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Tom ([00:00](#)):

Please note the following episode contains mature language and descriptions of sexual situations.

Tell me about the Braveheart.

Leonard ([00:08](#)):

Well, the Braveheart was the ex Sir Lancelot. It belonged to the British Navy. It was in the Falklands War. It took a bomb from the Argentines bombed and explode. It has a little bit of history there. And then, the British sold it to a South African casino company and it was converted into a casino ship. Then, the Singapore Navy bought it from them and turned it into a midshipman ship.

Tom ([00:08](#)):

A what ship?

Leonard ([00:37](#)):

A midshipman for training. It was called the Perseverance.

Tom ([00:45](#)):

Singapore, 2006.

Tom ([00:48](#)):

I have a photo here of Leonard. He's on the Glenn Braveheart, a warship that he purchased in 2003 and renamed a nod to his Scottish grandfather. It captures Leonard Glenn Francis at the height of his legend. In the photo, Leonard is wearing shades and a Glenn defense Navy-style baseball cap. The loose-fitting safari suit is meant to disguise his bulk, but still his thighs are straining at the material. You couldn't wrap your hands around his neck. Everything seems oversized. Even his shoes are enormous.

There's something a little clownish about the photo. He's surrounded by 23 Gurkha soldiers. Some wear their hats at a jaunty angle, others with berets or hard hats, automatic weapons in hand. They look faintly ridiculous, holding staged serious expressions as Leonard grins.

Leonard ([01:48](#)):

Well, the Gurkhas was my own little private mercenary force that I had on my ships. They provided security during port visits. And at the same time, they ran all the patrol boats, the security equipment, the sentries, the intelligence during the port visits.

Tom ([02:07](#)):

Tell people you don't know what Gurkhas are and how you recruited them.

Leonard ([02:11](#)):

Well, Gurkhas are warfighters. They're legendary in the British Army. The Sultan of Brunei has the Gurkhas that work for him and his army's police force.

Tom ([02:24](#)):

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Gurkhas are Nepali soldiers whose regiments in the British and Indian armies are renowned for their bravery. After leaving the service, many Gurkhas take up better paid work as mercenaries.

So how many did you have working for you?

Leonard ([02:39](#)):

Well, at my heydays, I had a couple of hundred, but they varied because I rotated them in and out. And depending on my requirement for them, I kept them in a Nepal. And then, when I had surges, I brought them back and I flew them back. It was more economical that way. And although I did have the bunks for the troops, as I would say, because the Braveheart could carry up to 380 troops on the ship.

Tom ([03:12](#)):

Leonard had his own warship and his own army.

I'm Tom Wright, and this is Fat Leonard, a podcast from Project Brazen.

I've been digging into the Fat Leonard affair, one of the craziest ever military scandals, with exclusive access to Leonard Francis himself. As I continued to investigate, I uncovered the astonishing role Leonard, the Braveheart, and his Gurkhas came to play in US national security policy. That someone like Leonard was given access to classified secrets ranks as one of the US military's worst ever national security failures. And we're revealing the full details here for the first time.

Tom ([04:01](#)):

Singapore, 2021.

Tom ([04:08](#)):

It may this year in a crowded bar in Singapore, just before a new round of COVID-19 restrictions, I met a former Navy officer. And the story he told me was almost too outlandish to believe. Few people realize it, but after September the 11th, the US waged its most successful war against Al-Qaeda not in the middle east, but in Southeast Asia. At the time, I was working for the Wall Street Journal in the region. We seemed to write about nothing but terrorist attacks in those days and the fear that Al-Qaeda is about to overrun Southeast Asia.

Speaker 4 ([04:45](#)):

202 people were killed including 88 Australians when a group of extremists members of Jemaah Islamiyah detonated two bombs in a popular nightspot in Bali.

Speaker 5 ([04:57](#)):

The blast, which brought this extraordinary level of destruction, was caused by a car bomb with a devastating attack in the heart of Bali's most popular tourist resort Kuta.

Tom ([05:10](#)):

In the Singapore bar, the former Navy officer and I were reminiscing about those dark days. He played a role in Operation Freedom Eagle, a US military mission aimed at rooting out Islamist fighters from their hideouts on remote islands in the Southern Philippines. The US initially sent in over 1000 advisers, special forces drawn from all branches of the military and CIA. The advisors provided equipment and

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technical know-how to aid the Philippines military hunt down the terrorists. The former Navy officer was almost wistful. He talked about the "fun shit" that went down in 2002, when US and Filipino forces "messed up" the militants. He talked about returning after missions to let loose at all-night parties in an old lighthouse that's now a luxury hotel in Subic Bay. As we drank, a beer for him, a white wine for me, talk turned to Leonard. And that's when he told me an astounding fact. Leonard had played a role in supporting these covert missions.

One of the militant groups was called Abu Sayyaf and its leaders, many of whom had fought in Afghanistan, attacked Western targets and kidnapped foreign tourists. They hit out on small islands and evaded capture by speedboat. The US sent Navy Seals, its special operations force, to aid in the fight.

Leonard ([06:42](#)):

They brought in the Mark V boats that's for the Seals. The Seals were fighting Abu Sayyaf up in the Southern Philippines.

Tom ([06:50](#)):

Mark V's are fast-paced patrol boats armed with Gatling guns, but they only have a small tank and can't travel for long before running out of fuel. The Navy was looking for a solution. It could use its own ships for replenishment, but that attracted too much attention for a stealth operation.

Leonard ([07:08](#)):

The Seals used to sail these boats across from Singapore across Indonesia, hit all the islands. And we used to resupply these boats across because they don't have a range. They're small boats.

Tom ([07:24](#)):

One day during one of our many video calls, Leonard's late evening in San Diego and my afternoon in Singapore, he told me about his part in the fight. He'd learned about the Navy's predicament from his contacts, he said. In fact, one of the reasons he bought the Braveheart in the first place was to give him a ship to help the US Navy fight Al-Qaeda.

Leonard ([07:44](#)):

So my ship, the Braveheart, used to also replenish them at sea. That's a capability we had and this was like very hush-hush. And we did that for them. You know? We'll resupply them with fuel and give them what they want. They would be very discreet because having Seals flipping around... And they will hit all the different ports such as to rest and refuel, and then take off.

Tom ([08:11](#)):

Let's stop for a minute to consider the absurdity of this image. Leonard, a foreign national, who's in the process of ripping off the US taxpayer, is playing at being a Navy Seal, hired guns at his beck and call. There's probably no image that better sums up the war on terror than this. It would be hilarious if it wasn't so deadly serious. And it gets more bizarre. I asked Leonard how he was able to sail the Braveheart and his armed Gurkhas into foreign waters. He claimed the US arranged for diplomatic clearance for his ship and men.

Leonard ([08:43](#)):

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Because you see, my ships were great. They're just like Navy ships. So we're a part of like the auxiliary. You know? And all the embassies gave me diplomatic clearance because that would avoid all the bureaucracy of immigration, customs, declarations. So I come under the flag of the United States.

Tom ([09:06](#)):

The diplomat in that country would ask the government of that country to allow this to happen?

Leonard ([09:11](#)):

Yes, a diplomatic note. Basically, this is to announce that the logistic ship and [inaudible 00:09:18] Glenn Braveheart, and the crew on board will be supporting the USS ship that's going to be important that time. They'll be providing force protection and other various services.

Tom ([09:34](#)):

A couple of weeks later, I was pouring through US court documents of Navy officers caught up with Leonard and found corroboration of his seemingly outlandish claims. A US Naval Attaché in the Philippines called Michael Brooks, who pleaded guilty in 2016 to conspiracy to commit bribery, had arranged for diplomatic clearance, allowing Leonard to bring the Braveheart and its armed mercenaries into the country's waters without any inspections. As a Naval Attaché, Brooks was the official representative of the US Department of Defense in the Philippines during the war against Abu Sayyaf. But Brooks wasn't only concerned with the war on terror. Like so many other Navy officers, he also enjoyed Leonard's largess.

In return for prostitutes and dinners, Brooks supplied ship schedules as well as arranging diplomatic clearance, according to his sentencing documents. And he partied on the Braveheart, which of course doubled up as a floating brothel. Brooks declined to comment. Here's Bruno Wengrowski, the former Navy Supply official.

Bruno ([10:40](#)):

The Braveheart was a party boat essentially. The term for the Navy officers that run the ship is called a wardroom. So he would have the whole wardroom and probably the chief's mess all go on the Braveheart. You would have gambling and new dancers.

Tom ([10:58](#)):

Bruno's talking about Leonard's elite Seal team, prostitutes from across the world whom he would rotate onto the Braveheart. As the officers drank whiskey and played roulette, the women performed life sex shows and took men off to the rooms. Mercenary ship, floating pleasure palace. The Braveheart was at the pulsating heart of Leonard's and the Navy's strange and hedonistic world. I was learning that Leonard's mix of covert work for the US Navy and the sexual kompromat he had on its senior officers was a very dangerous combination indeed.

Tom ([11:40](#)):

Manila, 2008.

Tom ([11:44](#)):

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In late May, the USS Blue Ridge pulled into the Philippines. At the time of the visit, the US mission in the Philippines was proving hugely successful. Many top Abu Sayyaf leaders had been killed or imprisoned. The group was in disarray, but the commanders on the Blue Ridge had other things on their minds. By now, they were not even pretending to do their jobs. Instead, they headed straight to the presidential suite at the Makati Shangri-La hotel and started to drink.

According to a grand jury charge that will go to trial next year, the Navel Attaché, Brooks, would join them after his day at the Embassy. 36 hours later, after enjoying a raging multi-day party with a carousel of prostitutes in attendance and wiping out the hotel supply of Dom Perignon, the men headed back to the boat, the indictment says. And unbeknownst to them, Leonard says he recorded the goings on.

At many events, Leonard claims he would put secret cameras in the karaoke machines that he'd set up in the suites of hotels.

Leonard ([12:59](#)):

I would set up karaokes in the presidential suites. And then, we will also have the cameras rolling. My butlers used to manage everything. My butlers that worked in the hotel, they were really good. They're very professional.

Tom ([13:13](#)):

So they would run the cameras in the main room and in the karaoke room?

Leonard ([13:16](#)):

Yeah.

Tom ([13:16](#)):

It wasn't like you were recording the sex in the bedrooms.

Leonard ([13:19](#)):

Sex wasn't in the bedroom. It was everywhere. They're like a bunch of animals.

Tom ([13:25](#)):

The existence of Leonard's secret sex videos, never before reported, are extremely unsettling.

Did those videos, say, of the Shangri-La carousel, 36 hours of drinking, or whatever it is, so that ended up with the DOJ?

Leonard ([13:38](#)):

No. No.

Tom ([13:40](#)):

Because what? The video is long gone?

Leonard ([13:44](#)):

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No. I have a lot of those videos and pictures, which we kept. What's the point of giving them everything?

Tom ([13:51](#)):

Where are they now?

Leonard ([13:52](#)):

Oh, I got them archived. They're all boxed up and kept in storage.

Tom ([13:59](#)):

So nobody's ever seen them?

Leonard ([14:02](#)):

No. I mean, we got them.

Tom ([14:05](#)):

Imagine Leonard sitting alone in his darkened office watching Navy officers, not to mention himself engaging in orgies. These videos both fed his morbid fascination with sex and gave him a sense of power over the weak sensualist officers of the Navy.

Leonard, I still don't get what you recorded it though. I guess maybe you and I have different ideas of what's fun in the bedroom, but why did you record it? If it's not to-

Leonard ([14:34](#)):

Well, I'm not making porn.

Tom ([14:35](#)):

Huh?

Leonard ([14:35](#)):

I mean, I keep things. It's always great to see people when they're drunk and what they're capable of doing.

Tom ([14:43](#)):

But you would keep these in your office and you would like occasionally just put them in for a laugh?

Leonard ([14:47](#)):

Yeah. I had videos. Yeah.

Tom ([14:50](#)):

So none of the guys who were videoed, until today, none of them would have known that. Right?

Leonard ([14:53](#)):

Well, they all kind of suspect I do have stuff on them. You know?

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Tom ([14:58](#)):

It seems to me, if I'm pressing you as a journalist, I'd say you did do it to get some kind of advantage though, because why did you do it secretly?

Leonard ([15:05](#)):

I don't think I needed to compromise. And these guys are so weak when it comes to alcohol and women. You got them. That's-

Tom ([15:12](#)):

Yeah. But it's like you put it in secretly to get a sort of a maybe you might need it in the future kind of thing.

Leonard ([15:18](#)):

Well, I kind of kept it more for entertainment. That's why I said I have pictures going back 20, 30 years.

Tom ([15:24](#)):

Why not give this stuff to the DOJ?

Leonard ([15:26](#)):

This is what I found out, Tom. The more I talk, the more I give, the deeper I get. Look it here. I'm nine years. I'm stuck here. I mean, this could have all ended a long time ago.

Tom ([15:41](#)):

But what if Leonard was collecting blackmail on the Navy, photos and videos he could sell to America's enemies; Russia or China?

Leonard ([15:55](#)):

What really worried the United States the most was their officers being corrupted by me, that they would be corruptible by the foreign powers.

Tom ([16:09](#)):

Foreign spies began to circle around Leonard. There's someone sitting in an indictment or in a sentencing. They said, "Well, you know what? It's really lucky that Leonard is not a violent person because if he'd been a violent person and he'd gotten all this classified information, then it would have been bad for the security of the US."

Leonard ([16:26](#)):

Well, I never betrayed them.

When I lived in Singapore, my house was just a stone throw from the Russian embassy.

Tom ([16:41](#)):

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Leonard's sprawling white bungalow was in the most sought after part of Singapore. Across the road is a Botanic gardens laid out by the British as a respite from the tropical heat, a reminder of home with bandstands and lakes. His neighbors were a who's who of the city-state, including a number of diplomats.

Leonard ([17:00](#)):

I met the Russian Defense Attaché as a Colonel a couple of times and receptions. Then, he found out where I lived and he would just come by uninvited to drop gifts to me. You know? Vodka and stuff like that. The same goes with the Chinese Defense Attaché. He was always very keen to invite me to play golf. And he was always asking my staff, "I want to meet your boss. I heard so much about him."

Tom ([17:33](#)):

Since World War II, when the US occupied Japan, China has bristled at America's domination of the Pacific. US bases in Japan and South Korea, so close to Chinese territory, remain a point of contention. China is looking upend this balance of power in its backyard. It regularly sends fishing fleets and Navy patrols to tiny disputed islands in the South China Sea, claimed both by China and a number of other Asian countries. It's illegally constructing outposts on these atolls. Turning Leonard would have given China a look inside the US Navy.

Did you ever get hacked? Did anyone ever try to hack your computers or anything like that?

Leonard ([18:16](#)):

No. We had a pretty robust system because we had so much activity going on.

Tom ([18:25](#)):

Leonard's pretty blasé about the risks he ran. More sophisticated systems than his have been hacked by China and Russia. My own family knows the reach of China. Over the years, I've written about Chinese Communist Party corruption. In 2018, I got hold of minutes of a meeting of Communist Party leaders in Beijing that detailed a discussion about efforts to bug our family home in Hong Kong.

As China moved to quash democracy protests in Hong Kong last year ending any pretense of the rule of law in that territory, my family made the decision to leave for Singapore. For many Asian nations, the US Navy is a final bulwark against China's aggressions. Here's Steve Barney, the 7th Fleet's lawyer at the time.

Steve ([19:11](#)):

I used to tell people that I put my head on the pillow at night, wondering, when I was in 7th Fleet, whether war would start while I was asleep. And I had everything laid out so that if I got a call in the middle of the night, I could be into our command center within a minute and ready to deliver advice to the commander, who's trying to execute the defense of the United States and its allies. So extraordinary.

Tom ([19:34](#)):

As China tried to turn Leonard, the Navy, again, relied on him to help project US power.

Speaker 3 ([19:45](#)):

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Indian Ocean, 2007.

Tom ([19:49](#)):

A stage five cyclone is scary with waves of six meters and winds of over 150 miles per hour. The swell was buffeting the Braveheart and the crew wanted to turn back.

Leonard ([20:05](#)):

I had a mutiny going on because my Gurkhas basically had to commandeer a lot of my ships because the crew which I had; Burmese, Filipinos, Indonesians; they didn't want to go through the cyclone.

Tom ([20:24](#)):

The Braveheart was sailing from Singapore to Chennai in India to support the nuclear powered USS Nimitz aircraft carrier on an important diplomatic mission. Leonard got on the radio to the commanding officers on the Nimitz.

Leonard ([20:40](#)):

They were very, very concerned because we went smack into the cyclone.

Tom ([20:44](#)):

Then, disaster struck. The Braveheart was accompanied by a flotilla of about 20 ships from Leonard's company. There was a supply boat loaded up with small ferries and patrol craft and towing steel barges. As a group of small ships were hurled here and there, the barges became loose and disappeared into the waves. For hours, the men were tossed and turned clinging to anything that didn't move.

And then, an act of God. The cyclone passed. As the waters calmed, Leonard spotted the barges drifting on the horizon.

Leonard ([21:31](#)):

We picked them up in the Indian Ocean. It was amazing.

Tom ([21:35](#)):

Finally, the Braveheart met up with the Nimitz just off the coast of India. Officers monitoring the trip on radar could see the small dots of the Braveheart accompanying the warships as if it was part of the Navy. For security reasons, the Nimitz was berthing off shore and Leonard's job was to protect the ship and to transport the 6,000 crew to Chennai. I asked John Bradford, a former Navy officer stationed in Asia at the time, why the US would be relying on Leonard to bring all this material from Singapore at distance of 1,800 miles, the equivalent of New York to Denver, rather than using an Indian company.

John ([22:15](#)):

It is extraordinary. What I heard at the time was that when we wanted to bring the carrier into Chennai, there was no local husband agent that could satisfy the requirements. Because of that, he was able to win the contract of some huge amount, enough that it made it profitable for him to actually bring various things including these ferry boats from Singapore to Chennai.

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Tom ([22:42](#)):

Leonard claims it was his job to make all kinds of backhand payments to local politicians to make sure the visit happened.

Leonard ([22:50](#)):

This is how it operated. I mean, isn't this how the waterfront operates? You know? The docks in the commercial world, how the mafia is involved? It's same thing. This is the military side of-

Tom ([23:02](#)):

Did they know about the bribes you paid or did they just turn a blind eye to it?

Leonard ([23:07](#)):

Nobody would know how much is done in the background to make things work for them. You got to bring Little America, San Diego down to the docks of Chennai, get rid of the rats, clean up the dock, set up an air conditioned mall on the pier so that the sailors can have their set up there just like how things are in the United States.

Tom ([23:34](#)):

What was the sticker cost of that?

Leonard ([23:37](#)):

Oh, it was lots of money. Wasn't cheap. The Nimitz port visit was like close to \$5 million.

Tom ([23:44](#)):

It was an astronomical cost, but the Navy was happy with this opportunity to stand up to China and discuss a lucrative arms deal with India. Leonard was helping the US project his power across the Indian Ocean.

No one in the Navy, however, had any idea that at this time Leonard was also being approached by Chinese spies. And no one, it seemed, knew that Leonard was also working for the Chinese Navy, supplying its ships when they pulled into Singapore.

You told me that you did some business for the Chinese Navy. Is that right?

Leonard ([24:18](#)):

Yeah. Chinese Navy. Yeah.

Tom ([24:20](#)):

What did you do for them?

Leonard ([24:22](#)):

Well, just being their agent when they came into Changi initially. I was very apprehensive dealing with Russians and Chinese because of my relationship with the US.

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Tom ([24:32](#)):

With all the kompromat Leonard had on US Navy officers, his contact with the Chinese Navy was extremely worrisome.

Did the Americans know you were doing that business?

Leonard ([24:41](#)):

Kind of. Yeah. But you know? They didn't bother about that.

Tom ([24:45](#)):

But wouldn't have been bothered by it?

Leonard ([24:46](#)):

If there's anybody snooping around, it was always the Chinese or the Russians. You know? It's not the US side.

Tom ([24:52](#)):

Meaning they just didn't pay attention.

Leonard ([24:54](#)):

No, they kind of trusted me a lot. I was like part of them. You know? I was them.

Tom ([24:59](#)):

Steve Barney agrees that Leonard's behavior put the US in grave danger.

I mean, this was a massive national security risk. Right?

Steve ([25:07](#)):

Yes. I think that that's exactly what it is.

Tom ([25:10](#)):

I asked Steve why he thought his friends and colleagues on the USS Blue Ridge secretly handed over ship schedules and other classified documents so readily.

Did they just see Leonard as part of the Navy because he was so embedded with the Navy at that point?

Steve ([25:27](#)):

I think at some level, yes.

Tom ([25:29](#)):

Even Leonard acknowledges the national security failure at the heart of his story.

Leonard ([25:34](#)):

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Certain things I'm supposed to know and certain things I'm not supposed to know. I probably had too much information.

Tom ([25:44](#)):

My investigations have uncovered another side of this story, one which is much more problematic for the Navy. This isn't a question of a few corrupt Navy officers, but a massive security breach in the US Fleet charged with keeping the world safe from China. Leonard says he never gave up information to China or Russia, sexual or strategic. He was making too much money. But if nothing leaked, it's a miracle.

Over the next two episodes, we'll turn to focus on the human cost of Leonard's actions like Paula Coughlin, whose military career was derailed by the Tailhook scandal in 1991. A number of women would have their lives wrecked by Leonard's personal cruelties. How Leonard brought one commander, an American immigrant success story, under his sway, and the price his wife and children paid is like a tale from Goodfellas.

Marcy ([26:42](#)):

He gave me the whole pep talk about, "Oh, being a spouse in the Navy is the hardest job." I always tell him Mike he needs to punch out and go home and spend time with his... Oh. Okay. So he's telling me that in one sentence. And then the other sentence, he's making arrangements for him to have prostitutes in Tokyo. I mean, this is just gross. Disgusting.

Tom ([27:04](#)):

Leonard was becoming a don and his naval conspirators were acting like mob foot soldiers. They would hold their secrets close and demand their wives do the same.

Marcy ([27:18](#)):

So it's like, "Let's just hush her up."

Tom ([27:24](#)):

Fat Leonard is a production of Project Brazen in partnership with PRX. For Audiation, the executive producer is Sandy Smallens. Mark Lotto is a co-producer and story editor. The producer is Ireland Meacham. Mixing and sound design is by Matt Noble.