

## **Jason LaCrosse on leadership, values and the battle of Isa Chel, Afghanistan**

### **In a nutshell**

Jason LaCrosse was Chief Warrant Officer in the US Army, serving as a Medevac helicopter pilot. In more than 20 years, he participated in various missions abroad in Afghanistan, Kosovo, Africa, and Iraq, rescuing more than 150 people. He was the Air Mission Commander who rescued 11 German soldiers in the battle of Isa Chel in Afghanistan on April 2, 2010. In this battle, Bundeswehr soldiers fought against Taliban units and were entangled in a fierce battle over hours with many injuries. This combat became known as the heaviest combat of the Bundeswehr since the end of World War II. Acknowledging Jason's outstanding service in flying into the hot combat zone and rescuing the Germans, he was awarded the *Silver Star* from the US Army as well as the *Gold Cross* (Ehrenkreuz in Gold) from the Bundeswehr.

### **Background on Jason**

- Jason LaCrosse was born in and grew up in Maine, USA. He has been a talented Baseball player at high school where he held the position as pitcher and wanted to go to college on that „sports ticket“. Unfortunately, he incurred an injury of his arm half a year before school end and had to bury this dream.
- Given the unemployment rate at that time – early 90ies – he decided to join the military instead. Coming from a family with a father having served in the Vietnam war and a grandfather who had participated in World War II, he had a strong affinity to the Army and therefore signed the „dotted line“, i.e. the Army contract, at the age of 18 years.
- During high school he already worked on an ambulance crew from time to time. Consequently, he joined the Army as a Medic which did not surprise anyone.

### **How did your first years in the Army look like?**

- „When I joined, I received basic training, followed by advanced individual training to become a Medic. This lasted around 6 months in total. Then I got the order to go to my first base. As we say: my first duty station. This is how I got to Germany. I arrived in Kitzingen in Bavaria in May 1993.“
- „When I think back, these early years were important to me, not only because of my first duty station. I also met my German wife and married her.“
- „I stayed in Germany for two years before leaving for my next duty station, where I re-enlisted to become a Flight Medic in Texas. I went to the Flight Medical Aidmans course in Fort Rucker during this time allowing for more advanced treatment of patients. Also, I was promoted to Sergeant.“
- „In the following years, from 1998 to 2001, I went back to Wiesbaden. In 2001, I was accepted to Warrant Officer Candidate School to become a pilot. I received aviation training on the Blackhawk helicopter and was promoted to Warrant Officer. Upon this promotion, I was sent back to Germany, this time to Ansbach where I stayed for nearly a decade until 2011.“

### **Where have you been at duty?**

- „As a Medic, I was in Nigeria, Albania, Kosovo and Tunisia, too. As a Medevac pilot, I was deployed in Romania, Bulgaria, Iraq and Afghanistan.“
- „All in all, I have completed more than 2.000 flight hours in a Blackhawk helicopter.“

- „There is nothing like a typical length of a mission. Once the emergency call comes in, we fly any distance between 5 minutes or more than one hour. The limits in terms of distance was defined by refueling needs.“

#### **What were your tasks, first as a Medic and later as a Medevac pilot?**

- „In a typical mission, there are two helicopters flying out into combat zone. Each helicopter crew consists of two Medevac pilots, a helicopter mechanic and the Flight Medic. We are safeguarded by another helicopter with armed soldiers, our gun support. We call this helicopter ‚chase support‘.“
- As a Flight Medic, you are onboard a helicopter flying into a combat zone. Your task is to rescue injured soldiers and transport them back to the nearest hospital. You are looking after patients and supporting the pilots with clearing the aircraft, checking for other aircraft and some other tasks.“
- „As a Medevac pilot, you are in charge of medical evacuations. Your task is to fly and land safely and to direct the gun support. You are considered a non-combatant. Therefore, the helicopter does not have weapons for offensive purposes. However, for defensive purposes, everyone carries a rifle and a gun.“

#### **What are the ingredients for becoming a Medevac pilot in terms of personality?**

- „As a Medevac pilot, the situation is special because you are flying out into a hot combat zone but without having any weapons on board. That is not the typical setting where an infantry soldier is armed and going into a gunfight. From a personality point of view, you need to have a strong sense of duty to support your country and to help others. For me personally, I can say that this is deeply engrained into me.“

#### **How many patients can a Blackhawk typically carry?**

- „We differentiate between different categories of patients i.e. *urgent* patients and *ambulatory* patients. Depending on the accouterments of the helicopter, we could carry two urgent patients and 3-4 ambulant ones. Another configuration, we used a carousel, where we could take up to six patients onboard.“

#### **Who has the command onboard a helicopter?**

- „You have two pilots onboard a Blackhawk helicopter, one is the pilot *flying*, the other one the pilot *monitoring*. One of the two is appointed as *pilot in command*. He or she is having the last word. As pilot in command you must have passed a written and flight exam as well as having practical experience previously. Who is designated pilot in command on a given day is planned in a Flight Schedule day by day.“
- „Typically, there are two helicopters, a MEDEVAC, and our gun support. For this entire team the responsibility lies with an *Air Mission Commander*. This person is appointed based on the largest experience in flying missions.“

#### **How does leadership look like in the US Army?**

- „The Army teaches different leadership styles from taking and executing orders to mission command. The leadership courses I participated in stressed the fact that a good solution can only

be achieved as a team. Or differently put: you can only achieve your mission if you act as a team. Camaraderie is a key element of serving.“

### **How do you define good leadership?**

- „I think there are those people who I call „In-your-face-leaders“. These are people who want everything done their way without any discussion. Then there are those who let everyone else make the decision without taking the responsibility for it. This is what I call a boss. A good leader is in the middle – he gives direction to his team, motivates them for the mission, explains why it is relevant and integrates the team in problem solving.“
- „My personal leadership style was characterized by camaraderie, we were a family. I met my team in the morning where we discussed the tasks for the day, security issues, weather and so on. For the tasks at hand, we jointly discussed the best approach. Everyone had a say and was expected to share his or her ideas and point of views. This is important to keep everyone engaged. Of course, at some point, I took the final decision. But before we entered the helicopter, I always asked the others: ‚Speak up now if you don’t want to go out!‘ Noone ever did!“

### **What matters most in terms of values to you?**

- „For me, it is about camaraderie. There should be no ego involved. That is inadequate since you know that the line between life and death is very slim. Putting yourself at the danger zone to get your job done and to look after your crew – that is what matters most to me!“
- „I believe in modesty, humbleness and not talking about own merits.“
- „I live by the Army values. These are summarized in the acronym LDRSHIP. L=loyalty, D=duty, R=respect, S=service, H=Honor, I=integrity and P=personal courage.“

### **How does a typical day in camp look like?**

- „There are days where you are completing training flights and spending the day with clearance of data, with maintenance and with sports. On other days, you fly in and out of combat zones, sometimes for many hours in a row.“
- „Each day, there are crews on call. Once a call comes in, the first crew up flies out while the second crew on duty moves up to first rank and so forth. This is rotated each day.“

### **Do you remember your first mission as Medevac pilot?**

- „Yes. This was on September 23, 2003 in Afghanistan. That was my first flight into a combat zone.“

### **What did you feel when the call came in?**

- „When the call goes out that there are injured patients, there is no time to think. Your adrenaline is jumping high but you are eager to get the job done. Still, you need to have a special personality since the Medevac helicopters do not carry guns.“
- „Only 5 minutes after the call came in, we started the engine and took off. During the day, you don’t see the bullets flying. But you hear the shots from the ground. This sounds like pop-corn popping. At night, you see the flashes from RPGs and tracer rounds.“

### **Are you aware about the danger of your job each single moment?**

- „You are aware about the environment and that you are at war. But during the missions as such, while I was flying the helicopter, I was focussed on getting the job done. There is no time to think when the bullets are flying.“

### **Isa Chel, this village in Afghanistan. What happened there on 2nd April 2010?**

In the district Tschar Darah in Afghanistan, 10 km off camp Kunduz, there is a small village called Isa Chel. On Goodfriday 2010, 25 Bundeswehr soldiers being part of the cavalcade „Golf“ reached Isa Chel in two dingos and two tanks „Fuchs“. Their task was to clear the roads and culverts from explosive devices. Their opponent consisted of Taliban warriors who couched in the neighborhood. Then a fierce battle started between the Taliban and the German soliders which lasted for eight hours and became known as the fiercest combat since the end of the World War II.

- When some Germans got trapped in an ambush, it is the moment when Jason LaCrosse is entering the scene: he was located in camp Kunduz, together with the German command, and overheard the sounds of combat from Isa Chel. Then the call came in: ‚Cavalcade „Golf“ trapped in an ambush. There are injured soldiers‘. Jason asked the German Battle Captain why they haven’t been called to go yet? The answer was: ‚I do not know (possibly because the German helicopters were never sent into a battle and were not allowed to fly into a hot zone‘. That was the mentality. When he heard this, Jason immediately said: „But we do! Go and speak to your TOC (Operations command) and request official help by us.“
- When paper work was done, Jason received the call „ 9-Line Medevac“, the alarm sign to get started. 7 minutes later, Jason and his team, and the gun support helicopter, were in the air approaching the combat zone.
- Jason: „When we flew into the combat zone, we came directly under fire. As we approached where the red smoke had been popped we came under even more intense fire.“ Jason directed the pilot on the controls to do a go around. Since the radio frequencies of the Germans and the Blackhawk helicopters were not aligned, Jason at first could not communicate with the soldiers in trouble. Therefore, they landed adjacent to a hill where Jason spotted some German soldiers. His Medic ran up the hill and exchanged news with the Germans but came back to the aircraft with no update to the frequencies. Jason directed the heli to takeoff again so they were not sitting on the ground long and making this an opportunity for the Taliban to attack the helicopter. Once the helicopter took off they took fire from all directions, no matter what direction they flew in to get away they took fire. The town was littered with enemy combatants.
- After a few minutes of loitering, Jason directed his pilot to go back to the hill where they landed once before to see if the Germans had an update to the frequency. Jason’s Medic once again ran up the hill to talk to the German forces. While his comrad was in discussions with them, a Taliban approached the heli from the rear. The crew chief onboard fired a warning shot after warning him multiple times to stop, but the man kept approaching. Then an Afghan police officer took care of this individual who later turned out to have been a suicide bomber.
- The Medic ran back to the heli still with no frequencies to reach the German special forces. The helicopter took off taking fire from all directions again. Via radio, they received a different frequency, tuned the frequency up and heard where the injured soldiers were located. They were right in the middle of the combat zone, where the red smoke rose. As Jason’s crew flew back to that area, RPGs were flying by below the helicopter, fire everywhere. The German soldiers recalled seeing spark flying off of the helicopters hull from the ricocheting bullets. The JTAC on the ground

radioed and mentioned: ‚This LZ (landing zone) is hot‘. Jason’s answer: ‚That landing zone is not too hot for me!‘ They finally landed at the LZ and took the first injured German soldier on board and transported him back to camp Kunduz. As they were flying back to Kunduz a call came in for another injured soldier. So they went right back to that LZ and into combat, each time taking heavy fire.

- After landing at that same LZ Jason’s crew chief told him they were taking fire from a tree line on the right. As a consequence, Jason told his crew chief to fire back as he also called in air support from his chase bird. The gun support helicopter took care of that and suppressed the enemy successfully. Meanwhile, Jason and his team took the other injured German soldier on board and rescued him.
- While on the ground at Kunduz, another call came in about four urgent patients due to a dingo truck hitting an IED (improvised explosive device). Jason called for the second MEDEVAC helicopter and all three helicopters took off again back to the same area. The Germans on the ground radioed saying they were going to move the patients to another LZ. While loitering for the new position, Jason’s helicopter and his chase helicopter came under fire again. An RPG exploded under the nose of his chase bird. Jason radioed the F-16’s above for fire support, but the enemy who was firing from a moving car drove into a garage which diverted the aircraft due to not knowing if there were any civilians in the compound. While loitering and waiting on the new LZ, Jason and the other helicopters had to fly back to camp Kunduz to refuel and was positively surprised to see that Bundeswehr soldiers executed a „hot refuel process“, i.e. refueling the helicopter while the rotors were still moving – which typically is not foreseen in the German procedures. Still, on this day, sticking to rules did not make too much sense. After refueling, all three helicopters flew back to the new LZ and loaded up all of the injured and returned back to Kunduz. Later they were called back again for another IED explosion with four more injured.

In total, Jason and his crew saved the lives of 11 heavily injured German soldiers by rescuing them from this battle. Three soldiers passed away later but eight survived. He flew six times into the hot landing zone and took battle damage on his helicopters. His crew was involved in this rescue mission for over three hours.

### **Was there a moment during this rescue mission when you thought: ‚Let’s abort‘?**

„No, that never came up. It was my mission to fly into hot areas. It’s my job. I have done this before for my US comrades. For me, it felt natural to do the same for the Germans.“

### **Do you still think back of this day?**

„There is no single day that I am not thinking back. The three Germans who passed away are on my mind each day.“ At this point, Jason’s voice is lowering, he needs to swallow. It is obvious that he is still fighting back his emotions. „I cannot stop agonizing if there had been a chance to rescue also these three lives. If we had been quicker in decision making or things would have gone a different way.“ But he saved eight lives. „That is not the way I look at it!“

When asked about his evaluation of the German special forces on that day, he says: „I think the German soldiers fought very professionally and did the German people credit. Kudos to them!“

### **What happened afterwards?**

- „The Germans were quick to award us for this mission. General Stan McChrystal picked up the awards from the German Ministry of Defense and brought them back to Afghanistan where they were eventually awarded to the crews in Kunduz. I received the Silver Star from the US Army and the Gold Cross from Bundeswehr. The other crew members were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.“
- „I retired from the Army in 2014 as Chief Warrant Officer. I left because of the selected next duty stations offered by the Army. They were not attractive to me. Since then, I flew civilian Medevac helicopters, worked in Saudia Arabia as contractor (i.e. trained the Saudi National Guard on aviation safety and flying helicopters) and am a Safety Consultant today for a Mutual Insurance Company here in Maine.“

### **What were the effects of war on your personality?**

- „After my first combat and my first deployment, I was a different person. When I came home, I was angrier. Little sounds like my daughter slamming a door or certain smells caught my attention and I would get very upset.“
- „Before my second deployment to Afghanistan, my wife said to me: ‚I know you will come back but please leave your asshole personality behind‘. Only then I realized which person I had become. So when I finished my second deployment, I sought professional help from a psychologist.“
- „War changes everything. I saw things which I wish I never saw. The three German soldiers who passed away after that battle in Isa Chel, are on my mind every day. I am twisting my brain if we could have been quicker.“
- „You don’t know how you will react to war until you have been in combat. As soon as the bullets are flying around your head, some will run or get scared, while others become calm and retain control. I can always tell who has been in combat when meeting other soldiers at events. Those having been in combat are the quiet persons.“

### **And how would you describe a hero?**

- Jason: „I don’t know what that is. We in the Army are only doing our duty. We are serving.“

Ok, Jason, if you do not know who a hero is, I do. You are! A quiet, modest, humble person who was courageous and committed to getting his mission done successfully. Because you are who you are, you should get all the credits for what you did.

Thank you very much for taking the risk and flying into the hot combat zone. Thank you for supporting my fellow German countrymen in this battle and for rescuing 11 soldiers. Thank you very much, indeed for your service!

*Wiebke Köhler, April 2020*

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