Follow up for you. There, there's always been a working relationship between God and CIA, current hot topic is a potential move by the secdef. To pull back on military support to the CIA. What's your perspective on this? And how would programs like this be impacted?

**Alec Bierbauer** 34:14

Well, if that support wasn't there, and in a very basic sense, this program wouldn't exist if if that pullback was was truly put into effect in an absolute sense. For us, we were you know, we were driven and it's a memo that we never thought would see the light of day but you know, from from a briefing with President Clinton, Sandy Berger, signed out a memo as a national security adviser, saying do more take Pentagon capabilities primarily technical in the in the context of the memo, and take CIA authorities and and and put The to to put the two together and do something good. Give me more capability in Afghanistan and when we detail that in the book and a little bit more detail than we'll cover here, but you know that relationship is is absolutely essential. The CIA does certain things well, and di D does certain things as well. And, and those functions ought to be left to whoever doesn't well, and where they're dependent on each other that that really needs to continue to happen. You know, it sounds trite, but it's a follow the money issue at some sense, you know, that there's, there's budget implications involved. But it's, it would be ineffective from a budget perspective, and probably from a performance perspective, to move that money to CIA and expect them to have all the organic capabilities that they they currently leverage off of God, we spent a lot of time talking about title 50 versus title 10. In a very, very brief sense, you know, intelligence versus military operations in CIA operates primarily under Title 50. In these circumstances, you know, Mark, and I tried to create a title 60 and blend the two we thought it was that simple. Turns out it wasn't but but yeah, to the, to the issue of current day, relationships. You know, it'll certainly Evan flow on that. Do DCI relationship and support, but it's, it's essential.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 36:31

Oh, very well said, Mark, given the interagency nature of the ops team, as Alex just described, what were your biggest command and control challenges? And how did you overcome them?

**Col (Ret.) Mark Cooter** 36:45

Well, it's interesting. I mean, we have some rough patches within in 2000. And in early 2001, especially due to some of those funding issues that crash or that first aircraft, I never thought it would drive some of our discussions and our legal discussions on. You know, especially once we started talking about arm and the platform on okay, if this person's in the left seat, or in the right seat, or whatever, it's going to drive that and which will also drive if something bad happens, who's going to pay for an airplane? And it was amazing, the the complicated proposals that the lawyers came up with, that I was going to have to deal with as the operations officer and Alec was going to have to deal with as the the obsolete for the CA.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 37:38

Let me interrupt right there and correct you. Because no, it's not amazing. What happens when the lawyers get involved. Okay, go ahead.

**Col (Ret.) Mark Cooter** 37:47

Roger that, sir. Luckily, the Air Force leadership and CIA leadership, had good vision, and just said, Let's go have these and we kind of outline that in the book. And that allowed us to exercise some simpler solutions, especially when it came to who would be on the crew when once we began, it became even more complex. You know, the decision was made at the highest level, that the CIA would may control the platform and its use. But we knew there would be military valid military targets to execute. So we as best we could from the trenches, tried to develop ttps on how and I'll use the term tactical control would be exercised from within CENTCOM, SOCOM and the C fac. Especially should we need to use our strike capability, or our ability to support other strikes. We also develop collection management processes, so those same organizations could leverage our unique collection capabilities. The key was we needed to have the right ela nose in the right locations to work there friction that arose. And there were many. And we outline a lot of that in the book, especially the ELA knows, between Alec and I had the worst job, to me the worst job to this day, because sometimes we got very heated and amany animated, and we certainly had a great lno at the at your location help us in the end was what we set up perfect. No way. Not at all. We learned a lot of things and we learned them on the fly. But we did our best given the many masters we had our short timelines and the security constraints that really hampered some of our ability to get the word out on what we could do. Many times on the radio as our pilots were trying to help somebody on the ground and we try and as best we can let them know that we were an RPA with a weapons game. ability and what what? Trust me, we can help you. So I certainly had some challenges, but I got through for the most part.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 40:10

Yeah, well, as you know, I got a million stories from the other end, but command relationships at first night, October 7 2001, kind of threw a monkey wrench into things, but save that for another day. You know, it appears that you guys made many technological advancements in a real short period of time. It really was less than 18 months for remote split Ops, weaponization, rover, weapons modifications, sigyn, and situational awareness tools for the GCs, a ground control station for the layman in the audience to name a few. How were you able to make that happen? And what are some of your your biggest takeaways? Yeah, the

**Col (Ret.) Mark Cooter** 40:57

interesting part is, we never looked at the totality of all that until we started writing together and put an outline together. And we were like, wow, there's a lot of stuff that was accomplished. And most of it, frankly, it wasn't like we were at the beginning, we developed a project and we had these tasks. And we knew we were to need these, a lot of it arose from just the problems getting set forth in front of us. The split ops and remote split ops are a great example those were based on. Yep, we want to do this, we want to conduct operations. But here are some constraints that are going to drive us to that. Some of the other capabilities were the same way. Some of them were born of some things we finally got on the predator. A good example of that is the second capability. When I was in the 11th, Reconnaissance Squadron, there were some testing done in the 90s, that there's no way you can do sigint on a predator can't put the antennas on the waves can't do that, etc. Well, we knew we needed to get a better capability to get more situational awareness on the Taliban air and air defenses, we learned that kind of the hard way, in our 2000 operations. And the experts said it couldn't be done. But you know, what my kids working with me, they, they could come up with some innovative solutions. So for about $20, they made it happen, they figured out a way to use are the new radio, because up until we started operations, we didn't have a radio to talk with the folks on the ground or in the air, we had to use a in the you probably remember in the Balkan days, we had to use a VTC capability to do that. And it was a nightmare. So once we got the aircraft on board, and especially, you know, in the 2000 mindset, you know, we weren't going to have anybody to talk to. So why don't we use that to listen to the bad guys. As simple as that. And for $20. We made it happen. And you know, it's the old adage, perfection is the enemy of good enough. And that was certainly a good enough. And a lot of our solutions weren't necessarily pretty. Maybe a lot of duct tape and zip ties to make it happen. But we just chose not to make the problems harder than they needed to be and simplify the solutions. And so a lot of the things you saw on the list of the slides that a lot of them were were that I can go on and on about rover and other things. But that's kind of how we got to where we were.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 43:49

Yeah, well, I can relate being in the chaotic watching the information coming directly into us, and then having to relay over radio, to the shooters and try to talk their eyes on to the picture that we're seeing that's being fed to us by the Fed. Now, obviously, we've come a long way since then. And Alec was talking about earlier when you guys found bin Laden. And you know, we didn't have that finished piece on the aircraft. And I think that's something that people miss is that the real rebel revolution of uninhabited aircraft is the combination of the fine fixed finish elements onto one platform. And that if we had this thing weaponized at the time, that the dude showed up, way back there in 2000. A lot could have been avoided by taking them out then back to you alika. And speaking in 2000, you are operating in Afghanistan, about that. Time. And it was about that same time that the Air Force was looking at exploring weaponization the predator. So can you tell us a little bit about how these two concepts got linked?

**Alec Bierbauer** 45:12

Is there, you know, born of necessity at that point, you know, when that when they gave him the concept was put on the table of Well, why don't we weaponize predator? You know, it's, it's sounded from a GI perspective sounded a little frightening. But and then as we dug into the details and realized we'd be constrained to about 100 pounds of payload on the wing, you start looking within the inventory to see what's to see what's available. But you know, that the, the the triggering event for it was, you know, fundamental and not being able to do something about it, we we had a robust discussion about whether we could Kamikaze the predator and but the velocity profile would would say the aircraft from from doing it and I'm not sure what the kinetic effects of bumping into somebody at lawnmower speed would do anyway but we looked you know, big Safari You know, when you when you got guys like Bill Grimes at the time, bringing capability and certainly when we got Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville, involved from the, from an army side when when, when the Air Force inventory didn't really carry anything small enough to fit on the wings. You know, Hellfire came came to the surface fairly quickly. And then, you know, with with guys like snake Clark pushing it from, from the from the Pentagon side, I think all told it was a half million dollars and 60 days to, to get that program going. And, you know, on a on a traditional program, he wouldn't have the PowerPoint briefing put together to pitch it, probably in 60 days for half a million dollars. And then, you know, getting the the army side on redstone was kind of new to us that at that point, we had some relationships there. But we got the same teamwork from the from them of setting aside bureaucracies and budgets, and they wanted to participate, were eager to do so and it came together.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 47:24

Very good. Let's switch topics just a little bit here. Mark. Over the years, there have been lots of discussions of RPA is in contested environments. Now you successfully operated with a potential air threat radar and infrared Sams and a AAA environment. So tell us a little bit about your perspectives on this topic.

**Col (Ret.) Mark Cooter** 47:47

Yes, sir. And, you know, I in the book we talk about some of those we detail in great detail, at least one of our mega engagement would probably be a strong word, especially if I mentioned it to user at least encounters. But we set successfully survived that also in the book who we outline another sex successful survival of a radar guided sa three system on for us just prior to the conduct of for OSPF to start. So, you know, I obviously had a little bit of experience with this. And when I left the program and went back into the white world, I would be in meetings in the discussion of RPA is in contested or semi contested would come up and people would say, Oh, you can't do that. You can't do that. And I just I cringed and it was funny. If there were people in the room that knew me, they would just look at my face, and they just kind of laugh and move on. And then I tried to explain that what it requires is linking the right intelligence sources in analyst with the right planners and pilots. And if you do that, you can make it happen. So sorry, I remember back as a young lieutenant and the Cold War and you know, Ivan was 10 feet tall, right? And the threat was high. But we knew we had to find a figure a way to get into the in when the fight, we had to find either gaps or seams or make those gaps and seams in the defenses. So we could get to the targets and I looked at it is no different for these rpac especially when you know depending on the commander's perspective, you know, what is the what is the attrition threshold for them. And it was certainly tough for us when you only had one or two aircraft, but we're certainly beyond that now. And I was involved in some of the testing at the time. ls range complex with predator, we flew it against some of the emitters out there. And I can tell you that predator is not going to survive over the Nellis range complex. We got some of the best operators in the world, or over any of the other first world capitals or high priority targets. But maybe, just maybe, with some good intelligence analysis, some good mission planning, you can accomplish missions that others may not think is possible. And it doesn't hurt if you have a third rate adversary to go up against. I will say that, and that was our team's perspective. We had great Intel people, great planners and great pilots that that made it happen.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 50:41

Well, very good. And thank you both for your insights. Your comments reinforce the need for planners, operators, the scientific and technology community and an industry to work closely together to create next generation force multipliers. Valkyrie comes to minus one. So Alec and Mark on behalf of the Mitchell Institute of aerospace studies, and all of a fa, thanks for your service to our nation, in your pivotal role in a key revolution in the history of the United States Air Force, as well as the CIA. Now, as a reminder to our listeners, our next aerospace nation events gonna be Tuesday, January 26, when I'll be talking with General James Dickinson, Commander, US Space Command. And I'd also like to mention that the links about the book and the slides from today's event will shortly be available on our website at Mitchell aerospace power.org. So now we're going to turn to questions from the audience who've been listening the conversation, and those who are out there want to ask a question, please raise your raise hand function. And when I call on you unmute your mic and state your name and affiliation before asking when we had one, and now she just went away, but I also have a bunch of comments and q&a in the text function. And so let me start with a question from Tom Hazel back. Have any of the lessons learned from this experience been incorporated into setting up new programs? Or are we re learning these lessons to this day?

**Col (Ret.) Mark Cooter** 52:30

I'll tackle that from from what I believe in the Air Force, at least throughout my career. I mean, we use the and built upon all the things that we did, especially from a technology perspective, you know, we took obviously, we painted all the all the breads became gray after that point. rover just exploded. I remember my time at at absent and, you know, just fielding as many of those capabilities out especially the folks on the ground was a huge piece in and I would say some of the all source capabilities that we brought the other sensors. So yeah, we we've expanded on some of them. You know, that was a challenge for both Alec and I and even after I left the program, keeping an eye on things to make sure they were making they're making their way out of the program. Some of them took longer than I thought I used to cringe when I was at Nellis when they would. They were only carrying one hellfire missile because of what they thought was that they were over max weight. And we had already flown at that that weight load before and successfully done takeoffs and landings. So I was kind of trying to push the tech date out of big Safari and into Air Combat Command. So I think we did our best and I think we're continuing to evolve. So Alec, you may have some on the agency side of the house.

**Alec Bierbauer** 54:01

Yeah, I think it just briefly I think we talked the relationship between God CIA and I think that's it has abdun flowed as it relates to programs such as this. I want to believe in the program in 2003 and going back into the field, but I saw it from the from the ground side and Afghanistan then and and certainly certainly saw that loop being closed and and i hope certainly that that continues. continues today.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 54:34

Very good. Let's turn to Dave Anhalt. Dave.

**Dave Anhalt** 54:37

Okay, Dave Anhalt. Can you hear me okay? Yeah. Okay. I'm a private consultant in the Washington DC area. But I have a question about given the fact that one of the advantages of using RPA is in the way you did is it provides the planners the advantage of executing risky missions with without risking human life a pilot for now not talking about her adversary. But but but that advantage of RPA. Is, is is seems obvious. So I have two questions. Question number one is just exactly what ever been the statistics that you're aware of, of the exchange ratio of going on risky missions with Hellfires? How many unfortunate losses of RPA? Did we get that sort of underlie the fact that God It could have been a pilot that got lost there, but but it was an RPA with a Hellfire instead. And number two, aside from that clear advantage of RPA, is, if you had to give a list of the top three reasons why we ought to have RPA, doing this type of a job as compared to the other elegant things that are in the Air Force inventory, what are those three things?

**Col (Ret.) Mark Cooter** 56:00

take a stab at it first Alec. So yes, specifically, any statistics on on that I can tell you, it certainly was in our cross check on every mission that we had, especially if Alec had good intelligence for whatever the high priority target of the day was. And, you know, especially with the the predator, it's very susceptible to weather kinds of conditions as well as threats. And so that was always in our calculus. But we also knew we didn't have to worry about there being a pilot in this in the seat to do it. But I will also say, for us back in the day, we only had a couple of air vehicles at our disposal at the Ford area. And so that was as much a challenge for us. So I think it's just, you know, that's where commanders commands and getting good guidance from, you know, for an airman from the C fac on what is the acceptable level of risk is, in accomplishing the missions, I think you need to have that clearly defined for RPA is just like you do manned aircraft, and you execute it in that way. Alec, any thoughts on that?

**Alec Bierbauer** 57:23

Yeah, the only thing I'd add is, you know, that the very inception of the program was was driven by a landlocked country, without a cease our combat search and rescue capability to be able to put manned aircraft over Afghanistan at that, at that point in time. And, and it, it drove this opportunity for an unmanned platform, it was the right capability for that specific environment. It's not for for every environment, you know, this, this should not be, you know, my perspective should not be seen as a as a, you know, plug and play, it solves all all, all mission sets. You know, certainly from the from an agency perspective, there's there's other platforms, both ground and air, that that are better used for certain missions, this statistics piece I can address. And, you know, I think, you know, and Hellfire as well, you know, right in a context, and it's certainly evolved in other other weapon systems. Now, but you know, that the pairing was right for us, but certainly not, not right in all circumstances.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 58:44

Okay, last question and comment from someone who I think you'll recognize general john Campbell. Here's his comment. First, a lots been written about the program, as Mark said, it's the worst kept secret in the world. However, for the most part, none of the articles and books ever went through the security review process, so they don't help the discussion. Thanks to you guys for going through the 39 month agony of the security review, because you've established a baseline for what we can talk about. Now, here's this question. The multi agency multi infusion cell was a key to the success of the program. Can you talk about the planning that went into the mission on which bin Laden was located?

**Alec Bierbauer** 59:34

I'll take that one. If you don't mind, sir, the that and thank you General Campbell, and certainly your your contributions are heavy into the success of this of this program, both both because you spoke agency and Air Force at the time, and it could translate for, for for me my leadership and vice versa on the other side. It missionary was when we found bin Laden and we had a human tipper, a piece of intelligence from a source that indicated the area that bin Laden might be in. We had a, you know, doctrines gotta come from somewhere. And I think that's a theme that that across a lot of evolutions and lessons learned that we had, but doing real time collections management plat, for a dynamic platform like this was, was something that evolved over time, we pulled representatives in from every organization that had a, that had a dog in the fight and a reason to be at the table. And and that allowed us to integrate that, that human intelligence with, you know, the analysts and some of Mark's analysts at the time to say, you know, if we're going to pinpoint somebody, you know, at a place in time, you know, and it was a Friday, let's find the mosques, what mosques are he like? Is he likely to be associated with it that particular in that geographic region, and we we had some thoughts on some buildings that might be used for prayers, and that put us over target. And then there was a little bit of luck involved in that. But that tasking, so in that mission planning, it started pre flight, you know, where are we going today. And it continued throughout the duration of, of that flight, and many, many others, adjusting for weather adjusting for Intel adjusting for threats. And we had one of our one of our engagements, you know, shortly after that, that sighting on mission eight but and that that community contribution to the collection management piece continued and evolved extremely well after that, but we kept everybody at the table that needed to be there.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 1:02:03

Okay, well, ladies and gentlemen, we've come to the end and Mitchell Institute's discussion of the development of the predator as clandestine interagency iosr, and strike capability roll out of nevermind, we'll do it ourselves. It's available via Amazon or other distributors. And I got to tell you, it was real special to have Alec and mark with us today. You guys comments gave a great insights into how interagency programs can and perhaps should work, as well as how to rapidly innovate. So thank you both for joining us. So from all of us here at Mitchell Institute, have a great aerospace power Kennedy. Out here.

**Alec Bierbauer** 1:02:46

Thank you, sir.