

Service to Country

An Interview with General Richard D. Clarke, Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM)

EDITORS' NOTE General Richard D. Clarke currently serves as the 12th Commander of U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) headquartered at MacDill Air Force Base, Florida. Prior to assuming command of USSOCOM, General Clarke served as Director for Strategic Plans and Policy (J5), Joint Staff, the Pentagon, Washington, D.C. General Clarke's other assignments as a general officer include: Deputy Commanding General for Operations, 10th Mountain Division from 2011 to 2013; the 74th Commandant of Cadets, United States Military Academy at West Point from 2013 to 2014; and the Commander of the 82nd Airborne Division. His formative and key Army and special operations assignments include: Director of Operations, Joint Special Operations Command from 2009 to 2011, and eight years in the 75th Ranger Regiment first as a company commander, then as a battalion commander, and finally as the regimental commander. He also served as commander of 3rd Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division. General Clarke has led soldiers at all levels in Airborne, Ranger, Mechanized and Light Infantry units in five different divisions, the 173rd Airborne Brigade, and the 75th Ranger Regiment in the United States, Europe, Iraq and Afghanistan. His deployments while serving in the aforementioned positions include Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, Operation Joint Guardian in Macedonia, three deployments in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, four deployments in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, and one deployment as the commander of the Combined Joint Forces Land Component Command – Operation Inherent Resolve. General Clarke was born in Germany and raised in an Army family. He is a graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, and was commissioned into the Infantry in 1984. He holds a BS degree from West Point and an MBA from Benedictine College. He is a distinguished graduate of the National War College earning a master's degree in security and strategic studies.



General Richard D. Clarke

What interested you in a career in the military?

I am the product of a military family. My father was the first in his family to join, and he served almost a quarter century in uniform. I was born in Germany, a year after he was commissioned, during his first assignment, and grew up moving from various Army posts around Europe and the U.S. I vividly remember his two tours to Vietnam, where he was away from us for a year. Moving every two to three years, deployments abroad,

and other unique aspects of military life became normal to us. But underlying that, the ideas of service to country and contributing to something bigger than ourselves were cultural norms that my parents cultivated. I spent much of my youth observing domestic sentiment in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Public trust in our military was at an all-time low, and had my parents not turned the tide for me personally, I would have been much less receptive to uniformed service.

In my junior and senior year of high school, we were living in West Berlin, and the United States was having some challenges which I observed firsthand while encircled by East Germany and the Iron Curtain. The Soviet Union's internal decline was still their best-kept secret, and they seemed as strong and influential as ever. The Iranian Revolution and the hostage crisis took center stage, and terrorist attacks were on the rise globally. There was a growing sense of instability and insecurity in the world. I was young and wanted to contribute. I also wanted to get an education, but lacked the means to pay for a four-year degree. The military offered a way to do both.

To be clear, I didn't see myself making this a career. Coming out of West Point, I planned to serve my five-year obligation and transition to a civilian job. I never planned to be in uniform 36 years later, but this life has been incredibly rewarding in ways I never expected.

How has your military service and experience shaped your leadership style?

My first assignment was to West Germany in 1984, then to Desert Storm a few years later, and then multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan since 9/11. I learned early and often that securing our nation is costly. When our military

service members make a solemn oath that they are willing to lay down their lives in defense of this nation, that's no small thing. The unforgiving nature of combat is a quintessential reality of the profession. Every decision can be a life or death moment. This shaped my leadership style in three distinct ways.

First, our decisions and actions may result in the death of other human beings; therefore, our commitment to the laws and ethics governing that reality is paramount. The realization that the enemy soldier on the other end of your gun is also a son or daughter, brother or sister, and father or mother is sobering. Young people sometimes see war as glamorous. It's not. There's no room for flippancy. We need to be knowledgeable, professional and precise.

Second, inaction, incompetence or unpreparedness both in training and in combat may result in the death of our own teammates. We cannot tolerate less than the highest standards. When it comes to discipline, fitness and care of equipment, we have to be uncompromising. If you're willing to compromise on those things in this profession, you're not taking the potential consequences seriously.

Third, when you strip away all the technology, the Soldier, Sailor, Airman or Marine of today is the same as the young warrior with a sword or bow a thousand years ago. They have the same hopes, dreams and fears. This is an intensely human business. People really do matter. If you really get to know your people and show them that you genuinely care about them, you have a chance to build the kind of team that can withstand that unforgiving environment in combat.

I'd also add a fourth leadership impact to that list, but it's one that took me many years to cultivate. Never get complacent and stay flexible. When I hear "that's the way we've always done it," it raises my blood pressure. In a single career, I've gone from setting up platoon defensive positions in the Fulda Gap to prepare for battle against the Soviets, to deploying to Desert Storm to counter the aggression of a third-world dictator, to conducting decades-long counterinsurgency campaigns, and now shaping our force to compete in this rapidly advancing digital information age. The world is changing fast, and we must be willing to change with it to stay on top.

What have been the keys to your success and ability to lead in your career?

I have been truly fortunate in my career to serve on some great teams, and while serving on those teams, I had great mentors who took an interest in investing their energy to make me better. Having the opportunity to serve in SOF units early in my career really changed both the trajectory of my career and my outlook on leadership in a broader sense.

As a junior officer, I joined the 75th Ranger Regiment more by fluke than by purpose. I had just completed my company command in the 101st Airborne Division, and had a job lined up in Washington, D.C., which my wife and I expected to be our final tour before leaving for civilian life. The Rangers were conducting a training event with my division, and my commander assigned me to serve as liaison. The Ranger Regimental Commander invited me to try out. I did, and it changed everything.

While in the Ranger Regiment, I was exposed to phenomenal mentors who were among the top leaders in the Army. The Rangers do a few simple, but very powerful, things right. I've tried to carry these characteristics forward and replicate them in every organization I've served with since.

First, the organization is built around a set of core standards that every member must meet. Those standards aren't exclusionary – they're a gateway, not a barrier. And it's not a one-time test where you pass and you're in. You have to maintain that level of performance. That was my first time being exposed to excellence as an organizational mindset, where every single person on the team met the same standards. It was a self-policing team with a culture of constant assessment.

Second, the organization challenged me every day. When you have a team built of people that really want to be on board, and each person demonstrates such exceptional talent, "good enough" isn't a term used often. It was a team where you wanted to excel, had to excel, where the worst thing you can do is let the team down. It's unambiguously written into their creed: "Never shall I fail my comrades." You would show up to work every day ready to give your best, and when you looked to your left and right, you'd see your teammates doing the exact same thing – or something even better. It definitely pushed me to do more.

Third, the organization was absolutely committed to building a deep reserve of leadership talent. Every single Ranger is a future leader for the Army. When a team believes that about each of its members, it creates an atmosphere to cultivate maximum individual potential. For me, it was a leadership laboratory every day. Every officer, non-commissioned leader, and enlisted soldier – each were committed to having a critical eye on the organization, conducting after-action reviews to identify issues, solve group problems, and share lessons widely. It was a learning organization through and through.

At the end of the day, the team generates success – the leader sets conditions. If leaders can cultivate an organizational mindset focused on excellence, oriented on team success, and committed to the individual growth of each team



General Clarke congratulates Navy SEAL candidates in August 2019 as they complete Hell Week, a rigorous multi-day phase of SEAL training designed to test physical and mental toughness.

member, they've done their part. Underpinning it all, leaders have to prioritize the team over their own interests. If you ever step into a leadership position and start with "how am I going to be successful," you're already missing the mark. When it's about the team succeeding, things will begin to fall into place.

How do you define resilience?

Resilience has been such a hot topic in a variety of fields for several decades. To me, it's about learning from challenging circumstances and using that knowledge to fuel renewed efforts to achieve your goals. It's the ability to bounce back when times get tough – physically, psychologically or spiritually.

The other aspect that comes to mind is perseverance – grit as an indicator of success. We often look at perseverance and resilience as separate phenomena. Perhaps, but I think there is a connection. Again, I recall my experience with the Rangers and the espoused values in their creed. In an organization that eschews the idea of surrender and commits to "display the intestinal fortitude required to...complete the mission," perseverance in the moment and resilience to overcome adversity and ready oneself to accomplish the next task are two sides of the same coin.

U.S. Special Operations forces (SOF) are renowned for their capability and are often put in the most stressful and challenging situations. How critical is it for your team to be resilient and do you feel that this is something that can be learned?

It might be the most important long-term outcome that we look to cultivate across our SOF formation. We know that our special operators and support teams will be sent into the most remote, ambiguous and politically sensitive environments. To prepare them, we expect

them to have three attributes. First, they must have unshakable character, fully prepared to make good decisions when faced with moral and ethical challenges. Second, they must demonstrate absolute mastery of their combat skills, ready to fight and win. Third, they must be resilient, having the tools to manage the stress before, during and after their mission.

Resilience can be nurtured and developed. Much of our training is intended to make SOF more resistant to experiencing performance degradations, and when challenged, to be able to return to a high level of functioning quickly. We expect that there will be times when our people are challenged, whether it is physically or emotionally, and we try to prepare them for those challenges. Through physical and psychological training, we steel our people for those challenges, and we expect them to proactively take care of themselves when they aren't at their best. We also have support mechanisms in place when they need help. The will to win in battle is important, but often the will to prepare to win is much harder. It requires a lot of discipline, time and rigor.

At USSOCOM, we have an outstanding program to address what we call Preservation of the Force and Family (POTFF). Our people are at the core of our competitive advantage, and the POTFF program is our principal mechanism to study and enhance resilience across our force. We look at performance and readiness through five domains, or pillars: physical, psychological, social, spiritual and cognitive. The last pillar, cognitive, is an area in which we are increasing our investment. Increased cognitive performance and brain health are two areas where we believe applied neurological science can really help in the coming years.

How has your personal resilience helped in your role as Commander of USSOCOM?

Sitting at the strategic level, I'm no longer personally confronted with the physical battle scenarios that I've talked about thus far. The stress and fatigue in this job is largely mental and emotional. However, it is important that I have a deep understanding of what our warriors are doing in the far-flung reaches of the globe, especially in a global pandemic, when they have to consider both their own condition and the health and safety of their own families. Every opportunity that I have to get out and meet with our forces, I take it. These interactions provide me insight regarding the challenges we face, but most of all I gain energy and a renewed sense of what – or who – is really important as I meet with our young special operators and listen as they discuss their missions, their personal goals, and their concerns.

When you asked me about leadership lessons, I talked about the importance of being flexible and adapting. Almost daily, I get the chance to see some of our teammates do that in good faith to keep our nation's advantage. But sometimes, bureaucracy does slow your attempts to innovate. Those can be demoralizing moments. Sometimes it's tempting to throw your hands up in the air and redirect your energy elsewhere. But, if it was worth doing in the first place, it's probably worth seeing through to the end. The great part about being on a team like USSOCOM is that before I can rally and tell everyone we're going to try again, they're already halfway to the objective picking up speed for another run.

Significantly, a lot of the same tools we teach to our young special operators are still important. Staying fit, eating healthy, getting enough rest, being reflective, having some outlets away from the daily grind, and cultivating deep personal relationships – each of these help to form a physical and mental foundation for wellbeing at any level. As for the will to persevere, it becomes who you are – an essential part of your identity. You're not born with it, but you learn it from great leaders and teammates over time.

USSOCOM's role as both a Force Developer and Force Employer is unique in the U.S. Military. Will you discuss how you approach this role and the keys to being successful in this mission?

It certainly requires us to broaden our perspective and think about the big picture. We have to listen closely to the needs of the Geographic Combatant Commanders who are running operations, then look very closely at how those requirements stack up in the global priority list, and how sustainable those missions are in the long run. SOF has learned some hard lessons over the past two decades. Our forces have been in high demand in multiple theaters. Collectively, we valued the employer role over the developer role. You can do that in very short-term “break glass in time

of war” scenarios, but not for multiple decades. We started making compromises in accountability, discipline and readiness, and pressure on the force accumulated at an unmanageable pace.

We have to take a comprehensive approach to readiness that values rigorous leader and team development, disciplined force generation (recruitment, accessions, training, and talent management), and sustainable and predictable tempo across the force. Additionally, we have to think about modernization. Our SOF need the best enabling technologies to give them every possible advantage. From both a personnel and equipment standpoint, we have unique requirements and need to stay alert to fresh opportunities to make investments that will grow long-term capability.



General Clarke and his senior enlisted leader, Greg Smith, depart the Special Operations Memorial in Tampa after commemorating the 40th Anniversary of Operation Eagle Claw, the unsuccessful attempt to end the Iranian Hostage Crisis in 1980 that, in part, led to the creation of USSOCOM.

As for my personal role in all this, these are huge tasks. My job is to give clear guidance and expectations, check on our direction and progress regularly, but otherwise get out of the way. I spend a significant amount of my personal effort on outreach. Inside of the DoD and the U.S. interagency, that involves tearing down procedural or policy roadblocks, working with the service branches to improve incentive structures for the incredible talent we have in the SOF enterprise, or finding security gaps where SOF can better assist the Joint Force in addressing the nation's security challenges. Externally, that outreach is focused on developing relationships with industry partners, particularly in the tech industry.

It's no secret that artificial intelligence and machine learning (AI/ML) technologies will have a profound impact on most industries, including the military. The breadth of those impacts – how we operate abroad, how we process information, how we structure our workforce talent – demands that I be heavily involved in finding a suitable way ahead for applying these emerging data-driven tools. There are a lot of really patriotic, innovative people out there who would love to apply their talents to the defense industry but don't because they may not see the connection between their product and our requirements. If I can help them make those connections and help them find an effective means of partnering with us, we both win.

Who are some of the resilient leaders you see today?

After two decades of continuous conflict, our ranks are filled with resilient leaders. In general, I really have to acknowledge the tremendous resilience, perseverance and leadership from our non-commissioned officer (NCO) corps. I have a personal relationship with a few incredible leaders who stand out.

Two senior NCOs who I've personally learned a lot from are Sergeant Major Rick Merritt and Chief Master Sergeant Greg Smith. I have known Rick since he was a Platoon Sergeant when I was a Company Commander and we have crossed paths in multiple positions and locations over my career. Greg is my senior enlisted leader at USSOCOM. Both are outstanding role models of everything we hope our young leaders will become – highly intelligent, morally straight and absolutely dedicated to the mission and their people. Rick and Greg were both exceptional small unit leaders when the war in Afghanistan kicked off in 2001, and both endured a blistering operational tempo, combat wounds and bouts of personal injury and illness. Through it all, they remain positive, engaged and unwavering in their commitment.

On the front lines, we've taken a lot of casualties over the years. Most are able to heal and continue service. Occasionally, we have leaders who are badly wounded and fight against the odds to rejoin their comrades. Nick Lavery is a powerful example. Nick was a Green Beret staff sergeant when a gunshot wound in Afghanistan left his right leg damaged beyond repair. Sitting on the sidelines wasn't enough for Nick. He strapped on his prosthetic leg, worked twice as hard, and fought back to the teams. He even graduated from warrant officer school and became our first amputee to graduate from combat diver school – one of our most physically demanding courses. He's absolutely inspirational.

Sometimes, wounds take you out of the fight, no matter how badly you want to continue. Romy Camargo's story is one of the most compelling I've seen over the years. Romy was shot in the neck in 2008 in Afghanistan. The bullet damaged his spinal cord, leaving him paralyzed. Romy and his amazing wife Gaby settled in Tampa and began the long, uphill road to rehabilitation. When twice weekly trips to the nearest spinal rehab facility in Orlando started to take their toll, they decided to open their own facility in Tampa and begin a tremendous non-profit outreach to help other veterans with spinal cord injuries. Romy joined the military to make a difference, and he's continued to do that in ways he never expected. That kind of winning attitude is priceless.

There are so many of our wounded warriors who are incredible. For anybody reading this interview, I encourage you to make a trip to see an event like the Warrior Games or Invictus Games. The events are inspirational, seeing the level of resilience and goodwill that radiates from some of our hardest hit heroes. If you want to see people who can turn a challenge into an opportunity, they're the masterclass. ●