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The Pope

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Behind his back we referred to him simply as SAM or Stan the Man. Always with reverence and respect of course. Later on, about the time he started to wear shiny silver stars, we started to refer to him as The Pope.

LTG Stanley McChrystal's meteoric rise through the ranks is no surprise to anyone that has ever had the opportunity to work for or with him. I was fortunate, from a subordinate officer perspective, on numerous occasions.

Few know the facts just yet as to why GEN McKeirnan was moved out of command in Afghanistan. Regardless of the reasons, and I'm certainly not read on to the scuttlebutt, I do know that America's interests, America's warriors, and America's mission in Afghanistan couldn't be in better hands under LTG McChrystal. My biggest concern is that I hope the senior officers in Afghanistan soon to be under LTG McChrystal's command are well rested.

I served as a staff officer under McChrystal in the late 90's before leaving for 1st SFOD-D. My Ranger peers and I had a unique opportunity to see the good and the bad in the 1976 West Point graduate. I think if McChrystal were wounded on the battlefield, he would bleed red, black, and white – the official colors of the 75th Ranger Regiment. He is 110% US Army Ranger, rising to become the 10th Regimental Commander in the late 90's, and still sports the physique to prove it. Even with a bum back and likely deteriorating knees after a career of road marching and jumping out of planes he doesn't recognize the human pause button. Maybe by now this is a good thing as the junior officers of today might be able to keep pace with the General.

As the Ranger Regimental commander, McChrystal was considered a Tier II subordinate commander under the Joint Special Operations functioning command structure. The highest level, Tier I, was reserved exclusively for Delta Force and Seal Team 6. This always seemed to bother McChrystal. His nature isn't to be second fiddle to anyone, nor for his Rangers to be considered second class citizens to the Tier 1 Special Mission Units.

Terms like "kit", often used by Delta and Seal Team 6 operators to collectively describe the gear, weapons, and equipment an assaulter carries was banned from the Ranger lexicon. The term "assaulter" or "operator" was also verboten speak within the Regiment. The men wearing the red, black, and white scroll were Rangers, not assaulters and not operators. They also didn't carry *kit*. They carried standard military issue equipment.

McChrystal also deplored the idea that the Regiment served as an unofficial farm team for Delta Force, or even the US Army Special Forces Green Berets. In his eyes, the Rangers were just as skilled in their primary mission of Airfield Seizures and Raids as Delta was in land based Hostage Rescue or the SEALs were in assaulting a ship underway. All things being equal, McChrystal was right. The Rangers were, and still are, just as skilled in their Mission Essential Tasks as are the Tier I units in theirs. He believed that losing quality officers and non-commissioned officers to what many considered the true tip of the spear outfits – those granted the most funding, most authority, and given the premiere targets - hurt the Regiment.

I recall a conversation then COL McChrystal and I had in my office one afternoon. Colonels don't commonly visit Captains so it was a slightly nervous, yet enjoyable occasion. He asked me what I thought about Delta founder COL Charlie Beckwith's decision to abort the rescue mission of American Hostages held in Iran in 1979. It was an interesting and enlightening conversation. The essence of the discussion centered around COL McChrystal's reasoning that Beckwith should have continued the mission with fewer operators and lift helicopters. Even though the risk would have increased significantly, COL McChrystal felt the embarrassment in the eyes of the world of failing to try was exponentially more devastating to our nation's reputation than executing a high risk mission that might have even an outside chance of success. McChrystal believed the American people would never accept such a decision like that again.

McChrystal has few peers and makes even fewer mistakes. It didn't take long for him to change his mind about the operators – the assaulters and snipers – after entering the General Officer ranks. From the very beginning as the commander of Joint Special Operations Command, then BG McChrystal tried to shake up the status quo of the Tier I outfits. He now owned those assaulters and snipers from the Army and Navy, and even though he completely supported creative risk taking and out of the box thinking, he quickly moved to fit their actions into an easily managed color coded box. It didn't always work the way the General wanted though and ironically, at least on the Army side, many of the agents of resistance were previous Rangers under his command.

Like most General Officers, BG McChrystal is stubborn, and no one can argue that he isn't a man of extraordinary stamina, advanced intellect, and uncompromising dedication to his warriors, the American people, and our way of life. Personally, I don't know a man with more stamina and stomach for the fight than LTG McChrystal. He sets an incredible pace, expects excellence, demands results, but most importantly he listens to the men on the ground. He might not have liked it that Delta and SEAL Team 6 were difficult to break and resistant to excessive management but he was smart enough to know when to loosen the reins and let the horses gallop.

One of the most significant issues was the idea that Delta and SEAL Team 6 should and could operate on the same target, at the same level, at the same time. It was a part of the General's cross fertilization plan of skill sets and team building. It took a little while, but the General eventually recognized that the two units were apples and oranges and squaring them in that color coded box resulted in a fruit salad of conflicting skill sets, SOPs, and even mindset. Ironically, in essence the General deferred to the recommendations of those assaulters and snipers. Again, many of them former rangers under McChrystal's command who continue to make the General very proud.

LTG McChrystal deserves an enormous amount of credit for the success of the Joint Task Force in Iraq and Afghanistan. I'm sure he isn't looking for credit or notoriety and I know he would push all that down to his men and women in the trenches or the TOC. He is credited with masterminding the eventual demise of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and didn't waste any time getting to the scene of the al-Qaeda in Iraq's death to see for himself the results of a long 2 ½ year manhunt. I participated in that hunt for over a year under McChrystal's overall command and his presence was well known and consistent. Another indicator of his stamina for the fight.

One night, I was with two other operators on the back side of an urban target in the middle of Fallujah. Some thirty British Commandos came in through the front door. We ran into a little trouble with the neighbors and missed the exfil call to return to the vehicles. We figured it out after a few minutes and maneuvered back up the street to our waiting white pick-up truck. I turned the corner just as the British were starting to roll and I noticed two individuals standing on the street corner. One was the JSOC command sergeant major, a long time Delta operator. The other was unmistakable as well; it was BG McChrystal. Naturally I was a little bent by their presence, especially the two-star commander. I hadn't been informed they were coming along nor were they present at the mission brief. It's nice to know when a VIP is in town and I would have preferred he carry a long gun in case we needed it.

However, on the ride back to camp, I couldn't help but shake my head in amazement and admiration of the commander's selflessness and commitment. He didn't have to be out there. That wasn't his job any longer. Obviously, nobody expected him to put himself in harm's way like that. This is probably why he didn't inform anyone he was tagging along for the hit. He knew it would create a stir among the ranks.

LTG McChrystal's in-your-face command style isn't as aggressive as it might seem. He always is open to creative thinking and employing the commando tools of disguise, diversion, and deception. I recall a very specific and unique concept of operation we sent up to the General to neutralize al-Zarqawi that was previously unheard of. Had it been any other General Officer of the time I wouldn't have wasted the energy. But with McChrystal, I knew he would give it a fair look. Within a few hours, his operations officer called to tell us the General was fully supportive of it and planned a meeting that night to work the details. The mission went off as planned but ultimately, as so many of them do, the fog and friction of war gummed things up.

LTG McChrystal is often credited with being the brains behind the technological breakthroughs that led to the operational and tactical successes against scores of terrorists in Iraq. I'm sure he is uncomfortable with that designation as he would be the first to tell you that the brains behind those secret innovations mentioned by author Bob Woodward belong to the talented staff sergeants and sergeant first classes that fill both JSOC's subordinate Tier I and Tier II units. And, of course, many of those are old Rangers; products of the 75th Ranger Regiment *farm* system.

Lastly, in an effort to share lessons learned with the commanders still in the fight who now have the great opportunity to work for LTG Stan McChrystal, I offer the three thresholds of The Pope. LTG McChrystal definitely believes in the dreaded Video Teleconference or VTC to share knowledge, assess operations, and gauge direction. But he doesn't necessarily enjoy sitting

through scores of Powerpoint slides - so briefers beware. Be brief! The general is a quick study. He'll pick it up in a couple of slides. But, beware of the three thresholds of his discomfort, impatience, and disgust.

If you notice the General start to nibble on his finger nails and lean back in his chair that is a signal to either get to the point or wrap it up quickly. If the general wipes his forehead or rubs his eyes that is a clear indicator that you have too many slides or aren't displaying the knowledge or command of the topic he expects of the briefer. Finally, if you are still talking after the nail biting and eye rubbing, and you notice the general rub the back of his neck and look at the command sergeant major, then you are about to be ceremoniously dismissed. He is always respectful, but it's never pretty.

Obviously writing from the seat of retirement, and with absolute respect and gratefulness for LTG McChrystal's aggressive leadership, personable demeanor, and unwavering mentoring, I envy the guys that are soon to find themselves sharing the same mess hall, weight room, and helicopter as The Pope. The man is unstoppable. Demonstrably more committed than most. More open, in fact insistent, on creative and innovative ideas from his subordinates to fight the war on terror. From my perspective, our rules of land warfare, our respect for human life, and our strategic constraints handcuff us to the point that the war in Afghanistan is unwinnable. But, with LTG McChrystal at the helm now all bets are off.

Dalton Fury retired from the military with over 20 years of service. He is the author of the New York Times Bestseller Kill Bin Laden: A Delta Force Commander's Account of the Hunt for the Most Wanted Man (St. Martin's Press, 2008) He can be reached at daltonfury@yahoo.com.

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