

When it Mattered

Episode 7: James Boyd

Chitra: Hello and welcome to When It Mattered. I'm Chitra Ragavan. On this episode we will be talking to James Boyd. He is CEO and co-founder of the tech startup Adyton. The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks happened in Boyd's first week at Stanford university and led him upon graduating with honors to enlist in the elite army special forces Green Beret 18 X-ray program. As a Green Beret, Boyd was deployed in multiple counter-terrorism and counterinsurgency operations. James, welcome to the podcast.

James: Good morning, Chitra.

Chitra: Good morning. Was there anything in your childhood or youth that showed a predisposition for a physically punishing career like joining the US Special Forces?

James: I think it would be the absolute opposite. When I think back to my 11 year old self, I was frankly a rich kid living a comfortable life, going to a good school, and I spent a little bit more time eating pizza and eating candy and watching TV than I probably should have. And I think my parents, they tried to get me to go get some exercise. They tried to get me to stop playing around with the computer. And it was definitely, it was a comfortable lifestyle for an 11 year old to just have toys and games and all the candy you could want.

Chitra: I imagine you weren't particularly physically fit either.

James: No, absolutely not. I was a little bit pudgy as an 11 year old. in fact, I think I remember my dad had asked one of my teachers, he's like, "Hey, is this going to burn off at some point?" And he would take me on cycling trips. And so there was this sort of a push to try and get a little bit more exercise as a pudgy 11 year old.

Chitra: So what happened next?

James: Well, I remember at one point I was going through this great school. It was a feeder into one of the top high schools in the country, and you're around a whole bunch of other smart kids, and it was very competitive to get into it. But I was coasting, we had all of these fantastic courses available to us, study Latin and Greek and things like that. And I was kind of shooting for about middle of the road on things, getting fairly average to below average scores. And one day my mother saw my report card and she was absolutely livid and she told me that if you aim for 70 you're going to get a 60 and she threw me out of the house. And this was before school. So I remember sitting on the steps of my house in London at 11 years old. I have been told that what I was doing was not good enough. I sort of wondered what I'm supposed to do next. And that was a very, very visceral moment that let me know that I was wasting what was in front of me.

Chitra: And you were living in London, but you had dual homes, you had a wealthy lifestyle. Your mom was American, your dad British. So you were going between countries, between homes, and it was just amazing till you had that realization.

James: Absolutely. I think my parents had met in California and so we actually had a house in California and a house in London, and able to spend vacations in California and there was nothing that we wanted for. And so it was really a position of tremendous comfort and tremendous privilege to be in that. And I think the takeaway was that I was probably wasting it.

Chitra: So did anything change right away when you realized that or did you continue with your 11 year old self forward a little bit?

James: Well, I can tell you that as an 11 year old when you get kicked out of the house and told it's not good enough, that sort of is a little bit of a kick in the pants and again, the privilege continued. And so I started after school tutoring and working with teachers and so my parents would pay on top of these existing school fees. They would pay extra money so that I could spend extra time with teachers. And it helped tremendously academically. So it turned things around. And really it was just trying, it was applying myself and not just coasting through things. And so really that sort of transformed the academic side of my performance

Chitra: And what happened next?

James: Well, I was fortunate to get into a school called St Paul's. It was probably top three schools in the country at the time. And this is a fantastic school where kids go on to be government ministers and run banks and hedge funds and things like that. And so this is where tremendously successful

people send the kids to go get into Oxford and Cambridge. And a fantastic opportunity. And I remember there was one day, I was probably about 15 years old, I've been doing well academically, and they would bring the older kids in to present to the younger kids, provide some mentorship and some guidance. And so one of the seniors who was graduating from the school, was probably 18 years old, reminded us that here we are in this incredibly privileged institution destined to go on to continue to academic success and then success with careers. And that we have every single advantage and every single opportunity ahead of us. And it's incumbent upon us not to use that just for ourselves, but to actually take that opportunity and that privilege and do something more for other people and for the world with that.

James: And so really there's a lot of focus on grades and academic performance, but the underlying why behind that has to be for someone else.

Chitra: And that was something that gave you food for thought, but it wasn't particularly transformative in terms of what you actually did at that moment, right?

James: No, I think it planted a seed. As a 15 year old you go back to doing your homework and then watching some football and probably drinking a few too many beers as a senior, but it just plants that seed that you need to think about that a little bit. And I don't think that really started to materialize until later on.

Chitra: And that was when you got to Stanford University in California?

James: Yeah, I was tremendously lucky or arrogant or naive, however you call it. And I applied to one university and I got in, went to Stanford in California and I remember the 9/11 attacks happened my very first week of college.

Chitra: What was that like? Do you remember that moment? I guess we all do, those of us who lived through it.

James: I think everyone has that experience of sort of anger and confusion and sadness all at the same time. And I think it sort of touched back to that seed that was planted earlier on, and it started to drive sort of a sense of service and there was a visceral feeling of needing to do something and everyone wanted to do something. You had people that went and gave blood and I think that that really ... That primed and that realized that idea that was planted by that kid earlier on. And Stanford was sort of a controversial place at the time. That was the height of the Iraq war as well. It was not a popular place to think about service.

Chitra: But you couldn't get it out of your mind?

James: No, I think it was a sort of drive. I remember at my first year of Stanford, I was still that pudgy kid from England that showed up, and I just knew that I needed to do something and I started training so that I could actually go do things, and I would stop ... I couldn't run a mile. And I ran the campus loop every day for about two years, it's about a four mile loop and just ran and ran. And I'd run till I throw up and I keep running and I timed it every day just so I could get faster. And I just knew that I needed to do that, so that I could actually have the opportunity to serve in the military later.

Chitra: And so did you do your education or did you leave right away?

James: I continued my education. I'd looked around at a couple of different opportunities with the army, with the Marines, with the UK army as well, and I'd heard about a program, it was called the 18 X-ray program, which allowed you to enlist instead of becoming an officer and roll the dice, go to infantry school and see if you can then join special forces. And so I dedicated myself over the next four years. I switched from computer science to international relations and studied Russian and trained and ran and learned as much as I could about international politics and security so that I could try and maximize the chance of success in that.

Chitra: Now this is one of the most difficult and the most elite programs in the US military. How did you pick on this particular one, and how did you get in? It must have been a challenging application process.

James: It was at the height of the Iraq war. They were taking a lot of casualties. And so they would open up these programs periodically to try and bring in motivated people from the streets. And I think part of this was a recruiting program for the infantry, but I looked at all of the options out there. And although this was perhaps one of the riskiest options, it put you in control of your own destiny. And if you were able to do that, you had the highest likelihood of deploying. So as I looked at all these other ... Looked at the army as an officer, you couldn't guarantee that you would end up in the kind of a job that will allow you to go and deploy and work overseas. I felt that responsibility, I was healthy and I was smart. And I guess when you're healthy and you're smart, you need to step up because other people were going and fighting and other people were going in and serving their country.

James: And I needed to do the same. And this was where I thought was the best way that I could put myself in a position to contribute as much as possible.

Chitra: And you had to give up your British citizenship to do this, right?

James: Yeah, I had dual citizenship from growing up and I went to the recruiting station, which was down at Moffett Field and they said, "Hey, you need to give up your citizenship." And this was a tough thing for my dad being British and I guess my cultural identity as a British person, but it was a challenge I think emotionally, but I viewed that as the best way of contributing to the war on terrorism. Because I thought about the British military, and I just thought that I'd have a great chance at deploying if I enlisted into the US army. And so I gave that up so I can get the security clearance and enlist.

Chitra: What was the training like? You sound like you were fitter than you were when you were 11 years old or even when you came to Stanford. But I imagine the training for this is ... I read some of the training suggestions for how you train for this. And it just seems pretty ... Well for those of us like me for whom fitness is more an aspiration, I just laughed when I read it so you can tell me what it was like.

James: I look back and it was fun. But I think probably at the time it wasn't quite so fun. It was a lot of very long days, a lot of carrying rucksacks around, a lot of continuous movements. So you go out, routinely you'd sleep two or three hours a night, you be carrying rucksacks and you'd have to think as well. And so it's a lot of sweating, a lot of being cold and then a lot of skills focus. So very focused on building discipline around specific actions and it was just a tremendous experience in learning what you're actually capable of. And in learning what you as a group of people, as a team are capable of and forming a tremendous sense of comradery around that. And I think that I sort of look back a little bit and as you're walking 10, 12 miles carrying heavy backpacks and maybe you haven't eaten or slept in a while, there's sort of an emphasis on bringing the positive to the situation. And the guys kind of joke around a little bit and I tried to always create a positive mood around that.

James: I guess they call it embracing the suck, you've got to kind of relish and enjoy the misery that you're enduring.

Chitra: And it must've been quite miserable from everything one hears and reads about this kind of training, the rigor that's involved.

James: I definitely remember some uncomfortable nights. I think there was some interesting head games as well, where you would walk and you wouldn't be told how far you were walking. You just needed to walk. But I don't know, I kind of enjoyed that. It's an opportunity to push yourself beyond your own limits.

Chitra: And so clearly you overcame all of your physical challenges and probably some of your mental challenges of succeeding when you were younger, just through this process it sounds like.

James: Yeah, you learn so much about yourself and I remember thinking that that's just ... You do something that you've never done before. Like you jump out of a plane or you blow something up and you think to yourself, "Well hey, I've never done this before and there is no reason in the world why I should think that I'm not excellent at this." They teach you a lot of mental techniques to really take on things that are outside of your experience area and allow you to accomplish things that people shouldn't think that they should be able to do.

Chitra: What was the best mental exercise you learned in the process?

James: I guess it really it's about managing yourself. I think you just focus on what needs to be done and what has to happen. And when everything becomes focused on the task of the objective, it sort of eliminates the ego from whatever you're doing. And it focuses all your energy on just accomplishing that one thing. And it's this external thing. It's this external goal in it. It might be an individual goal, but it's also probably a team goal. And when you focus on something like that, like you're walking through the woods at night and you're trying to navigate and it's 90 degrees and an absurd amount of humidity in North Carolina, and you're carrying a rucksack and you haven't slept for a couple of days, but you're just trying to do this as well as possible because if you can navigate as well as possible, then it means that the guy that's running the patrol is going to have more time to be able to plan their mission. And they're being graded on that.

James: And so the better you can do at your job and just focus on looking at a compass and taking a step forward and choosing the right path, you're going to set up the other guy for success. And so really it was just, it's a submission of the ego to what you're trying to accomplish.

Chitra: And clearly you were very successful. You graduated with honors from the infantry school, the basic leadership Academy, the Special Forces qualification course. You seem to have pulled off an incredible turnaround.

James: Yeah, I mean I think it's ... Again, I came from a life of privilege and luxury and not everyone has the chance to go and hang out at Stanford and train and run through the Hills and eat great food before they do this. And so I had every opportunity. So I think it was incumbent to really try and push as much as possible and learn as much as possible. Because I

remember that they said when ... You'd have these mentors, senior guys running all of the training and those one very, very poignant thing that guy said, he said, "When you joined the team, the only two things that you bring to the team, are your fitness and your integrity."

James: And there's this tremendous sort of leveling component where the value that any human brings is what they're able to do and it doesn't matter where you came from or anything like that. It's just what you're able to bring to the table on a daily basis. And so I always applied myself in training, to learn as much as possible, to help the guys around me, to make sure that when I went and joined a team that I would be able to contribute as much as possible to the team.

Chitra: So the Special Force's primary mission is unconventional warfare. What did you learn about leadership in the process of becoming a Green Beret 18X-ray, and learning the process of waging unconventional warfare and some of these other things that you learned?

James: I think the whole exercise through the training is to get people to be adaptive and resilient and brutally stubborn, I think. Unwilling to accept any kind of failure and then they throw them into these environments where they're working with partner forces, they're living with them, they're sort of immersing inside the culture and focusing on helping those partner forces be more successful. Because a lot of times these are other people's wars, these are insurgencies that are providing safe havens to terrorists and helping them improve the local security situation. And there's this concept in close quarters battle whereas you walk into a room and you set off some explosives and then a bunch of guys run into the room ... Is you have this concept called find a job.

James: So you're trying to point guns in as many directions as possible and make the room as secure as possible. And if ever you have enough people pointing guns in those directions, you find some new job to do. You find something else useful to do. So you're continually seeking to find more to do because this is just building what the team is doing. And I got to see that on deployments where you would find those jobs. So the team is there for six months, they're working on things and everyone's busy and you're always looking for that opportunity to take on a little bit more to help the team to achieve their mission.

Chitra: I know a lot of what you did was probably classified, but are there any missions you can talk about that kind of clarified your vision of yourself as a leader of leadership as you undertook some of these dangerous operations?

James: Think back to 2010 I think it was my third trip to the Philippines and this was where Al-Qaeda had a Safe Haven. It's where they planned some of the 9/11 attacks from. And so there'd been a continuous Special Forces presence there working to help the Philippine police and the army create a more secure environment and building on that idea of you just do whatever you can to try and make things better all the time. And knowing that I'd had all these privileges and all these opportunities, and I saw there was one partner force that was a group from the Philippine army that was next to this mountain range where all of the Al-Qaeda guys, the local affiliate Jamas lo Mio were hanging out and it was kind of a seam and nobody was talking with these guys. And I thought, well, I looked around and I'm like, "All right, well somebody's got to go and talk to these guys. Somebody's got to get them outside their base and going and running some operations and trying to secure the local area and make it a little bit less friendly to Jamas lo Mio and the Al-Qaeda guys".

James: So I looked at that and my boss gave me the green light and so I started working with the local Colonel and the Philippine army to get him to actually run operations. And it was tremendous to have the freedom to do that. I think probably as a young junior non-commissioned officer, you don't get that opportunity very often. But Erik trusted me and let me go and do that.

Chitra: And what was the most difficult thing you ever had to do? If there is one that you can share? The most challenging thing that really made you ask yourself, "What am I doing here?"

James: I think one trip in 2009 and this is not like an acute physical challenge, but I remember one trip in 2009 where we were working with the local Tier 1, which means that these guys are the top guys in the entire Philippine army and so they're going around and they're catching terrorists all over. Working with those guys. And our job was both to train them for operations and make sure that they were as prepared as possible and then also to put together missions for them. So we were trying to be their champion. And it's not very sexy, but I remember working days and days and days on end and going to meet with local counterparts and meet with cops and meet with the local intelligence services and just working to get missions for these guys. And so I was training them all day long and making sure that they were ready to go and conduct things and be tactically sound.

James: And then just working, taking all these meetings, drinking a lot of what they call 3 in 1, it was instant coffee with creamer and sugar, more than is probably good for you. Just to try and get a couple of operations that they could go and run, so they can catch some bad guys. And we were

able to do that. And they were able to catch some bad guys, but it was a grind. It was just training all day and going in and talking all night just to try and get some things going so that they could get out the door, and they could go catch some bad guys.

Chitra: And I think that's a great example because when you read the books, and you see the movies, or the TV shows, you see all of these dramatic door breaking operations and that constant action and the constant energy. But underneath all of that is that constant grind of gathering intelligence under very dangerous conditions. And trying to protect yourself and your team and everyone around you. And so I think that's a really good example.

James: Yeah, I think there's guys that are doing absolutely Herculean feats out all over the world and people that are saving lives and catching bad guys. And these are just phenomenal Americans, they're phenomenal patriots and from all other countries as well. And there's a lot of this, it's a grind, it's continuous effort on a daily basis. And the only grounding reason why you do that I think is that internal drive to do something for other people and the sense of responsibility, because everyone there from very diverse backgrounds is unified behind that mission that's assigned to the team. And everyone knows that they need to do that part. And they do that every single day.

Chitra: How long did you serve and what was it like when you got out to re-acclimatize yourself to being a civilian?

James: A little over five years. And so I'd gone from the training in North Carolina out to Asia with a team, they're phenomenal guys. And then came back from that to Washington DC and it was kind of funny, I joked with my dad who was in the finance sector and I said, "I didn't know that there was a global financial crisis because I was deployed I missed that whole thing." And I came back to Washington DC and I moved in with my wife who had been living there and working there. And I get to the apartment building she's been living in and the guy wouldn't let me into the building because he said, "Hey, she's not married, you've never been around, who are you?" And then even my bank, they put a fraud alert in place and they shut down the credit cards as soon as I got to Washington DC and they said, "There's no way that this guy is there actually with his wife."

James: And I think a lot of guys struggle with this transition. It's not an easy thing to go from being in such a high trust environment where everyone is purpose driven behind a goal and sort of relentlessly moving towards that. So now all of a sudden you're kind of on your own and you've got to figure things out for yourself. And that can be a challenging spot light. I

remember for the first few months I was a little bit paranoid and probably a little bit aggressive about things when I got back into the civilian sector.

Chitra: How did you overcome that and regained both your sort of calmness and focus and your life, and your new mission?

James: I had met on the way back from a deployment, I've met up with a buddy of mine from Stanford and told him about some of the challenges I'd faced on deployment where I'd been writing some code to try and glue data together to catch some bad guys. And he said, "Hey, I work at this company called Palantir and you should really go check it out." And so I'd looked at that, and I was very fortunate that he helped bring me into Palantir, in early 2011. And what that connected me with was a bunch of other guys who had tried to make things better for other guys in the army and the Marines and the intelligence community. And so it gave a vehicle for purpose and gave you that little bit of a tribe back to work to try make things better for other guys.

Chitra: And then what you found was a different way to help your former teammates and future Special Forces because you were seeing gaps in the kind of intelligence that they had access to in the field and you found a new way to deal with that.

James: Absolutely. I saw that myself back in the Philippines where you're trying to analyze information and pull things together, and you're hamstrung by the tools. And I knew that this was a problem, and I have a very strong memory of ... We found out some information about ... There were two guys from first group, my unit that had been killed in an IED attack in 2009 and we'd uncovered some of the finance network information that had actually supported some of this. And being able to prove to other organizations that we had this information was incredibly difficult. And I felt incredibly frustrated. I didn't want to come home after that trip. I wanted to stay there and keep working at that. And what I saw at Palantir was that this is an opportunity to actually solve that problem for a whole bunch of guys.

James: For the thousands of people out there in the army and the Marines and say, "Hey, we can actually solve this and we can make this better for those guys." And I think it was a sense of responsibility that ... Not everyone has been fortunate enough to have this experience and understand these challenges and Palantir was this tremendous vehicle to actually solve that. And I felt that it was again our responsibility to tackle this so that Marines could find IEDs and army guys could find terrorists and things like that.

Chitra: And tell me about what you're doing now. You've now started to do your own company, Adyton. Tell me about what Adyton does and what you're trying to accomplish sort of in this next phase of your life.

James: Yeah, I think it's building on that sense of responsibility to do what you can, right? Going back to finding a job, it's ... I saw in Iraq that the ... In 2015 and '16 I'd been there working to develop some tools to help defeat ISIS. And we saw that as a complete vacuum of mobile technology within the defense sector. And guys need this. And in 2000 and ... Gosh, I guess it was 2018, I'd gone, I'd seen my brother, he just got back from Nangarhar. And he's telling me about his experience trying to support operations fighting ISIS, using the cell phone that he's been equipped with and some of the software challenges he had there. And so we're trying to develop the technology that will enable software to run securely on mobile applications within the defense sector. And really it's giving guys access to the information that they need. It's not just inside of a skiff where we saw Palantir had great effect, but it's actually for the guys that are out there on patrol, giving them access to what they need.

Chitra: So your brother also joined the military?

James: Yeah, he ended up in the exact same group as I did. So he was in first group and again, phenomenally talented guy. He speaks Chinese, has a master's degree in counterinsurgency studies, and he's doing tremendous things to support teams as they go and they track down bad guys.

Chitra: Older or younger brother?

James: Younger brother.

Chitra: How do your parents feel about having had two of their kids ... I guess there were two of you, right? Two of you in the military?

James: I think they want ... My dad jokes. He's like, "What did I do wrong?" I think they share that kind of concern that any parent would have. And I think that they also ... They see that this comes from a sense of responsibility to do things for other people. It's not something that is expected or asked for many people from our background, but that they brought us up with the kind of values that you need to step up and take responsibility.

Chitra: Looking back, are you glad you took the journey that you did and do you miss your life in the Special Forces?

James: Absolutely. It was a phenomenal experience. I think the guys that you work with are just some of the best people out there. Everyone is driven. Everyone wants to accomplish something bigger than themselves. And I wouldn't change that. Wouldn't change it one bit. I miss it every single day. Just phenomenal human beings. I miss the sense of purpose and intent that everyone brought on a daily basis. And so that's why we're trying to create some of that ourselves. We're trying to create that with a software company to give guys a vehicle for purpose and intention and make things better for others.

Chitra: James, thank you so much. This has been a great conversation. Do you have any closing thoughts?

James: Having seen developing countries all over the world in conflict areas where people are struggling, they're struggling for food, and they're struggling for shelter. Comparatively speaking, in the United States we have things way better than most people in the world. And certainly there's a lot of us that have things better than most. I have had that myself, a tremendously privileged background. And given that opportunity, it's really it's not about what you can do for yourself. What I learned in the army is what you do to show up every single day and do things for other people. And everyone is judged purely by the actions and the outcomes. And so really given this tremendous privilege, it's on us to figure out how we best contribute to other people. How we best serve and make the world a slightly better place because these have to be external goals, not internal goals.

James: And I'm very thankful for all of the opportunities and the privileges that I've had to do that. And I think you see the heroics that guys achieve and it reinforces why we have to show up every single day and why we have to pursue what we can do to make things better for others.

Chitra: Great conversation, James. Thank you.

James: Thank you, Chitra.

Chitra: James Boyd is the CEO and co-founder of Adyton, a technology startup based in Scottsdale, Arizona. Thank you for listening to When It Mattered. Don't forget to subscribe on Apple podcasts or your preferred podcast platform, and if you like the show, please rate it five stars, leave a review and do recommend it to your friends, family, and colleagues. When It Mattered is a weekly leadership podcast produced by Goodstory, an advisory firm helping technology startups find their narrative. For questions, comments, and transcripts, please visit our website at goodstory.io or send us an email at podcast@goodstory.io. Our producer

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