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How Chief Warrant Officer 2 Nick Lavery Tapped into the Power of Resiliency and Mental Toughness



Introduction

“I was going to come in. Do my five years. Get to the front of the fight. Kick some ass. Then get out and figure out what to do with the rest of my life.” It has been 16 years since Chief Warrant Officer 2 Nick Lavery has joined the Special Forces, a decision that he did not expect would become a lifestyle. Throughout those 16 years, Nick has been sent on numerous deployments and has been wounded at least three times while in combat. Of those three, the third resulted in the amputation of his right leg above the knee. He explained that it was his mental toughness that led him to be the “first Special Forces operator to return to combat as an above-the-knee-amputee.” His journey of resilience is what has allowed him to continue to serve, to this day, in combat and inspire those around him. Before he joined the Special Forces, his story began with his childhood.

Childhood

It is important to know that Nick moved around Massachusetts throughout his childhood.

Moving to a new location each school year is tough on anyone. At a young age, Nick had to learn how to become resilient despite the constant shuffle. This is where his conditioning to mental toughness began. “The term bullying wasn’t nearly as big as a deal as it is now. Back then it was ‘kids being kids.’” It wasn’t until Nick attended Boston College High School that he was finally able to settle in a school environment. During his sophomore year, Nick ambitiously decided he was going to join the Marines. The marketing strategy and commercials spoke to the parts of Nick that were hungry for strength and the desire to be respected. Yet, this was also during the time that he was recruited to play college football.

College

Ultimately, Nick attended the University of Massachusetts-Lowell. It was during his sophomore year when Nick witnessed the horrific events of September 11, 2001, in his college dorm room that was the formative event. As the planes drove into the twin towers, anger started to fester in Nick as he “watch[ed] fellow Americans, in real time, make the choice between burning alive in a building or jumping out of it.” This tragic moment in American history reinvigorated his desire to serve and was the catalyst that propelled him to join the service after graduation.

Early Enlistment

Despite having a college degree, Nick decided to enlist in the U.S. Army. “I wanted to get my hands dirty, be in the mud, and get in the game... I knew I wanted to be in Special Ops – I wanted to be at the tip of the spear.” This led Nick to join the 18-x-ray program: Special Forces

recruit, contract option. “This gave guys an option to bypass service in conventional Army and have a shot in going straight to Special Forces.”

For those wanting to go into the Special Forces, Basic Training and Advanced Individual Training (AIT) are completed in one iteration called OSIT – One Station Unit Training, often taking roughly 18 weeks to complete. Nick had a challenging time in Basic Training. It wasn’t because of the physical challenge or having to follow orders. Instead, it was the age gap. “I was a 24-year-old man, with a lot of life experience, graduated college, and I was surrounded predominately by, you know, 17-, 18-, 19-year-old kids that were really just leaving their homes for the very first time. And literally on day one my Senior Drill Sergeant was like, ‘you’re in charge of this whole group and that’s that.’” Therefore, his challenges came from how senior he was to everyone else and having to play that game for several months. Looking back, he thinks that he could have done a better job at using that as a leadership opportunity. But he did realize that it taught him how to lead by example with the basic skills of leadership the military instills.

Afghanistan 2012

What ultimately changed Nick’s mindset about the military was his first deployment to Afghanistan in 2011. It was there that he fell in love with the Special Forces industry and decided that being a Green Beret would be a career for him. After that deployment, he would continue to go on missions overseas with his team.

“This was my third time in Afghanistan... we all lobbied, and we all fought for this, this particular mission... It was the most dangerous.” It’s September 2012, and Nick and his team are

in an austere environment. A type of environment that is all Special Forces operators' dream. During this mission, Nick was wounded twice in action.

“First time I took some grenade shrapnel to the back of my shoulder. About six to seven weeks later, I took an AK-47 round to the face.” These two incidences prepared Nick to become conditioned to being wounded in combat, put back together, then getting back into the fight a few days later. It's this same mental conditioning that would end up saving his life.

“Well, on this particular day, as we were in our motor pool, at our compound... A Ford Ranger pickup truck drove in as well... which was a violation of our SOP that we had established... I noticed it right away, as did a lot of my guys. I ultimately made a decision to wait and address that SOP violation later on.” This was a decision that would affect Nick for the rest of his life. Shortly after the truck pulled in, once the mission brief was finished, a member of the Afghan national police force jumped onto the back of the truck and open-fired with a mounted PKM machine gun.

“From about 25 feet away. I saw what was happening. I processed what was happening. I know what my response is. I know what my training is. You really have two options in that kind of scenario: One is move to cover and eliminate the threat, and the other is assault through. I do neither of those things. And this is not something that I am proud of, but is true. What prevented me from doing what I am trained to do is one of our infantry soldiers that was set to go out on this mission with us...to mostly help us with base defense and security... one of those soldiers was basically frozen. Like a deer in headlights. As this guy is shooting at us. And seeing that,

really superseded me doing what I'm supposed to do. So, I move towards him. I get to him. I put my back towards the shooter, me and this soldier are basically chest to chest. And that was when I was hit for the first time in the top of my right leg. And the impact was so strong that it knocked me and him down onto the ground. And that is when I felt another four or five impacts to my lower legs. To my lower body.”

Nick then dragged himself and the soldier to cover, where he struggled to stay alive for the next two hours. “Most of the damage to me was to my right leg. They estimated I took maybe four, maybe five, rounds to my right leg. My femur had been shattered; my femoral artery was severed. I noticed this quickly and with an injury like that, you probably have eight or nine minutes to live...So I began treating myself, as we were trained to do.”

Adapting and Overcoming

It was in the very beginning of Nick's two-year rehabilitation process that he decided he was going to overcome this trial. Despite having over 35 surgeries at Walter-Reed that resulted in the loss of his right leg above the knee, Nick was going to persevere.



“It was right there, it was during that, you know I'm still in critical-ish condition. Because any of these bacteria that's in my body could actually kill me. But it was there that I had really made the decision on what it was that I was going to do. I was going back. I was going back to my team. I was going back into combat. I was going back into

my lifestyle. Again, a lifestyle I had grown to love. But also, one that has a deep connection of purpose and meaning with it to me.”

Nick ultimately moved from the question most people get stuck on, “What am I going to do?” and instead chose to focus on the “How am I going to do what I’m going to do?” It was this mindset that allowed him to direct all of his energy to getting back into the game. The desire to serve his country alongside his team superseded the physical limitations that were now impeded upon him.

“I have this philosophy that in order to achieve success, or certainly greatness, or to become elite at something, or to be the first to do something, you set your sights high. In order to do that, I believe you not only have to become comfortable in solitude but be able to



excel within solitude.” Nick explains that it’s the type of solitude that is found when in the darkness of the early morning and late-night grinds, when no one is around to know whether you’re putting in that work, that allows you to be driven by your own internal desire and need to achieve to remain strong in your decision despite those around you who may think differently.

A Message to the Audience



“You got one shot at this. You got one shot at this life.... The statistical reality is the likelihood of us being us now in this moment is as close to the definition of a miracle as it gets. Something that is essentially impossible to happen without divine intervention. There’re some really amazing statistical case studies to actually put a number to it, but its somewhere in the ballpark of 1 in 450 trillion is the likelihood of you being you...Realize this is a gift.

This is a gift and it’s not one to be wasted. Take that a step farther and accept that we have an obligation to make this gift one of happiness and one of success. And knowing that this ride is going to end, right? You’ve got one shot at it, why not just leave it all out on the field? Like really, what do you have to do lose?”

Despite the adversity Nick has faced, he continues to get to the front of the fight and inspire others to reach their full potential. While he continues to serve his country as a Green Beret, he also attends events around the U.S. as a motivational speaker. He currently has released his book *Objective Secure: The Battle-Tested Guide to Goal Achievement* and has led a Ted Talk on *Living by an Ethos*. I am appreciative to have had the opportunity to interview him: It is an honor to share his story.