

FEATURE ARTICLES

Appreciating Culture

Hans Bush, Col (Retired), USA, Military Advisor (Hollywood, CA)

Interviewed By: Douglas Lindsay

Lindsay: Would you mind giving an overview of your career, lessons you learned along the way and how you got to where you are today?

Bush: I was born and raised outside of Rochester, New York where I grew up on a dairy Farm. My dad was a school teacher and he raised us through gymnastics because he was also a gymnastics coach. I finished high school and headed off to college and joined the Pennsylvania Army National Guard. I knew I was going to go in the Army and I thought I would get some experience before I finished school. I went through Reserve Officer Training School (ROTC) and graduated with a degree in Communications in Television and Movie Production. I didn't pick it because I thought that was going to be important down the road. I picked it because it looked like a lot of fun and it was. The whole idea behind everything was a decision I made when I was very young. I knew I wanted to go Special Forces. I made that decision when I was probably eight years old. I saw a John Wayne's movie and that imprinted on me. It wasn't until I got to junior high when I realized I had to join the Army to do that.

I finished school and ROTC, got a commission and then headed off to the Army in the summer of 1985. I did the whole gauntlet of things that you do as a young infantry officer mostly at Fort Benning, Georgia. I did jump school and then Ranger school, and took my first assignment at Eglin Air Force Base where I was a Platoon Leader and a Ranger Instructor. As soon as I was eligible to apply and try out for Special Forces, which was now

Hans Bush (Colonel, Retired, USA) is a retired career Special Forces Officer who currently works as a Military Technical Advisor to motion pictures (Harry Humphries, GSGL) with previous projects including *Lone Survivor*, *Jack Reacher: Never Go Back*, and *Godzilla: King of the Monsters*. While in the service, he commanded five times and had numerous combat deployments including Panama, Haiti, Mal, Iraq, and Afghanistan. His military qualifications include Ranger and Special Forces qualified, over 1,000 jumps to include being master static line and extreme high-altitude free-fall, and holds jump wings from multiple foreign countries. As a public affairs officer, he held such positions as Senior Military Advisor to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, Chief of Public Affairs for the ISAF Joint Command in Kabul, and Chief of Public Affairs for U.S. Special Operations Command. His awards include the Combat Infantryman's Badge, Special Forces Tab, Ranger Tab, Master Parachutist Badge, Master Military Free-Fall Badge, Legion of Merit, and Bronze Star (with oak leaf cluster).

a new branch, I did. I got accepted and I headed off to Fort Bragg. I went through the SF Qualification course. I had to spend a little extra time there since I broke my knee falling off a mountain half way through the course. After getting a pin in the knee, I finished the course and graduated. I showed up in 7th Group and rolled straight into Operation Just Cause. My first month in Group was also my first real mission. We did our work in JUST CAUSE¹, went back to Fort Bragg to refit, and then headed back to make sure that the bad guys didn't start causing trouble again after the newly elected government was in place. That was the biggest piece of my team leader time and I was a Captain at that point. After that it was time for an instructor assignment, and I taught at the Special Forces Officer Course. That is was pretty normal as they want to pull freshness from Detachment command that had recent missions and use them to train the new captains.

Lindsay: That seems unique as it isn't always the case where we pull people just off of command (especially in theater) to be instructors.

Bush: At the time, the Army wasn't at war. The Cold War was still under way and we had JUST CAUSE and DESERT STORM, which were both pretty quick. The view in the Army at the time was that if you are an officer, to be professionally developed, you should be going from an operational assignment, to a training and doctrine assignment, then, back to an operational assignment. That was the cycle and what the Army looked like before 9-11. We could afford to do it before 9-11. So, I had instructor tours scattered throughout my assignments.

¹ Operation Just Cause occurred between December 1989 and January 1990. The goal of the Operation was to restore the democratically elected government of Guillermo Endara. In addition, forces attempted to arrest Manuel Noriega on drug trafficking charges (for more information: https://www.army.mil/article/14302/operation_just_cause_the_invasion_of_panama_december_1989).

Because I had come into the force very young, I was able to try out for Special Forces as a First Lieutenant. So, by the time I had finished the above, I was still pretty young as a Captain. At that time, the Army was putting a lot of pressure on the Special Forces branch to get their officers to participate in their secondary specialties, their functional areas. It was something we hadn't done much before and we never worried about it. So, I filled out a dream sheet - a list of my preferences for a functional area. It was standard Special Forces type stuff. Nowhere in there did I put Public Affairs. My previous commander was getting ready to go to Haiti and asked me to join him. We were staged in Cuba as a quick reaction force and a rebuilding force. If and when required, we were on standby to rescue the U.S. negotiation force that was working down there at the time. We finally went in and took care of the issues that were going on, and stayed there for about a year while they went through their transition through the elections. While I was there, the Army saw that I had snuck back to 7th Group and decided that they wanted me to do something else. The something else was to participate in a secondary specialty. Instead of looking at my dream sheet, they looked at my undergraduate degree and decided that they were going to code me as public affairs. I had never heard of that and quite frankly, didn't have any interest in that. They sent me to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and I worked with Military Review, the Chief of Staff of the Army's professional journal. I actually enjoyed it a lot more than I expected to. I had a great civilian team of writers and linguists. We were joined at the hip with Southern Command since we also published a Spanish and Portuguese edition. So, SOUTHCOM ended up sponsoring several trips for me into South America in that job. In the category of "be careful what you get right," General Clark's Public Affairs officer got pulled up to be a very senior Army Public Affairs officer and from time to time, he would reach down and pull me up.

I had a couple other assignments in there and when a command position opened up, I moved over and took command of my B Detachment in 3rd Special Forces Group. I did that for two years and that was mostly in North and West Africa. Up until then, I had only worked Central and South America so it was neat to see another part of the world. After that, I went to Puerto Rico and I began the line of my career where I worked with a lot of the classified units in the Special Operations community. It was in that job, when 9-11 happened and I got pulled immediately after the attacks to join a special planning group to put together our campaign on the Global War of Terror. After that tour, I was assigned to United States Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) as the Director of Public Affairs for all Army Special Operations. Normally, they don't have a Special Forces Officer in that role but because of my unique background, they chose me. While I was there, I got to deal with everything that was going on in the early 2000's. Mitigating accusations about sensationalizing the Private First Class Jessica Lynch (USA) rescue. Had to put a lot of hours into handling the death of former National Football League player, Specialist Pat Tillman (USA). We had other missions and of course, we had fatalities. All fatalities came through our team before they were put out to the public. It was a good, but tough assignment. It opened my aperture to not only the rest of the Department of Defense, but also the rest of the U.S. government. I had interaction with Congress at that point, and I really started to grow the muscles for the interagency side of the house. Because of that, I got selected to be the Director of Public Affairs at U.S. Southern Command in Tampa, Florida. Once I arrived, I was immediately deployed to Iraq as part of a Special Task Force. After that I returned to Tampa to finish out that assignment. Apparently things got handled well and I was selected to go to Army War

College at Carlisle, Pennsylvania. During that time, I had a previous commander of mine, General Stanley McChrystal, ask me to go to Afghanistan upon graduation and I had every intention of doing that. A few weeks before graduation, the whole Rolling Stone article unfolded. It was a series of really tragic public affairs, combined with really bad timing and bad

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luck. By the end of the week, he was at the White House offering his resignation. But, I was still headed to Afghanistan. Now, I had to go to Afghanistan among a bunch of strangers. I was going to be working at the Operational Headquarters (3-Star) of the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) Joint Command (IJC).

Lindsay: That is where we overlapped when I was deployed to the IJC headquarters in Kabul were we worked together in communications.

Bush: That's right and you know how that unfolded. We pioneered a few things there that were pretty important. For the first time, we had Public Affairs, Information Operations, and the Communication effort really working together to counter very aggressive enemy propaganda. We were countering propaganda instead of stomping out brush fires. From that, we actually created something that became doctrine, the Joint Incident Response Teams, to do real time

countering of things like civilian casualties, air strikes, night operations, and SOF raids. We built a team that could be deployed on short notice. We got ground truth and we got it communicated quickly enough so whatever enemy propaganda effort was trying to take hold, didn't get a chance to take root.

Lindsay: So, you were able to get inside the cycle so that you could preempt them from being able to do that.

Bush: Yes. It was a hybrid team of experts. I had civil affairs, public affairs, and videographers. I would also have an expert from what the allegation was about. For example, if it was an air strike, I would have a fighter or bomber pilot with me. The fun leadership part was that I was taking folks on short notice, going out into trouble that was still under way. It led to some big eye moments from some folks that weren't used to leaving the base. Every one of them met the challenge. All of that was pretty high pay off and we kept the temperature down. As a result of that, I got asked to go to the Pentagon to be a military advisor for the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, George E. Little. I did that for a few years and it was a huge learning experience. Just when it looked like I was ready to hit retirement at 30 years, the Army had one more mission for me. They sent me out to San Antonio to direct the communications effort to bring Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl back from captivity through what's called Reintegration at Fort Sam Houston with U. S. Army South. Army South is kind of a special command as they are the U.S. Government lead for hostage reintegration. There was a spectacular amount of media interest in that because of the controversial deal to get him back and the fascination with just the story of this young guy who just wandered off and was captured and held for five years. After that, I came back to Tampa, parachuted into my retirement and retired.

I kind of skipped over something that happened when I was the Public Affairs Director at SOCOM. In 2009, a Hollywood director had just bought the movie rights to the book, *Lone Survivor*. That was Peter Berg. He came down on a tour to SOCOM to try to win a production agreement to support making that into a movie. Because of my job, it was my job to receive him, hear the briefing, and make a recommendation. They did a really good job with the sincerity to get the essence of it, the accuracy of it, and to respect the story. The Admiral agreed to support it in two phases. He told the director that we will support you in your research phase as you write the script. Then, we will assess the script and, if it looks like we are all headed in the same direction, we will support the production. Peter said great, but I have a request. Can I get an expert assigned to be my Subject Matter Expert (SME) from your Headquarters? The Admiral smiled, said "sure", and then looked at me and said, "That would be you, Hans." During the assignments after that, Peter and I stayed in contact. In fact, in 2009, I took him to Iraq where he observed some missions with SEALs in western Iraq. It took five years to make the movie. At the time studios were not interested in making an Afghanistan war movie. The one that had come out before did not do all that well. It made the studios a little gun shy. But it was a passion project for Peter and his crew. He didn't let it die. They basically self-funded it between himself, Mark Wahlberg, and Eric Bana. In 2013 it got shot. I went out to support some of the production and they had DoD production support. It did extremely well.

During that project, I met a guy named Harry Humphries. Harry is a retired Vietnam-era SEAL. He has a company out in Los Angeles (Global Solutions Group, Inc. - GSGI) and they are one of the go-to companies that provide technical advisors for military movies. Movies that have commandos, military

mercenaries, terrorists, or law enforcement. He had been hired by Peter and his studio to navigate all of that for *Lone Survivor*. We worked together and became friends. He had said to me, “When you retire, I’ll give you a call.” I said, “Okay.” I kind of thought that was just a polite thing that he said to people when they worked with him for a while. But, I retired and Harry called me up. He said, “Can you be in New Orleans on Monday?” I said, “What’s up?” He said that he wanted me to meet Tom Cruise, because he is the Executive Producer of the next *Jack Reacher* movie. He said “I’ve been chatting you up and if he likes you, then you can do your first movie as a civilian.” So, I did and it worked out. For the last five years, that is what I have been doing.

Lindsay: Do you enjoy it?

Bush: I do. It’s great fun. It’s like running away to the circus. I have been very blessed with the productions I have worked with because I haven’t had to fall in on poorly funded or chaotic productions. I went from *Lone Survivor*, which was a passion product of very talented people, to *Jack Reacher* which was well funded, crazy professional, Tier-1 folks running all the departments. I couldn’t have asked for a better one out of the gate. From that, I went to some remote work for a while. Then the next big one was *Godzilla: King of the Monsters*, which was shooting in Atlanta. I had never done science fiction or fantasy before. I got tagged to train actors that would play military characters in the movie as well as the mercenary characters. I got to work with the writers on the dialogue and on the set design and wardrobe. It is a lot of fun because you get to touch all of the departments. When you are shooting, you get to sit next to the director. It is wonderful access and collaboration. It’s a real privilege to travel in that small space because these productions are huge and spread out, but there are only a handful that are at the core of

this thing. We shot at the sound stages in Atlanta for five months, then we went to Mexico for a month and we were done shooting with actors. Then, the whole production went up to Canada, and they grinded on supercomputers for 19 months creating the monsters. It was almost two years for the movie to come out. In the meantime, I got recruited for another Army story that we just finished shooting for HBO in Italy. It’ll be coming out next October (2020).

Lindsay: I appreciate you going through that because throughout your career, you have spent a lot of time in different countries, dealt with different cultures, worked inter-agency (which have their own cultures), different services, etc. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about what you learned as a leader about interacting in various cultures, how you developed an appreciation that those different perspectives bring, and how has that helped you to be a better leader.

Bush: That’s a lot. Let me take piece of that at a time. As a Special Forces officer, we get exposed to the inter-agency. In the Army in general, and Special Forces for sure, you have a lot of very competent, A-type personalities. Our view of the world is among ourselves, looking out. What we consider right and wrong is based on our world-view. As time goes on, you realize that isn’t a good model because there are some bright and brilliant things happening that don’t look and sound like what we do every day. If you are a military person, you tend think when it comes to foreign policy that we are the hammer and everyone else needs to pay attention to us and go whatever direction we swing. As time goes on, you realize that we are the hammer, but we don’t have a single hand on the hammer. We don’t own the handle and we don’t own the swing. Because all of that is policy. We don’t make policy, we do policy. Then you tumble back to that in-between place, where we have a very big responsibility to inform policy.

Living in different worlds really came through working in the E-Ring² of the Pentagon, where pretty much all of the senior people I was around didn't have military experience. But, all of them had U.S. policy experience and very powerful national government experience. In that environment, I gained an appreciation for what a life-long commitment of some really brilliant people looks like. It is easy to poke fun at Washington from a distance. It's a lot harder to poke fun of it when you right

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in the middle of it and you start getting surrounded by some fantastic talent. That was a big revelation. Much of the second half of my career included deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. In these deployments, they were named operations with a senior American Flag officer who wasn't necessarily subordinate, in the traditional way, to the U.S. Ambassador or the country team on the ground. Outside of those campaigns, that was always the case. Everything was the Ambassador. Everything was the Embassy. All direction and guidance came from them. Not so much in Iraq and Afghanistan because it was very much military action.

Your other question was working with other countries. I got to work with a lot of foreign armies and foreign personalities. I developed an appreciation for not defining right by our experiences but by theirs.

² The Pentagon is organized into rings determined by ranking. The E-ring is generally occupied by more senior leaders.

Cultures are funny. What we think right looks like isn't always what right looks like in their eyes. We put a lot of work in Afghanistan in metaphorically punching people that weren't telling the truth in the face with the truth. It took a little while to realize that we were doing that in a culture that values fantastic storytelling and the ability to stretch what may have been a small moment into a big moment. It was revered that you could exaggerate or tell a grand story. It was revered that you could have this "little guy beats the big guy" story line. If someone in the crowd stood up and pointed out with very clear and compelling facts that it wasn't true, that was not endearing. That was not considered hero behavior. It was quite the opposite. The reaction to that was, "You are kind of a jerk. He was telling a pretty good story here." We had to learn that. We had to embrace that and kind of thread that into what we were doing.

The idea of saving face is not as powerful in the U.S. as it is in some of these other countries. If causing them to lose face causes more damage down the road to what your organization is doing, then maybe that is not the way to go. As we worked our way down all of those branches and sequels, I think we got a lot better at it. There was a huge effort put into this. There was a 3-star command created just to do this during the years we were in Afghanistan. We had never had that kind of infrastructure for that kind of effort in the past. Maybe not since World War II, when we put Flag (senior) officers as studio executives in motion picture studios. So, it was a pretty interesting time in history.

Lindsay: What about working with the differences between the cultures of the service?

Bush: There are differences. As a younger officer, you are a lot more ethnocentric. You assume your branch is the best and that everyone else is just folks who weren't

able to cut it in the job you are doing. But as time goes on, and aircraft and helicopters take you great distances and get you there on time and safely, you start to grow a new appreciation for them. Or, if you get into trouble and the artillery folks you made fun of and other branches show what they exist for, your heart warms in all directions and you start to realize that the other services are important - very important. And, they are just like the Army when you look at the spectrum of talent.

Lindsay: With what you just talked about regarding the value of other perspectives, what advice would you have to young leaders, or to a young Hans Bush if you could go back?

Bush: I'd really be careful about labels and looking at all the services and ranks and assuming that there is a common brush to paint all of them with. In any given moment, someone that chooses to become a Navy SEAL, could just as well have decided to try out for Special Forces and vice versa. Most of the folks in the Special Operations community are cut from the same cloth. They may be in different suits, but they are all pretty much the same cloth at the beginning. If you pull away from that, there is talent anywhere you look for it. If I could give my younger self some advice, I probably would have put more effort into finding things that are going right as opposed to finding things that are going wrong. You tend to find and fixate on what you look for. If you just find things that are wrong, you can end up being a grumpy officer, leader, or commander. But, if you just take a second at try to find something right that is happening, and throw a little light on it, it can take hold. Then, pretty soon, the whole temperature of the unit starts to turn around. I have been blessed over 30 years with all kinds of commanders – and for the most part, commanders who had that figured out. Everybody has a story about their worst commander

who was just mean and grumpy all the time. Then, they talk about the best commanders they had who didn't let good order, discipline, and success fall off the table. When things were wrong they corrected it. But, they put just as much effort into shining light on things that were going right. I would have been better served as a younger officer if I would have thought a little more about that and put a little more effort into that.

Lindsay: It has to be interesting working in your current role in Hollywood because I think there is a misconception among some people about how Hollywood views or values the military. However, based on what you have said, the fact that they are willing to bring in subject matter experts like yourself to make sure that they are authentic, is a huge testament to wanting to get the stories right. What has been your experience, having come from a bureaucratic, traditional organization like the military, to one that is perceived as quite a bit different in the motion picture industry?

Bush: To be fair, not every show hires a military technical advisor or creates a military department. Those that don't and try to tell a military story anyway generally aren't very successful. Those are the ones that have the outrageous uniform mistakes and all the wrong phraseology. Everyone that is a veteran, and there are millions of veterans watching movies, sees that. The bar is pretty high for getting it right and not every studio invests in that. When they don't, it shows. With that said, coming from the structured command network that we have in the military into a movie production, it is surprisingly familiar. You have commanders, directors, staff, divisions, departments, and special operations. Between the writers, the lighting, and the cinematography, it is really like all of the DoD intel community you have ever touched. They have that same kind of intensity and attention to detail.

You have the director, who is like your operational commander. You have producers who are your next level up and then, you have your studio executives who are very senior and are like your Pentagon level folks who are approving the really big decisions on the production. Things like negotiating production agreements with other countries, handling hundreds of millions of dollars, and making something that would be chaotic into a very organized, and logical investment of millions of dollars. The assistant director in *Godzilla* was a British gentleman who was very talented and sought after, and we got to talking over lunch one day. He is a real student of the history of film. He explained that the way a production is done, the cast and crew, how the divisions are set up, how they communicate on the radio, how they organize in base camps, and how they organize transportation, it's all straight out of the military. Almost all of the really big deal directors, producers, and executives as movies were born, lifted all of their experience being in the military in World War I and World War II. So, it is actually a much more familiar place than I expected.

Lindsay: That's very interesting, I hadn't quite thought about it that way. But, if you think about moving hundreds or thousands of people and dealing with millions of dollars that can be a logistical nightmare if you don't have a form of order and discipline within the process.

Bush: Not just moving around, but moving in and out of countries and with a lot of logistics - moving their own fuel, moving weapons, both real and simulated, into countries that don't allow weapons in and out. It's really a pretty impressive choreography.

Lindsay: Do you notice that when you interact with the talent and staff that they value the expertise that you bring to the table?

Bush: The short answer is yes. I have felt warmly appreciated on every project that I have done. There is a real hunger on the part of the actors when we do boot camp or intensive one-on-one training to get them to where they are believable as a military character. You make a pretty tight bond. They want to get it right. They want to get everything right. They do that with every character from project to project. Acting is not easy. It is not an easy life. 90% of those in the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) are unemployed at any given time. It is a very small population that are at the top doing big work. It pyramids out pretty quick with a lot of people struggling to get there.

Lindsay: Any parting thoughts or advice that we haven't talked about that you would like to share.

Bush: It was a 30 year adventure that went by in the snap of a finger. We didn't talk about the most important part of the whole thing. That is Maribel, my wife. If I didn't have her in my life, I wouldn't have been able to get even half way down the trails that I did because she was able to see and do things, and help us be a family that I was not able to. I could leave on these many deployments knowing all was taken care of. It just wouldn't have been possible without her. She is quite wonderful. Thanks for the opportunity to share some thoughts.