



Book review: Team of Teams by General Stanley McChrystal

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Tac Talks

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Introduction

The commander of Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), General Stanley McChrystal, played a crucial role in the War on Terror. In his book "Team of Teams", he reflects upon why a well-trained and an equipped military coalition was outmanoeuvred by an under-resourced Al-Qaeda inspired insurgency in Iraq. In particular, he was forced to reconsider his role as a senior leader in a modern military organisation that needed to fundamentally improve if it was to have any impact against a fanatical, agile and highly dispersed network of 21st-century insurgent fighters, known as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). His extensive personnel experiences in leadership are complemented by a clear evaluation of the wider challenges faced by modern organisations, for which he presents many well-defined and viable solutions.



Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and Commander ISAF General Stanley McChrystal talk with soldiers during a visit to the Special Operations Task Group at Camp Russell, Oruzgan Province, Afghanistan in 2009. Photographer: CPL Rachael Ingram.

In 2004, the AQI insurgency was flourishing in Iraq despite, the best efforts of a modern western military coalition to restore order. This situation forced General McChrystal to set about re-inventing the well-established military hierarchical command system, with its typically ingrained information silos and organisational stovepipes. He took particular aim at the military's "Need to Know Principal" (or fallacy) which he considered being counter-productive in keeping pace with the speed of information exchange required for prevailing in 21st-century warfare. He concluded that the suppression of information exchange was usually demanded by organisations with motives that were not primarily aligned with the achievement of the overall Commander's Intent; in this case, defeating AQI.

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Members of General Entry 390 Rogers Division standing at ease during their graduation parade at the Royal Australian Navy Recruit School at HMAS Cerberus, Victoria, June 2021. Photographer: LSIS Bonny Gassner.

On a personal level, McChrystal considered that his inclusion in the decision-making process was simply a “rubber stamp” that slowed the process and sometimes caused the coalition forces to miss fleeting opportunities. He concluded that the additional time and effort taken to gain his approval did not result in any better decisions and he came to realise that in normal cases, he didn’t add tremendous value to the decision making process. Faced with this realisation, he changed the process.

It would not surprise any maritime warfare practitioner that as part of General McChrystal reflections, he took particular note of the strategic successes of Admiral Horatio Nelson, which culminated in his famous naval victory against overwhelming odds at the Battle of Trafalgar. McChrystal, like others before him, concluded that Nelson’s genius lay not in a clever fleet manoeuvre in which the combined French and Spanish Fleet were comprehensively defeated, but in the years of innovative management and leadership that preceded the battle. Nelson’s effective redistribution of authority was accomplished in an era where the conventional wisdom demanded a strict system of centralised command and control during major battles on the high seas. Nelson’s faith in his personnel was evident in his simple, yet effective message to the Fleet

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before the Battle of Trafalgar, "No captain can do very wrong if he places his ship alongside that of the enemy".



The aftermath of an explosive ordnance disposal mission during Operation DAMASK.

In the spirit of Nelson, General McChrystal determined that he would be a more effective leader in the 21st-century warfighting context by taking an "Eyes On-Hands Off" approach. Rather than making individual operational decisions as was done by his contemporaries, he restricted his role to being a champion of implementing effective processes. This included creating an environment that ensured a seamless and timely flow of information, through the availability and prioritisation of scarce resources – ensuring that organisational silos and bureaucratic processes that ruined agility were negated.

General McChrystal understood the daunting task of confronting the obstacles of the often rigid and hierarchal decision making bureaucracies of the private sector, the military and the public service. Despite his best efforts, positive progress was excruciatingly slow. Developing a new attitude of "shared consciousness" and "empowered execution" that motivated thousands of personnel within and external to the JSOC was always going to take time and was most likely to result in an abject failure. The subsequent events that transitioned JSOC from an organisation designed to fight in a 20th-century conflict to one that was adapted to defeat an agile, dispersed and networked adversary of the 21st-century makes for compelling reading. I consider this well-written book to be an essential read for all Maritime Warfare Officers seeking to broaden their appreciation of effective leadership in an increasingly complex management environment.

Team of Teams is available through all good book stores and from the Defence Library via the Overdrive Application.

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