

## Thirty Six Years of Service in the United States Army

LTC Tomas Yla

*Head of the Center for Leadership and Methodological Training  
General Jonas Žemaitis Military Academy of Lithuania*

Retired General John William ‘Mick’ Nicholson served in the United States (US) Army for 36 years. Speaking at the International Leadership Conference at the General Jonas Žemaitis Lithuanian Military Academy (LMA), he shared his insights on past and future wars, and gave some practical advice to today’s leaders on how to deal with the ‘new reality’.

General J. W. Nicholson categorizes his years in the US Army into three periods. Each was a different ‘new reality’ that forced him to relate his military experience to the metamorphosis of warfare dictated by the times. Just as the war in Ukraine is now bringing new technologies and changing tactics to the battlefield before our eyes. The General briefly reviewed all three phases of his career and linked them to current issues in an attempt to answer the question of how soldiers and officers can prepare



General John William Nicholson, Commander of the NATO Resolute Support Mission and U.S. Forces–Afghanistan. *Source: Wikipedia*



Online discussion with General John William Nicholson.  
*Photo by E. Genys*

themselves for the major changes and challenges in the defence sector that are predicted to take full effect in the coming years.

“The coming years are going to be challenging in the defence sector, and I have had to face change many times in my career and have learned to deal with it, so I can share my experience with you. I have been in the military for 36 years. There was a 10-year period during the Cold War, followed by a decade before 9/11, and then another 18 years after 9/11 which involved 6 years fighting in Afghanistan,” he said.

General J. W. Nicholson was an infantry lieutenant and captain during the Cold War. The infantry mission is close with and destroy the enemy. He served with the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division and the 75<sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment, the highest readiness units in the US Army. The troops in these units were always on high alert, ready for deployment anywhere in the world, should the need arise. As he put it, “Jump, fight, win!” was their daily mantra, and the Ranger principles of never leaving a fallen comrade, never accepting defeat, and completing the mission even if you are the only survivor were in their bones.

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General J. W. Nicholson describes the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR) as a tectonic shift after which everything changed. He said: “Until then, our enemy was the USSR, which wanted to destroy us. We knew everything about the Soviet army: how many there were, how they were organised, the capabilities of their weapons and equipment, where they were concentrated, how they trained and fought, what their tactics and leadership principles were. We, too, trained relentlessly to be able to defeat these guys. At that time, in the US Army, you could go from being a second lieutenant to a four-star general simply by virtue of your tactical expertise in defeating the Soviets. The US Army had over 1 million troops, 400 000 were in Europe, and we could build our force to what we called ‘10 divisions in 10 days’. So the mastery of tactics was important, but the logistics were also of paramount importance. It was in this kind of army that I gained experience in my first decade of service,” said General J. W. Nicholson.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the collapse of the USSR in December 1991, the US was essentially left with an army whose purpose was to destroy the Soviets. “We took that army to the Middle East and fought Operation ‘Desert Storm’, conducted by a large coalition under a United Nations mandate. This legitimate basis was critical to our success in a conflict that lasted only about six months,” said the General. “Six months after ‘Desert Storm’, I was a major and stationed at Fort Leavenworth, where I was studying for my Masters in Advanced Military Studies. At that time, as professional military men, we were doing a lot of thinking about the future of warfare. We studied history and military theorists like Sun Tzu, Machiavelli, Clausewitz, Liddell Hart, Douhet, Mahan, Galula, Mitchell. This education was excellent because it provided an intellectual framework within which we could consider new developments in technology and geopolitics (along with our tactical experience) in order to think about the future.”

The speaker noted that in the 1990s, the US Army faced a lot of uncertainty about the post-Cold War era. “Americans emerged



Online discussion. From the left: Brigadier General Almantas Leika, Commandant Lithuanian MA; Brigadier General Vakur Karus, Commandant Estonian MA; Rear Admiral Yves Dupont, Commandant Belgian RMA. *Photo by E. Genys*

from Desert Storm with the false belief that future war would be fast, precise and almost bloodless thanks to new technologies. Americans wanted a ‘Peace Dividend’ and there was domestic political pressure to bring troops home and reduce the size and expense of the large Cold War Army. The US Army was reduced from 18 divisions to 10, and the number of troops in Europe went from 400,000 to 60,000 allowing funds to be redirected from defense to other needs of American society. However, the 1990s also witnessed new complexities, new missions and new risks in unusual places such as Mogadishu, Liberia, Rwanda and Bosnia. High casualties in urban combat in Mogadishu in 1993 raised political concerns about the risks of these new missions. We ended up deploying as part of a large NATO-led multinational coalition into Bosnia in a ‘peace enforcement’ role. These dynamics lead to debates within the US Army about our operational concepts. How should we be organized, trained, equipped and led for these new complexities,” said General J. W. Nicholson.

Even among top US officials at the time, he says, there were

quite heated discussions. For example, the former US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CHOD), General Colin Powell, who was highly respected in the military, had developed a doctrine to increase army effectiveness and reduce casualties, but US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright clashed with him over how many troops the US should send to Bosnia, using her now famous phrase “What’s the point of having a big army if you don’t use it”. There was no consensus across the US government on the Army’s operational concept. Many wanted to stick with a Cold War approach that had proven successful in the past, but other leaders were concerned we would be left behind by advances in technology and changes across the globe.

In 1999, the U.S. Army Chief of Staff General Erik Shinseki led an effort called ‘Army Transformation’. He famously said “if you do not like change, you will like irrelevance even less.” He said we didn’t know how or when war would come but it would be very different from the past and we needed to change to be ready. He refocused the Army on creating lighter and more rapidly deployable units to include the Stryker Brigade Combat Teams that were networked for optimal effectiveness. He initiated a process to integrate new technologies into the development of a future combat system, developing technology insertion points into Army acquisition programs. General J. W. Nicholson commanded the Army’s first Stryker infantry battalion and after his two year command worked for General Shinseki on Army Transformation.

On the 11th of September 2001, when J. W. Nicholson was still a lieutenant colonel, he did not go into his office at the Pentagon that day as he usually did because he had to move his family into a new house. But like many people in the area, he heard the terrifying sound of a passenger plane hijacked by terrorists crashing into the Pentagon that day. According to the general, the nose of the plane came within 100 feet of his office. All of his colleagues in the office at the time were killed. “I was just incredibly lucky,” he said. “For all of us who avoided the fate of many of our friends and colleagues, those events were a wake-up call. And it really

galvanised Americans to fight against the extremists and terrorists who had carried out the attack. It was at that time that Article 5 of NATO was invoked for the collective defence of the United States. To be honest with You, this was something that none of us had ever expected to see. But we were very grateful that Lithuania and the other NATO allies stood by us when we needed them and then deployed with us to Afghanistan. A 41-nation coalition fought there for almost 20 years,” the General recalled.

General J. W. Nicholson spent another year working at the Pentagon before studying at the National Defence University, where he obtained another Master’s Degree. These studies, he said, were an opportunity to once again reflect on the journey and what lay ahead. Immediately after graduation, he took command of 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division which he built, trained and lead in combat in eastern Afghanistan. Form 2006 to 2018, he spent 6 years in Afghanistan, commanding various units before becoming a one-, two-, three- and finally four-star general. It was there that he gained invaluable experience. He learned how to deal with uncertain situations and how to make difficult decisions in the face of constant risk and change.

“The higher up you go, the more success depends upon people over whom you have no command authority. It became increasingly important to work effectively with colleagues outside your tactical organization. As the Commander in Afghanistan from 2016 to 2018, I was part of three different chains of command: First, the US military leadership up to the President of the United States. Second, the NATO leadership up to the Secretary General. Third, I was an adviser to the Afghan President and Afghan army. Even though I had no command authority over them, our advice as coalition partners was extremely important to the Afghan president, the National Security Council and their military leadership. So the job of any military leader is to be able to build a team that achieves unity of effort. That means that you are going to have to exert a certain amount of influence on people who are not under your command. This is not unity of command. It is unity of effort,”

General J. W. Nicholson told the audience at the international conference.

To address complex challenges and achieve unity of effort, the US general said he had to develop new operating models. This was both difficult and risky. “You couldn’t just give them an order to do something. You had to get them to work together. To do that, I first had to who were the key people involved in solving a specific problem. Once I had established a relationship with them, we identified our shared interests and how we could work together to achieve our common goals. It was also important to anticipate where friction was likely to arise and how we would overcome it when it did occur. Then it was a matter of communicating along the lines we had established until trust was built. With trust came results. Only then could results be achieved,” General said.

In his view, the art of communication with people in difficult situations is the key to success. He also drew attention to the cultural differences. “I say this as an American because I think we have been somewhat lacking in the ability to build relationships. Americans are transactional and often communicate along the lines of: Here are my interests, you know what I want and I know what you want, so let’s agree, let’s slap the table and move on. In other cultures, unfortunately, that style has not worked very well. I know this because I have spent the last 10 years living in Muslim countries – Afghanistan, Turkey, now the United Arab Emirates – and working with people from different cultures, political systems, religions and traditions to achieve results. In Afghanistan I had to learn how to achieve unity of effort with people with whom I did not share a common culture or heritage. So in addition to the traditional US Army values of loyalty, duty, respect, honour, selfless service, integrity and personal courage, I had to develop other qualities that make for a successful leader on the battlefield, including, most importantly, humility and patience,” said the retired US Army general.

Humility, he says, means recognising that a military leader does not have all the answers, but needs to find them when faced with a

complex problem and an unfamiliar environment. When working in another country, it is the locals who know the situation better. You have to be humble enough to learn from them. Of course, this takes time, so patience is a necessary quality in a leader. The same goes for learning to work with new technologies. It takes humility to accept that you don't know everything there is to know about electronic or cyber warfare, unmanned aerial vehicles or the latest lasers, and then the humility to be willing to acquire the knowledge you need. So in order to solve complex problems, humility and patience are essential.

“The importance of emotional intelligence and empathy for leaders is something I would also like to emphasize. Emotional intelligence means trying to put yourself in the other person's shoes and see the problem through their eyes. It does not mean that you have to agree with them and give up your position. But it is important to take the opportunity to see the problem through another set of eyes and try to understand where someone is coming from. Empathy means that you are willing to learn about the other person and their point of view. This kind of relationship is the prerequisite for connecting with other people and being able to see a way forward to a possible solution,” the speaker added.

Speaking on the future of warfare, General J. W. Nicholson stressed the importance of taking the time to reflect, to understand the character and nature of war and how to accomplish your nation's security policy and objectives through creative approaches. This requires drawing on existing experience and the capabilities of new technologies, new partners and new teammates. It then requires designing solutions, creating unity of effort, building trust and seizing opportunities. According to the General, finding the best way to respond to change takes time because there is simply no time at the tactical level on the battlefield, and the commander is often forced to make a decision based on the best information at the time, but leaders must be able to find a moment to step back and think about the problem, conceptualise the solution, and then find the best way to implement it.



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The international conference audience showed great interest in the US general's experience in various wars. The cadets present asked him to give practical advice on how to be an effective leader in a war zone. General J. W. Nicholson pointed out that good time management is essential for leaders, especially in a war zone. He said: "When I was a colonel commanding a brigade in Afghanistan, we were spread over 11 provinces. Most of my brigade operated in company or platoon-sized units. So there was someone fighting every day. My soldiers served for a year. Then our service was extended for another four months. During that time we lost 45 soldiers and 330 were wounded. It was a very difficult year physically and emotionally to deal with the losses. During all this time our soldiers were given only two weeks off to go home and then went back to fight. By the end of that 16-month deployment in Afghanistan, I was physically and emotionally exhausted. It was then that I began to question whether I was managing my time properly, so I decided to find a better way of doing things before I went back there."

At the time, he used to refer to the time-management formula he had devised as simply '2, 3, and 7'. He tried very hard to get seven hours of sleep every night, because he realised that the brain does not function optimally when making life and death decisions without enough sleep. He even compared trying to make a decision after only three or four hours of sleep to trying to make a decision while drunk. Sleep, he said, was essential for a leader to be able to make quality decisions and responsible decisions for the lives of his soldiers.

It is equally important to eat three meals a day, he said. It is like putting fuel in your car to make it work. And also spending at least two hours on your physical, emotional and spiritual balance. It is important for leaders to find their source of strength because war is so draining. "For some it may be prayer. For others it may be talking to family and friends. The most important thing is to find what it is that helps you to keep your emotional balance, and to set aside some time each day to do that. For example, when I



General John William Nicholson greets U.S. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter. Kabul, 12 July, 2016. *Source: Wikipedia*

learned my soldiers were fighting, I always said a quick prayer for their safety and got them whatever help they needed. Whenever possible, I tried to talk to my wife every day, even if it was just for five minutes. This all helped me stay grounded. Leaders should think about how they will sustain themselves for long duration in the high stress of combat and come up with their own methods,” said the US General.

In his speech at the international conference, General J. W. Nicholson touched on another subject that is very sensitive for any officer – how to accept that subordinates may die because of a decision taken by their commander. “As an officer and a leader, when you go to war, the reality is that you will possibly lose people who you love – your troops. Good leaders care deeply about their soldiers. But in order to accomplish your mission, you have to lead them in doing dangerous things which may get them injured or killed. Before our deployment, I told my leaders that if and when we lose someone, we as leaders should know that: 1) the mission was important enough to risk their lives 2) the mission was well planned and well lead 3) they had all of the training, equipment

and support they needed to be successful. All of these elements were essential before we conducted any mission.

But of course, even if you have done everything right, you can still lose someone in battle. The weather can be bad, equipment can break. Sometimes the enemy gets lucky. All of these things have happened to me. I've lost soldiers. And when that happens, you have to be able to look at yourself and know in your heart that you did the best that you could. And the next time you try even harder. And again you make sure you did your best. Either way, you will mourn the loss of the soldiers you love for the rest of your life, and you will have to comfort their families, their widows, their children, their parents. There is no greater responsibility than that."

Continuing sensitive subject, the cadets asked whether it is possible to prepare for death, because it is one thing to have the knowledge that it can happen, and another thing to lose your soldiers. "Loss is the most difficult part of my service," he said. "It's something that everyone has to deal with emotionally and morally, and I think the most important thing is the knowledge that you did everything you could do. It's also worth remembering that if the goal was not to lose anyone, you'd never go into combat. The point is that you have to go, fight and win, and still do your best to bring them back. And as far as the enemy is concerned. Your job is to kill the other person, right? This is not easy but if you have to do it – it should be done according to your moral values, according to the laws of warfare. And so I'd say, if it's legal, if it's moral, if you're in that situation – then don't hesitate."

Speaking about his combat experience, the US Army General stressed the importance of taking care of soldiers' emotions. He said commanders should spend time with them after a battle to talk about everything that happened, especially if someone was wounded or killed. What was done right and what was done wrong. What did we learn and how things can be done better next time. Especially important, remembering your fallen comrades, say their names, tell their stories, speak with their families, grieve with them. All of this helps soldiers to stay whole and continue the mission.



General John William Nicholson, Commander of the NATO Resolute Support Mission and U.S. Forces–Afghanistan. *Photo from personal archive*

General J. W. Nicholson also emphasized the importance of looking after the emotional health of their soldiers. Funeral rituals such as community mourning, honour ceremonies and communication with loved ones help to deal with the difficult emotions of loss or survivor's guilt. Experiencing traumatic circumstances has led to crises for many soldiers such as divorce, substance abuse or even suicide. It is very important for military leaders to look after not only the physical but also the emotional health of their soldiers.

General J. W. Nicholson made a number of points about current developments on the battlefield. He said the gap between the battlefield and the public has narrowed: "During the Cold War, when I was a lieutenant, you couldn't have any communication at all with your family, friends and other people during combat operations. It was like being cut off from the world. Of course, there was a longing and concern for your family, but at the same time conditions were created that allowed you to focus and concentrate

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fully on the task at hand. But with each deployment to Afghanistan, the ability to connect with society increased. When I went there as a colonel, you were lucky if you could call your family once a month. When I went there as a commander, I could talk to my wife every day, and my soldiers could send text messages to their families. So actions on the battlefield now have an immediate personal, social and even political impact. And military leaders will have to take this into account in their decision-making.”

He also highlighted the extremely rapid pace of technological change. He stressed that leaders must not only be aware of innovation, but also be able to apply it creatively in their work. General J. W. Nicholson gave an example of how the Commander of the Italian Air Force had done this by looking at how best to train the next generation of pilots for the F-35 fighter jets, where they would not only have to fly but also manage a large amount of data from a variety of systems and sensors. The commander invited a group of young pilots under the age of 25 (with limited flying experience but more familiarity with information technology) to develop solutions on how best to train, and allowed them to share their insights. He also took advice from his senior officers, of course. But at the same time, he created a way for himself to be advised by the most junior people in his command.

Values such as humility, emotional intelligence and creativity will be essential for military leaders on as they face new defense challenges, according to the US General. However, even as the character of warfare is evolving because of new technologies, the nature of war remains brutal and challenging. Commanders must be at the top of their game to succeed in their mission and look after the welfare of their soldiers even as they develop solutions for the future.