

There is a bronze soldier on guard at St. Nicholas Shrine



At the west end of Liberty Park at the World Trade Center, a bronze horse mounted by a modern soldier rears in defense of the only house of worship destroyed on September 11, 2001. The statue, engraved *De Oppresso Liber*, represents the U.S. Army Special Forces of Task Force Dagger—the Green Berets inserted under cover of night into Afghanistan in the opening hours of America’s response to the deadliest terrorist attack in its history.

In attendance were active-duty service members, Port Authority officers, retired veterans, and retired intelligence officers who served alongside Task Force Dagger during its initial infiltration into Afghanistan. Many took the podium and spoke in remembrance of fellow service members, including those lost during the mission.

“The Green Beret name for this statue is ‘*De Oppresso Liber*,’ to liberate the oppressed. That is what our country, uniquely, in the history of the world has been able to do time and time again,” said Lt. Gen. John F. Mulholland Jr. (Ret.), who commanded Task Force Dagger and later served as the CIA’s Associate Director for Military Affairs. “We want this statue here so that thousands of Americans and

people from the world take the five minutes to stop, examine a statue, read the story, and have in their mind the message of this statue.”



His Eminence speaks with Lt. General John F. Mulholland, Jr., a retired senior officer and former Associate Director for Military Affairs at the CIA. (Orthodox Observer/Dimitrios Panagos)

In an interview with the Orthodox Observer, Mulholland recalled the weight of command on the night his men crossed into Afghanistan. “I was a commander and these were my lads,” he said. “It was incredibly dangerous.”

The 9/11 attacks had occurred only weeks before, so intelligence about the Al-Qaeda and the Taliban was limited. The first teams went in at night, Mulholland said, “into the darkness, into the unknown.”

Those men, and the teams that followed, met that uncertainty with remarkable courage and bravery, he said. Among them were the “horse soldiers” who rode into battle beside their Afghan counterparts. In less than two months, they brought down a Taliban regime.

That victory was not without sacrifice. Six American soldiers and one CIA officer gave their lives in the campaign. On the 25th anniversary, Mulholland said, it was important to remember the men who went in that night and those who did not come home. “It wasn’t cost-free,” he said.

The statue was introduced to the public during New York City's Veterans Day Parade on Nov. 11, 2011, and dedicated that day in a ceremony led by Vice President Joe Biden and Mulholland. It later moved to a temporary location near the base of One World Trade Center and was dedicated in Liberty Park in September 2016. Sculptor Douwe Blumberg conceived the work, and in April 2011 an anonymous group of Wall Street bankers who lost friends in the attacks commissioned the large version. A piece of steel from the World Trade Center is set into its base.



America's Response Monument overlooking Saint Nicholas Shrine and the World Trade Center (Orthodox Observer/Alkis Tzortzoglou)

His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America opened the commemoration, held days before the 25th anniversary of Task Force Dagger's insertion, honoring those who answered the call to fight on America's behalf.

“Lord, in your infinite mercy and compassion, grant on this solemn anniversary of their courage and sacrifice the good news of your love — love to all who visit this sacred monument. Send healing to those whose hearts have been broken by loss and grief,” His Eminence said. “Strengthen those who defend our liberty and keep us safe from harm. Restore sanity and reason in our world, blinded by hatred and intolerance. Free those who have been traumatized by grief and injury, whether of body, mind, or soul. And grant to those who have fallen in the defense of our nation and of our sacred and universal values, that their sacrifice may always be acceptable in your presence.”

Among those gathered was Carl Hollister, an Archon of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and director of the St. Photios Greek Orthodox National Shrine, who served in Afghanistan in 2004 and 2005.

“I worked with some great people, some great heroes, and there’s a lot of heroes here today,” Hollister said.

America’s Response Monument sits directly above the site of the original St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church.

“The original location of our church, which perished on 9/11 should be ever protected and guarded by this symbol of heroism and courage is a deeply meaningful commemoration for all of us,” Archbishop Elpidophoros said.

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