

MITIGATING THE RISE OF TERRORISM – WHOSE JOB IS THIS ANYWAY?

By Daniel J. Basta

The sun rose on a warm sultry day on September 11, 2001, in Washington DC. The hot sticky days of August were finally coming to an end. Asia S Cottom, Rodney Dickens, and Bernard Brown II, all eleven years, rose especially early filled with anticipation and excitement. They had to get to Dulles airport in northern Virginia early to catch American Airlines Flight 77 departing at 8:10 am. Their parents had given them a last-minute check before they left the house – did they have everything they were supposed to bring, including their bathing suits.

The three children had been selected by the National Geographic Society (NGS) to attend a marine sciences youth field camp at the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary, off of Santa Barbara on the California coast, where they would join other children from around the country. This camp would likely be a once in a lifetime experience for many of the children who attended.

At the airport they were met by three dedicated elementary school teachers, Sarah M. Clark, James D. Debeuneure, and Hilda E. Taylor, who would chaperon them on their excellent adventure to the west coast and back to Washington, DC. They also met Joe Ferguson and Ann Judge waiting for them at Dulles airport, both from NGS. It was with an air of nervous excitement that the eight adventurers walked down the jetway onto Flight 77 to join the other 55 passengers that morning and the six-crew members making the flight. The flight was only about a third full and they could spread out and travel in comfort.

Thirty minutes after takeoff five hijackers rose and stormed the cockpit taking over Flight 77. It's impossible to know the terror experienced by everyone that morning –

especially the children. At 9:37 am Flight 77 crashed into Pentagon at 530 miles per hour killing all the passengers and crew and 125 individuals in the Pentagon, wounding another 106. The dreams, aspirations, and hopes for the future of everyone on Flight 77 and the individuals in pentagon that morning ended at 9:37 am. When the sunset a dark “Vail of Terror” had descended on America. Things would never be the same. Most Americans struggled with their grief and anger, all wanting to find some way to contribute to help combatting the terror brought to our shores and communities.

One day in 2004 three years after 9/11, a U.S. Navy Captain, Dave Olson, had come into my office. He was in dress blues, had a big smile, a hat in one hand and a briefcase in the other. He put down his briefcase and we shook hands. Dave Olsen was a Navy Reservist assigned to U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) headquarters in Florida. There was no hint we would spend the next several years “scheming” to breathe life into an unconventional program to help mitigate the rise of terrorism.

Dave had come to see me to expand the experiences of a youth training program he had founded – SCUBAscouts.¹ Dave was a Naval Academy graduate, had been a Naval Aviator and then had transitioned into the intelligence field; he was a staff officer working in the USCENTCOM Intelligence Directorate. It was inevitable that the events of 9/11 had come up in our conversation, as it so often had in those days. Dave and I shared experiences on that day and the aftermath. I was unaware of concerns in the intelligence community about losing the hearts and minds of the people in Iraq and Afghanistan. Dave had been unaware of our direct connection to the 9/11 attack on the Pentagon.

I am sure it had been Dave who had begun connecting the dots in his creative mind. He had witnessed how young people in the SCUBAscouts program had found

¹ SCUBAscouts was a program teaching youths life skills and marine science through Scuba diving. The program has since been renamed, SCUBAnaults, and is in St. Petersburg, Florida.

common ground, and an idea formed as we talked. Dave had expressed it something like:

“Wouldn’t it be great if we could bring youth from the Middle East together with American youth in a marine sciences field program. I bet all the hate and animosity would go way when they shared exciting experiences together.”

It was a lightning bolt of an idea and might be the most fitting tribute we could make to those we had loss on 9/11. The experience tragically denied the children, teachers, and NGS personnel when Flight 77 crashed the Pentagon, could be used to help combat the rise of terrorism that had contributed to their deaths. It might even bring youth from the countries of the 9/11 attackers to be part of the youth program we had begun to envision. It was a great idea, and we both committed to find a way to do this, even if it “was not our job.” We then began the long and bumpy road to enlist others to our scheme. This had proved difficult, no one thought combating the rise of terrorism was their job. However, two small groups of like-minded individuals propelled the idea forward.

One was fueled by the desire of individuals in the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the National Geographic Society (NGS) to find a way to add meaning to the lives their colleagues and the children killed on 9/11. We had personally known them and their deaths haunted everyone in NGS and in NOAA’s entire National Marine Sanctuary program. They had died on their way to experience one the best things the Sanctuary program did – summer marine science youth camps. Everyone had been at a loss of how they might contribute to help fight the rise of terrorism. It is fair to say that a pall of depression still existed over many in NOAA and NGS.

The other had been a realization by individuals in the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) and in the Coalition Forces during the Second Gulf War; that the war in Iraq, and Afghanistan could not be won with bombs and bullets alone. Something else or in addition was needed to win the hearts and minds of the peoples of these nations – but what? The U.S. has tried to win the hearts and minds of its’ enemies many times,

such as during the Vietnam conflict, and scholars continue to debate the efficacy of these efforts.

The program ultimately created – “Ocean for Life”– involved many individuals, behind the scenes, committed to helping make a better world despite the cynicism, bureaucratic barriers, and politics of the time. The goal of the program had become to help overcome the fundamental ignorance and misunderstanding that led young people down the path to terrorism. The bureaucracy had made clear to me and others that: “mitigating the rise of terrorism was not our job!” But given the events of 9/11, we thought overcoming the rise of terror was everyone’s job.

There had been youth education programs, cultural exchange programs, and even video journalism camps before. However, the Ocean for Life (OFL) program was to combine all three in a marine sciences youth field camp and experience. OFL brought together early high school age students from the “Coalition Nations” engaged in the War on Terror – Armenia, Australia, Bahrain, Canada, Denmark, Egypt, France, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Norway, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. The program challenged them to learn from each other through a single unifying concept – one global ocean connects us all. In each evolution it had never taken more than a day or two for the ignorance or misunderstandings students had brought with them to begin to dissolve away.

Much about the OFL program can now be found online, including the photo journals and video shorts made by students. An informal online community still exists among many of the students who had attended the OFL marine sciences field camps. But what cannot be found anywhere is how this extraordinary program came to life and why it had ended. This article addresses the key events that led up to the arrival of the first evolution of students in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. It is the part of the OFL story few individuals or even most participants know about. There are lessons in how this program came about and in its eventual demise that may help others better take forward ideas directed at the same problem today.

From the beginning, it was clear that anything we might undertake had to be approved by the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and the Coalition Nations. This had required that we at first work outside of official channels. We knew the concept would never get off the ground if we did otherwise. Our initial ideas had revolved around creating a program in Iraq. It seemed to make sense, given all that was going on in Iraq at the time.

The partnership had begun when Dave Olson invited me to the annual SCUBAScouts awards dinner in St. Petersburg, Florida. Also invited had been a number of USCENTCOM “intelligence heads or leads.” We had all sat at the same table. Also among us was a highly regarded Iraqi “consultant.” The outline of the program we discussed that night had made perfect sense around the table. There had been a palpable sense that something wasn’t working or was missing in ongoing efforts in the official “War on Terror.” The program outlined had struck a chord. With the solid backing of these officers, admittedly behind the scenes, we had taken the next steps. Our Iraqi friend agreed to provide contacts in Iraq to help flush out how it might work. I agreed to enlist our National Geographic Society (NGS) colleagues who were still wrestling with the aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy.

Enlisting the NGS as a partner was critical, its reputation added credibility and helped dispel speculation that the proposed program might be a covert DOD intelligence gathering operation². The NGS also had experience in aspects of the educational programming we envisioned. I and others had also known Joe Ferguson, and Ann Judge at NGS, both killed on Flight 77, and it was personal to us to involve NGS. I contacted my colleague and friend, Terry Garcia, the Executive Vice President of the National Geographic Society. Terry and I had struck up a friendship some years before when he

² This had actually come up a number of times, especially early on.

was the Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere – the head of NOAA.

It had been Terry who led the effort during the bedlam on 9/11 to determine who among our colleagues and charges had been on Flight 77. It was indeed bedlam in Washington on 9/11 and a day never to be forgotten. Terry and I had stayed in contact throughout the day and well into the night, as I helped him make this terrible determination. No one had been sure who besides Joe and Ann had been on Flight 77. Neither NGS nor we had the roster. The roster had been carried by Joe. It wasn't until very late on 9/11 when the grisly facts had been confirmed. Terry had been in the middle of it and the tragic aftermath which followed. He had been an easy sell and began to explore NGS participation in our idea. At this time, however, the aftermath of the War was still reverberating within Iraq, and the Iraqi families our colleagues in Iraq had approached feared reprisals from terrorists if their children participated. And NGS leadership had also begun to fear for their personnel in the Middle East. Terry's hands were tied and our negotiations with Iraq had grounded to a halt. Our brilliant idea was not going to work in Iraq. It seemed we were at a dead end – What now?

Fortunately Dave Olson had kept the idea alive where it counted most, within USCENTCOM. If it we couldn't bring the program to Iraq, why not expand the idea to the entire region and use the Coalition Nations themselves as the basis for the program. It was another lightning bolt of an idea from Dave.

The most influential officer in the Coalition Forces was Norwegian Brigadier General Arne Skjaerpe, the Chairman of Coalition Forces at USCENTCOM. He was highly regarded by both by his Coalition colleagues and U.S. officers at USCENTCOM. General Skjaerpe understood the potential value of the program and had also felt something was missing in their efforts. When General Skjaerpe had become an advocate, other like-minded officers in the Coalition Forces want to know more. A door

had begun to open. If the Coalition Forces advocated for an OFL program, we might be able to make it work after all.³

A Coalition Forces summer social event proved to be the pivotal moment. It was another one of those behind-the-scenes opportunities. Dave and I had been invited to participate in a chartered fishing cruise for Coalition Forces officers, and to a subsequent dinner. We had cruised more than 20 miles offshore into the Gulf of Mexico and out of ear shot and prying eyes. The fishing wasn't very good, but our goal had been to socialize with as many officers as we could to share our ideas for an OFL Program. By the time the boat docked we had made many friends and supporters. Maybe pitching the idea of an Ocean for Life Program while on the ocean had been the trick. That evening after the officer's dinner and a short OFL presentation we had gotten their attention and support. The fishing trip had personalized everything. Many officers had even wanted to know how they might get their own children into the program. We now had an OFL Coalition at USCENTCOM which General Skjaerpe could officially take forward.

With support within USCENTCOM and the Coalition Nations, many individuals and institutions were recruited to the task. There had been more than enough challenges to go around. A formal two-week curriculum and field camp was designed and scheduled, venues were established for the field camp(s), and processes developed to select youth from the U.S. and participating nations. Protocols had been developed for students and instructors, chaperons were selected for each student; training programs created on religious and cultural practices, such as, prayer times or dietary restrictions to maintain cultural norms during the program. A special agreement with the State Department was established to clear visas. And most importantly, a formal project plan

³ Unfortunately It became clear early on that none of the Middle Eastern nations in the Coalition would consider participation if Israel was involved. What an irony that was, given our goal to reduce ignorance and misunderstanding in the region as a whole.

and budget had been prepared to move through the USCENTCOM and DOD approval processes to fund the program. A host of other details also had to be worked out. It was a tall order indeed! The work of the individuals who applied themselves to help create and conduct the Ocean for Life program is a separate and worthy story in and of itself.

As compelling as OFL had been, the big question remained: “How could this modest program contribute towards winning hearts and minds, given the scale of the problem?” Even at its planned maximum, only 90 students were to participate in two marine sciences youth camps per year. The answer was not in the number of students but rather how the program was designed to project their experiences. We contended that the program was designed to expand its reach far beyond those in attendance and even beyond the Middle East. This had been of interest within USCENTCOM and with others.

OFL was not simply a youth based cultural exchange program, but rather an orchestrated photo and video journalism experience. Participants were encouraged, and assisted, to project their experiences over the internet to whomever, wherever, and whenever after they had returned home. We contended that the natural desire of young people to share their experiences, in the form of the photographs, videos, and the photo-journals they created would spread the universal messages of OFL far and wide. Our intent, from the very beginning, was for the field camps experience to go “viral.”⁴ After many months of frantic work, the first field camp was to be conducted in the Florida Keys, primarily by National Marine Sanctuary personnel.

However, six weeks before the first 60 students and their chaperons were to arrive disaster struck. The hard work and aspirations of so many was about to come to naught. A five-year OFL mission plan had been accepted within the USCENTCOM and DOD

⁴ This was before the proliferation of cell phones, which would have increased the reach of OFL messages many times over.

project framework and officially placed in the FY 2009 DOD budget request and approved. It had taken over four years to get to this point and it was now nearly eight years since the 9/11 attacks. But at the eleventh-hour DOD attorney's decided DOD funds, our primary funding source, could not be spent on a program of "nonuniform" training or education. The amount of funds in question hadn't even add up to "eraser dust" in anyone's DOD budget – what had happened?

Early in 2009 I had received a call from DOD regarding the forthcoming OFL program. DOD wanted to restructure the program to focus on "students" from military academies. I certainly understood DOD's interest in fostering relationships with the militaries of other nations. However, this had nothing to do with the objectives of the program set to begin. Maybe there could have been a middle ground, but that was the last we had heard from DOD, until we were notified funding was withdrawn. The "bombs and bullets" faction had the pen and in a punitive manner crossed out the program. I think they saw their job as winning wars, not preventing them. Preventing them was someone else's job.

We had protested mightily and called on members of Congress we knew. How could such a worthy and approved program be so arbitrarily pushed aside at the last minute? The Honorable Senator Carl Levin, Joint Chairman of the Armed Forces Service Committee tried to intervene to no avail. A Bill was introduced by a supporting Congressman to exempt the OFL program from the "legal" sticking point DOD had raised. Even General Petraeus, the Commander in Chief of USCENTCOM was powerless to intervene. General Petraeus, however, had then written to the Secretary of the Department Commerce (DOC) and the NOAA Administrator about the value of the program and encouraged them to support it. The General's letter was ignored. Clearly addressing the hearts and minds of youth to avoid the path to terrorism was not our job. It didn't seem to be anyone's.

At this the darkest of junctions, concerned American citizens had risen to ensure the OFL program for 2009 and beyond go on. One individual had immediately written a check for \$250,000, another for \$70,000, and still others for more. An important contribution was made by the SCUBAnauts organization, thanks to Dave Olson and Ben Hayes, which had come forward and placed the entire OFL program under their corporate insurance policy. The 2009 class arrived on time and had an outstanding OFL marine sciences camp. The idea that Dave Olson, I, and then others, had brought to life absolutely worked. The exciting personal experiences, photographs, videos, and messages of students were broadcast everywhere across the internet. A nongovernmental website created by the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation had allowed students to post whatever they chose and had become the basis for a community of OFL alumnae that continued for many years.



The value of OFL was further illustrated to me by conversations I had had with a Pakistani chaperon, a full Colonel in the Pakistani Army who had arrived, prior to the second OFL field camp, at USCENTCOM to take command of the Pakistani military delegation. The Colonel's first assignment was as an OFL chaperon. I had seen the questioning look in his eyes when I gave him the OFL pitch. He was a 20-year combat veteran and had just come from commanding an armored brigade in the disputed Kashmir region. He had been very polite, but I sensed he was probably thinking, "What the devil am I doing here as a nursemaid for students?"

Ten days later I was visiting OFL students in Santa Cruz, California, they were learning to surf together. When I spied the Colonel making a beeline for me. I had almost tried to avoid him; I thought he was about to tell me what a waste of his time this all had

been for him. To my surprise he had embraced me and proclaimed that participating in OFL was one of the most profound experiences of his life. He had seen firsthand the almost magical way in which youth can come together and resolve complex cultural issues that perplex us. He had finally seen something that gave him hope there might be a way to resolve the unresolvable. The Colonel had asked me how a program like OFL could be created to help build a bridge between Pakistan and India. I couldn't tell him how to that, but I could tell him how much I appreciated what he had said. This experience further confirmed for me that we had really been on to something, regardless of how things turned out. A few years later the program had come to end.

Without DOD or any other governmental support, such as in the Congress, fund raising had become a monumental task. In truth, it was impossible to convince nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and foundations they too had a responsibility to help in combat the rise of terrorism. To them it was not their job. By the final evolution, the underlying driver of OFL, to contribute towards combating the rise of terrorism, was only a whisper. OFL had become an interesting international marine sciences program to connect youth to a "Global Ocean" community, useful and important but different. It had become clear that OFL as envisaged had run its course.

The last OFL fund-raising event, had been held at the prestigious Penn Club in Manhattan in New York City –



ground zero for the 9/11 attacks. It was a poignant statement of how attitudes had changed since the attacks ten years before. A star-studded cast had been in attendance, including almost all the members of the “National Commission on Terrorist Attacks on the United States” and the Chairman, former New Jersey Governor Thomas Kean. Also in attendance were representatives of the organizations created after 9/11 to support victims’ families, and build the 9/11 Memorial, etc. It was an extraordinary evening. However, there was a sense of waning interest to continue to combat the rise of terrorism, wasn’t the war over. *(Shown above is part of the 2013 fund raising brochure)* Although strong support had been voiced for OFL, helping to fund it was not their job. The attendees were focused on the needs of their own programs. It was another realization, If the communities and organizations at ground zero, the primary victims of the 9/11 attacks, did not view it vital to support or become partners in OFL, then who would. People were just moving on; it wasn’t their job to mitigate the rise of terrorism in the world.

Interest in the goals of OFL was also waning in the Middle East. OFL had become a neat little marine sciences experience for some Middle Eastern youth, probably valuable at some level. However, the program as envisaged had run its course. Time had come for others to take up the OFL program and support it as the program it had become. No one in the Middle East or the U.S. ever did.

An opportunity to recognize and mitigate the origins of the rise of terrorism had been squandered. The story of OFL illustrates of how difficult it is to press challenging ideas in government and society, even on something as dramatic as the 9/11 attacks. But It also demonstrates how attention to ideas and even serious problems erode quickly, regardless of the extraordinary or profound events that may birth them.

Perhaps the most important lesson of the Oceans for Life experience is the need to continuously explore ways to win the hearts and minds of our adversaries. Combating the rise of terrorism is a continuous and complex problem and likely never to be fully

resolved. But winning small victories, such as in OFL, can have significant effects overtime, although they are often hard to measure in the short run because of the way we think. Changing our thinking may be the biggest challenge of all. The rise of terrorism has faded into the background for the time being, but as history informs us, it will only reemerge.

The question to ask ourselves is: “whose job is prevention of the path to terrorism?” The answer is: “It’s everyone’s and always has been.” We must all reorient our thinking.