

An Army Family Legacy
Interviewer

So, General, thank you for agreeing to be interviewed by us today.Â Today is January the 11th, 2012, and we are in the offices of the Center for Oral History with Major General Robert Abramsâ€”Abe Abrams, as youâ€™re called, right?

Robert Abrams

Thatâ€™s right.

Interviewer

Most of the time, we ask people if they come from military families; we donâ€™t need to ask you that questionâ€”we know you do.Â Â But tell us what it was like to grow up with such a legendary Army figure as your father.

Robert Abrams

Well, you know, when youâ€™re growing up, when youâ€™re a kid, you donâ€™t really know any different.Â Â You know, that was my norm, and to be honest, totally candid, I just thought I was just like any other kid growing up.Â Â It wasnâ€™t till much later in life that I realized that clearly I had a much different upbringing and environment to grow up in than any of my peers.Â Â I am the son of a soldier.Â Â What most people donâ€™t know, though, is both my brothers are soldiers.Â Â All three of my sisters married soldiers.Â Â

Robert Abrams

And, you know, of course my mom was an Army spouse for, you know, 38 years, and then, of course, after my dad died she stayed connected with the Army.Â Â So it isâ€”itâ€™s everything about me.Â Â Since the day I graduated high school, I already had my appointment to the Military Academy and came here, and so this is sort of my lifeâ€™s work; this is what Iâ€™ve known.Â Â Itâ€™s all Iâ€™ve ever known, really, in terms of serving our nation and defending ourâ€”what we believe in.

Robert Abrams

Soâ€”but back to your original question so I didnâ€™t think any differently.Â Â But I had some unique opportunities as a kid growing up that others didnâ€™t.

Interviewer

Where did you arrive in your fatherâ€™s career?Â Â What was theâ€”Â

Robert Abrams

He was the Commanding General of the Third Armored Division.Â Â And, you know, in the old, original Cold Warâ€”in the deepest, coldest parts of the Cold War.Â Â Right before I was born, we had the crisis in Berlin, so there was a lot of challenges.Â Â And, you know, I was born overseas, traveled back and forth a couple of times.

Interviewer

Where were you born?

Robert Abrams

97th General Hospital, Frankfurt, Germany. And

Interviewer

And your father was the

Robert Abrams

Third Armored Division Commander. So he left command; we went back to the States. He served on the Army staff and then went back, commanded Fifth Corps there in Frankfurt. And then, you know, we went back to the States and he was the Vice Chief of Staff, and then

Interviewer

What did you learn from him?

Robert Abrams

Well, clearly he was incredibly well-respected based on his personal engagement, his personal experiences, his wartime experiences. I had a unique opportunity. The summer of 1969 I was entering into the third grade. My mom and my two older sisters who lived with us there in Thailand traveled back to the States to care for a sister and sister-in-law who were both having babies that summer. And so I spent two and a half months that summer with my dad in Saigon.

Robert Abrams

And I tell people that and they go, "How'd that work out?" It worked out great, "cause I had a unique opportunity that none of my brothers and sisters ever had: I had one-on-one time with my dad for two and a half months.

Interviewer

But he must've been incredibly distracted. I mean

Robert Abrams

Yes and no. I mean it's all about what you expect is for norm, but I had an awful lot of contact with him. I saw him just about every day for lunch, "cause he'd come home and have lunch, and that was his physical fitness time. And then I'd have dinner with him every night, and sometimes there were big groups with his staff" sometimes it was one-on-one time. You know, I learned about commitment. I learned about selfless service.

Robert Abrams

I tell people today "we talk about the tempo of the Army that we're under. Year on, year off, the stress on families, and so forth. I tell people, "My dad was in Vietnam five straight years. And they sort of look at me" "Is that was that allowed?" Yeah, it was.

Interviewer

Your brothers were with you when you were there?

Robert Abrams

Yeah, both my brothers.Â Â Both brothers were in Vietnam in 1968 with my dad.Â Â â€™68 was a bad year for my mom.Â Â Your husband and two of your sons are in Vietnam in harmâ€™s way, and both my brothers were in serious harmâ€™s way.

Interviewer

So your brothers are older.

Robert Abrams

They are, yeah.

Interviewer

Youâ€™re the youngest.

Robert Abrams

Iâ€™m the youngest of six.

Interviewer

Yeah.Â Â Now letâ€™s back up for a minute and go toâ€” youâ€™re eight years old, I guess, when youâ€™re there.

Robert Abrams

Right.

Interviewer

Whatâ€™s an eight-year-old vision of Saigon in 1969?

Robert Abrams

It was pretty normal, and yet again, I had unique opportunities. During the day I would be able to travel downtown with one of my dadâ€™s enlisted aides.Â Â Go to the PX complex, other thingsâ€”spent a lot of time at the gym.

Interviewer

You mustâ€™ve been under a lot of security, though.

Robert Abrams

Zero.

Interviewer

Zeroâ€”really.Â Â Wow.

Robert Abrams

Iâ€™”you know.

Interviewer

Can you imagine that today?

Robert Abrams

No, I can't. And I thought about that in a number of scenarios, that's no. And I did. I learned how to shoot when I was there. My dad's protective service detail, CID agents, about once a week they'd go out to the firing range to keep their skills up. They took me out, and pretty soon I became a pretty good shot. It was just a unique—it was a unique opportunity.

Interviewer

What did you see that made it clear that you were in a war zone, even as a child, though?

Robert Abrams

Well, right outside there's bunkers for indirect fire attacks. You'd hear the air raid sirens—a constant stream of jets taking off and landing at Tan Son Nhat Air Base at all hours of the day and night. Of course I read Stars and Stripes every day. I didn't read the front page—I was more focused in the back at the comic book page and so forth, the funnies.

Robert Abrams

But it was clear, and there was many of the people on my dad's staff—there was a sense of purpose. It was clear. I was there during a couple of conferences that he held. Of course, I wasn't in the room—I was off—but

Interviewer

Your dad was not, at that point, a Commanding General, was he? It was Westmoreland.

Robert Abrams

He was.

Interviewer

He was okay.

Robert Abrams

Yeah, he was.

Interviewer

When did he succeed Westmoreland, then?

Robert Abrams

Summer of '68.

Interviewer

Okay, so it was earlier than I thought okay. So he was pretty busy, then.

Robert Abrams

He was.Â Â Soâ€”but it wasâ€”and many of the figures that we all know publicly, that I didnâ€™t really understood who they were then.Â Â They were these are justâ€”I saw them as friends of my fatherâ€™s; you know, coworkers.

Interviewer

Like who were you thinking of?

Robert Abrams

Ellsworth Bunker.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.Â

Robert Abrams

Ambassador Colby.

Robert Abrams

Ellsworth Bunker was, of course, the Ambassador, right?

Robert Abrams

He was.

Robert Abrams

Yes.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Interviewer

And William Colby, is that what you said?

Robert Abrams

Yes.

Interviewer

Was he the former CIAâ€” or the future CIA Director, I think, I guess.

Robert Abrams

He was.Â Â These were allâ€” these were all notable people.Â Â People on his staff we had known as family friends for a long time.Â Â Don Coles, you know, General Weyand, you know, he was the Deputy, COMUSMACVâ€”he lived in the same compound.

Fatherâ€™s Passing Leave a Vacuum

Interviewer

You had quite a vision on history, then.

Robert Abrams

I did. And I didn't realize it until much later in life, really the gift I had to watch all of these figures operate. So now the truth be told, though, is that after my dad passed away, there was a vacuum in my own life in terms of

Interviewer

Time would've been early 1970s" 74.

Robert Abrams

74.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Robert Abrams

So I was a freshman in high school, and both my brothers were busy in their own careers and so forth. And frankly, everybody was kind of hands-off, 'cause they were all" everyone was concerned over what people might perceive as trying to influence what might happen with me. So I was kind of left to my own devices.

Interviewer

Where were you living then?

Robert Abrams

Well, we moved out of Fort Myer and moved into our family's home in Falls Church, Virginia.

Interviewer

And you went to a public high school there?

Robert Abrams

No, I went to Bishop Ireton High School there in Alexandria. It was"at the time it was an all-male Catholic high school. But the family had already planned to put me in there. I was already enrolled and in my freshman year"my first week of school, my dad passed away. Because we knew that at the end of my sophomore year, he was going to retire"he'll be at the end of his four-year term as the Chief. He had no aspirations to do anything else. We knew we were going to retire to the home, and this would allow me to go to the same high school for four years and give me the best opportunity.

Interviewer

This is part of your dad's plan for you, then.

Robert Abrams

It was. Well, both my parentsâ€™ plan. Soâ€™

Interviewer

But your dad died of cancer, am I right?

Robert Abrams

He did.Â

Interviewer

Yeah. And that was a long, drawn-out bout with cancer, or was it pretty quick?Â

Robert Abrams

Six months, and, you knowâ€™

Interviewer

What kind of cancer was it?Â

Robert Abrams

Lung, and then got into his lymph nodes. So he had a lung removed and several lymph nodes removed, and was on the road to recovery. He was back semi-at work, working out of the house, and then itâ€™now, this was seems like ages ago. But the medical technologyâ€™we just werenâ€™t there. If heâ€™d have contracted the same sort of cancer today, I suspect he probably wouldâ€™ve lived a lot longer, butâ€™Â

Interviewer

You were about 13, 14, when heâ€™

Robert Abrams

Thatâ€™s right.

Interviewer

Mustâ€™ve been a terrible blow at that age to lose your dad, whoâ€™s been a role model.Â

Robert Abrams

It was.Â

Interviewer

Yeah.

Robert Abrams

But since you mention that, my mother was a strong personality in her own right. She was a force to be reckoned with.

Interviewer

She lived quite a bit longer. What, she lived into this century.Â

Robert Abrams

She did.

Interviewer

Yeah.Â

Robert Abrams

Absolutely. She passed away in January of 2003. And she was a tough, strong, resilientâ€”she had raised, you knowâ€”while my father was busy serving his country and spent a lot of time deployed in tough jobs, she was really the figure who ran the house and raised these kids. So she wasâ€”there was no downturn in parental involvement, if you will. But it wasâ€”Â

Interviewer

She was a strong figure, there for you as you needed her to be.

Robert Abrams

She was, but I mean clearly it was, she had lost the love of her life, and when you lose your spouse, itâ€™s hard to deal with. But she and I persevered and so forth. But where I was goingâ€”I didnâ€™t have a real clear idea what I wanted to do. I casually mentioned one summer that maybeâ€”well, I donâ€™t know. Maybe I want to join the Army. And that was my own volition.

Early Army Ambitions

Interviewer

Did you have any choice? I mean, when you looked at your brothersâ€”

Robert Abrams

Oh, I did, absolutelyâ€”thatâ€™s where I was going. Iâ€™

Interviewer

You really thought you could do something else.

Robert Abrams

Hey, look, I couldâ€”oh, I absolutely could have done everything else. Â And both my brothers had sort of backed away. No one was trying to influence me. Noâ€™

Interviewer

MG R. Abrams:

Robert Abrams

They were. No oneâ€”they were both Majors. So I casually mentioned this, and my mother and I were taking a trip to Germany to visit one of my brothers, who was stationed there.

And he said, "Well, if you're really interested, you probably ought to get a taste for it before you go any further." So he was an Operations Officer; an S-3 of a tank battalion in Gelnhausen, Germany, and we were going to be in Germany for about six weeks. He said, "Okay, I'm going to take you for two weeks. I'm going to assign you to a tank platoon. Got this Second Lieutenant, Bill Hewitt, and he's going to sort of sponsor you, and you report for duty and do whatever he tells you."

Interviewer

How old were you then?

Robert Abrams

15-16. It was the summer between my sophomore and junior year in high school. So I trotted off and met Lieutenant Hewitt, and I reported for duty in his tank platoon. They were getting ready for an annual general inspection by the Division IG, and so they were working really long, hard hours in the motor pool, getting their tanks and all their equipment ready and soldiers ready and so forth.

Robert Abrams

And so I'd report in there bright and early every morning, put on my coveralls, get to work, and work like a private all day till I was exhausted. Then I'd be released at 7, 8:00 at night, go to my brother's quarters and have dinner and fall asleep, get up the next day and repeat. At the end of that two-week experience, I told my brother, I said, "Okay, I really like this. I really want to do it."

Interviewer

What did you like about it? What was the thing?

Robert Abrams

Oh, "clear as a bell" camaraderie, teamwork, a sense of purpose—even then. Now, this is the Army of the, you know, mid-70s, which was not

Interviewer

The nadir of the Army, really, right?

Robert Abrams

Yeah.

Interviewer

I mean it's the low point of the Army.

Robert Abrams

It was. We had a lot of challenges in our army.

Interviewer

Did you see that in your little two weeks?

Robert Abrams

Oh, absolutely. Youâ€™

Interviewer

What did you seeâ€™morale problemsâ€™

Robert Abrams

It wasnâ€™t morale. You could see that there was a lack of purpose. There was the difference betweenâ€™we had just transferred, become an all-volunteer force, so you still had some who had originally been drafted and then decided to stay onâ€™the senior NCOsâ€™clearly a difference between those. There was some racial tension, and that was clearly evident. Theâ€™

Interviewer

You saw this in the interactionâ€™

Robert Abrams

Absolutely, because I wasâ€™I was just down there in this tank platoon. So I could see it firsthand, but I could also see the power of leadership, effective leadership, â€™cause there was some leaders in that platoon that were really strong, and there were others that were terrible.â€™

Interviewer

Do you remember the strong ones and what you saw in them?

Robert Abrams

Sure, absolutely. You know, they had a sense about them. They had competence, confidence. They clearly treated others with dignity and respect. I mean these are words that we apply today for coaching young leaders. â€™ It was not part of our culture back then.

Interviewer

How, for instance, did they deal with the racial conflict in a way that demonstrated their leadership?

Robert Abrams

Oh, it was just a matter of just their personal interactionâ€™treating everyone equallyâ€™and they clearly had those that didnâ€™t. Soâ€™and that was really a function of the time.â€™

Interviewer

And you picked up on that as a 15-year-old.

Robert Abrams

Absolutely. I was fortunate, because when my dad was in Vietnam, I went to an international school in Bangkok for five years. 36 nations represented in this international school. I didnâ€™t know it at the timeâ€™it was my normal. I didnâ€™t know any different. When I came back to the States, though, and went to a public junior high school where the demographics were much different, there was a lot of racial tension in Arlington County,

Virginia, in 1972.

Robert Abrams

I distinctly remember my third day of school, coming out of the school and the entire junior high was surrounded by about 40 squad cars from Arlington County Police Department. Â There had been a huge racially-motivated fight at the high school about an hour previous, and they didnâ€™t want it to spill over to the junior high. And I wasâ€™and the junior high I went to wasâ€™Caucasians were the minority. There was a large African-American populous, and there was a pretty growing Asian-American.Â

Interviewer

And this was strange to you because youâ€™d been in this diverse high school inâ€™I mean your school in Thailand.Â

Robert Abrams

In Thailand, where there was never any issue. â€™Cause there was a lot of embassy kids who went to the school, and you know, thereâ€™s all sorts of people who lived in Thailand. So for me to see that now in high school. So now fast-forward into what I experienced in this tank platoon. I had already been given the life skills on how to deal with diversity. Many of them obviously had not, andâ€™but what I told my brother, I said, â€™elf lâ€™m going to do this, though, I can tell you right now,â€™ I said, â€™el need to be a leader, because we, franklyâ€™thereâ€™s stupid things going on down there. Â lâ€™m going to be a junior in high school, and I can figure it out.â€™ And thatâ€™s what sort of set me on a course for becoming an officer.

Vietnam From a Childâ€™s Vantage Point

Interviewer

When the Abrams family gets together and you talk about Vietnam, and your fatherâ€™s role, and the history of that conflict, what is that exchange like?

Robert Abrams

Well, to be honest with you, when the Abrams, when all the Abrams kids get together, first off, itâ€™s infrequent, which is unfortunate.Â Â Weâ€™re notâ€™none of us are very proud of it.Â Â Itâ€™s just hard to get all six of us together.Â Â Â Of course lâ€™m still on active duty, so lâ€™m moving around.Â Â Three of them live in Northern Virginia; one lives in Buffalo, New York; one lives outside of Nashville, Tennessee.Â Â So getting us together, itâ€™s got to be a significant event.

Robert Abrams

They were all present when I was promoted and assumed command of Third Infantry Division.Â Â The next previous time we had all been together was my motherâ€™s funeral in January of 2003, so eight years had transpired.Â Â We can get four together, we can get five together, but getting all six together is difficult.Â Â But when weâ€™

Interviewer

But I mean not so much technically, but justâ€™

Robert Abrams

But when we doâ€”

Interviewer

Yeah.

Robert Abrams

We rarely talk about that experience in Vietnamâ€”Iâ€™ll be honest with you.â€” Itâ€™s notâ€”itâ€™s notâ€”mostly what weâ€™ll talk about is those experiences of our lives, growing up in the Army with our parents, where we were together and there was something fairly significant or humorous that occurred, so that we can capture it.

Interviewer

You know the histories here, nowâ€”you know that there is at least one faction of historical opinion about Vietnam;â€”that the war is broken into two sections, really: your fatherâ€™s, and General Westmorelandâ€™s; and that the first was a failure and the second was on its way to success, but Congress pulled the funding out and down it went.â€” Is that the way the Abrams family looks at it?â€” Is that the way you look at it, personally?

Robert Abrams

No.â€” I think that would beâ€”

Interviewer

What would your history of Vietnam be with respect to your fatherâ€™s role?â€”

Robert Abrams

I think that ourâ€”my own personal view is that it was a work in progress, and clearly there was a change inâ€”thatâ€™s well-documented.â€” I didnâ€™t realize it at the time, but of course, we all know it now.â€” There was a clear change in the strategy to put the Vietnamese in the lead.â€” To coin a current phraseâ€”

Interviewer

By the time your father got there, you meanâ€”

Robert Abrams

Right.

Interviewer

Or sort of roughly shortly after your father got there, it switched to beâ€”

Robert Abrams

Putting the host nationâ€™s security forces in the lead.

Interviewer

Yes.â€” Yes.

Robert Abrams

Which, you know, is pretty topical today.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Robert Abrams

And that we just finished in Iraq, and of courseâ€”

Interviewer

And it relates very much to your experience in Iraq.

Robert Abrams

Andâ€”absolutelyâ€”and in Afghanistan today. Â So, our memory is, and my own personal recollection is that there was a lot of progress being made. Â I mean, thereâ€™s a lot of our nationâ€™s blood and treasure, and in our own family, investment. Â The fact that my father was there for five straight years really, for us, is that thatâ€™s his commitment to what our nation needed done. Â

Robert Abrams

And to provide our soldiers, sailors, and airmen and Marinesâ€”â€™cause it was a joint forceâ€”the best leadership possible, and the continuity towards our objectives.

Interviewer

But was he an architect of this shift, do you think? Â Was he a prime mover of this shift of doctrine from the way it had been under General Westmoreland to the way it was under his leadership?

Robert Abrams

Yes.

Interviewer

And where did that come fromâ€”what was hisâ€”did he ever share with you hisâ€”

Robert Abrams

No. Â No. Â I was too young toâ€”I mean I can read about it now.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Robert Abrams

But theâ€”but no. Â I was too young to have been able to render any opinion. Â Iâ€™ve done a lot of study about it, and clearly that was, this was his vision. Â Soâ€”but thatâ€™s sort of our recollection. Â For us, as a family, ourâ€”it was the real commitment, â€™cause it really fractured our family in terms of geography and contact and so forth to have both parents in Southeast Asia for five straight years, while you got other children in varying stages in their lives, all over, moving in, moving out.Â

Robert Abrams

Two of the brothers had already participated in the campaign, and were back doing other things. Â So itâ€™s â€”thatâ€™s ourâ€™”from a family aspect, thatâ€™s sort of our perspective. Â Then, of course, afterwards, for us, itâ€™s really the formation of an all-volunteer army. Â I mean that was his vision, and thatâ€™s where he was going.

Interviewer

And why do you think he wanted that, or you must know why he wanted that.

Robert Abrams

Well, he recognized the value of a professional force that was committed. Â We knew we were going to have to downsize anyway, but the inherent value in a professional army made up of volunteersâ€™”and remember, heâ€™d been doing this for 36 years when he became the chief, andâ€™”

Interviewer

Heâ€™d been through, really, several chapters of the story of the American Army, if youâ€™re going back before World War II and going forward to Vietnam.

Robert Abrams

Absolutely. Â I mean his first duty assignment, he was in the Horse Cavalryâ€™”Seventh Cavalry; Fort Bliss, Texas. Â And so much of that shaped his view. Â If you look at his service as a Battalion Commander in the Thirty-Seventh Tank Battalion in the Fourth Armored Division in World War II, and you study the characters inside that outfit, he knew the inherent value of the difference between those who were professionals and those that wereâ€™”had just been drafted.Â

Interviewer

So when you look at the army that youâ€™re serving in, and the one that you served in in Iraq, and you look at two of the most significant characteristics of itâ€™”a highly professional force, dedicated in this case to a strategy that understands the nature of civil conflicts, supporting and putting forward the indigenous forcesâ€™”those are two enormous pieces of your fatherâ€™s legacy, right?

Robert Abrams

They are. Â Thereâ€™sâ€™”as the clich  goes, those that refuse to read history are condemned to repeat it. Â So much of this groundâ€™s been plowed before. Â Sometimes we just have difficulty sort of applying it to the current operating environment, the current conditions of the day, but there is a lot of parallel. Â

Cultivating A Culture of Solidarity in Iraq

Interviewer

Tell me about Iraq, your service in Iraq.

Robert Abrams

Well, ifâ€™”I had served in Desert Storm, and so that was a completely sort of a different

experience. It was a great experience thatâ€™A

Interviewer

Thatâ€™s your first combat experience?Â

Robert Abrams

Yeah, that was, as a company commander, and in the First Cavalry Division. Andâ€™great leader development opportunity. Things were much, much differentâ€™much more austere, where we were. A lot of planning, building, training in preparation, and then all to be, violently executed in a short amount of time, and then sort of our retrograde back. But an incredible experience nonetheless. I learned a lot on that particular experience in terms of empowerment of our junior leaders.

Interviewer

What do you mean by that?Â

Robert Abrams

Well, thereâ€™s a lot of talk written today about, in a counterinsurgency environment, that these are, centrally-planned, decentralized execution. Â Weâ€™ve got to have â€œcreate a culture of empowerment of training and trusting our junior leaders to act. Tactical actions have strategic impacts.

Robert Abrams

My own personal experience since Iâ€™ve been inâ€™and Iâ€™m in my 30th yearâ€™to be honest, thatâ€™s not much different than what I experienced as a lieutenant serving in the Cold War Germany with a border mission. When I was in the Third Armored Division in support of the Eleventh Armored Cavalry Regiment up on the East-West German border, and serving up at OP Alpha, and it certainly wasnâ€™t any different than my experience as a company commander in Desert Stormâ€™as a HHC company commander and responsible for ensuring that really the sustainment stance of the Battalion Task Force met the needs of the Task Force commander as part of the Brigadeâ€™s construct, I had a great deal of authority and autonomy within the commanderâ€™s intent to be able to meet that.

Interviewer

What does that do? What is it about providing that kind of respect and autonomy to junior officers that makes the force stronger?Â

Robert Abrams

Everyone canâ€™when that occurs, and there is this trustâ€™higher to lower and lower to higherâ€™then it allows multiple, multiple actions to occur simultaneously that create incredible synergy towards achieving your objectives. If subordinates always have to ask, â€œMother, may I?â€ or ask permission, or vice versa; that commander always has to call to direct; you will move, you will do things sequentially. You wonâ€™t do them simultaneous.Â

Interviewer

But what about the other flip side of that it would seem to me, that you have this potential

for somebody going off the reservation.A

Robert Abrams

Well, you do. That's this whole notion of building trust. And there's three things, really, that you can't rapidly produce in a unit to get them ready for operations, for combat operations, for deployment: trust, fitness, and discipline. Those three things all take time. You can't there's no magic formula. You can't put it in a bottle, break it open, sprinkle it on a unit, and out they go the door and suddenly it's there. Trust happens over time through a number of settings. It happens in training events. It happens in running the Army at echelon in meetings, to sustain yourself to meet our minimum requirements. It happens in personal interaction. It happens socially. This is a big aspect of our culture as an army, the social aspect's this feeling of being part of something bigger than yourself.

Robert Abrams

Again, I go back to my own experience growing up. I mean that's one of the things I remember from my parents, and certainly my brothers and sisters. That was always a part of our Army life, was the social aspect. So all of that is to say when you ask, "What's the" this is about trust. And so I had earned the trust of my leaders, Battalion and Brigade Commander, and then I trusted that they would underwrite any mistakes that I may make in pursuit of their objectives.

Robert Abrams

Can people go off the reservation? Sure. And those, I say, you can find those out pretty early in their career: those that are self-serving vs. selfless.

Interviewer

Well, it would seem to me also that this is one of the attributes of a all-volunteer professional army, right? I mean because you have the time to train these people. And you have a volunteer force that's committed from the action of even joining.

Robert Abrams

That is one of the inherent benefits of an all-volunteer army. They all voluntarily swear the oath. They may not know when they start what they're getting into they may not. Most of them don't, to be honest my personal experience, they don't. But once they're in, yes, there is a general sense that everyone's going to give way together towards a common objective. And working together, shoulder to shoulder, being part of a team, has an incredible sense, gives you an incredible sense of self-satisfaction, because you're part of something much, much bigger than yourself.

Interviewer

Let's go to your company commander experience in Desert Storm. Did you see any combat during that time?

Robert Abrams

Well, I guess combat's relative. So, you know, as an HHC company commander, I wasn't up on the front lines. The Task Force certainly saw direct-fire contact and direct-fire contact, and I was responsible for providing support to it. There was I had plenty of opportunities. I'm grateful that we didn't have any soldiers killed or wounded, but

we certainly had more than our fair share of opportunities to get into some scraps.

Robert Abrams

But the First Cavalry Division was “was the strategic reserve, and then got committed there at the very end. But they had their role to play, so yes; yes, and no. Yes, I experienced it; no, I didn’t. Probably the most dangerous thing I had to do was drive through unexploded ordnance from the multiple 45 days of bombing that occurred. And you had all these bomblets laying around the battlefield, and I was in a little thin-skinned Humvee. And then dealing with a lot of soldiers “Iraqi soldiers who had been stranded and were just trying to make their way to be captured. That was sort of unnerving; when you’re a single Humvee and it’s just you and your driver, and you come across 30, 40, 50, 60 Iraqis.

Interviewer

What’d you do?

Robert Abrams

Oh, we detained them, got them under control. I didn’t speak Arabic at the time, and”

Interviewer

Do you now?

Interviewer

I speak a little bit, and I was much better when I was in Iraq. But there wasn’t any fight left in these guys, and there was assorted other issues that a young company commander gets to deal with. But again, I was given a great deal of autonomy to support to ensure the Task Force was sustained. As part of the assistant XO senior sustainer, troubleshooter for the battalion. And it was an incredible experience. But I was lucky “I’d been in the same battalion for four years before we deployed. I’d served as a staff officer, and then I’d commanded a tank company for 20 months.

Three Catalysts of the Sadrist Movement

Interviewer

Let’s fast-forward, ‘cause our time is limited.

Robert Abrams

Sure.

Interviewer

To your experience in Iraq in this war. You were deployed there when?

Robert Abrams

2004 and 5, so”

Interviewer

And you saw a lot of experience with Mahdi Army, if I remember correctly.

Robert Abrams

Yeah, we did, and itâ€™s well-chronicled. Thereâ€™s a couple of things that we werenâ€™t really sure where Iraq was going in 2003, but we knew we were going to be there much longer than we originally had planned. So when the Divisionâ€”the firstâ€”

Interviewer

You were there after the invasion.Â

Robert Abrams

Thatâ€™s right. The First Cavalry Division had been off-ramped. It was part of the original troop list. And I was at the Army War College when that occurred; when the war started. So Secretary Rumsfeld had off-ramped army divisions for a lot of reasons that are well-chronicled, and so it became apparent by late summer of 2003 that we were going to have toâ€”we werenâ€™t going to keep units there forever. We were going to have to rotate forces. So the First Cavalry Division was alerted, and at that point in the campaign, there was a clear desire to transition to stability operations. Â We were done with decisive operationsâ€”we now want to transition to stability operations. So to set the conditions I was commanding at that time the most modernized, digitized, heavy brigade combat team, modular Brigade combat team in the Armyâ€”and not fully modularized, but certainly modernized.

Robert Abrams

And so the word came, â€œHey, youâ€™re going to go.â€ And then we were well into our train-up, and we found out about three weeks before our NTC rotation that we were not going to be able to take, we were not going to be allowed to take all of our combat vehicles. So we were allowed to take two Bradley companyâ€™s and one tank companyâ€™s worth of tanksâ€”16 tanks and 30 Bradleys.Â

Interviewer

And you didnâ€™t think this was enough.Â

Robert Abrams

Well, we didnâ€™t know, to be honest. We didnâ€™t know if that was wishful thinking on theâ€”I mean, look, there were great, great leaders who were on the ground in-country who were making these assessments and recommendations. Â And as Iâ€™ve always said, itâ€™s easy when youâ€™re back here sitting in aâ€”the armchair to second-guess andâ€”Â

Interviewer

Although there was a lot of pressure from the civilian leadership, too.Â

Robert Abrams

There was. But again, Iâ€™m a believer ofâ€”if weâ€™re going toâ€”when weâ€™re deciding whatâ€™s really going on on the ground, we probably ought to trust the commander on the ground. And if you donâ€™t trust the commander on the ground, then replace him. Put somebody in there who you can trust, whoâ€™s going to give you an honest, candid assessment.

Interviewer

But wasn't part of the tension at that moment that the fellows on the ground were communicating something to the Defense Department. The Defense Department really didn't want to do that.

Robert Abrams

I think that to be honest, I don't really have visibility one way or the other as to what was, at that point, in fall of 2003, what was being communicated and what the Defense Department assessed. I know what our mission was. And there was a clear desire to transition to stability operations for all the right reasons. So we changed our training I had to reorganize. Two tank companies became motorized infantry "caterpillars," we call them. One of our artillery batteries had to do the same thing. One of the infantry companies had to become motorized, two of the engineer companies. It was quick transformation, but, again great leaders with the right mental the right framework to operate from quickly made the transition, recognized it. Looked for ways to maximize and so forth.

Robert Abrams

We spent a lot of time on language and culture, and to prepare ourselves, we did a lot of contact. I was fortunate; I was going to backfill a unit who the commander I'd known for a very long time who had a close personal relationship as the Second Armored Cavalry Regiment. Then-Colonel Brad May was the Regimental Commander. So and then we went and visited in January, and again, I'm a those that were there on the ground, they have the best understanding of the environment, not someone who's been there as a tourist for six or seven days. We certainly came away with our own impression. But that was the so when we arrived there in late March of 2004, this was that's what our plan was.

Interviewer

What was going on in Iraq in 2004 when you got there? How would you characterize the point?

Robert Abrams

Well, it all it's all about timing. And by mid-March when the brigade had arrived in Kuwait, before we had moved up to Iraq, it really had started to turn really bad. And there was three things that occurred that were really bad from my perspective. I was going to East Baghdad, Sadr City, 9 Nissan, everything east of the Tigris River, which, up to that point, had been the quietest, least enemy SIGACTS least amount of direct-fire contact, quietest AO in all of Iraq without question and certainly in Baghdad. We had a closure of the Housa newspaper, which was sponsored by and endorsed by the Muqtada al-Sadr and the Sadr movement, or the Sadr Current.

Interviewer

Closure what do you mean by closure?

Robert Abrams

Ambassador Bremer closed it and said, "Hey, you're inciting, you know, anti-coalition rhetoric, et cetera, et cetera. You guys got to change your ways or I'm shutting

you down,â€ so he shut them down. So that was number one. In response to that, the Sadrists formed a protest and marched across the bridge to the Green Zoneâ€ about 20,000 peopleâ€ to protest, and that was fairly peaceful. But some rocks were thrown and some other things.

Robert Abrams

And unfortunately, some soldiers felt threatened, and we had a U.S. soldier kill two protestors. Â So that was the second significant event. And then, there wasnâ€™t a lot of public apology and so forth. Of course, there was, but it wasnâ€™t public, and it certainly wasnâ€™t strong enough, and they wanted the soldiers tried, and there was this whole investigation that was ongoing.

Robert Abrams

And then the third thing that happened was there were members of those that were loyal to Muqtada al-Sadrâ€ key advisorsâ€ who had already been put on the kill or capture list. I mean they were legitimate targets. And one of them was at a press conference addressing the shooting that had occurred in the Green Zone, outside the Green Zone. And some soldiers who were there in the First Armored Division saw him on TV, so they just went down to the location and arrested him. So those three things absolutely inflamed the Sadr movement, if you will.

Interviewer

Three mistakes, you think?Â

Robert Abrams

Well, I donâ€™tâ€Â

Interviewer

Because all of them were triggered byâ€ I mean the decision to close down the paperâ€

Robert Abrams

Yeah.

Interviewer

The lack ofâ€ poor handling of the apology, and then the seizing at the press conference.Â

Robert Abrams

I wouldnâ€™t say mistakes, because at that time, based on everything weâ€ I mean remember, hindsightâ€™s always 20/20 or better.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Robert Abrams

So Iâ€™m not saying mistakes.Â

Interviewer

But do you think it wouldâ€™ve blown anyway?

Robert Abrams

No. Well, I think it wouldâ€™ve happened much, much differently, and probably under conditions more conducive to us. And that was really for us, as we wereâ€”youâ€™re always most vulnerable in transitionsâ€”always. So now weâ€™re in the middle of a huge transition. First Armored Divisionâ€™s on the way out. First Cavalry Divisionâ€™s on its way in. And the confluence of those events, on top of these three separate events, really made us vulnerable. Andâ€”

Interviewer

But it does feel like they were mistakes. Iâ€™m not trying to get you to say that, butâ€”

Robert Abrams

No. Well, Iâ€™

Interviewer

It mustâ€™ve felt like, â€œIf we had only done it differently.â€

Robert Abrams

No. In hindsight, if we had done it differently.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Robert Abrams

But as we were leading up to it, weâ€™

Interviewer

You were saying it made sense in the moment.

Robert Abrams

We could seeâ€”absolutely made sense in the moment. Absolutely, it made sense. So I would never second-guess those decisions. And certainly the actionsâ€”those soldiers did not mean to kill those two protestors. Things happen like that. When youâ€™re 50 guys, and thereâ€™s 20,000 people at the gate, and youâ€™re worried for your safetyâ€”we certainly mourn the loss of life. We donâ€™t condone it. They werenâ€™t shooting wildly, spraying madly. They were trying to use good restraint.

Interviewer

But things happen in chaotic situations.

Robert Abrams

Things happen.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Robert Abrams

So Iâ€™d certainly never, never say that those were mistakes. Â But there was, as a new guy coming inâ€”and I had a Battalion Commanderâ€”this is fairly well written about in a book called The Long Road Home. Â It was written by Martha Raddatz; published in 2006. Â It sort of talks to all of this. Â

Robert Abrams

But I had a battalion Ccmmander who was on the ground for about three weeks earlier because the policyâ€”the boots-on-the-ground policy by Secretary Rumsfeldâ€”there was no wiggle room, and so and no one wanted to go back and say, â€œHey, we need to extend this squadron out of the Second Cav an extra month, â€™cause they got here a month earlier.â€ Â No one wanted to do that. Â And there was no justification, because Sadr City was so quiet.

Interviewer

It was peaceful, quiet, yeah.

Robert Abrams

They had one fatality in the previous nine monthsâ€”one. Â So we assumed some risk, andâ€”but I had a Battalion Commander there with about 40 of his leaders, and he had been riding around and dealing and learning and so forth. Â And I was in daily dialogueâ€”well I was down in Kuwaitâ€”on email. Â And he said, â€œHey, sir, Iâ€™m just telling youâ€”somethingâ€™s not right. Â Things are brewing here, and Iâ€™m not sure everybody sees it.â€ Â

Robert Abrams

And so again, as a new guy, your tendency is to say, â€œOh, the sky is falling. Â You guys donâ€™t understand; this is really bad.â€ Â I donâ€™t ever subscribe to that, because those that are there, I mean they know. Â They have forgotten already a lot about the AO that weâ€™ll ever learn. Â I mean they had experienced it, and you have to trust, and I did trust, their own commanderâ€™s assessment, and their instincts. Â Well, I think what we underestimated as a force was what was going to be the breaking point for the militia, and then what were their actions going to be. Â

Robert Abrams

Because up to that point, they had been fairly controlled, so there was a large show-of-force parade by the Sadr militia on the 2nd of April, and they had blocked off the city so we couldnâ€™t observe it. Â And we didnâ€™t want to enflame things, so. Â And then the 4th of April we had a platoon that had spent the day in the city escorting sewage vacuum trucks to take the raw sewage off the streets, and they had dropped them off at the governmental center and were on their way back. Â There were some reports of people with weapons, so they stopped off and, yep, saw those guys with the weapons and said, â€œOkay, weâ€™ll break contact. Â Weâ€™re going to go back to our base now.â€ Â

Robert Abrams

And they did, and as they were on their way out, they were attacked by probably 3 or 400 guys, and we spent the rest of the night—both—two vehicles were immobilized, and they became under serious attack. It took us about four hours to establish link-up and extract them. By the end of the night—oh, and the militia had taken over all the police stations, all eight police stations in Sadr City, and basically ransacked the place. It took us all night. It took us four hours to regain contact with the platoon and get them out, and took us till about 3:00 in the morning to reestablish control. We had to attack on multiple axes to seize back the police stations. But when the sun came up we had eight soldiers killed, 63 very seriously wounded, but we had the city back under control. And that started about 80 straight days of nonstop fighting in Sadr City.

Interviewer

Wow. That's tough.

Robert Abrams

It was tough. There were some days that sort of shook your faith, but I will tell you that it's because it's tough when you're losing soldiers. Now, we never experienced another day that bad, and when you read the book—and I've reread it again recently—there'll be some that said then, and they'll say now, "Gosh, why did you send people into that city, into that firefight, in unarmored vehicles?"

Robert Abrams

Well, we didn't have all our—we had just arrived. I wasn't even the battle space owner. I was still—I was subordinate to Brad May, my good friend, and that night—and everyone was doing everything they possibly could, but the Bradleys had just arrived—hadn't been fully—I mean within 24 hours, and we had no premonition that we were going to be fighting that way, and they weren't even supposed to take over the AO for another three or four days.

Muqtada Al-Sadr's Tenacious Sway

Interviewer

So clearly something went wrong to set up the situation, and—

Robert Abrams

Oh, sure.

Interviewer

I'm not saying they were mistakes. I mean clearly they had not read the Mahdi Army well in their sense of intelligence.

Robert Abrams

Well, I don't think it's a matter of not reading it. I think there was an underestimation as to what Muqtada al-Sadr could mobilize, cause up to that point, he had not mobilized anything. He—

Interviewer

But you didn't think he had the potential to do what he did? Do you think even he was surprised about the following that he was able—

Robert Abrams

I don't think he was surprised. I think that is what surprised us. Everyone who was there that

Interviewer

Misread his capabilities, then, in a sense.

Robert Abrams

Yes.

Interviewer

And who's not pointing fingers, who's to blame for that? What should've happened that we didn't do?

Robert Abrams

We should've killed or captured him much earlier. He was a threat. He was a clear threat. We chose not to.

Interviewer

We chose not to believe

Robert Abrams

I shouldn't say kill or capture detain him, which certainly would've been capable.

Interviewer

Did you meet him?

Robert Abrams

No. I met a lot of people who were very close to him.

Interviewer

What's your sense of him? What was it that made him he was a leader in his own way?

Robert Abrams

It's got nothing to do with him it's got everything to do with his father.

Interviewer

Explain.

Robert Abrams

Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr was martyred along with one of Muqtada's brothers in 1999 at the Muhsin Mosque on Chwader Street, and right just north of the Jamilla Market. And

Muqtadaâ€”or Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr had been a champion forâ€”he was the originator of the Sadr Current. Â Really focused on taking care of the poor, disenfranchised Shia, most of whom had been dislocated post-Desert Storm from the south, from their homes down in Amara and al-Kut, and other places down south, and had been displaced up into Sadr City. But he was the champion of the poor.

Robert Abrams

And he had his own views of Sharia law and the enforcement thereofâ€”he believedâ€”he was constantly a thorn in the side of Saddam Hussein, who ultimately killed himâ€”had his police kill him in 1999 because he was constantly causing trouble in Baghdad and other places. So they killed himâ€”they martyred him. And so the memory of him, and the Sadr Currentâ€”there were several people in the Sadr movement who to this day still believe in the principles behind the Sadr Current, which is hey, we got to take care of all these poor people. Â We got to get them medical care. We got to educate them. We got to give them an opportunity. We got to take care of their basic human essential needs. There are others that want to exploit it for other reasonsâ€”for their own personal power. Soâ€”Â

Interviewer

Isnâ€™t it ironic, I mean, that here we have a chain of events where his martyrdom at the hands of Saddam Hussein, whom we remove, yet we get a new wave of violence against us, even though we were the agent of Saddamâ€™s removal.Â

Robert Abrams

He wasâ€”Muqtada al-Sadr was pretty plainspoken in the summer of 2003 and said, â€œWeâ€™re thankful, weâ€™re grateful. Please leave.â€ Because he had an opportunity to assert himself as a political figure and as a leader and as a power broker in Iraq, which is what he wanted. Which is really what his advisors wanted, and he wanted on behalf of his fatherâ€™s movement. And from the beginning, Iâ€™ll give him credit for consistency. Â He was consistent. When he returned fromâ€”you know, Muqtada was out of the country, so when he returned from Iran, he was pretty consistent in his message. â€œThank you very much. Please leave, and weâ€™ll take it from here,â€ was sort of his attitude. And thatâ€”we underestimated how much power and how much influence he had to be able to mobilize the people against us.Â

Interviewer

Well, then hereâ€™s a piece of irony, because we just talked a few minutes ago about your father and the doctrine of putting the indigenous soldiers forward. Our intention from the beginning was to move to stability operations and extract ourselves from Iraq. And here heâ€™s saying, â€œLeave,â€ and weâ€™re saying, â€œWeâ€™re in the process of leaving,â€ right? And yet a new wave of violence, created basically under his guidance, leads to our having to stay.Â

Robert Abrams

Correct. That actâ€”between that and the killing of the Blackwaterâ€”security guys and, theirâ€”

Interviewer

Their hanging.

Robert Abrams

Their hanging there in Fallujah â€”those two eventsâ€”

Interviewer

Yeah.Â

Robert Abrams

If there was any space that we were on a path forâ€”to transition in short order out of Iraq, it was allâ€”it was all gone at that point. And again, we fought for 80 straight days, and it wasnâ€™t like that everywhere in Iraq, but over on the east side of the Tigris River, it was every single night.

Manipulating â€œHuman Intelligenceâ€: A Delicate Alchemy

Interviewer

Why was he so tough to defeat? He seemed like such a minor force, really.

Robert Abrams

Well, first off, we are operating amongst the people. Now, in Baghdad, unlike in other placesâ€”I mean Baghdadâ€™s a city the size of Austin, Texas, size-wise, with eight million people.Â

Interviewer

So the geography and the real estate the size of Austin, Texas, with eight million people.

Robert Abrams

Thatâ€™s right, so itâ€™s a incredibly challenging environment.Â Â And we wereâ€”we didnâ€™tâ€”we took an approach.Â Â Our tactic was not toâ€”was to not have to evacuate the city to clear it out of all of those who were undesirable, and then allow all the people back in.Â Â It wouldâ€™ve been aâ€”it wouldâ€™ve been a humanitarian disaster if we had attempted to do something like thatâ€”a siege of a city that size.Â

Robert Abrams

So our tactic was along multiple lines.Â Â Clearly, in some parts of the city we couldâ€”where things were pretty peaceful, we could start to restore essential services, start to help them form their nascent sort of self-governmental structure in some sort of democratic form, with advisory councils and so forth.Â Â And in other places where you had those that just absolutely did not want to get on board with either of those, we had to fight. Â But our tactic wasâ€”so we chose to fight them in and amongst the people.Â Â

Robert Abrams

Why did it take soâ€”first off, weâ€™re talking numbers.Â Â You havenâ€™t asked me about numbers, but thatâ€™s well-documented, how many people you need to operate andâ€”

Interviewer

Well, speak to it, becauseâ€”

Robert Abrams

Well, to be successful in a counterinsurgency, we didnâ€™t want to immediately grab hold ofâ€”we were in the middle of an insurgency, but in fact, for stability operations, General Shinsekiâ€™s on record with all of his experience in the Balkans and other places and from history, that you need a fair amount of forces to be able to secure the populace, separate the populace from those that donâ€™t want to join the program and insurgents, if you will.Â Â And you either have to get them to change their minds, or youâ€™re going to have to detain them or kill them.Â Â So and weâ€™

Interviewer

And that takes a lot of boots on the ground to do that.

Robert Abrams

It takes a lot of boots on the ground.Â Â And we didnâ€™t have a lot of boots on the ground in comparison.Â Â So, and there was plenty of work going on in the rest of Baghdad and throughout Iraq, so in my particular AO, we had about 4,000 soldiers in the First Brigade combat team.Â Â And everybody had their challenges, and spread pretty thin, and there was a lot of them and relatively few of us.Â Â

Robert Abrams

It just takes time.Â Â We knew, thoughâ€”I can tell you the commanders knew that we did not want to get into a battle of attrition, â€™cause theyâ€™re going to win.Â Â Butâ€™

Interviewer

And thatâ€™s a basic rule of thumb, isnâ€™t it, of all warfare, that if theyâ€™re fighting for their homeland, and youâ€™re an invading forceâ€™

Robert Abrams

Sure, but Iâ€™m in their neighborhood.

Interviewer

Yeah.Â Â Yeah.

Robert Abrams

Andâ€”but what wins the day, which takes time, instead of it being eighty days, why couldnâ€™t we get it done in two weeks?Â Â Well, the other thing is so if youâ€™re going to operate in amongst the people and youâ€™re going to fight in their neighborhoods, youâ€™ve got to do so, though, with precision.Â Â You have to do so withâ€”and treat those noncombatants with dignity and respect.Â Â You have to respect them.Â Â

Robert Abrams

We didnâ€™tâ€™to fly a helicopterâ€™to use a helicopter in direct fire mode on Sadr City took my approval.Â Â We didnâ€™t shoot artillery.Â Â We didnâ€™t use all our combat enablers.Â Â I allowed the Battalion Commander to decide whether he was going to use main gun off his primary fighting systems.Â Â But this was largely a dismounted operation withâ€”at the platoon level enablers.Â Â We used a lot of ISR capability.Â Â We had shadow UAV, we had Predator, we had not enough full-motion video, but we had, we had a lot.Â Â

Robert Abrams

We utilized helicopters for observation, maintain contact, and so forth.Â Â So itâ€™s just going to take time.Â Â And we had to go findâ€”we had to go find weapon sites, caches, storage points, leadersâ€”

Interviewer

Well, you needed intelligence, then, right?

Robert Abrams

So weâ€™ve got a lot, working a lot of human intelligence takes time.Â Â A lot of these networks hadnâ€™t been fully established, so that takes time as well.Â Â Soâ€”but when youâ€™re in there every night, killing 20 or 30 bad guys, theyâ€™re not going to come out in the day because all the people are out during the day.Â Â Theyâ€™re going to come out at night.Â Â In many cases, theyâ€™re trying to establish their own local security; enforce Sharia Law, kill policemen, attack police stations, and so forth, so thatâ€™s what really sort of caused it.

Robert Abrams

But it does take time.Â Â We knewâ€”we knew we were getting successful when a couple of things happened.Â Â First off, and the bad guys were always making mistakes.Â Â The militia, for all their talk, they were incredibly ill-disciplined, and they actually killed more civilians than we ever did.Â Â They had a horrific mortar attack where they dropped about 10 mortar rounds right in the middle of a market.Â Â I mean they were a thousand meters short of our positions.Â Â And I donâ€™t know, they killed 30 people and wounded another 50â€”it wasâ€”bad.Â Â Andâ€”

Interviewer

And did they look upon this with resentment towardsâ€”

Interviewer

People in the market know whoâ€™s responsible for that.

Robert Abrams

Without question.Â Â Well, first of all, we told them, but they all knew.Â Â They all knew as well, because they knew who was firing it, and they could hear the firing.

Robert Abrams

Towards them.

Interviewer

They did.

Robert Abrams

Absolutely.Â Â The second one is when the fighting-age men started, the young onesâ€”Iâ€™m talking 17 to 25.Â Â When they started to dry up, they couldnâ€™t get them out in the street to carry a weapon, then we knew when we started seeing really old guys

and kids. A A When we started seeing 12 and 13-year-old kids carrying weapons to do things, we knew that they were on the ropes.

Interviewer

Same thing happened in Germany, right, in World War II—basically it's another rule of thumb. A

Robert Abrams

So there's a lot of parallel.

The Iraq War in Hindsight's Clarity

Interviewer

If you were to do it over again, what would you have done differently?

Robert Abrams

Oh, for Iraq?

Interviewer

If anything. A

Robert Abrams

I would've

Interviewer

What did you learn, in other words, that if A

Robert Abrams

You'll

Interviewer

That you'd like to impart to a cadet, for instance, who might be in that situation 15 years from now, and such?

Robert Abrams

You need to be—we talk about it. A And I'm—this is hard for me to admit, 'cause I had talked about it from the—it's always been a part of my own personal leadership style. A You have to be ready to fight from day one. A Not always looking for a fight—don't go pick a fight—but you must be ready to fight from the moment you get there.

Interviewer

And you're saying this is hard for you to say because you thought you were not ready for it?

Robert Abrams

Oh, no, we were ready, but we weren't ready for this.

Interviewer

You weren't ready for the right thing.

Robert Abrams

We weren't ready for that.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Robert Abrams

And it's hard to predict. You're going to a stability operation. Now, you're organized that way. You had trained that way. We certainly had. I mean, clearly, by our record that night, even though we suffered a lot of casualties, the truth is it could've been a lot worse. It could've been incredibly worse. It wasn't, because we had done proper medical training at the individual soldier level—combat lifesavers. We had great medics, physician assistants, and medical doctors, at a consolidated aid station. They all went to—because we were in transition, we actually had three aid stations on one camp, so a lot of docs. The weather was good. We flew dust-offs—I don't remember how many we flew—lots. You know, to get out 63 very seriously injured, lots.

Robert Abrams

And our soldiers were incredibly lethal that night—heroic actions. The Battalion Commander at the memorial ceremony said that, "Uncommon valor was common that night." Absolutely unbelievable things that were done. So it could've been a lot worse, so they were ready to fight. What will always haunt us who were responsible is we should've never been in thin-skinned vehicles.

Robert Abrams

And we knew that. I had made a strong case to get more, and they were coming, but when the enemy—the enemy always has a vote. That's for a young cadet, you can have the greatest plan in the world—the enemy has a vote, and so there's risk that you assume. We assumed risk by having soldiers in unarmored vehicles. And if I had to do it over again, that night we got—the events that occurred that night, I'll never second-guess the decisions that were made to send more people in in thin vehicles to get those guys who were cut off.

Robert Abrams

Do I wish they had done it differently, to not have so many people wounded? Yes. But I also know that had they not made that attempt that took pressure off the platoon, because there was people who were moving to fight them instead of trying to get after the platoon, because they were really trying to take this platoon. They were trying to capture the platoon, and they were holed up in a good spot. So really, the message is hey, when you get there, you need to be ready, and you need to be ready for all contingencies.

Interviewer

One of the lessons must be if youâ€™re a soldier, be prepared to be surprised.Â

Robert Abrams

Always. Things are not always going to go your way the way you envision it. You have to be flexible. You have to be ready for the unexpected, and have that sort of a mindset. You canâ€™t let it break down. But the other thing Iâ€™d say isâ€”and this is probably one of the proudest things I have of that whole experience. When the sun came up, everything was back under our control. No oneâ€”we had 100 percent accountability of everybody. We had retaken all the police stations. Â We had evacuated all our wounded. Everything was accounted for. There couldâ€™ve been a lot of wringing of hands and lack of fight in a unit.

Interviewer

So that all goes to the professionalism.Â

Robert Abrams

Professionalismâ€”trust in their leaders, commitment to their mission, commitment to their buddiesâ€™ memory. And they did so for the next 80 days with precision. There was noâ€”I can look anybody in the camera today or look anybody in the eye today and say, â€œWe didnâ€™t have killing sprees,â€ even though there was soldiers who were plenty angry. We didnâ€™t have any, in this particular outfit, we didnâ€™t have any murdering of civilians. We didnâ€™t have any mistreatment of detainees. The one allegation of detainee abuse that we did have was investigated, and I court-martialed the Sergeant who was responsible. Â But that was an isolated incident. But that goes to the training, professionalism, commitment of our force.Â

Interviewer

So the temptation for revenge was resisted.Â

Robert Abrams

It was. And it was clearly there. Theyâ€™re humans. So thatâ€™s what I always impart on young leaders. This is about you got to be a leader of character, â€™cause that doesnâ€™t happen without leaders at every level who walk the walk in terms of our Army valuesâ€”being leaders of character. Itâ€™s not a clichÃ©. It really works. But it happens in actions, not in words. You have to live it. Itâ€™s got to be that platoon leader whoâ€™s out there on point who says, â€œNo, weâ€™re not going to do that. No, weâ€™re going to use restraint.â€ Thatâ€™s the difference.

Interviewer

Character comes out in context, is what you mean.Â

Robert Abrams

It absolutely does. You have to be an expert in your craft; you got to know your job. And then soldiers, you got to take care of soldiers. You got to be tough. You got to discipline them. You got to give them a great environment. You got to ensure theyâ€™re fit, that theyâ€™re competent. You have to endure the hardships along with them.

Robert Abrams

There's the old saying that people want to be taken care of before they want to hear about all that you know, they just want to know that you care. Soldiers today in a professional army will do anything we ask them to do. They just want to know that their leaders are going to take care of them first. Then they'll do anything. And I've watched it. I watched it that night. I watched it the next 80 days. I watched it for the whole year. I've been watching it for the last 10 years. That's the difference between really high-performing units and those that aren't at that level of trust. And that's really fundamentally at the base of this.

Interviewer

Well, thank you very much. I appreciate your time.

Robert Abrams

Thanks very much. I hope some of that was useful.

Interviewer

Absolutely. Thank you.