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FEATURED TOP STORY

## Washington County native Mark Nutsch & Special Forces team featured in movie '12 Strong'

By Cynthia Scheer Washington County News Jan 24, 2018 Updated 23 hrs ago



Actor Chris Hemsworth portrays Mark Nutsch, who grew up riding horses in Washington County, in the film "12 Strong," which opened Friday. Photo courtesy of Warner Bros. Studio Images

David James

Washington native Mark Nutsch is portrayed by actor Chris Hemsworth in the major Hollywood movie "12 Strong," which premiered Friday.

Alex Shultz, owner of Astro 3 Theatre in Marysville, said he expects to get the movie here on Feb. 2.

"12 Strong" tells a portion of the story of how Nutsch commanded the first Special Forces team deployed to Afghanistan after Sept. 11, 2001, and how the 12-member Green Beret team, now sometimes referred to as Horse Soldiers, rode to war on horses alongside Afghan allies, capturing the second largest city in Afghanistan in only a few weeks and eventually overthrowing the Taliban.

Nutsch's mission has been called the most successful, unconventional warfare campaign in modern history.

The 1987 Washington High School graduate, who now lives in Florida, grew up roping and rodeoing and was one of only two Special Forces soldiers, or Green Berets, on his team who had ridden horses before the October 2001 mission.

Nutsch was a champion calf roper and letterman on K-State's rodeo team. He has said the extent of horse-riding experience of the other 10 Green Berets on his team amounted to pony rides at the county fair or their mothers putting a few quarters in the mechanical horses at the store and letting the kids ride back and forth for a few minutes.

Members of Nutsch's Special Forces team, named Team 595, did not know they would travel by horseback through northern Afghanistan during their mission, and they had no military training on horses. The team members discovered their mode of transportation after they had been secretly dropped into Afghanistan at 2 a.m. Oct. 19 during a blinding sandstorm.

The Northern Alliance – a group of local warlords and resistance fighters in northern Afghanistan whom the soldiers were tasked with helping overthrow the Taliban – gave Nutsch's team the worst of the lot when it came to the horses. The horses were small, uncooperative and fought the soldiers, who were significantly taller and heavier than Afghans.

Nutsch is 6 feet tall and weighed about 215 pounds during the mission. He said that while some Afghans were 4 to 5 feet tall, some were 6 to 7 inches shorter.

The horses were outfitted with wooden saddles covered with carpet, and the stirrups were so short that the soldiers had to use their hands to hold on.

Members of Nutsch's Green Beret team struggled to command their horses as they mounted up for the mission. Nutsch said he frequently doubled back to help.

He said his knowledge about the behavior of horses from his years of ranching, riding and roping in Washington County was a key to his team's success in Afghanistan.

He said he was able to give his team basic riding instructions, advise them on inspecting their horses and riding gear when they changed out horses, and helped them tailor and repair cinches, stirrups and other tack during the mission.

### In the beginning

Nutsch is the son of Larry and Vivian Nutsch, who now live near Alma.

During his childhood in Washington County he showed horses in 4-H and at the State Fair, participated in high school rodeo and played football and basketball and ran cross-country.

But when many kids were playing baseball in the summer, Nutsch was riding horses, doctoring cattle or practicing roping in private arenas in the county.

He spent two years on K-State's rodeo team.

He has said that he worked nearly full-time during his college years, and he joined the Army ROTC with the desire to pursue a military career when he graduated in 1993.

He completed Army Ranger School and went on to become a platoon leader. When his time with the Rangers was finished, Nutsch volunteered to try out for the Special Forces. He completed two years of training in the Special Forces, where he took advanced shooting courses and became proficient with weapons, close combat and hostage situations.

He was stationed at Fort Campbell, Ky., and the Special Forces soldiers there focused on the areas encompassing the former Soviet Union. Nutsch was one of the first Special Forces soldiers to learn Russian.

In 2000, he was deployed to an area in the former Soviet Union, and he went on several more missions to the Middle East and Central Asia before his two years on Special Forces Team 595 ended just before 9-11.

Nutsch began a staff position with the Army on Sept. 10, 2011.

Three days after Sept. 11, Nutsch was put back on Team 595, and as he told KFRM radio's Duane Toews recently, his "A Team" was selected out of 45 Special Forces teams to be the first to enter Afghanistan after 9-11. He said his team was selected because of the team's skill set, and he considered it a great honor.

Nutsch's team was sent to a secret location in Uzbekistan to be briefed on their mission before being dropped into Afghanistan only a few weeks after 9-11.

### Quality of life

Nutsch said his team was cold and hungry during those first few weeks of the mission. They slept outside, in a cave or up against a rock. The team was in the foothills of the mountains with an elevation of 8,000 feet, and the mornings were frosty.

"We got snowed on (and) rained on," he said.



The riders would begin saddling the horses picketed around the sleeping area first thing in the morning, and Nutsch would have a meeting with the Northern Alliance's General Dostrum or whoever was in charge that day.

Nutsch's team and their allied Afghans then got on their horses and headed in the direction of that day's assignment. The loose grouping of riders would make their way to villages, where they met with local representatives and talked with them about Taliban activity in the area. The group then moved on to its next location.

"When we got near the Taliban, if we could definitively identify them as Taliban, we would call in airstrikes with precision-guided munitions," Nutsch said.

The group would switch to fresh horses several times a day some days.

Nutsch said he eventually got to keep a horse he liked, and he kept it with him all the time.

Nutsch's team went hungry many days during their mission. While they carried enough food for three meals a day in their 50-pound packs, they chose to keep only one meal a day for themselves. They gave the other two to Afghan soldiers, who didn't have much food.

More meals were later dropped by air for the soldiers and their Afghan allies to eat, and the Afghans were eventually able to provide the Green Berets with an evening meal of rice with sheep or goat.

### **The mission**

Nutsch has said the purpose of his team's mission was to gain information while aiding the Northern Alliance in fighting the Taliban and al Qaeda.

American military aircraft could bomb the Taliban's weapons arsenals and command centers, among other locations, but the aircraft had to stay at high altitude to stay out of range of man-portable anti-aircraft missiles, and it was difficult to identify moving targets among the mountains and caves at 20,000 feet. The solution was to put spotters on the ground to gain intelligence, scout targets and call in the airstrikes. Those spotters were Nutsch's Special Forces team.

Northern Afghanistan is mountainous and full of caves, and Nutsch and his fellow Green Berets, who grew beards and wore some native clothing to blend in, were forced to travel on horseback because of the trails across canyons, cliffs and off-road travel. Nutsch said safety hinged on traveling off-road, and the roads often contained mines.

The team scouted Taliban bunkers and command centers and used the GPS devices they kept in their saddlebags to radio the coordinates of the enemy targets to B-52 bombers 20,000 feet overhead.

The mission has been described as a few dozen men on horseback supported by a few hundred aircraft.

The team rode horses every day, four to seven hours at a time, and their journey was likened to the Pony Express where the soldiers would ride 15 to 20 miles before switching to fresh horses and riding on again.

Nutsch's team also radioed in air drops of food, blankets, clothes and Australian leather saddles, which helped earn goodwill with the Afghans, who were starving, freezing and going barefoot or wearing simple plastic flip-flops in the snow.

### **Having a baby**

Nutsch's wife, the former Amy Lindsley, lived in Washington County during part of her school years. She was seven months pregnant with the couple's third child when he deployed. The baby was born prematurely a month after Nutsch's deployment.

He wasn't able to talk to his wife immediately after he was notified of the birth.

"I didn't call home right away, I couldn't," Nutsch said.

"I was in the middle of coordinating an uprising across several provinces."

He said he and his teammates were excited to hear about his daughter's birth, and he was asked many times: "Hey, have you called home yet? Is everything all right?"

Nutsch was finally able to find a quiet location and call his wife by satellite phone "just as she was about to be home," he said. He talked with her briefly and was able to assure her that he and his teammates were fine.

"I couldn't talk about where we were," Nutsch said.

None of the team's families had heard from them in several weeks.

Nutsch said he was able to get quick reports of other wives to pass along to his team, and he asked his wife to tell the other wives that the team was all right.

### **Risking lives**

Nutsch said his team was instructed to conduct unconventional warfare to render Afghanistan free of the Taliban. Members of his team were nearly killed many times, and Nutsch said in one of his dispatches to headquarters that he was surprised his team hadn't been "slaughtered" yet. The Green Berets did not have any body armor because of the additional weight, and they and their Afghan allies had little more than horses and AK-47s to fight the Taliban, who had tanks, rocket-propelled grenades and other full-military equipment.

"There was incredible drama that happened on this mission," Nutsch said a few weeks ago in an interview for "12 Strong."

He said the U.S. military risked the team's lives to gain information in rural Afghanistan, and the 12 team members knew their lives were being risked throughout the mission. They didn't know until later, though, that the information they were relaying back to headquarters was being shared with the highest levels of the government, including President George Bush.

Nutsch, who spent about three months in Afghanistan on the mission and received a Bronze Star with valor for bravery, and is now a consultant to Special Operations Command. He said "12 Strong" should be considered a fictional account of the events that happened to the Horse Soldiers, although he thinks the movie is relatively accurate. He said he is co-writing a book that will tell the whole story in much greater detail.

