

# When it Mattered

## Episode 55: Alex Dietrich

Chitra Ragavan:

US Navy Lieutenant Commander Alex Dietrich was going about her business this spring, getting ready to retire from active duty as one of the first female fighter pilots in the US. Then she got an unexpected feeler from 60 Minutes, the CBS television show. The US government was preparing to release a report on unidentified flying objects, or UFO's. Would Dietrich be willing to go on the show and talk about the strange site that she and her four teammates had seen up in the air during a training mission back in 2004? The 60 Minutes producer asked. Hello, everyone I'm Chitra Raghavan, and this is When it Mattered.

Chitra Ragavan:

Dietrich thought hard about it and decided that taxpayers needed to know more about the videos, now unclassified that had been captured that day, videos that you all may have seen on the news over the past few weeks. That decision to go public and help remove the stigma associated with reporting strange sightings, or inexplicable phenomena, has put the introverted and media shy Dietrich in the spotlight. It has also connected her to legions of UFO believers on social media, a rather strange spot for someone to be in who is not a science fiction fan, despite a rich family history in science fiction writing.

Chitra Ragavan:

Joining me is retired Lieutenant Commander Alex Dietrich. She served as an F/A-18F strike fighter pilot from the VFA-41 "Black Aces" of Lemoore, California. Dietrich retired from the US Navy after 20 years of service, having logged more than 1,250 hours and 375 carrier arrested landings. She served two combat deployments in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. Dietrich is now serving at the National Center for Atmospheric Research on their talent learning and development team, with a mission of science and service to society. Alex, welcome to When it Mattered.

Alex Dietrich:

Thank you.

Chitra Ragavan:

Why did you decide to join the Navy and become a fighter pilot? It's a rather non-traditional career, pretty formidable barriers and a daunting challenge, in addition to putting your life on the line in service of your country?

Alex Dietrich:

Well, I would say that I was a typical teenager. I went to an atypical high school, it was the Illinois Math and Science Academy, but I had the typical teenage angst, and I wanted to have fun, I wanted to have an adventure. And so when college counselors and teachers were asking me what I wanted to do, I had to declare a major for college and I had to take all of these standardized tests, I said, "Oh, I don't know what I want to study, and I don't really know what I want to do." I thought, well maybe I could have an adventure, maybe I could do something fun first and then settle down later in life, and so that's why I decided to pursue Naval aviation, and I did that through the NROTC scholarship at George Washington University, so four years of going and having a normal college experience, but also doing some summer training with the Navy, and some Naval science courses throughout the year. And then I graduated and commissioned in May of 2001, into the Navy.

Chitra Ragavan:

So your initial goals weren't all that lofty and ambitious.

Alex Dietrich:

No, not at all. Again, it was all about me and my selfish adventure, and wanting to do something cool and exciting while I was young and had the energy.

Chitra Ragavan:

But all of that changed on the day of your first flight, which also happened to be on 9/11. That must have been quite a day for you. Tell us a little bit about that.

Alex Dietrich:

Yeah, so I graduated, again, in May of 2001, and I headed down to the beach in Pensacola, Florida, which is where our ground school is. We call it aviation preflight indoctrination, API, and then from there I went to Corpus Christi Texas for flight school for our primary flight training, and just a little T34 turboprop planes. And we were just doing the initial, we call it a fam phase, or familiarization, when 9/11 happened. And obviously that was a huge shock to the country, to the world, but for me and my peers, it was a total paradigm shift. We realized that it wasn't about me and my selfish adventure, that I had raised my right hand and taken an oath of service, and service to something bigger than myself, and I needed to figure out what that meant, and how I was going to contribute in a meaningful way.

Chitra Ragavan:

That must have been an incredible change in your perspective. I want to go back a little bit in time, from before 9/11, when you were actually in flight school that summer, you were given a very unusual and interesting extra credit question in an otherwise boring FAA manual that you described to me a couple of days ago as a sleeping pill of a manual. What was that extra question that you were given?

Alex Dietrich:

Yeah, so this was some interesting foreshadowing. So summer of 2001, in my initial ground school flight training, this flight rules and regulations course where they're teaching us about civilian airspace of how to stay out of trouble and not get a flight violation, there was an extra credit question that said, "What do you do if you see a UFO, how do you report it?" And my peers and I thought it was an absurd question, that it was silly, that it was a trick, but then when we opened up this thick FAR/AIM Manual, that's the FAA's flight rules and regulations manual, we opened it up and we said, huh, there actually is this page in here with this phone number to call when you see a UFO. And I thought, that's weird, that's cool, and also what a brilliant teaching technique that this instructor found this absurd little tidbit to include and serve as a hook to get us to actually open up the book and read through it.

Chitra Ragavan:

And I guess it became very relevant, which you probably didn't realize at the time, but fast forwarding to November 14th, 2004, that question actually became relevant to you and your team, there were four of you who were up in the air on a training mission. Tell us briefly what happened next, what did you see?

Alex Dietrich:

Yeah, so we were launched and expecting to do this routine training mission off the coast of Southern California, when we were vectored to intercept a real-world contact that the USS Princeton, one of the other ships in our battle group, was picking up on their radar. And when we merged with it, we saw something weird in the water, some disturbance, and then we saw this weird flying Tic Tac shaped object that we engaged with, and it disappeared almost as fast and abruptly as it came into the picture. And we were shocked, we were confused, we were alarmed that we couldn't identify it visually, that the Princeton wasn't able to identify it from their radar. And then a follow on flight, a single aircraft with two people, was able to get some clear footage of it, but again, from that we weren't able to identify what it was, or how it was maneuvering the strange way that it was.

Alex Dietrich:

When we came back to the ship one of the first things I said was, "Does anybody have a copy of the FAR/AIM Manual? I need to find that page with that phone number to call to report a UFO." But the other aircraft in my flight, the lead aircraft, was my commanding officer, Commander Dave Fravor, and he was the skipper of the squadron, the most senior aviator in my chain of command, and so I didn't call a phone number or call the FAA directly, I deferred to him and his seniority in terms of reporting the incident up the chain of command, and taking any follow that would be appropriate.

Chitra Ragavan:

And so you all were pretty vocal about this, you were amazed and reported it, even though probably as a junior officer, you were probably a little concerned about, as you know, there's a lot of potential stigma associated with disclosing these kinds of things,

and people are like, what is she talking about? What happened next, was this taken seriously? What was the next couple of steps that happened?

Alex Dietrich:

So I would say that we did an official debrief. We went to our intelligence officer, or intelligence team on the ship, and we gave them the information that we had. So in that respect it was taken seriously. Our colleagues, our friends, and the folks on the ship certainly teased us, and we had a good laugh about, again, the absurdity of the situation. We're certainly conditioned as Americans, or in our culture, with all of our movies and TV shows, to make fun of UFO's and people who see them. So on a personal side, there was teasing and this banter that was happening, but then on a professional side, I did feel that it was recorded, that the incident was noted by the chain of command, and eventually this was confirmed a few years later when I was contacted by members of the team in the Pentagon who were investigating UAP incidents. I assume that it was part of this ATIP being referred to in the media, the first generation being ATIP, and then the current-

Chitra Ragavan:

The organization that's looking into this, yeah.

Alex Dietrich:

Right, and I think the current title is UAP task force. But whatever the title, the intent was to make sure that they had all the information and that they were able to add this incident to a pool of data, or similar cases, to look for trends and do a thorough analysis. So from about 2009 until this year, I've been in contact with, in a one-way flow. They call me in to answer questions about this particular incident, and maybe show or share something that they have from a different incident and say, "Is what you saw? Is this similar?" I'll say yes or no, but they're not giving me a download of everything else that they're looking at.

Alex Dietrich:

So just because I saw something weird in 2004 does not mean I have insight into all of these other incidents that may or may not be happening. So from that perspective I think that, yes, this has been taken seriously by the department of defense, by the folks in the Pentagon who are looking into this as a potential national security issue, national defense, is this an adversary? Is this some sort of disruptive technology that's either an immediate kinetic threat off the coast of California, or is it some sort of espionage effort that is collecting information on our systems, on our tactics, and in the case of 2004, we were training, so are they watching us to see how we maneuver and how we react? So I think that it is being taken seriously and investigated thoroughly.

Chitra Ragavan:

Now your colleagues probably didn't know it at the time, that you have this rich family history in science fiction. I mean, it's really amazing. Tell us a little bit about what that connection is.

Alex Dietrich:

So I personally, I don't enjoy science fiction. I don't read it, I don't watch it, I enjoy documentaries, I think that truth is stranger than fiction, and oftentimes more entertaining. But my great-grandfather, Roman Starzl, was one of the, I guess, pioneers of the science fiction genre. He was an author and publisher of a newspaper in a small town in Iowa, and so he wrote a lot, but he did write these science fiction stories that were gobbled up by folks when that genre was beginning in that era. And so it's a legacy that my family is proud of, and personally I've skimmed a few of his stories but, like I said, I have a hard time following them because I'm just not that interested in science fiction.

Chitra Ragavan:

And his son was also someone who was in a line of work different than writing science fiction, but at the time, the work that he was pioneering in medicine was considered almost science fiction, correct?

Alex Dietrich:

Yeah, so Roman's son, Thomas, who was my grandfather's brother, Thomas Starzl, he was the pioneer of human organ transplantation. And absolutely, when he started his work, the thought of taking an organ out of a person and installing it into another body just seemed like science fiction. Folks thought he was crazy, they thought he was like a Frankenstein mad scientist, that he had a God complex. He faced all sorts of criticism and friction in trying to advance this field and do this systematic research in the lab. But he eventually was able to persevere, and as we know, it's commonplace now. I went to the DMV recently and they ask you on your driver's license, do you want to be an organ donor? Yes, no.

Alex Dietrich:

So we might not understand the science behind it, the surgical techniques or the immunosuppressive therapies, the medicine or the drugs that you take to prevent rejecting that donor organ, we may not understand it, but we all accept it as normal and possible. And so yeah, that's another family legacy that we're proud of, and that I think is a demonstration of being open-minded and innovative, but also grounded in the principles of sound science and making sure that the results are replicable, and that you have evidence to back up what you're trying to do.

Chitra Ragavan:

So has that influenced how you're looking at these unidentified aerial phenomenon, as the government now calls them, or UFO's as we know them to be, has that influenced how you see it? I'm sure people are asking you all the time, "But why can't you tell us what it is? What could it be? Give us your hypothesis," right?

Alex Dietrich:

Yeah. It's so interesting that people think that I spend a lot of time thinking about this, just because I had an encounter, but I don't. I had this encounter in 2004, but it doesn't

scratch that part of my brain that is really interested in pursuing the why behind it, or the what behind it. I'm not a UFO-ologist, I don't spend time reading or researching this area. A lot of people do, but it's just not that interesting to me. I have a degree in civil engineering, and I chose that because I do prefer the hard science, or the tangible science. I had courses in concrete and steel and soil and water, and things that I could touch and see, and really visualize the forces involved.

Alex Dietrich:

So when folks ask me, "What do you think it was?" Or, "What do you think about all these other incidents that people are reporting?" I say, "Well first of all, I don't know that those other incidents are related." It would be irresponsible of me to lump them all together and say they're all of the same origin, or the same phenomenon. And furthermore, I'm just not qualified to do that analysis. I don't have any of the technical, or I don't have the education to help me understand that degree of physics, or what might be involved.

Chitra Ragavan:

I think this report is going to do, this upcoming report, it's going to be released in the next couple of weeks. I mean, is it going to assuage all of the UFO believers out there? I mean, is it going to answer any questions, is it going to change hearts and minds? What's your sense of it?

Alex Dietrich:

I don't think so. I would be really interested to hear from the social scientists right now. And I have a feeling that they're probably exhausted from the last four or five years of our political situation, and analyzing the collective psyche that it led to an insurgence on the capital. Hopefully they're all taking a well deserved vacation. But I would like to have them weigh in on, what's the psychology behind these UFO believers, and what's the sociology and the anthropology behind these communities of folks, whether they're on the extreme of the conspiracy theorists, or whether they're on the extreme of the debunkers.

Alex Dietrich:

There are these tribes that have organized around this issue, and I'm interested in that, how they identify, how they communicate, what their goals are, and how many of them see this report as some sort of paradigm shift or, I don't know. I don't know what they want, and I suspect that the report won't give them what they want. And part of their ethos is this anticipation, that they enjoy the pursuit of the unknown more than actually figuring out what is behind any one of these particular incidents.

Chitra Ragavan:

Yeah, fascinating. And weirdly, you're not interested in science fiction, but this thing has now connected you to this whole world of people out there, they're probably reaching out to you and probably identifying with you in a certain way, because you've somehow shared this experience that many of them believe that they've had as well.

Alex Dietrich:

It's some sort of strange karma, I guess. Yeah, that I would say, I don't want anything to do with this, and I've suddenly become a magnet. It's really interesting, so people have been reaching out to me for years, and it's interesting that when reporters now are calling me they say, "Why did you decide to speak out?" And I tell them, "I have never not been speaking openly about this, it's just that 60 Minutes had never called me before, and when they did, I agreed to talk on this larger platform." But folks had been reaching out to me for years, from serious journalists and reporters, to curious citizens or conspiracy theorists. And so I can usually tell from their tone, whether they call me on the phone, or in their email, whether they seem of sound mind and stable, or whether they are kooky.

Alex Dietrich:

But what's interesting to me is that there's been an uptick now, since the 60 Minutes report, of people who are articulate, and they seem of absolutely sound mind, who are reaching out to share their stories with me. And I don't know what they expect me to do with them, and I guess I could relay them up through this official reporting channel and be a node for that, but what's interesting is, again, this psychological need to be validated, or to share this experience with someone. And a lot of them do, they reach out to me and they say, "I saw you on 60 Minutes, and you don't seem crazy, and I'm not crazy, and I just need to share with you this experience I had 10 years ago, or 20 years ago." It's as if they want me to hold it with them and share this burden that they've been carrying around, that they've been too afraid to share, or they didn't know where to share it without sounding crazy, or maybe risking their career or their relationships by being lumped in with the UFO freaks.

Alex Dietrich:

So I think that that's a really interesting phenomenon that's happening right now, and I try to acknowledge as much as I can, I try to send back, at least a one-liner and I say, thank you for sharing, I hear you, I see you, hang in there.

Chitra Ragavan:

Well people now associate you with the Lieutenant Commander who's talking about UFO's, but really you've had a very successful career as a fighter pilot, you've broken a lot of barriers in a very male dominated industry, so to speak. It must not have been easy for you, I'd love to know what that has been like as you've now retired and you're looking back, the barriers that you broke, and now you're helping others break as well.

Alex Dietrich:

Sure. Well I'd say, first of all, that I stand on the shoulder of giants. And although I am one of a handful of female fighter pilots, I'm not the first, and there are women who were truly groundbreaking, and dating all the way back to World War II with the WASPs, the Women Airforce Service Pilots who served as instructors, as transporting the aircraft off the assembly line to their various spaces within the US in order to free up the men to go overseas and deploy in the combat zone. So those women were flying these, these

beast aircrafts, these bombers and fighters long before me and my generation of, of women pilots, so I just want to give a tip of the hat to them. And then of course in the eighties and nineties there were really the first combat women who entered after the repeal of the combat exclusion, and I think that was under the Clinton Administration and '91, '92, and so those first women really, just a load of gratitude to them.

Alex Dietrich:

But we haven't reached a critical mass yet. We are still working to provide networks of support for young women who are coming up through flight school and into the fleet, so it's important for them to have a lateral network of support with peers, so that they don't feel the tokenism being the only woman, or the only minority in a squadron. That can be hard. And then also that they have a vertical network of support, that they have mentors and role models in the senior ranks. Each year we're getting a few more that promote to command, or promote to even the ranks of Admiral, in order to provide that line of support back down. If you can see it, you can be it.

Alex Dietrich:

I was already out of the squadron the first time I was able to attend a conference, it's called the Women in Aviation International, but when I did it was one of the first times that I'd ever connected with other women in flight suits in a large group, and there were probably 70 or 80 in the room, military aviators, in this group of thousands of other civilian pilots and air traffic controllers and maintainers, everybody in the aviation industry. But I just thought, wow, where have you been all my life, all my career, like unicorns. And so there's been a real effort to connect now, which is much easier to do with social media and all of our online networks. So we've really tried to organize and reach out to those young women who are coming up, and lift them up with support as we can, whether it's meeting up in these little local chapters, we have Facebook groups, and things like that, or whether it's actually going to something formal, like this annual conference, to share our stories and provide professional advice, and just support each other in our development.

Chitra Ragavan:

And you're a founding member of the military's eMentor program, which is promoting membership and opportunity for future generations of minorities in non-traditional fields, and I think there are various programs that you support. What drives you to do what you do, and what are a couple of these programs that you're hoping will make a difference?

Alex Dietrich:

Yeah, absolutely. So we're very proud of eMentor, And again, that's one of those formal initiatives to try to connect women and minorities to be deliberate and methodical about mentoring, to create time and space for these young women to say, these are my goals, or these are my questions, and to connect them with mentors who can say, yeah, I've been there, done that, let me tell you my experience, my lessons learned. Or my mistakes, so that maybe you can avoid or minimize your own. And then these networking groups, like Women in Aviation International, I'm a huge fan of that.

Piggybacking on that is the Wings for Val Foundation. So every year we go to WAI and offer a scholarship in honor of our friend and fellow jet pilot Val Delaney, who we lost too soon in a training mishap. She was a prowler pilot out of Washington State, and we were just devastated to lose her, but her living legacy is this scholarship program that young girls and women can experience the joy of flight and pursue a career in aviation, and just keep her legacy life.

Alex Dietrich:

There's one other program I want to put out there, because it's another great scholarship aviation opportunity for young folks, and that's my Illinois Math and Science Academy friend and classmate, Kenyatta Ruffin, founded the Legacy Flight Academy, and legacy is referring to the legacy of the Tuskegee airmen, so those men who served in World War II in a segregated squadron, because they were African-American, but they served bravely, and with honor, and they made a significant difference in the course of our tactical advantage in the war. And so this program provides, it's like a summer camp for underserved communities, for youth to come out, and again, experience aviation, and see the potential, if it's something that they would like to pursue. And so it gives them that opportunity, and that's called Legacy Flight Academy.

Chitra Ragavan:

Now you're also an award-winning instructor with the Naval ROTC, you've been a permanent military instructor at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, you're teaching leadership and ethics. What's the core message that you try to instill in your students?

Alex Dietrich:

I have been teaching for the last 10 years, and I'm just in awe of this next generation. I have a lot of friends and older family members who say, "What's going on with kids these days? The millennial generation," and actually we're onto generation Z, we're actually even past millennials now in terms of who's in school and who's graduating right now. And I just am inspired by them. I'm not frustrated or annoyed with them at all, I think that they're different, they're not better or worse, they're different in their motivation and in their communication style, and all of that. But I'm just in all of their ability to really think critically about the issues at hand, and their ability to organize and just leverage the technology that we, as a gen Xer, or my boomer dad right now, I was trying to help him get his internet set up here.

Alex Dietrich:

We're in good hands with this next generation, and so I'm just trying to get out of their way as an educator and instructor, and to reassure them that they can be the leaders of the next generation, and they don't have to fall into the trap of hero worship, or the great man theory of looking at history for World War II, Korea, Vietnam heroes to worship or emulate. Thank you gentlemen for your service, but really the future is cyber. The future is counter-insurgency, the future is a very different battlefield, and it's going to take a different kind of leader and operator, and technical and tactical expertise, and the kids are all raised there. They're rising to that challenge, and they have what it takes,

and they just need to be encouraged and supported on that path, and not shamed or belittled for the quirks that make them their own generation, that they have their own identity.

Chitra Ragavan:

Looking back at the young woman that you were, who took our first flight on 9/11, who became one of the nation's first female strike fighter aviators, a seasoned operator who fought for her country, teacher, mentor. What would you say, looking back, to that young woman about the journey that you've been on, Alex?

Alex Dietrich:

I would say, find a mentor at each phase along the way. I think it took me a while to figure that out, how important mentorship was. I would say, keep an open mind, and keep your sense of humor. I think that that's really gotten me through some tough times and some challenging choppy waters is being able to laugh and find humor, even in the darkest hours, because otherwise you just go crazy.

Chitra Ragavan:

In addition to everything else, you're also a mom, and you've been through this past year of COVID pandemic. Have you had any, what I call, viral insights in the wake of COVID-19, that moment of clarity brought upon by a crisis?

Alex Dietrich:

Yeah, so this past year has really emphasized the importance of making sure your priorities are straight, and of prioritizing your connections. I know that we were cut off from our village, with three small children, and everyone says it takes a village to raise kids, but when you cut off from them, you appreciate how much did that village matters. And so that, and then friends and family, the really important relationships that in 2019, you might've said, "Oh, I'll get around to calling that person," or "I'll get around to visiting that person." In 2020 when you couldn't, when travel was restricted and physical contact was limited, you really realized how much you take those relationships for granted, and that you should reach out and prioritize friends and family, and who is important to you, when you can, before it's too late, before you can't.

Chitra Ragavan:

Alex, thank you so much for joining me on *When it Mattered*, and for sharing your amazing and inspiring story.

Alex Dietrich:

Thank you. I wish you the best, and stay safe.

Chitra Ragavan:

Lieutenant Commander Alex Dietrich served as an F/A-18F strike fighter pilot from the VFA-41 "Black Aces" of Lemoore, California. She recently retired from the US Navy

after having logged over 1,250 hours and 375 carrier arrested landings. Lieutenant Commander Dietrich served two combat deployments, in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. Her last deployment was a year long boots on ground deployment as a provincial reconstruction team engineer in Ghazni Afghanistan. Dietrich has now retired from active duty, and serving at the National Center for Atmospheric Research on their talent learning and development team, with a mission of science and service to society. She continues to mentor young aviators, especially women and minorities, through programs, including her Alma mater, the Illinois Math and Science Academy, the Legacy Flight Academy, and Wings for Val, Women in Aviation International. This is When it Mattered, I'm Chitra Raghavan.