

Duty, Honor and Patriotism

An Interview with Admiral Craig S. Faller, Commander, U.S. Southern Command

EDITORS' NOTE At sea, Admiral Craig Faller served as Reactor Electrical Division Officer, Electrical Officer and Reactor Training Assistant aboard USS South Carolina (CGN 37); Operations Officer aboard USS Peterson (DD 969); Station Officer aboard USS Enterprise (CVN 65), and Executive Officer of USS John Hancock (DD 981). As Commanding Officer of USS Stethem (DDG 63), he deployed to the Arabian Gulf and participated in maritime interception operations in support of United Nations sanctions against Iraq. During his tour as Commanding Officer of USS Shiloh (CG 67), he assisted victims of the devastating tsunami off Indonesia. As Commander, John C. Stennis Strike Group / Carrier Strike Group 3, he deployed to the Middle East supporting Operations New Dawn (Iraq) and Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan). Ashore, Admiral Faller served as a DIG Prototype Staff Officer at the Nuclear Power Training unit in Ballston Spa, New York; Action Officer in Navy Strategy and Concepts Branch (N513); Legislative Fellow on the staff of Senator Edward M. Kennedy; Program Manager, Surface Nuclear Officer Programs and Placement; Executive Assistant to the Commander, U.S. Pacific Command; Executive Assistant to Commander, U.S. Central Command; Executive Assistant to the Chief of Naval Operations; Commander, Navy Recruiting Command; Director of Operations (J3) U.S. Central Command; Chief of Navy Legislative Affairs; and Senior Military Assistant to the Secretary of Defense. Admiral Faller has earned various personal, unit, service and campaign awards. Admiral Faller is a 1983 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy with a BS in systems engineering and a 1990 graduate of the Naval Postgraduate School with a master's in national security affairs (strategic planning).



Admiral Craig S. Faller

COMMAND BRIEF U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), located in Doral, Florida, is one of 11 unified Combatant Commands (COCOMs) in the Department of Defense with the mission of being a ready and trusted partner that works collaboratively to ensure the Western Hemisphere is secure, free, and prosperous. SOUTHCOM (southcom.mil) is responsible for providing contingency planning, operations, and security cooperation in its assigned Area of Responsibility which includes Central America,

South America and the Caribbean (except U.S. commonwealths, territories, and possessions). The Command is also responsible for the force protection of U.S. military resources at these locations. SOUTHCOM is responsible for ensuring the defense of the Panama Canal. Under the leadership of a four-star commander, SOUTHCOM's staff is organized into directorates, component commands and Security Cooperation Organizations that represent SOUTHCOM in the region. SOUTHCOM is a joint command comprised of more than 1,200 military and civilian personnel representing the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and several other federal agencies. The services provide SOUTHCOM with component commands which, along with the Joint Special Operations component, two Joint Task Forces, one Joint Interagency Task Force, and Security Cooperation Organizations, perform SOUTHCOM missions and security cooperation activities. SOUTHCOM exercises its Combatant Command authority through the commanders of its components, Joint Task Forces/Joint Interagency Task Force, and Security Cooperation Organizations.

What attracted you to public service and did you always know that you wanted to serve in the military?

I've always looked up to my parents. My parents are wonderful role models (my Mom has passed but my Dad is still doing great). They always took a genuine interest in my sisters, brother and I, and encouraged me to think bigger than myself – to consider service in the military and try the most challenging career first to discover what I could achieve. I also had neighbors, the Fletcher brothers, who were Naval Academy graduates. I looked up to them and they inspired my interest in the Navy with their stories and cool pictures.

I have consistently found inspiration in other leaders such as my second Commanding Officer on the USS South Carolina (CGN 37), Captain Eric Ernst, and his wife Nancy. They remain wonderful role models who exhibit grace, empathy and humility.

I always enjoyed being on teams and I appreciate the value of good, selfless teamwork. I was in the Boy Scouts and played baseball, football and basketball. Growing up in Northwest Pennsylvania, I remain a loyal Pittsburgh Steelers

and Pirates fan, fueled by the success of their great teams of the 1970s. The U.S. military is the greatest team of all. Once I realized that, I never looked back.

What has been the impact of the global pandemic on the U.S. military's Southern Command and how has Southern Command adapted its operations to address the challenges brought on by the pandemic?

From the very start of this pandemic, ensuring we protected our people as a first principle in order to complete our vital mission of defending the United States has been our number-one priority. We've leveraged every means to keep our people informed and healthy. We tried to take the many complex sources of information and policy direction and make it simple and understandable. I believe that as a leader if you assume you are communicating effectively then you are already sliding backward into communication oblivion. My rule of thumb is to repeat everything eight or more times by every method available and then constantly challenge my own effectiveness.

One of the ways we adapted that we will carry into the future was in successfully leveraging virtual technologies to remain engaged with our security partners and continue in ever-important dialogue. For example, we hosted the first ever SOUTHCOM-sponsored virtual regional security conference with chiefs of defense from the Caribbean, Central America and South America during this pandemic.

Challenges like the ones our nations faced during this global health crisis highlight the importance of leadership and being a reliable, valued and trusted partner. We have to be there for our neighbors day in and day out, not just when they need our help. When they do call, we answer on the first ring and we take action – follow-up is so important.

How proud are you to see the way that your team at all levels has shown strength and resilience during this challenging and unprecedented time?

The pandemic did not diminish threats to our U.S. homeland nor to our regional partners across Latin America and the Caribbean. In fact, we have seen just the opposite – threats have increased as enemies of all types try to take advantage of the pandemic.

True patriots, hardworking and committed, our SOUTHCOM team has done an awesome job staying safe – utilizing what we call force health

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protection – while keeping our command ready. Our national security missions demand us to be ready for when a horrific event happens – and it will happen. It’s not a matter of if, just when.

People want to know the “why” behind their efforts. When so much has changed so quickly in terms of basic life functions, including the risks of going to the grocery store or gas station, childcare and school, family events, vacation and on and on – this has a tremendous unsettling impact on all of us. So for our leadership team, it was important from day one of the pandemic to ensure we demonstrated by our actions and words that we get this. I have tried to remain empathetic towards all of the day in, day out pressures while doubling down on communicating to our team. I explain how our efforts are saving lives and why this results in a more secure, prosperous and free hemisphere. This is a powerful “why” that fuels my passion and energy for our mission and our people. I believe our team has embraced this.

One area our entire team rallied around was helping our neighbors. From the earliest days of this pandemic, when our partners called for help, we quickly responded. We supported the region’s immediate response and are now supporting our partners’ long-term health preparedness and prevention efforts. To date, SOUTHCOM has committed more than \$50 million in funding for 435 donation projects to support requests from 28 partner nations in the region for much-needed relief supplies and equipment to support their fight against the pandemic.

In the midst of the pandemic, back-to-back major hurricanes (Eta and Iota) devastated Central America. Earlier in the year we had rehearsed how to respond safely to such a catastrophic event in the midst of a pandemic. When disaster struck, we did just that, rapidly deploying a team across Central America operating in four different countries, saving lives and making a difference.

Our partners recognize we’re in this together, working collectively to overcome a major health crisis and threats fueled by the pandemic and major hurricanes.

What do you see as the biggest threats in the region and what needs to be done to counter these threats?

I call this region our neighborhood, one of promise and potential, where nations led by democratically elected leaders far outnumber those without them. I view this neighborhood as a beacon of freedom to the world. However, our

neighborhood is under assault by a vicious circle of threats. Young democracies need strong institutions, yet corruption fuels transnational criminal organizations which undermine our partners, their institutions, and threaten our U.S. homeland. External state actors, in not so great power competition, are actively working in this hemisphere. They undermine democratic principles and the rule of law, placing their own interests above those of the region’s citizens. These threats undermine the stability of institutions and democracies. Left unchecked, these threats contribute to a spiral of instability, exacerbated by the negative health and economic impact of COVID-19.

To succeed against this vicious circle of threats, we know we must work together, collaborate, share information and capitalize on our collective capabilities and expertise, so that every country’s security success is also a regional security success.

How concerned are you about China, Russia and Iran’s growing influence in the region and what do you feel is the most effective way to address this concern?

The National Defense Strategy identifies competition with China and Russia as our top national defense priority. In my view, the most pressing national security challenge facing our world is how to reconcile this competition without conflict. China is the number one trading partner with the United States and most of the nations in the hemisphere. How do we ensure the benefits of this economic relationship while maintaining a true rules-based international order?

I don’t ask our allies and partners to choose. I focus on the value of a relationship with the U.S. military and SOUTHCOM. Our people, programs, equipment and professional military education are the best in the world. We have training and education grounded in human rights, diversity and inclusion, and a truly professional non-commissioned officer (enlisted) corps. The Western Hemisphere is a neighborhood of like-minded democracies whose citizens value individual freedoms, human rights, and the rule of law. The governments of Russia, China and Iran do not champion any of these values. I candidly point out the benefits and risks associated with whom you pick as your friend. This approach works, so long as, first and foremost, we stay at the top of our game – morally, mentally, physically and professionally. We must know our neighbors and learn their cultures, histories and security needs. That’s where we focus most of our efforts and in my view that’s how we will continue to win.

How critical are strong partnerships in order to combat the many challenges facing the region and how is Southern Command working to strengthen its partnerships throughout the region?

Partnerships are the key to everything in life. Teamwork wins. I have never successfully accomplished any task in life and in military service or overcome any security challenge alone. SOUTHCOM has been building enduring partnerships with the Americas for more than half a century. Ties between our militaries are as close as the ties between our people. For example, one of the annual exercises we sponsor – UNITAS (which means unity) – is also the world’s longest-running annual multinational maritime security exercise. It is a true reflection of our enduring promise to one another for a cooperative, prosperous, and secure hemisphere.

To succeed in protecting our shared neighborhood, we must work together, leveraging the strength that comes from a collective approach. This is what we are doing in our pandemic response and in the aftermath of hurricanes Eta and Iota. In both instances, we worked shoulder-to-shoulder with regional partners to save lives and mitigate human suffering.

We choose to focus on security cooperation because we know that peace and stability in our hemisphere does not happen by accident. It is the result of decades of working together, building trust, and is a testament to the shared benefits of our defense partnerships.

What do you tell young people about a career in the military and the rewarding and fulfilling experience of public service?

If you choose to serve in our nation’s military, you will be joining an all-volunteer team that will equip you to win. Our competitive edge is what each service member contributes to the mission.

In our profession of arms, we learn to be led and to be leaders. We are guided by a legacy of uncompromising duty, honor and patriotism left by those who have served and sacrificed before us. Our oath is a commitment to preserve and defend our way of life. Whether that commitment is for three years or thirty years, every individual’s service is important.

The U.S. military is also a reflection of the American people. Our men and women come from the very towns and cities we serve to defend. We are as diverse as our nation, with ties to families, friends and allies around the world. ●