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Simon Mayo: Hello, and welcome to another Daily Mayo. My guest today is a Royal Marine Chinook pilot who has written a book about his experiences, and it's called "Immediate Response." Major Mark Hammond was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his services in Afghanistan in 2006. I asked him if that was the main inspiration for this book.

Major Mark Hammond: Not specifically because of the DFC. And I've always said that the DFC was for the crew, not just for myself, because it's a crew effort. There was four of us on that crew for that particular day, on the sixth of September. The reason for the book, ostensibly, was to try and tell the story of what the Chinook crews are doing in Afghanistan. Not particularly to say I was a hero or my crew were heroes, because they're doing it on a daily basis out there. And there's been a plethora of books about Afghanistan, but none have really told the story of Chinooks.

Simon: Yes. OK. And it's worth saying, I think, at this point, because there'll be emails and people will want to ask you questions. You are a serving member of the armed forces.

Mark: I am.

Simon: The issue of helicopters is a political hot potato. So there are clearly limits to what you can say and what you can't say, would that be right?

Mark: Yeah, there are. And it's not for me to say, really. There's far more appropriate people to discuss the number of helicopters in theater. The staff office at PDHQ constantly review force levels, and it's not for me to comment. I fly them. I don't decide how many are in theater.

Simon: Clearly, it's very frustrating because, actually, you're the person. We don't want to hear from a politician, whoever they are. We actually want to hear from the people who fly them. But we understand that you're a serving member of the armed forces, therefore somewhat limited. So, if anyone gets anything out of this book, it will be precisely what you want, and that is to explain about the Chinooks, to explain exactly the role that they have, which, you argue in the book, is absolutely vital and crucial to the whole Afghanistan mission.

Mark: It is. I first went out there in the beginning of 2006, when we were sitting up Camp Bastion.

Simon: Prelim ops, as they're referred to in the book.

Mark: Preliminary ops, yeah. And going from Kandahar out on the one main road, which basically runs around Afghanistan, would take 12, 24 hours. We're out there in 45 minutes, out to Camp Bastion. But in those days, nobody was really shooting at us because we were running from Kandahar to Bastion. It was when we went back, later in 2006, that the hornets nest had been stirred up somewhat by three Para.

Simon: Just explain. There's a wonderful illustration at the back of the book, the detail of which I haven't seen since when I always bought Airfix kits. If you had the most complicated Airfix kit for a Chinook, you can imagine this illustration. It's a complete sort of cross-section. It's got every single little detail in there. Just explain the kind of beast that we're talking about and why it's so important.

Mark: I mean, one of the main things about the Chinook, which, again, I'm an anomaly within this because I'm a roamer in on exchange with the RAF. So they're operated within the Royal Air Force, maintained by Royal Air Force engineers. It's a beast. It's an amazing aircraft. And it's one of the few aircraft in the world that can actually lift its own body weight. So, rather than a normal helicopter, which has a tail rotor on it, this is called a tandem-head helicopter. So it's got two very large rotor heads on it, which means it can lift more weight longitudinally, along the length of the aircraft, which makes it ideal for dropping off stores, for dropping off a large quantity of troops per aircraft. And also, as described in the book, it's very good for having a medical team on the back, because there's more room, and you can put all the stores, the oxygen and the medical supplies required in the back of the helicopter.

Simon: So how does it compare, to fly, with all the other military helicopters that you've been involved with for so many years?

Mark: A helicopter's a helicopter. Houses get bigger, houses get smaller. Houses go left, houses go right. It's still the same principle, flying the aircraft. It's just you've got to remember that with a Chinook, it's 99 feet long. So you're very reliant on your crew members down the back of the aircraft, because the number-one crewman who's on the ramp is 90 feet away from you, and all you're doing is talking on an intercom with him. So it's a real team effort, a real crew effort, to make that helicopter fly.

Simon: Well, maybe the best way of explaining what it can do is just explain the Distinguished Flying Cross 2006. You said it was a team award. Just explain the circumstances and what led up to the medal. I know it's a story that you've told many times, and if people want more detail, there's extraordinary detail in the book. But just give us an outline of what happened.

Mark: Basically, 24/7, 365 days of the year, there is the Immediate Response Team at Camp Bastion, which is made up of the Chinook crew, force protection sit on the back, and the medical team, which is a full surgical medical team, and they're on a notice to move in order to go out into the area and pick up any casualties. 2006, three Para were fighting hard in the places such as Sangin, Musa Qala, Now Zad. And our job was to go and rescue casualties, when they occurred. We had a difficult time in the morning, when my friends were on RIT where a patrol had walked into a minefield at Kajaki.

I came up on watch with my crew at about 16:00, when there was casualties. And it's not normally just one casualty; it's two or three casualties. But the most seriously wounded was a T1, which means we want to get him back within the golden hour, which meant going into

Sangin at a time that proved to be a little dodgy. As we go in there, Apaches looking after us, routed into Sangin, got the casualty, but as we came out, we knew that the enemy was setting up to attack us.

Simon: How did you know that?

Mark: We have various ways of knowing that they're setting up, that I won't go into detail with. But there are guys that were on the gate, as it were, up on the...

Simon: So, being spotted by your colleagues.

Mark: Yeah, the paras on the ground will spot guys setting up heavy machine guns to the north, which is what happened on this occasion. So as we came out of Sangin--so we picked the casualties up. The medical team are starting their work on the very seriously injured guys. And as we came out, that's when everyone started shooting at us.

Simon: Before you took off, did you know, having had that information, that you were going to be attacked?

Mark: Well, whenever you go into Sangin, or any of the places out there, you're thinking about whether you're going to get attacked or not. But it came as, not a shock, but it came as a bit of a surprise when the bullets started flying as close to the aircraft as they did. So we got out, and we routed back as fast as we possibly could...

Simon: Well hang on, you just said, "We got out." Well, how did you get out? If you were being attacked, was it, presumably, through your skill flying this beast that you got out?

Mark: My skill. The skill of the crew, I would say, because Dan, who was my number-two crewman, if he hadn't called that we were being shot at... So there's a certain phrase, which was, in this case, "Tracer, break right." So he was calling the fact that a big, fat, burning tracer was coming towards the aircraft and told me to break right, which means to yank the aircraft to the right-hand side, pull power, and basically move your position in the sky so that where the enemy is aimed for, you're not going to be there anymore.

Simon: And you hadn't seen that?

Mark: No. So if it hadn't been for Dan calling it, we would have probably been hit. So we got out. And we got out of Sangin and routed back to Bastion as fast as we possibly could, and trying to save this poor lad that was on the back of the aircraft. The Chinook's never-exceed speed is 160 knots, and we were doing 160 knots, as fast as we possibly could, to get these guys home. But unfortunately, by the time we got back, just as the casualty was being carried off, he died, on the ramp, which was gutting for the whole crew.

And once you've finished that adrenalin rush, we're expecting to shut down and re-brief and wait for if there was going to be a next casualty. However, there was a next casualty straight away, so we launched straight back to Musa Qala, which at the best of times is not a nice place to go. It started to get dark now. So we're now flying around with night vision goggles on our heads, which is basically trying to look through two green toilet roll tubes.

So, restricted field of view, we're going into the middle of a town, in the middle of the Afghan desert, where they are surrounded by baddies, in order to pick up more casualties.

As we went in -- and it's been described many times before as you know the closing scene of "Star Wars," which in this case it was -- they just threw everything at us.

We had one RPG went up 10 feet above the aircraft, rocket propelled-grenade. Another rocket propelled-grenade went 10 feet below the aircraft, just missing us. We were, as we did say in the book, we're flying in and my left hand seat, my co pilot, that I call Daffors, brilliant bloke, is giving me the patter and talking me on to where the landing site is. And then there was this shudder through the airframe and bizarrely, he turns around and says, "I think we've hit a bird." And foolishly, I agreed with him. I mean what bird is doing flying in the middle of this fire fight I had no idea.

Simon: It was stupid bird, any intelligent bird would have thought, "You know Oz, stay in my desk for today."

Mark: I've done enough for the day. Unfortunately everyone told us to wave off, i.e. to abort the landing, because of the wave of fire that was being thrown at us.

Simon: When you say everyone?

Mark: The Apaches that were looking after us, the guys on the ground, they're all on the radio saying, "abort, abort, abort." So we basically had to fly away from the landing site, still being shot at, my crewman still returning fire against the enemy on the ground. And we had to go back to Bastion to basically think again, to replan, to get back in without getting shot at. At that state we found out that the "bird" wasn't a bird, it was a 14.5mm caliber round that had hit one of our blade route. So basically gone up into the rotor head, narrowly missing Daffor's head and hitting the blade route. And if it had severed the blade route then we would have been toast.

Simon: He's not a bird watcher then, your mate Daffors is he?

Mark: I don't think he likes feather kind very much anymore.

Simon: Not at all. Is that the end?

Mark: No. Then we replanned the mission and some two hours later ...

Simon: Remind us who you're trying to save, what do you know of these people that you're trying to save.

Mark: Well we knew that he was part of the Royal Irish Regiment. He had taken a shrapnel wound to the neck and three other guys had been injured. Now the medics, in what they call the district center in Musa Qala, had actually stabilized him to what we call a T2. So we had a couple of hours to replan the mission, get all the supporting arms that we required. We had an A10 Thunderbolt aircraft to support us. We also had Apaches. We had artillery and everything was put in place just to get us in, to get us back into that landing site, in order to get the casualties out so we can get them to hospital.

Simon: OK, so the mission continues.

Mark: The mission continues. We briefed it, they stabilize to T2. We had a couple of hours to think about what we were going to do, how we were going to get in there. We replanned it with the C.O. of three Para, Colonel Tootal and the rest of the guys in the three Para Battle

group. And then at the appropriate time we routed back into Musa Qala, which is a bizarre feeling; knowing that you're going back into the place that a large quantity of people are trying to kill you, and they know you're coming back. Because they know you didn't pick the casualty up. And they know that you're going to pick that casualty up. So they know you're coming back.

Simon: Do you approach in any different manner?

Mark: We changed how we were going to get in. And we had so much fire support, to ensure that we got in. But even when we got in there, and we landed, and landing in Afghanistan is a completely different kettle of fish because it's dusty, and you've got this huge great helicopter. From 15 feet down you don't see anything. You're just listening to your crew. So we landed on. They just about heard us coming in. So they know where you've landed, they know you've picked up casualties, they know you've got to leave. So when you leave, they shoot at you again. We had two more RPGs fired at us on the way out.

But we got him home. So we were all gutted as a crew that we couldn't get in there and pick him up the first time. But then we managed to get back and pick him up. Which, you know, from a crew point of view is what we're there to do. We go in there and make sure we can get the people back.

Now, I was awarded the DFC for myself and my crew. But anybody else in the Chinook force and have done subsequently. If they'd been on watch that night, they would have done exactly the same thing. So it doesn't make us special per se. Just We were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Doesn't mean we weren't scared, cause we were but...

Simon: Do you have time to be scared? Do you get scared afterwards? I imagine if you're in the heat of that battle and trying to get that particular soldier out, you're just making calculations, you're listening to the instructions and advice of everyone shouting in your ears, you just have to do your job.

Mark: You do. You crack on with your job. It's not till you get back and the adrenaline ceases. Cause you do. You get an adrenaline high because you're going in there and getting shot at. If you don't like that, then, you shouldn't have joined the forces. But it's what is after that, when all that adrenaline is gone and you sit down and think, "I could have died." Personally I never thought I was going to die. Some members of my crew thought their number was up before they went back in. It didn't stop them from going back in.

Simon: When you say, if you don't like being shot at you shouldn't join the armed forces, do you mean you liked...

Mark: No I don't mean "like being shot at."

Simon: It's what you said.

Mark: Yeah it was. What I'm trying to say is it's a peculiar adrenaline rush. You talk to anybody that's been shot at. I don't mean like being shot at. Nobody likes being shot at. But that adrenaline rush is...It can be addictive. It can be. I'm not saying that I want to go back in and get shot at again.

Simon: Which presumably is dangerous if you let it get to you, if you make decisions based

on that.

Mark: Indeed. And that is one of the reasons for our training; is to understand that adrenaline rush and to deal with it. Because you can't let it run away with you.

Simon: The book is "Immediate Response from the Heart of the Afghan Battlefield, A Chinook Pilot Explosive True Story." That's fantastic isn't it. So we're into the world of military bestsellers. It's a dramatic story that you're telling. I wonder if people will pick it up and think that they're buying a new novel from one of those well known SAS writers.

Mark: Slightly different. There hasn't been too many Chinook, indeed helicopter stories out there. An old friend of mine, James Newton, wrote one about the Iraq war when we were out there in 2003. And I don't think any recent books about Chinooks had been written, so it was a perfect opportunity.

Simon: I mentioned at the beginning of our conversation the fact you're a serving member of the Armed Forces. Therefore you're extremely limited in what you can say about the current dispute. But the fact that it is a dispute, and being discussed by politicians, and being discussed in Parliament as being a very real political issue, must impact on you. You must be aware of that. You must be aware of the fact that these things are being discussed back in the UK.

Mark: They're always discussed and the military is discussed in general. As I say, it's...

Simon: But it's your job. It's the meat and drink of what you do, that is at the heart of the political debate. Are there enough helicopters? I know you can't answer that but this is what you do. And the fact that it's become a political issue, must impact a bit on the morale of the troops, on the things that are discussed?

Mark: It hasn't affected the morale of the Chinook crews as far as I've seen. If it's not Chinooks, it will be something else that will become a political issue. As I say, it hasn't affected the morale of the guys at Odium, the engineers, the armors, the air crew. We just crack on with our job.

Simon: Would it be relatively uncontroversial to say that your job would be easier, if there were more? Presumably, that's stating the obvious isn't it? I think everybody would agree. In an ideal world you...

Mark: Simon, you said it was stating the obvious so I don't really need to comment do I?

Simon: No, I've stated the obvious you certainly don't have to. One of the most fascinating sections in the book Mark, is you talk about the Taliban and what it's like to fight them. And you talk about combat Darwinism. About how they're getting smarter, and they're working out how to fight you. Can you just explain a bit more about what you mean by that and how the nature of this beast, you call it the "Teletubbers" in the book, how fighting them has changed?

Mark: If you fail to have respect for your enemy, then you're an idiot. So everyone respects the Taliban and the Afghan people in general. But the Taliban are hard fighters, and they will adjust, they will adapt, in order to achieve what they would see as victory over British and ISAF forces. What that means is that we then have to adapt our tactics or techniques and

our procedures in order to combat that change. And that's why it's "Combat Darwinism" -- and they will adapt, they will change in order to try and achieve victory; we then have to adapt and change, and it's a game of chess that is war, basically.

Simon: And you talk about the fact that they've become aware of the fact that you are operating under certain legal constraints and they exploit that. Can you explain a bit more how that impacts on your work?

Mark: It does impact to a certain extent. We have strict rules and regulations that govern when we can or cannot fire. Those rules do not apply to the Taliban. So that's just the nature of the beast.

Simon: When can you not fire?

Mark: There's a whole raft of rules which I've won't go into now, but there's a passage in the book where if there's a guy on a mobile phone, do we know, do we think that he is, a, phoning his mates in Sangin, telling them the helicopter is coming, get ready. Or is he phoning his mom to say he's going to be home, put the bread on. You don't know. So you don't shoot obviously, because he's not a threat to the aircraft or he's not a threat to you. Those rules -- and it's called Card Alpha, is when there is a direct threat to yourself or a direct threat to your associates and your comrades that you can fire. So, but British Armed Forces don't have suicide bombers, do we?

Simon: No.

Mark: So these rules don't apply to the Taliban and to the insurgents and therefore it makes it more difficult.

Simon: You explain in the book, at the first time, I think it was the first time when you went in 2006, how you and your colleagues spent a lot of time reading about Afghan history and reading and arguing about Afghan politics. And you say that Afghanistan was in a sense a country that was designed to be unstable.

Mark: There is a thought that that was the case, the great game between the British Empire and the Russians; the Russian Empire in order to create a buffer state between the "southern stans" and the Indian Empire. There is an argument to say that this place, that Afghanistan has been kept perpetually unstable, in order to keep that buffer state. Whether that's true now is another argument. But definitely, it was a line on the map drawn by the British and the Russians. And if you understand and as we did, look into the makeup of Afghanistan, with the different tribal backgrounds, the Pashtuns, et cetera, it's a patchwork of nationalities and tribes et cetera. And so it would be difficult to impose, I think as I said in the book, a Western-style democracy on there because they're not a Western democracy per se there.

Simon: But there were the elections just a few days ago, British troops very much involved in that operation to try and get that vote to be safe and secure as possible.

Mark: Oh, indeed, and that's a sign of progress. If anyone doubts that progress has been made in Afghanistan since the arrival of British and ISAF troops, then surely an election, a free election is a sign of progress that's been made.

Simon: There are many though as you're aware, who increasingly do ask "what are we there for?" They do see the bodies coming back, now past the 200 mark. And they do query the mission and wonder why, they kind of understood it in the first place, understood that the Taliban had to be defeated, they don't see much of an exit strategy. What do you say when your mates back home say, "Come on man, what's it all about, is it really worth the price that we're paying?"

Mark: I mean, the price we're paying, again is there are far more appropriate people to ask, but from my personal point of view, having gone out there for three years now, to see the difference between when I first went out there in '06 to now is quite stark. When we didn't have the British troops up the Sangin Valley, there was no power running out of Kajaki Dam, there were no lights running down the Sangin Valley; now there are. There's troops patrolling the streets in Sangin, Musa Qala, there's power running down from the Kajaki dam; you could argue that none of that would have happened if there hadn't been British and ISAF troops in Helmand.

Simon: There's a very useful glossary of terms at the back of the book because you're using loads of acronyms, loads of initials flying all around the place. Very fortunately, this is a complete explanation of what all the different phrases mean, as you get to the back of the book. But one of the things I found particularly interesting and I'm not asking you to illustrate this is the fact that almost everybody, you included, suffer from detachment Tourettes; that you're one person when you're home with your family, as soon as you leave your family, there is a complete outbreak of det. Tourettes, and it's defined in your book as a complete inability to complete any phrase or sentence without swearing.

Mark: That's very true. I've a very close friend who is a Scottish guy, who is the most mild-mannered gentleman you've ever come across until he gets on det., and then he's the most foul-mouthed beast. I think it maybe stress or maybe it's just- it's a release, and you do end up with det. Tourettes. The difficult thing is getting rid of it when you come back home.

Simon: I would imagine if you're not getting so successfully getting rid of it, someone will tell you --

Mark: Someone tells, normally your wife or your children will tell you pretty quick, yeah.

Simon: Yes. That's not the kind of language that they're used to.

Mark: Language we use at the home.

Simon: And does it get easier to switch or you're talking in the book about being an innie and an outie about getting used to family life, coming back into family life and then leaving family life. The more you do it, does it get more difficult or does it get more easy now?

Mark: I'd say that that's a difficult question and you'd probably have to ask my wife. It takes a certain breed of woman and man actually, to join the military family. It's hard on them, it is. Because you go away, although the communications package, you can email home you can phone home et cetera, is not like World War II, when you went away for five years and probably got a letter once a year, the communication package is good. But they sit there and if they watch the news, et cetera, then it's stressful upon them. And it gets harder as you have children; daddy's going away again or mummy is going away again. It's hard on the family. There's a good support package and the community, the Forces community is very

good. But yeah, it's hard on the family. It doesn't get easier, it never gets easier.

Simon: You're going back?

Mark: Very shortly.

Simon: And does that make you quite excited?

Mark: It's my job. If you're trained to talk on the radio and then were never given a live show, how would you feel?

Simon: I'd be very disappointed. But then I'm not shot at, my job is not life-threatening, not normally anyway.

Mark: Well, indeed, one could argue it's probably more dangerous cycling around the streets of London than it's flying in Afghanistan, I don't know, haven't cycled around the streets of London recently. But I was trained as a pilot. We're trained as pilots, we're trained as crewmen to go out and do it for real, and it's what we're paid to do, and that's what we do.

Simon: Major Mark Hammond, his book is Immediate Response. Thanks very much indeed for listening, another Daily Mayo along tomorrow.

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Female Announcer: Simon Mayo, and Mark Hammond's phone review. [Radio Break]

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