

**The Langley Files**  
**File 18**  
*The 9/11 Survivor Turned CIA Usama Bin Laden Tracker*  
*Part III: Finding Bin Laden*

*(music begins)*

**Walter:** At CIA, we work around the clock and across the globe to help keep Americans and others around the world safe. Secrecy is often vital to our work.

**Dee:** But we're committed to sharing what we can when we can. So let us be your guides around the halls of Langley as we open our files and speak with those who have dedicated themselves to this mission.

**Walter:** These are their stories.

**Walter and Dee:** This is The Langley Files.

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**Dee:** Welcome back everyone to part 3, the final part, of this very special 3-part episode. We've been speaking a former CIA officer who was a survivor of the attack on the Pentagon on 9/11, had later joined the CIA, and ended up on the very team on the hunt for the target responsible for the attacks on that unthinkable day, Usama Bin Laden.

**Walter:** When we last left off, Kevin had shared that the team had a high level of confidence that they had found Bin Laden and were awaiting the final course of action that would be taken by the United States against this target.

**Dee:** So let's listen to Kevin as he shares his experience during this operation and what it meant to him, personally.

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**Walter:** Where were you when you found out which option had been chosen and how was that?

**Kevin:** So we had a center here at headquarters that was monitoring the Abbottabad compound 24/7. And so in those final months and weeks, there really became an even closer high-profile focus on that center. We had different watch sections helping with the monitoring in that center, and then ultimately coming off of one of those watches, I think is when I heard that the the decision was made to go with the raid. And that was after, you know, many practice sessions and planning sessions with the Navy SEALs. So in the final month and weeks leading up to the raid, um, mind you that we've been on this target and I'd been on the Bin Laden target since 2009, the final decision coming down was incredible that we were actually moving forward with the COA that we all thought was the best choice we are hopeful for. And then it became a time of incredible scrutiny.

**Walter:** Was there a moment when you were told this is happening tonight?

**Kevin:** Yes. In the weeks leading up there were many meetings and we would get feedback of these meetings and we knew that a decision point was coming soon. Primarily, I think it was because of the the weather and the moonlight. We did get word that, uh, a date had been selected. And originally Saturday

was the date the day before the actual raid happened. And so in the lead up to that Saturday, that compound was being monitored closer than it ever was, if that was even possible, we had individuals who then went overseas to directly support from closer locations. We had our lead courier targeter go overseas. Here at headquarters, we were in constant surveillance mode and constant reporting mode because at that time um, there were daily reports that had to be fed up through the command leadership here and in the White House. And basically everybody had to have situational awareness of every occurrence happening at the compound, anything that was happening around it, or in current events and things that could impact the operation. So everyone was kind of on pins and needles. We had multiple communication centers that uh, weekend set up, different centers out in the field overseas. We had one at the White House. There was one here at headquarters, and then we had a center that was surveilling the Abbottabad compound as well and that's where I was located. And when the raid was pushed to the following day, that day, Saturday, became a day of constant reporting, getting ready for Sunday, the day of the raid.

**Dee:** What was going through your mind personally as that, I can imagine the adrenaline of the day of thinking this is gonna happen, and then having it pushed to the next day?

**Kevin:** For sure. I remember I had a birthday earlier in the month of April and was able to get away uh, with my wife. And when we got back, I said to her, the next couple weeks are gonna feel like a deployment, speaking the Navy language to each other. She just acknowledged that she knew what I potentially meant by that and nothing else was said. And so those were very busy days and nights leading up to it. Heading into that weekend, I didn't have to say anything. I remember just looking at her and, uh, telling her that I was working the weekend and giving her the look. The look was kind of, "we're close, this is, something's gonna happen." Sunday morning of the raid, I woke up, come in to work, ready to take up a position that I was assigned to at the center here that was for surveillance and communication. I remember coming into work, not being anxious, not being nervous, but just, feeling like we need the triple check everything that was on our to do list and and just make sure everything was perfect because of not just the visibility of the operation but because, you know, our warriors were heading into harm's way. Kind of very quietly gathered my things from my desk in CTC, my AC one binder, as I called it, headed to the center, and my role at that center that night for the raid was to to be a communications link back to personnel and CTC. And so, inside the center, we had all sorts of individuals plugged in with every resource that you can imagine to support and monitor and surveil the raid as it was being conducted. So we had personnel manning different stations, and we had a SEAL team member present there who was on communication link directly to the field, um, where their command element was and he was relaying communications back into our space. We had individuals who are watching the compound, um, with the surveillance, and it was being projected with feeds on large screen TVs. And so we definitely were visually aware of what was happening and then getting communication reports through that communications officer. It was time to start the raid and remember well, secure chatting with some colleagues who are back in our spaces in CTC and saying, "here we go."

And we started then getting the reports of just how far out the helicopters were to the compound and relaying that back and pretty standard, but also in that space, monitoring to see if there were any Pakistani indications that they knew the helicopters were entering their airspace. And it was all quiet. When the helicopters came into the field of view, we initially observed that first helicopter do like a sharp spin and do a hard landing or controlled crash inside the walls of the compound. And nothing was said in the space. But the "oh shits" were deafening for sure. And I remember, um, not knowing every scintilla detail of the raid, but I leaned over to a senior CTC officer who was nearby me in that space, and I asked, did the plan change or were they meant to do that? And he shook his head no. And as we watched the mission unfold there was a a long stretch of silence and and quiet. We get occasional reports through the SEAL

communication officer there. About 15 minutes or so passed. We're watching, and then we hear this individual stand up and yell out "Jackpot! Geronimo!" And to hear that Naval officer yell that out, the whole space, reacting to it not with cheers of jubilation but almost disbelief and surreal moment. But to hear that for me and to see that up on the screen, uh in terms of looking at the compound was extremely surreal. Any kind of celebration or any kind of other feelings lasted for about three seconds, and then it was focus of getting them out and watching that happen because they needed to get back safely, and and that's what our focus was.

I remember very clearly, uh, watching the helicopters depart the compound and the charges that were set to destroy the helicopter that had crashed went off and it was really almost out of a movie. It was, it was such a scene. They were heading back to their base, and, uh, that space was very closely monitoring if the Pakistanis were responding in any way. They did end up scrambling some aircraft that was detected. The call outs from the aircraft that were airborne, their distances to the helicopters are being reported. And I was reporting that back to our space, and it was kind of a countdown in mileage again. How many miles they're out from base. I remember feeling almost, every one of us in our space, in that center, wanting to push those helicopters to fly faster and just by sheer will get them back safely. And once they crossed the border, got back to their base, and were safely back, it was the time for us to then kind of reflect and and in our somber almost way celebrate quietly and essentially the centers just shut down. We exchange hugs and handshakes and, trying to digest and process the moment. And I very much want to get back to our CTC spaces with my colleagues and friends and share that moment. So walking back, I just, you know, was almost lightheaded when walking on a cloud between where I was and heading back to the CTC spaces, and went directly into a senior colleague's office in our vault and exchange a huge hug with him. We called up the photograph that was taken with the raid of Bin Laden and took a look at that and still had to do facial recognition and still had to do DNA testing, but, uh, to my eye and to his, of course, we had gotten our guy. We reminisced a little bit and and there wasn't a ton of celebration really. I almost think looking back, that in that way that I compartmentalized and focused on being professional, I still was in that mode, but inside I know that was bursting out. I remember, uh, gathering my things and putting them into my bag, ready to get home back to my wife. And I looked at the plaque that I had on my desk for those two years I had made up. And it it said, "don't confuse effort with results." And I looked at that plaque, and, um, I thought of the the years and the incredible work and sacrifice that so many professionals put forward to get Bin Laden before 9/11 and certainly after. And I mentioned that marathon and all of those who ran any mile marker along that marathon and all of that effort and to be a part of the result phase - the end phase, uh, was so rewarding. And that was kind of my mantra - don't confuse effort with results. And certainly, all of that effort led to that result.

I remember walking out of the building and heading to my car and going through the top deck of the parking lot, and there were pretty loud small groups of celebrations going on in the top deck of the parking lot, and I got in my car and drove home. And when I got home, my wife greeted me at the door. We didn't say anything. We hugged. She looked in my eyes and I finally could say, "We got him. We got him." And I said, I gotta call Steve, my brother, brother that I never had. But that brother who saved my life on the day of 9/11. And Steve was still working. He was working for, uh, our national security in another organization. And he was often early to bed and early to rise. And so I gave Steve a call and I said, "Brother, are you sleeping? Did I wake you up?" He said, "No. No, I'm OK. Um what's going on?" I said, "Well, the President is about to make an address and I think you should turn on the TV. You're gonna wanna hear it." And Steve had no idea of what we were leading up to and in that moment it clicked for him. He said, "Brother I'm turning it on right now." And, uh, I said, "I'll call you when it's over." And we hung up and my wife and I watched the address and, uh, and took that address in. And then I called Steve back and and we shared a moment, and the arc was complete. My contribution to that is something

that I'll ever be thankful for. To witness and contribute to all that we were doing during that timeframe against Al Qaeda, against Al Qaeda senior leadership, and to ultimately achieve success with the raid, allowed me to think about next chapters in my life, too. And, uh, it wasn't immediate, but in the the coming weeks and months, that was kind of the decision process that I was going through.

The next day there was still a lot of work to be done. I went to bed the night of the raid, knowing that the next day was gonna be an early start. Got into work and a close colleague who played just an unbelievably key role as an augmentee to our team to bring incredible capabilities and programs to bear against the compound, he and I, and another colleague of ours, another targeting officer from the team, drove to Andrews Air Force Base to meet the aircraft that was coming back from overseas with our lead targeter from the courier team, and some other personnel from overseas. We went to Andrews Air Force Base, and we convinced the the watch desk there to let us take my personal Suburban at the time that I was driving out onto the flight deck and drove my Suburban out on the flight deck. And I think it looks semi-official um, so we were kind of parked off to the side, but on the flight flight deck there and the aircraft landed and as they got out, we greeted one another with the biggest hugs that you can imagine. I remember part of my role then was to quickly get down to Quantico, Virginia, to the FBI spaces there because on the site, second floor of Abbottabad compound one was a treasure trove of information - computer hard drives, documents, all sorts of materials that were taken from the raid. And so an important, really vital part of the raid was the we call sensitive site exploitation - the SSE off of that raid. We had an FBI officer that was part of CTC who deployed overseas, and when the Seals came back with all that material from the compound, that individual took custody, legal custody of the material so that there would be a chain of custody. And if anything from that material gathered could be used in the criminal prosecution or cases, there would be a no jeopardizing the integrity of those investigations. So that material was escorted down to Quantico for the documentation and recording of everything that we got and then prioritizing how to exploit it and and get what could be potentially tactical information from it to prevent any planned attacks and first, and then also to learn more as quickly as we could about the Al Qaeda network and senior leaders.

Down at Quantico, it was quite a scene to see on many, you know folded out card tables, long rectangular card tables all of the materials and papers and documents and flash drives and hard drives and computers, and also some personal effects and things that were taken from the compound. Anything that the SEALs or others thought were of interest off site were laid out on those tables. Remember processing through those, and we had segregated the personal effects from the compound into a conference room. And so in that conference room were boxes of the clothing items and different just toiletries and things that were taken, and various books and things that looked like they might be of personal importance to the residents there and particularly Bin Laden's family on the third floor and Bin Laden himself. Looking at the clothing items, looking at the just personal effects was, again, surreal. It brought it home. It was very much a feeling of of closure for me and uh, at the end of that long day, boxing up those items and telling our leadership in CTC that I would be driving them back to headquarters, it was quite uh, emotional, really, realizing that those personal effects were in Abbottabad just days earlier also was a very tangible, visceral feeling of closure.

**Dee:** The President has now already formally made the announcement to the world, are you able to talk to family, friends, about your role in any of this or that you had involvement? Or are they not witting and not knowing that you're here with the Agency at that point at that point?

**Kevin:** And that point, and that's a great question, I wasn't able to freely share it too widely. I had a few very close friends that knew generally that I was on the hunt, my wife, and that was about it. So all these

celebrations are going on across the country and the world, and a lot of congratulations being passed and things, and I just wasn't a part of that. And that was fine by me.

**Walter:** You mentioned, uh, how it felt like a time to reflect and to look ahead to the next chapter of your life and what that would entail? Can you talk us through what your thoughts were or what that felt like for you in the days and months that followed?

**Kevin:** The the days and weeks and months that followed the raid were also very busy because we were very much in the mode of trying to get new leads to Al Qaeda, leads on their structure and organization of course, leads on any planned attacks that might be ongoing. But it was also a time for me to reflect and digest everything that we had accomplished as a team. It was challenging and difficult to think about moving on. I put my focus in the months after to shifting gears and trying to bring some technology and other targeting tools that we found useful in the hunt for Bin Laden and and help the team that was still hunting for Zawahiri. The HVT two team was made up of really close colleagues and friends. And so, uh, I shifted gears personally and focused on some technical aspects that were hopefully gonna make an impact to make a difference to help their efforts as well. But at that time, too, I was contemplating what my next chapter might be. So for me, that first factor of trying to make a difference and trying to pass along some of the successes that we had to other aspects of the team and other technologies that we are working on. And another factor was my young and growing family. And after all I had been through from 9/11, and after 9/11, I definitely reflected and took stock to put the decision out there that I was gonna put my family first and prioritize my family over everything. It wasn't an easy decision. There was a ton of focus that I put on myself knowing that moving on there would be a bit of a loss of identity, maybe of purpose. I'd live in a lived a life of service, a life of trying to make an impact, and transitioning that and kind of shifting that focus squarely on my family, um, became my number one priority.

But it was the right time for me and my family to do that. Many times since 9/11, both in the early days and the years after, if I ever shared my story, someone would always say, "while you were meant to do something, you were meant to become something and it would be grandiose" or something like that. And I always remember telling whoever was saying that to me, you know, if it's only to be a great husband and a good father, that's more than enough for me. And that's why I decided to put my focus, and my attention was was on my family. So in the months finishing the Bin Laden mission, it was time to take stock and really move forward with those tough decisions.

**Walter:** Do you remember your last day at the Agency?

**Kevin:** I do. Uh the last day of the Agency was very bittersweet. We had, um, a going away and, uh, because I was gonna be living in the area for for not too much longer, uh, we were gonna be relocating, um was busy connecting with friends and making sure that colleagues had my contact information and that we could stay close. And importantly, I wanted to leave something behind. I had obtained some photographs of the compound and different aspects of it, as well as some photographs of bald eagles that I had taken over the years on my own as a hobby. I left behind some personal notes on those photographs to the the people who made such a difference in my life during my time here, mentors I had, close colleagues and friends that I worked with, something to leave behind - a little piece of me so that they could keep here in the building, thanking them for all that they did, and, um, being a part of my journey of never forgetting. That was a big part of my life to make sure that we'd never forget 9/11. That night was justice. It was justice delayed, but it was not denied. Being able to leave a piece of me and those thoughts behind was important, share those with my colleagues.

**Dee:** I would say other pieces of you were left behind, too, within our CIA museum as well. There was a presence of your of your time at the Pentagon. Is that correct, that remained in the museum?

**Kevin:** So the the ribbons that I was wearing on my CNT uniform on the on the morning of 9/11, I had a a couple rows – I was still junior, so it's a couple of rows of medals and ribbons. Those weren't too badly burned. I donated them to the museum here when I first came on board the Agency. And I remember telling the gals who I donated to, I said, “Listen, they're in pretty good shape. I know what they look like. Don't singe the edges and burn these off and make them more dramatic.” I said “I think they might be dramatic enough as they stand,” and then also the Purple Heart that I received. So I received a Purple Heart as one of the the first wounded in the war on terror. I remember that ceremony at the Pentagon. Admiral Vern Clark, the Chief of Naval Operations, hosted the ceremony in the Hall of Heroes. And we had it in the Hall of Heroes because it was so fitting because Sergeant First Class Workman received the Soldier's Medal for Heroism for helping save my life that day. So the two of us were in that Hall of Heroes, and Admiral Clark presented our awards. I remember he called me a hero as well, and I corrected him. I think it was on the spot, something I could do and maybe not have done before. But I corrected him on the spot, and I said, “I'm a survivor. Steve is the true hero.” I donated that Purple Heart to the museum as well. So that's there. And and, uh, it just was amazing over the years to see my artifacts there in the museum. Actually, they originally were placed under an acrylic box in the hallway at the entrance to the museum, and someone at some point in time had placed a a plastic pedestal with an American flag on top. And I thought when I saw that, wow, that that's such a kind gesture. And I remember walking by that frequently and and seeing it, and then the months would unfold, and then years would unfold because it had been there since I first walked through the doors when I donated it, and no one ever removed it. It was they cleaned around it. They left it there, and it's always stayed there and and that just, that made me, just, it was a special thing to see all the time. I wrote up a a little placard for the displays of the artifacts, and on that I explained where they were from, and it didn't list my name. But over the course of the years, I'd have, uh, analysts or case officers or fellow targeting officers kind of come up to me, and if they knew me, they would say, “Kevin, are those your medals? Is that your Purple Heart?” And I would ask them how many times they maybe had walked by that over the years. And they said, “Well, I walk by that every day.” I said, “Oh, aren't you a fine case officer? Aren't you an excellent analyst?” And just, uh, some friendly ribbing and things and because I never told anybody, really, I didn't wear that on my sleeve, and I just wanted it to be kind of a silent source of inspiration and motivation for someone who have to be taking the time to to look at the the artifacts there in the museum, which are many are, just incredible.

**Walter:** Those artifacts were at the very entrance to the museum when Dee and I joined. Uh, we walk past it every day. Uh, and generations of CIA officers, for whom 9/11 was part of what ultimately led to us joining, it's it's an honor to talk to you today.

**Kevin:** Thank you. I remember, um, after the raid, we had hosted some members of the SEAL team here at headquarters and conducted a little bit of a briefing and things. And after the briefing, I had the opportunity to follow them down because they were getting a tour of the museum. I found it incredible sometimes where I happened to be walking by when a tour was being given, and to hear the docent talk through my story, I would sometimes pause and just listen and and observe the group. But on that day, when we took some of the SEALs down, it was a special moment because I was able to present the Master Chief with what I consider my personal coin, a coin of remembrance from 9/11 and um, say just a little bit on behalf of those who were killed on 9/11 and those who survived 9/11 and thanking those guys for what they did in the bravery and courage that they showed. I'll never forget that moment at the entrance to the museum shortly after the raid. Reflecting back on the hunt - not necessarily the raid, but the hunt, just reflecting on my personal experience on the team and the incredible analysts and the incredible targeters who I worked with. Reflecting on maybe what some key success factors were with the HVT one team – one would be the active institutional knowledge, the incredible role that the analyst

played and that they shared their knowledge. They shared their expertise with the targeting officers that were part of the team and those targeting officers could then, uh, really be creative catalyst for driving operations and collection. I think a second critical key factor was driven focus. That really helped guide us every day and help set our priorities, help set our resources, and our efforts, and that third would be the role of the targeters. I think targeting career track is so unique and so special, and it definitely does serve as a catalyst for success. So when you put all those together and the closeness and coordination and the trust, the trust was huge between all of those components in terms of analysts, case officers and targeting officers. Um, that trust and that communication was vital and and really was, I think, the key to that success.

**Dee:** I'm gonna share a quote that we've heard Director Burns say over the years here at CIA - that CIA officers "are often out of sight and out of mind. Our successes are often obscured, our failures are often painfully visible, and our sacrifices are often unknown." So, knowing you lived in the space, you worked here. You know that we don't often get to tell our stories to the public. But here you are, right here, telling your story. What compelled you to want to come on this podcast or just in general, you do this outside of this podcast, to share your story?

**Kevin:** Such a great quote and such a great question. I think for me, the sharing my personal story, particularly surviving 9/11 from day one was always important because I thought that I could be a positive story amidst so much tragedy. And so from the very early months, first year after 9/11, I was comfortable sharing my story and and hoping that being a positive story amongst that tragedy would give people hope and also found it cathartic to share just how much of an impact the collective support of the nation, and, like I said that Navy family and close friends and community taking care of me - how much of an impact that made. Sharing this story in terms of my intelligence career is something that I haven't done before. I love the quote - "we share what we can, and we protect what we must." And, uh, sharing this story for me is a an important part of my life story, the arc that my life story has taken, back from the early days of 1998 into the deployment in Persian Gulf, striking out against Bin Laden and Al Qaeda in response to the African Embassy bombings, my career taking me to the Pentagon, working adjacent to the intelligence officers who were investigating the Cole attack, focusing my efforts on the 9/11 Commission as a staff member to learn the lessons of 9/11, and then ultimately coming here to focus on critical mission areas like weapons of mass destruction, and ultimately Usama Bin Laden. I'm really thankful for the opportunity to sit down with you all here and and share these aspects of what I witnessed and what I contributed to and the impact that we made.

**Walter:** And we're grateful. The honor's ours.

**Dee:** Absolutely. We thank you for your service every step of the way - the service that you've done for this nation. As fellow CIA officers, though, utmost respect for your journey and greatly appreciate you being willing to share that story with us.

**Walter:** Thanks, Kevin.

**Kevin:** Thank you both.

**Dee:** Thank you.

*(music begins)*

**Dee:** You know, we typically end every episode with a trivia question, but in this instance I just don't think it's appropriate.

**Walter:** I agree, my friend. For everybody listening at home, tuned into our next episode where we will answer that still pending trivia question from our last episode, and test your knowledge with a new trivia question.

**Dee:** So, thank to our audio experts Corey and Grif, we thank you.

**Walter:** And thank you again to Kevin. And from all of us here at Langley....until next time...

**Dee:** We'll be seeing you.

*(music concludes)*