

Voiceover: This program is supported by the Army's Office of the Chief of Public Affairs Midwest.

(Theme music)

Voiceover: The following is a production of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library. Bringing citizens and citizen soldiers together through the exploration of military history, topics, and current affairs, this is *Pritzker Military Presents*.

Clarke: Welcome to *Pritzker Military Presents* with Medal of Honor Recipient Captain Florent Groberg and Dr. John Allen Williams. I'm your host Ken Clarke, and this program is coming to you from the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago. It's presented in partnership with the US Army Office of Public Affairs Midwest. This program and more than four hundred others covering a full range of topics on military history and affairs is available on demand at PritzkerMilitary.org. On August 8, 2012 while serving as commander of Task Force Mountain Warrior, charged with escorting twenty-eight coalition and Afghan National Army personnel through the city of Asadabad, Captain Florent Groberg distinguished himself in combat by acting quickly and selflessly in identifying and subduing a suicide bomber who was preparing an assault. With the help of Silver Star Recipient Sergeant Andrew Mahoney, Groberg was able to drive the attacker away from the formation and down to the ground. While Groberg had him pinned, the attacker's explosive thus detonated. As a result of his actions a second bomber who was hiding nearby detonated his vest prematurely and ineffectively, sparing the majority of lives Groberg was charged with protecting. Captain Groberg sustained the loss of almost fifty percent of his left calf muscle and suffered other injuries as a result of the attack. Born in France and a naturalized US citizen in 2001, Captain Groberg attended the University of Maryland before entering the army in 2008 earning his commission as an infantry officer in December of that year. A graduate of the army Airborne and ranger schools, Groberg was initially assigned to the 4th infantry division as a platoon leader deploying to Afghanistan for the first time in 2009. Now medically retired from the army he resides near Washington D.C. where he is a civilian employee of the Department of Defense. He is joined by Loyola University Chicago professor John Allen Williams, a retired captain of the US navy reserve who currently sits on the museum and library's board of directors. Specializing in political science Dr. William's writings include works on military strategy, military culture, and strategic policy. Please join me in welcoming to the Pritzker Military Museum and Library Medal of Honor Recipient Captain Florent Groberg and Dr. John Allen Williams. Thank you, gentlemen. (Applause)

Williams: Captain Groberg for the benefit of civilians and non-army people here, I wonder if you can discuss with us, what was the tactical situation leading into the events that we'll talk more about? What were you doing there, and what sort of led up to the action?

Groberg: Ken just brought it up. We were running a security patrol in Asadabad, which is located in eastern Afghanistan in the Kunar province. The mission that day was for my boss Colonel Mingus and Command Sergeant Major Griffin to attend a security meeting with the provincial governor. So we flew in from Jalalabad in helicopters, and we dismounted, and our job was to simply escort the principles, which in this case were Colonel Mingus, Colonel Aldrath, three other battalion commanders, two command sergeant majors, two GS-15 state department individuals, and two majors in the army to this meeting. I had five other guys on my team: Sergeant Brink, Sergeant Mahoney, Specialist Balderrama, Pfc. Secor, and Pfc. Ochart. So I have a team, we're six. And what we're supposed to do is just, on foot, escort them about a click, thousand meters,

to the compound. And we'd done this a thousand times. This is our typical patrol. We understood the threat in the area. It was pretty low. But we understand that every time you leave the wire in Afghanistan is--you put yourself in danger. So that morning when we landed it just felt a little bit different, and I wanted to make sure that because it felt a little bit different for me that I was doing the right thing, so I changed everything. And thinking about it over the last couple months, specifically the last couple of months, I'm starting to realize that maybe the way it felt different is because I had so many high-ranking officials in that patrol. And so all we had to do was just escort these guys to the compound. Fortunately, as we were walking towards the compound we were targeted by two suicide bombers.

Williams: So it was not anything at the beginning that was specifically threatening, it was just realizing you had very high-ranking people, and they might be a more obvious target.

Groberg: It's--that is it. I wasn't thinking that way at that specific moment. I just remember getting off the bird, helicopter, and thinking, "I don't like it, and I want to change things." So the way we ran our security, it was, we had--we put the principles, and usually that was just the colonel and the command sergeant major, and we put them inside of a diamond. And I would have Ochart up front at the spear, Balderrama my medic to the right, myself to the rear, and then Mahoney to the left. And then behind me I'd have Sgt. Brink and Secor. With the command sergeant major walking rear, there's rear security. 'Cause usually I'd have command sergeant major in there. That day I wanted--I put Brink and Secor up front, in front of us, and I told--and I put afghan national army in front of us. I wanted Brink to control the pace of our walk. 'Cause we knew one thing is that Colonel Mingus would never go past the point man, 'cause he walks fast but if we control it we got this. And I wanted myself to be upfront of the diamond, so I switched with Ochart. I looked at Ochart. I said, "You're so big--you're 6'2", 6'3", 215 pounds. You got this. So in case anything happens, you go out there, you put the colonel down, and you take him to safety." I wanted better eyes on. I wanted to see the road clearly so from my vantage point I could just make decisions a little bit more quickly.

Williams: So when did it transition from a general feeling of unease and this might not be safe to something that really made you think this is a problem.

Groberg: As soon as we saw motorcycles. So we're about maybe six/seven hundred meters into the walk, and we're about to cross a bridge, and once you cross that bridge there's a set of stairs that lead you into the compound. So we're real close. The problem is once you get past that bridge, set of stairs on the right, the road continues and curves. And we saw two motorcycles coming at us full speed. And you're thinking, "What is going on right now?" Afghan national army did a really good job. The point man just took his rifle up, started shouting at him, and so then the guys just dismounted their motorcycles and started running. So at that point, once they do that you know this is not good. 'Cause if they would have been just two motorcycles driving fast they would have stopped, you know, and just turned around. Probably said something at us, but they would have turned around. In this case these guys got off the bike and started sprinting. So you know that's a threat. You're just trying to analyze a threat, assess a threat. At that point Sergeant Brink was up front turning around to look at me to see--kind of check if I'm tracking what's happening. When he's turning around, he gets fixated to my left, and that's when I turned to my left, and I saw a guy who wasn't there a couple seconds ago. He must have gone out of the building. And he was walking backwards and parallel to us. And I was looking at him, like, woh, okay. You put one and two together, this is just not good. But all this is happening so fast. Your talking about from the motorcycles from waking up from the blast, this is thirty seconds if that. From me getting my eyes

onto that guy to the blast is about eight seconds. So he immediately turned, did a 180 cut through, I left my position, Sergeant Mahoney followed me. I make contact with him, I yelled at him. I hit on with my rifle. As soon as I hit my rifle I just knew this guy was bad, and he had a vest. So I grabbed his vest, suicide vest, and all I just remember thinking is, "Gotta get him away from the boss." And I threw him--Mahoney was out there, sprinted and finishes him down. He just detonated at our feet. And he killed four people. Williams: Wow. It's sort of interesting how you have a sort of like a second sense or instinct about this that perhaps makes you more alert when you see something specific that turned out to be a threat.

Groberg: Complacency kills. Complacency kills. Attention to detail. These are typical things that you hear from, you know, from the first day in the army. We know that every time we step out of the wire, every time we leave a base and we're out there, we're potentially gonna be faced with danger, and that means we need to be on our game one hundred percent of the time. We need to pay attention to everything that's happening. Atmospherics are important. It's the same thing happening here. When things happen like that so fast, you just go back to your training and your instincts and your teamwork. And you know that you're gonna make the right decision 'cause you're prepared for it. That's what happened on August 8, 2012.

Williams: Now, there was another suicide bomber that was--that you mentioned that detonated his belt prematurely. I imagine he panicked or something. I don't know. Did you ever wonder what happened there?

Groberg: My understanding is that he was still in a building, and what happened--they were gonna do a two-point attack on us to make sure they killed all of us. And when the first one detonated he prematurely detonated, he caused the other one to detonate. So he was coming out, and because we got there and he detonated, caused the second one to detonate.

Williams: Well, these things don't happen completely automatically. What sort of training or preparation had the army given you that led you to this point? I mean, you had had, what, four years of commissioned service by this time about? Did you think that the training that you got was helpful in preparing you to do what you did that day?

Groberg: Absolutely. One hundred percent. I was lucky enough to be able to choose my team. So Sergeant Brink picked the guys, and we had a bigger crew before we left for Afghanistan. And from there on we made the decision of which guys we're gonna keep, you know, to make our team of six--specific six. Now you understand, we didn't--every time we went outside and we conducted patrols outside the wire we travelled to the other places, the other outposts, and once we got to these outposts we were imbedded with their own teams, their own platoons. So when we left the wire, ninety-five percent of the time we had a big security, and our six, all we had to focus on was just collapsing on our principles and getting them to safety if we get attacked, not conducting the actual fight. And once they're in safety, we cannot rejoin the fight. But during--prior to deploying, you train. You spend a lot of time with these guys, you do repetitive training. You know, you go from standard room-to-room to reactive contact to suicide bomb. We were trained with that. We had a training where we did a key leaders engagement meeting, and somehow the elder of all people in this training scenario was a suicide bomber. Likely? No. Possible? Yes. How do you react to it? We learned a lot. But we were prepared. We were prepared. We trained, and we were a team. And we talked about these things. Every time before we left on mission, we remembered each other-- we talked to each other about complacency, being on point, communication, radio--you see anything, communicate. And this is what we're gonna do in case we're faced with this type of scenario. And suicide bombing was a threat. It was a reality. A friend of mine, Mike Perrot, had just been hit by a suicide bomber three months prior to that, so I understood

it. But to be honest with you it's one of those attacks that you just never think you're ever gonna be involved with.

Williams: What strikes me that the training that you had was thought out not only to help you deal with particular things that happened but maybe even more importantly to put yourself and your people in a frame of mind to deal with uncertainty and be prepared for something that sort of came up that you didn't expect.

Groberg: But that's combat for you. You can plan every day for a certain scenario, and you have to be able to adapt on the fly 'cause combat is never really what you planned for. It's gonna throw you different types of loops and scenarios, and you have to be ready to adjust and adapt right on the fly. But you trust the guy of the gal to your right and to your left. So it's one of those things. I trust my training and my instincts and them. And with those three things combined, we can accomplish anything. So you're confident. You're confident in your ability to react accordingly to the situation.

Williams: What was the percentage of days that you spent there that were in excruciating boredom where nothing happened as opposed to where quite a lot more than you wanted to happen happened?

Groberg: Ninety-nine percent of the time. I didn't have a sexy job, believe it or not. I planned--I personally planned all the air movements and the coordination processes with the different units to let them know-- this is where we're gonna go. This is how--what we're gonna do. This is what I need. This is what the boss requests. And then when my guys, we'd go brief, and then we'd just go out there, escort them, and then just sit there in the sun while they conducted their meetings, or--so you just sit there for hours on end, and you're just waiting, and you're waiting, and you're waiting. And then once they're out you escort them back to the helicopters, take off to the helicopter, and you go back to base. And then you repeat it over and over again.

Williams: It sounds like Groundhog Day. How do you keep an edge?

Groberg: You understand what the mission is. You understand that--who you're serving. In our case it was so easy--well, it was still fun though. You gotta remember, I'm protecting someone. It's the responsibility behind it. It's kind of--wow, really, how did I get here? How did I get here to serve with such amazing guys on my team and for such an amazing person? And I honestly love General Mingus. He is a second father to me. He has been a mentor and the best mentor I have ever had the opportunity to spend time with and under. So protecting him was everything to me, everything to Mahoney and Brink and Ochart and Secor and Balderrama. It's like protecting your own father; you want to make sure everything is right. So it was boring waiting outside, but you know, we had conversation with each other, we joked, and it was like brothers.

Williams: Well I was gonna ask you to think--talk more specifically about General Mingus. I understand, and from what you just said, he was a very special mentor to you. And, you know I think often civilians often think of the military as being an impersonal bureaucracy, but it's anything but that. Especially I think in combat arms, very personal, and it's a very small army in many ways. You keep running into people. So how-- tell us a little bit more about this mentor/mentee relationship that happened. I think it's an important part of the story.

Groberg: Well he selected me for this position. I was greatly honored, so I wanted to make sure that I served him right. But like anything, especially when it's a brigade commander, it's intimidating at first. So I would make mistakes, little mistakes such as planning and things like that, and what his vision truly was when he was over there. And he was the type of leader who he would sit me down and look at me and say, "Flo, this is what I want to happen. This is the way I need it to happen." and we worked really well together because I'm the king at making one mistake, but I don't make it again, and I told him that right off the bat. And we built that personal relationship because I would say

just--I would try to joke with him. I didn't know him at the time. And I think he just thought I was crazy. So, but I think he loved it. But he also loved the way we interacted together as a team and the way we loved serving him and Command Sergeant Major Griffin. But let me tell you something about General Mingus. He was a colonel, and he sat, and I sat in rooms, where he is with generals--two star, one star generals--and the entire time he doesn't say a word 'cause he knows his place. And they're talking and they're bickering; they're doing whatever they're doing. And I just want--I'm looking at him thinking in my own head, "Ah, but he knows the answer to this. Why doesn't he say something? Come on." You know, I'm looking at him like, "Come on. Say something to stop this." And finally one of the generals goes, "Hey Jim, what is your opinion on this?" And in thirty seconds he just crushes it. And I'm over here, like, in my own head--'cause I'm just sitting there, in my own head I'm like, "Yeah. That's what I'm talking about." And then they just--they look at him, and they come back. They're like, "Yeah, I like that." He had generals that would come up and ask him for--you know, ask him for his own opinion because they understood that he got it. He was that leader. He was the type of man that--of very few words, but when he speaks, he makes an impact, and people want to follow. I never heard him curse, never heard him yell. That's out--that's not normal in an infantry setting at all.

(Laughter)

Groberg: And you knew you were in trouble if he flicked his glasses down. That meant that, "What'd you just say?" I got that every Thursday, so I was an expert--sergeant-manner expert with that. But no, he had that presence, and to this day he is the only person, the only leader in the army that I have spoken about to many people and not a single person yet has said a negative thing about him or even a complaint, and that's quite incredible.

Williams: It's remarkable.

Groberg: It's remarkable. And he makes--he has made a huge impact on my life. And he has adopted me into the Mingus family. I spent Christmas with his family. I went to his promotion to general. It's just been truly an honor and a pleasure and a privilege to have been given the opportunity to serve under such an incredible individual and to continue a friendship with him to this point.

Williams: It's important to point out the personal things, especially for the people who don't understand the military very well, and the idea that you could have such a close relationship with your boss is--would be news to a lot of people, I'm sure, and it's an important part of the service, I think. Now you said it was about thirty seconds from the time you saw the motorcycle until the time you were unconscious. What happened then, as people told you later? I mean obviously there had just been an attack. And so how did the tactical situation evolve, and then what happened after you were out of the picture there?

Groberg: Well, I was thrown fifteen, twenty feet from the blast, and I woke up a couple--I don't know exactly when. It could be seconds; it could be a minute. But it was still cloudy, still a dust of cloud in front of me, so it couldn't have been that long. But I woke up, and I just remember taking my helmet off, the straps all loose, threw it off. And I saw my leg, I saw my fibula sticking out, foot turned, bleeding, muscle melting. And I'm just thinking, "Oh, I must have stepped on an IED." this is probably an ambush, and it's gonna be followed up with small arms fire. So I looked for my rifle. I couldn't find it. Took my pistol out, made sure there was a round in the chamber because if any bad guys was gonna come at me at that point I wanted to be able to take him out. And I access myself for wounds. And I had my tourniquet in my lower left pocket of my pants, so that got blown off. I just remember thinking, "Okay, that's not good." But I wanted to see if I had any type of internal wounds here in my chest. And I had blood everywhere. So I was

good to go, and I started--I wanted to get myself out of the kill zone before patching myself up. And I started dragging myself out. That's when my platoon sergeant, Sergeant Brink, came out of nowhere and grabbed me by the handle of the plate carrier and dragged me into a ditch where my medic, Specialist Balderrama with a torn knee, is kneeling down and fixing me up. He's keeping me awake 'cause I lost so much blood, and he's reassuring me that I'm still gonna save my--I'm still gonna have my leg. I'm telling him, "Save my leg, doc. Save my leg." "I got it, sir. Here, hold this. Hold your leg up." You know, one-man team, so I was holding my leg as high as I could for him to patch it up. But I was in shock, which meant that I was not feeling the pain at that time. And I think that makes a big difference to be honest with you. And then after that the guys started coming around, and the dust cloud clears, and I ask for status reports, and it said Malwar 6 is fine. Malwar 6 was the call sign for the colonel. It said, "Malwar 7 didn't make it." I just, "What?" No way. Oh, they told me--you know, they accessed me. Like, hey, "Do you know what day it is? You know where you are?" "Yes. Yes. Come on let's go. Get me out of this hole." we get in this hole, this ditch. They start dragging me. I tell them, "No, pick me back up." you can hold me. I still got a good leg. I can skate around. and that's when I'm walking with these guys--they're really dragging me, and that's when I saw command--saw Major Griffin, Major Gray, Major Kennedy, and Ragaei Abdel Fattah all had been KIA on site. And that's when I--it hit me. At that point, like, this is reality. These guys are no longer here. And I just got really angry.

Williams: You said something. You think this was in Army Times when I showed this to you beforehand. You said this. You said, "We defeated the enemy that day. We said that no matter how bad you want to hurt us, we're always going to keep standing up and bringing it back twice-fold on you. But it was the worst day of my life, because even though we defeated the enemy I lost four of my brothers." I wonder if you could tell us something about these men whose names you just mentioned.

Groberg: I just had dinner with Command Sergeant Major Griffin's family. We went to the Bears game, and just--you know, you can judge a man through his family and the way they talk about him and the way they act and the way--how much they loved him. Command Sergeant Major Griffin was one of the individuals who took me under his wing and allowed me to develop as an officer. He mentored me as well. He would be--I would go into his office and spend a lot of time when the boss was too busy with the generals and things like that. And I asked him questions. "Help me with this, help me with that." And then we'd talk about his life, talk about his kids, talk about his wife and how he was an athlete, I was an athlete. He liked combatives; I liked combatives. He was a friend, and he was the brigade command sergeant major, you know? And he took time every day any time I needed to or any of my guys needed to, to spend time with them. He cared. 'Cause to him caring for soldiers was his duty, and he really loved that, and he really embraced that. And he was a Bears fan, just like I am, so you know--we were really, really close. Gray--six months he was--he was the air force major and part of their JTGS. And for six months we kept talking about, "Hey, you're gonna get on a helicopter with us." you know, come out. And for six months he says, "No. You know, I'm coming, I'm coming. Nope, gotta do this." Because he was taking care of his team. And all his teams around the area-- DAO, area of operation. And I just remember him, seeing him--I never told this before, but--in little shorts, short shorts in the gym just crushing it, and his soldiers up there, his airmen up there just looking at him and just kind of shaking their heads, 'cause he was so strong and such an athlete. But every time I went to talk to him, I had the outmost respect. He was loved by these guys. And that just tells you a lot about a leader. I didn't spend as much time with him military-wise, but I would talk about his guys. When we'd go out on patrol I had JTGS with me. I'd be like, "Hey, how's Gray?" "Aw, he's awesome. He fights for us. He does all these incredible things for us."

just so, you know, an amazing human being. And then when I got to meet his family, Heather and the kids, just--just, you can't help but smile and feel sad too, because just like Griffin, I miss him. Kennedy had just been in country for three weeks when that happened. I didn't know Kennedy personally that way, but I feel like Kennedy and I were like best friends 'cause I know so much about him. I got to meet so many people that he impacted positively in their lives. His family is just adorable. His twins are adorable. His brothers are amazing human beings. His wife is--you can't say enough good things about her, and it shows you what he means to everyone else and what type of individual he was. And Ragaei Abdel Fattah was probably just one of those guys that you say he's the smartest person in the room, yet he's so humble. You know, and I got to meet his kids, his two sons, and I told them, "Hey, your dad was an incredible individual." And I told the oldest one in 2012, he was sixteen, I said, "You have a responsibility to lead your family now just as your father did. And I trust that he did a heck of a job for you." And the kid looked at me in the eyes, he's like, "I'm ready for that task," and that kind of-- I was not ready for that answer, to be honest with you. And that just shows how he raised his family. Strong men. You know, I have him here, and the army boys, and obviously Gray, and they're just a reminder that we lost four unbelievable, powerful, influential individuals on that specific day. And I got another chance to live, Mahoney got another chance to live, a lot of the other guys got another chance to live. So I feel like I've been given a second opportunity in life to honor them and make them proud.

Williams: So after this was over, you obviously had some recuperation to do. And so they--did they medevac you to Germany and then back to Walter Reed, or what happened then?

Groberg: So I went from Asadabad to Jalalabad and then surgery in Asadabad, then Bagram--surgery in Bagram. Then Landstuhl, Germany. Surgery in Germany. Multiple surgeries in Germany, to Walter Reed hospital. So Andrews Air Force Base to Walter Reed hospital. And along the way they kept ask--they were accessing whether or not they were gonna cut my leg, and when we got to Walter Reed it was decided not to unless I requested it. And I was just--just kind of looked at them and said, "Well I don't really want to cut my leg. I kinda like it. It is skinny, but I'm gonna keep it."

(Laughter)

Williams: And so you had a lot of distinguished visitors, I'll bet, including a tall guy who was President of the United States. So the president came by while you were at Walter Reed?

Groberg: Yeah, September 11, 2012 he came by, and I just found out about it that morning when Secret Service is coming in and just are checking your room--like, "Who are you? What are you looking for?" "Oh, no big deal, we are just-- the president is coming visiting you, so we're securing the area." "Oh, okay. What?"

(Laughter)

Groberg: And wow, ten minutes of his time he spent with us and my family. He talked about--he just mentioned how proud he was of us, you know, serving and how proud he was of my family and everything that had happened, that he might see--he did say this actually on the phone--and I don't know if he really meant it, but he did say it on the phone when I got the phone call from him asking me--telling me he was gonna see me--he said, "I told you you might be looking at something special." I guess he said that, you know, what you did was really special. What you and your guys did was really special, and we might see each other again or something of that nature. But you don't--I was on dilaudid and oxycontin at that point. I'm just trying to comprehend the fact that the president of the United States is in front of me and my mom's hugging him. It's real weird.

(Laughter)

Groberg: And you don't even know what to say. You're just like (Sigh). They taught me to think before I speak. In this case I was just thinking a little bit too much. But it was pretty special.

Williams: And so then sometime after this you did--you were--said, "Hey, stand by for a phone call from the president." How--what--how does this happen?

Groberg: This was three years later. And you forget about any--you don't join the military for medals. So my goals were simple, to get through recovery and get back to work. Get--you know, make sure I gain acceptance from the gold star families. That was one of my big demons that I had to fight with for a long time. I wanted to make sure that they understood that we try to do whatever we could to make sure that every one comes home, and I just didn't want them to be mad or disappointed or just--hate me because I was not able to bring their husbands, fathers, sons home. So that's what I'm thinking about. Just gonna give you a little background and understanding of what my mindset. As you get better--as you recover better, then you start thinking about what--how do I continue to make a difference in my life? I can't be an infantry officer anymore, so what can I do to go out there and still serve? But you never think about medals. So when you get this random call talking about, "Hey, is this Florent Groberg?" "Yes." "Okay. This is Colonel Slaney. I'm calling you to let you know that the senior high-ranking officials will call you--a senior high-ranking government official will call you on September 21st between the hours of 1400 and 1430. Is this a good phone number? Will you be available?" "What? Okay, sure. What did I do?" You figure you did something wrong, you know? But so I told my boss. My boss just pretty much said, "Take the afternoon off, and go take care of this phone call." So my girlfriend Carson and I sat there and waited for this phone call, and when we got it some lady said, "This is so-and-so from the office--the White House. Do you mind holding for the president?"

Williams: You said you would be alright.

Groberg: I said, "Yes." Yes. You know, that weird, like, I don't know what to say so I'm just saying a word right now. So--and it was the president.

Williams: Wow. When you came home, quite aside from the Medal of Honor, what was the reaction of the people around, the people that knew you? Was it yeah, I knew you'd do something like this, or what were you thinking, or some combination of that?

Groberg: No, it was more, take your time to recover. I was not myself for months. You've got to understand, especially the first eight--six weeks, I was under some heavy medication, so you're not really yourself in regards to having--being able to just hold the type of conversation that you want to hold with people. So they were just happy I was alive. I think that was probably the collective feeling. But in regards to talking about the events, nobody really talked about it 'cause it's a pretty emotional event, and I didn't want to talk about it. So they treated me the way they would treat Flo. Which is me, as the way they knew him, either family or friends, and they were just happy that I was there. And that was it. Later on as things kind of settled down, guys are like, "How'd you do this? Well, how did you--what was going through your mind?" its simple. Training and instincts combined with the love for the boss and having the best team around. You know, and having a guy like Mahoney that sees me going through the gates of hell and says, "I don't know what this LT's doing. Heck, he probably needs a little bit of help." And he goes right with me. You know, it's just--it's simple. Easiest job in the world, serving people that you love and serving the United States of America. To me that made sense.

Williams: One of the things we academics talk about is something like unit cohesion.

Morris Janowitz, who invented military sociology, studied that in the Wehrmacht and how they were effective as long as the unit was together. I'm guessing from what you say that the unit you had was pretty tight with one another; it was combat effective. That isn't an accident. How did you help nurture that? What sort of--how do you access the

importance of that kind of combat--that kind of unit cohesion in terms of success of battle?

Groberg: Sergeant Brink putting me in an outstanding NCO. He understood how to help our guys, you know, do the--their job at the best of their abilities. So you take sergeant Brink's leadership, you take my leadership, and you take my NCOs and soldiers' leadership, you combine it all into one, and you spend every single day with them for months, and you just--and you work together as a unit, and you understand what the mission is, it's easy. We were a little special in that sense, that we asked all these guys to volunteer for this position fully knowing that our job is to make sure the boss and command sergeant major get home at all costs. If that means you're sacrificing yourself for them, that's part of the duty. You're signing on the dotted line. This is what you want to do. If you don't feel like you're capable to doing this, you're probably not the right person. And these guys without the blinking of an eye, "Yes, let's do this." So you've got that common thing here. This is--and that's the same thing everybody does when they raise their right hand on maps to join the military. They understand that they're joining an organization where teamwork and unit cohesion and brotherhood, sisterhood, means everything, and we had that.

Williams: Having been a recipient of the Medal of Honor must bring with it changes of course, problems perhaps, and opportunities. Young people in the military are being thanked for things they haven't done yet. I can only imagine what people's reaction is when they find out what you've done. And you even got a call from Stephen Colbert.

Groberg: I just--you're sure that America's appreciative. I'm just lucky to be surrounded by so many amazing individuals. And when you reflect back on your time that you served you realize that you served for everyone around you, and it's just a privilege and an honor to be given the opportunity to do such a thing. So I'm just thankful for their support, as is anybody else who serves, I should be thankful for their support.

Williams: Well, you surely had a lot of opportunities of things you could have done with your life besides join the army. How did you settle on that?

Groberg: Grew up with it, with this idea that I wanted to be an army person or FBI, sort of that realm of careers. But I always knew I was gonna join the military, just didn't know exactly. But 9/11 really settled that one down. It made a difference, as it did for millions of other people. Changed our world, and changed my world. It was just about a matter of not if but when I was gonna join. And my father who had a deep impact on me, my--the person I am today, simply told me, "I'll support you whatever you want to do, but you started something, and when we start something we finish it. And you started college, so I want you to finish college and then go serve." And he said something amazing, which is "This is America. Americans step up. So you're gonna have that guy or that girl, gal, to your right or your left that's gonna go out there and take care of the job, and it's your responsibility to finish your studies and then go out there and support them."

Williams: Well, now one of the complications as you were going into this business was that you had dual citizenship with the United States and France having been born in France. So was that a difficult thing to deal with, and what did you do?

Groberg: Not difficult. Patience still--I needed patience that I didn't have at that time, but you know, you had to--I had no choice. But they told me, "You need to go renounce your French citizenship." So I said, "Okay, no problem." So I went to the French embassy in Washington D.C., and I asked them to--"Where do I renounce my French citizenship?" And the guy looked at me like I was nuts. He said, "Second floor, you're gonna be with this person." Again, same thing. nuts. "Are you sure? Don't you want to join the French army?" I was like, "No."

(Laughter)

Groberg: "Thank you though." I've got to be very careful. I have a cousin in the French army. He's a stud, so he's gonna kick my butt. But, no, but I wanted to join the US Army. That's--my heart was set on that. That's where I wanted to make a difference. And then I just had to wait for the paperwork to be done, and since I was done I was able to join.

Williams: Well, we're shortly gonna go to questions and answers, and I'm wondering if there's something that I might have asked you and you hoped I would have. Is there some other point you'd like to make to have on the record before we do that?

Groberg: To me this medal does not represent anything that I have done or my team has done. It isn't--this is not an individual award. This is not possible. This is such a big honor. To me this medal represents true heroes, the true individuals that committed all, and in this case the four guys that did not come home that did not come home on August 8, 2012. Second, it represents their families, the gold star families. I get to come home and watch football, eat pizza, have a conversation with you. I get to spend Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter with people that I love and family. Four families don't have that anymore. They're no longer complete. And they have to live with those actions, those consequences, and that pain every day. But the fact that they embraced me, took me in their arms, and said, "We're so proud of you, and we're so happy that you're here. You're so important to us," just shows you the strength behind these type of families. True American families. And they're everything that I want to represent. I've been given a second opportunity in life, and I want to make sure that this opportunity and this platform, voice that the medal represents is well served, and that I represent them and the four individuals that didn't come home to the best of my abilities.

Williams: Well, this is a time when this country in particular I think needs some inspiration. And in addition to obviously the thanks for what you did, but thanks for helping us understand what this is all about and being sort of an inspiration to a country that really needs it right now.

Groberg: Thank you, sir.

Williams: Thank you.

(Applause)

1: First, Captain Groberg, thank you very much for your service. Medal of Honor recipients receive their medals at the White House. What did--how did you and your family feel about being in the White House, and what were, especially, your families' reactions?

Groberg: I was honored. Just--and overwhelmed, nervous, maybe a little intimidated. But I was just honored to be in the white house with all the guys that I served with. My past soldiers, my leaders that I served for, and then all the gold star families. And I wanted to not cry on national TV, and also I didn't want to fall out, knock my knees on national TV. But it was one of those moments that's surreal, and you can't truly appreciate it at that specific moment; you just go through the movements. But deep down you understand how important this is for so many people, to include my family and then the gold star families and the people that were there on that specific day, because you're representing all of them.

2: Thank you for being here. I'm just curious about your opinion on the future of Afghanistan.

Groberg: That's a good question. I left Afghanistan earlier than I wanted to. In 2012, obviously. I still had three months to go. And I'm optimistic. I'm optimistic that we have the right people out there serving in our military to make that difference. And I'm optimist that the army promoted General Mingus now. So Colonel Mingus, Brigadier General Mingus. And I know that he is one of the best leaders out there. So if the army is making the right decision in promoting the individuals such as him, we're going in the right direction.

3: Captain Groberg, Dan Cartivan, captain of Marine Corps. Cap Williams, good to see you. First read about your story August 2014, letsrun.com. I was actually deployed overseas. I fought as well. But one question I have--a lot of the notoriety, a lot of the press in today's society, it's dealt with special operations command. You know, JSOC, some of the high-speed, sexy type units. You were conventional-type soldier. Kyle Carpenter, Dakota Meyer, both conventional-type soldiers, Medal of Honor recipients of the Marine Corps. I see many shipmen here; I see cadets here. Can you maybe speak a little bit about the importance of being ready? You just never know, preparedness, and when you're asked to lead a mission, when you're asked to step up to the plate, how do you go about preparing? How do you go about doing this? Because, you know, like I said, conventional soldier yourself, we're not getting maybe as much of the press as say some of the high-speed type stuff, but you just have to be ready one hundred percent of the time to execute when asked.

Groberg: Absolutely. First of all, JSOC operators and these guys--SEALS, DELTA, Special Forces, Green Berets, PJs, and we got two marines up there--
(Laughter)

Groberg: Unbelievable. And they need all the press in the world, and they're probably the last one except maybe the SEALs to--
(Laughter)

Groberg: --to ever, ever care for that press. It makes them feel uncomfortable, just as uncomfortable as I've been in some settings to talk about that specific day of August 8, 2012. Look, it's just--it just shows you what type of individuals serving our country, conventional or in special operations--it's the same thing whether or not you're going through doors at night because you're a vampire in the JSOC world. It means that you work at night. We call them vampires. They never work during the day really. or you're just a regular infantry mortar man, anything of that sort. Heck, a cook. And you put yourself in a position where you're in combat, you need to be able to react according to the training that you have received. This is why we talked about complacency, readiness, planning, organization. Good leadership doesn't come from one specific person. It's a team atmosphere. Personally I always incorporated my NCOs into my planning. I'd get a mission from the boss, the same one as platoon leader from Captain Conlon, come back and say, "here's the task, purpose, expectations." I'd take that back, I'd come up with some sort of plan, I'd sit there with my--Sergeant First Class Daly and then Moffitt and Richardson and Wade. I'd be like, "Hey guys. This is the mission. This is my thinking process. What is your input? How do we make this happen? 'Cause you have a lot more experience than I do." So we worked together. We'd create a plan, and then I'd go brief it to the soldiers, and then I'd tell them how important it is. PCCs, PCIs, making sure your kits up to--always ready. Little things like that. McCraven said it best: if you can wake up every morning and make your bed--I don't do that every morning. I'll just be honest. I get in trouble 'cause--but if you wake up and make your bed every morning, just that simple act is gonna show you, give you that--it's gonna allow you to be better. Not better. I don't even want to use that word.

Williams: It gets your day off to a good start.

Groberg: Yeah.

Williams: You accomplished something.

Groberg: Organized. You know.

Williams: Yes.

Groberg: Organized. And that's what I wanted to be as a leader and as a soldier. Not even as a leader, just as a soldier. I wanted to make sure that I was always a sergeant-manner expert at the basics, so I knew how to shoot, how a radio worked. Believe it or not some people struggle with that sometimes. My basic, you know, medical lifesaving

skills. How to read a map and how to speak to a soldier and convey a message. If I could do that and then take little pieces of knowledge from everyone around me, eventually I could be an effective leader. I was still a young officer. I was just a captain. I was promoted on August 8, 2012, the day I was hit. And that was the day I officially became captain. So I was first lieutenant at that moment. But if you can be a sergeant-manner expert at the basics, be able to listen, and follow before you lead, you'll be in the right path.

4: Back before the Iraq war when everything French and France was being denigrated and the courage of the French was being impugned, how did you feel? Did you resent it? Give you any extra motivation.

Groberg: Before 9/11, is that what you said--the Iraq War?

4: Right.

Groberg: Hen they were talking--when US were making fun of the French. I just kind of took it to the next level. Well, I'll tell you a story. You're gonna like this one. I was kind of thinking, "Man, you people don't even know. No. Have you ever even been to France?" So I went back to France in 2004 to see some of my family, and guess what they did. The same thing. I went over there. They're like, "Oh, you Americans, blah blah blah. You know, can't even go out there." I'm here like, ah you French.' I'm like, I can't win.

(Laughter)

Groberg: I can't win. But we stand together right now, so that's what matters.

(Applause)

5: I will give you an opportunity to say anything else that you have on your heart or anything in particular to these young people that are here or will be watching this now or online of in the future. What should they know that they don't? What would you like to tell them? What should they take away from this?

Groberg: You're special. I truly believe that. You're special. Especially in this day and age. I'm always amazed by the individuals that volunteer to serve in the armed forces. When there are so many amazing opportunities that you could be doing out there. So it's just remember that. What I want you to remember though, and this is what really hits me home, is we get to wear this uniform, your uniform. Know a little bit about your history and what this means to a lot of people. And if you really need a reminder go to your local VFW and listen to their stories and the way they look at you and listen to you and want to hold your hand and want to tell you, "I remember when I had this uniform, what this meant to me. Let me tell you about this guy. Let me tell you about this gal. Let me tell you about when I was here and there." This is not yours. This is not mine. This is our country's and we have to ear with honor. You understand, remember why you're serving and you want to serve. You take a moment, take a step back, and reflect on how amazing that is, then you're gonna wake up with a smile on your face no matter how bad it is. And no matter how bad it is in combat, you're gonna be able to step up and be like, "Let's do this again and again and again and again." So, just be proud. And I'm proud of you guys, all of you. Anybody that's--all veterans, and I'm just honored I had the opportunity and the privilege to serve with the world's greatest organization and for the best country in the world. We are the United States. We have the responsibility in this world, believe it or not, to step up, and we do. And I'm just happy I had the opportunity to serve in our armed forces.

Clarke: Thank you to Medal of Honor Recipient Captain Florent Groberg and Dr. John Allen Williams for an excellent discussion and to the US Army Office of Public Affairs Midwest for helping make this program possible. To learn more about the Museum and Library, become a member, and explore all the Museum and Library has to offer, visit us in person or online at PritzkerMilitary.org. Thank you, and please join us next time on *Pritzker Military Presents*.

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