

GEN Stanley McChrystal's remarks on the occasion of his retirement ceremony, 23 July 2010, Fort McNair, Washington D.C.

GEN. MCCHRYSAL: This is frustrating. I spent a career waiting to give a retirement speech and lie about what a great soldier I was. Then people show up who were actually there. It proves what Doug Brown taught me long ago; nothing ruins a good war story like an eyewitness.

To show you how bad it is, I can't even tell you I was the best player in my little league because the kid who was the best player is here tonight. In case you're looking around, he's not a kid anymore.

But to those here tonight who feel the need to contradict my memories with the truth, remember I was there too. I have stories on all of you, photos on many, and I know a Rolling Stone reporter. (Laughter.) (Applause.)

Look, this has the potential to be an awkward or even a sad occasion. With my resignation, I left a mission I feel strongly about. I ended a career I loved that began over 38 years ago. And I left unfulfilled commitments I made to many comrades in the fight, commitments I hold sacred.

My service did not end as I would have wished, and there are misperceptions about the loyalty and service of some dedicated professionals that will likely take some time but I believe will be corrected.

Still, Annie and I aren't approaching the future with sadness but with hope and iPhones. And my feelings for more than 34 years I spent as an Army officer are a combination of surprise that any experience could have been as rich and fulfilling as mine was and gratitude for the comrades and friends we were blessed with.

That's what I feel. And if I fail to communicate that effectively tonight, I'll simply remind you that Secretary Gates once told me I was a modern Patton of strategic communications. (Laughter.) Fair point.

So if we laugh tonight, it doesn't mean all these years have not been important to me. It means the opposite; that every day and every friend were gifts I treasure and I need to celebrate.

But first, I need to address two questions that we've been asked often lately. The first is: What are you going to do? Actually, Annie is the one who's asking me that. I'm thinking I'd be a good fashion consultant and spokesman for Gucci -- (laughter) -- but they haven't called.

The other question is always asked a bit tentatively. How are you and Annie doing? We did spend some years apart, but we're doing well. And I am carrying some of what I learned into retirement.

First, Annie and I are reconnecting. And now, we're up on Skype with each other. Of course, we never did that all the years I was 10,000 miles away, but now we can connect by video link when we're 15 feet apart. And I think she really likes that. (Laughter.)

I was so enthused I tried using Skype for a daily family VTC -- (laughter) -- where I could get updates and pass out guidance, but there's some resistance to flatter and faster in the McChrystal household.

The same is true for the tactical directive I issued soon after my return. It's reasonable guidance: One meal a day, early-morning PT, the basics of a good family life. (Laughter.)

But I've gotten a few night letters, and Annie's stocking up on ammonium nitrate fertilizer -- (laughter) -- which is strange since our new yard is smaller than this podium.

Although the insurgency is relatively small -- one woman -- she's uninterested in reintegration. (Laughter.) I assess the situation as serious and, in many ways, deteriorating. (Laughter.)

Mr. Secretary, look at her. I'm thinking at least 40,000 troops. (Laughter.) (Applause.)

Let me thank everyone for being here. This turnout is truly humbling. Here tonight are my wife and son, my four brothers, two nephews, mentors, comrades from countless phases of my career, and some special guests whose service and sacrifice are impossible to describe with words.

But because this crowd is pretty big, for good order and discipline, I've divided you all into four groups. Please remember your group number. (Laughter.)

Group 1 are all the people who accepted responsibility for making this ceremony work from the planners to the soldiers on the field. My apologies for all the time you spend in the heat. You're special people. And in my mind, you also represent soldiers all over the world. You have my sincere appreciation.

The second group -- (applause). The second group is distinguished servants of all nations who have taken time from your often-crushing schedules to be here. And thanks for your years of support and friendship. I got you out of the office early on Friday.

Group 3 are warriors of all ranks, and that includes many who don't wear a uniform but defend our nation with whom I have shared aircraft, VTCs, remote outposts, frustrations, triumphs, laughs and a common cause for many years. You are not all here. Some of you are deployed and in the fight. Others rest across river in Arlington. Most of the credit I've received actually belongs to you. It has been your comradeship that I have considered the greatest honor of my career.

Finally, Group 4 is all those who've heard we're having two kegs of beer in the backyard after my ceremony. This group includes a number of my classmates from West Point, old friends, most of the warriors from Group 3, and some others who defy accurate description. Anyone already carrying a plastic cup might be considered the vanguard of Group 4. (Laughter.) Everyone here today is invited to join.

To Secretary Gates, I want to express my personal thanks, certainly, for your generous remarks but more for your wisdom and leadership which I experienced firsthand in each of my last three jobs. Your contribution to the nation and to the force is nothing short of historic.

Similarly, I want to thank the many leaders, civilian and military, of our nation beginning with President Obama for whom and with whom I was honored to serve. Whether elected, appointed or commissioned, the common denominator of selfless service has been inspiring.

As COM ISAF, I was provided a unique opportunity to serve alongside the professionals of 46 nations under the leadership of NATO. We were stronger for the diversity of our force, and I'm better for the experience.

My thanks, also, to the leadership and people of Afghanistan for their partnership, hospitality and friendship. For those who are tempted to simplify their view of Afghanistan and focus on the challenges

ahead, I counter with my belief that Afghans have courage, strength and resiliency that will prove equal to the task.

My career included some amazing moments and memories, but it is the people I'll remember. It was always about the people. It was about the soldiers who are well-trained but, at the end of the day, act out of faith in their leaders and each other; about the young sergeants who emerge from the ranks with strength, discipline, commitment and courage.

As I grew older, the soldiers and sergeants of my youth grew older as well. They became the old sergeants, long-service professionals whose wisdom and incredible sense of responsibility for the mission and for our soldiers is extraordinary.

And the sergeants major -- they were a national treasure. They mold and maintain the force and leaders like me. They have been my comrade, confidante, constructive critic, mentor and best friend.

A little more than a year ago on a single e-mail, Command Sergeant Major Mike Hall came out of retirement, leaving a job, his son and his amazing wife Brenda to join me in Afghanistan. To Mike, I could never express my thanks. To Brenda, I know after all these years, I owe you. I also love you.

To true professionals like Sergeants Major Rudy Valentine, Jody Nacy, Steve Cuffie, CW Thompson, Chris Craven, Jeff Mellinger and Chris Farris, your presence here today is proof that, when something is truly important, like this ceremony, you're on hand to make sure I don't screw it up.

I've been blessed with the presence of old friends throughout my career, friendships that began long ago at West Point, Forts Benning, Bragg, Lewis or countless other locations and shared years of Army life, moving vans, kids, laughs, disappointments, and each other's successes which grew into bonds that became critical on the battlefield.

I treasure a note I received during a particularly tough time in Afghanistan in 2007 from fellow commander, Dave Rodriguez, that quoted Sherman's confidence that, if he ever needed support, he knew his friend Grant would come to his aid if alive. Serving with people who say and mean such words is extraordinary.

I served with many. Many of you are here tonight. And not all the heroes are comrades in uniform. In the back of a darkened helicopter over Kunar, Afghanistan, in 2004, a comrade in blue jeans whose friendship I cherish to this day passed me a note. Scribbled on a page torn from a pocket notebook, the note said, "I don't know the Ranger Creed, but you can count on me to always be there." He lived up to his promise many times over.

To have shared so much with and been so dependent on people of such courage, physical and moral, integrity and selflessness taught me to believe.

Annie's here tonight. No doubt she walked the 50 feet from our front door in cute little Italian shoes of which we have an extensive collection. (Laughter.) In Afghanistan, I once considered using Annie's shoe purchases as an argument to get Italy to send additional forces. (Laughter.) But truth be known, I have no control over that part of the McChrystal economy. (Laughter.)

But she's here like she's always been there when it mattered. Always gorgeous. For three and a half years, she was my girlfriend then fiancée and, for over 33 years, she's been my wife.

For many years, I've joked, sometimes publicly, about her lousy cooking, terrifying closets, demolition derby driving and addiction to M&M candy, which is all true. But as we conclude a career together, it's important for you to know she was there.

She was there when my father commissioned me a second lieutenant of infantry and was waiting some months later when I emerged from Ranger School. Together, we moved all we owned in my used Chevrolet Vega to our first apartment at Fort Bragg. The move, with our first days in our \$180-a-month apartment, was the only honeymoon I was able to give her, a fact she has mentioned a few times since.

Annie always knew what to do. She was gracious when she answered the door at midnight in her nightgown to fight Sergeant Emo Holtz, a huge mortarman, carrying a grocery bag of cheap liquor for a platoon party I'd hastily coordinated that evening and not told Annie about following a Friday night jump. I got home not long after to find Annie making food for assembling paratroopers. Intuitively, Annie knew what was right and quietly did it.

With 9/11, she saw us off to war and patiently supported the families of our fallen with stoic grace. As the years passed and the fight grew ever more difficult and deadly, Annie's quiet courage gave me strength I would never otherwise have found.

It's an axiom in the Army that soldiers write the checks but families pay the bills. And war increases both the accuracy of that statement and the cost families pay.

In a novel based on history, Steven Pressfield captured poignantly just how important families were and, I believe, are today. Facing an invading Persian army under King Xerxes, a coalition of Greek states sent a small force to buy time by defending the pass at Thermopylae and were led by 300 special, selected Spartans. The mission was desperate and death for the 300 certain.

Before he left to lead them, the Spartan king, Leonidas, explained to one of the Spartan wives how he had selected the 300 from an entire army famed for its professionalism, courage and dedication to duty.

"I chose them not for their valor, lady, but for that of their women. Greece stands now upon her most perilous hour. If she saves herself, it will not be at the gates. Death alone awaits us and our allies there but later in battles yet to come by land and sea.

"Then Greece, if the gods will it, will preserve herself. Do you understand this, lady? Well, now, listen, when the battle is over, when the 300 have gone to death, then all Greece will look to the Spartans to see how they bear it. But who, lady, will the Spartans look to? To you. To you and the other wives and mothers, sisters and daughters of the fallen.

"If they behold your hearts riven and broken with grief, they too will break and Greece will break with them. But if you bear up, dry eyed, not alone enduring your loss but seizing it with contempt for its agony and embracing it as the honor that it is in truth, then Sparta will stand and all Greece will stand behind her.

"Why have I nominated you, lady, to bear up beneath this most terrible of trials, you and your sisters of the 300? Because you can."

To all who wear no uniform but give so much, sacrifice so willingly and serve as such an example to our nation and each other, my thanks.

As I leave the Army, to those with responsibility to carry on, I'd say, service in this business is tough and often dangerous. It extracts a price for participation, and that price can be high.

It is tempting to protect yourself from the personal or professional costs of loss by limiting how much you commit, how much of belief and trust in people, and how deeply you care. Caution and cynicism are safe, but soldiers don't want to follow cautious cynics. They follow leaders who believe enough to risk failure or disappointment for a worthy cause.

If I had it to do over again, I'd do some things in my career differently but not many. I believed in people, and I still believe in them. I trusted and I still trust. I cared and I still care. I wouldn't have had it any other way.

Winston Churchill said we make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give. To the young leaders of today and tomorrow, it's a great life. Thank you. (Applause.)