

# Interview: Dr. Ervin J. Rokke

## United States Air Force Academy

MS. MOUND: General Rokke, most experts agree that the profession of arms is in the midst of an extraordinary transformation. How would you describe the changing nature of the military profession in the 21st Century?

GENERAL ROKKE (Ret.): First of all, I agree completely with the notion that the profession of arms is in the midst of a historic transformation. The nature of the profession is changing in fundamental ways, and I believe at a much more rapid pace than in the past, most certainly than we have seen during the time I've been associated with the military. In large part, this change has to do with the environment in which relations take place among nation-states and among nation-states and non nation-state players. During my professional career, which covered approximately the late 1950s through the mid-90s, that interaction was a very linear process.

There were two major players: the Soviet Union and the United States. The other players at the table, if you will, were nation-states who tended to act in predictable ways. It was a bipolar world.

The players generally lined up behind one or the other superpower. There also were the so-called neutrals, but, frankly, they weren't major players. It was essentially a zero-sum game between Moscow and Washington, and the stakes of the game were driven in large part by the relative balance of our respective military forces. In a traditional sense, it was all about who could blow up the other most efficiently and effectively.

MS. MOUND: Since you were a military intelligence officer at that time, your perspective is especially poignant.

GENERAL ROKKE (Ret.): Yes, I was a military intelligence officer when I wasn't teaching here at the Air Force Academy. And, frankly, I spent virtually my entire career dealing with information that was relevant to the fundamental task of destroying our opponent's military capability or associated industrial capacities. In other words, I was concerned with traditional military power and what's now called the "kinetic" conflict arena. My focus was on the enemy's capability to hurt us militarily. I didn't pay much attention -- or

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perhaps I didn't pay as much attention as I should have -- to our or the other side's intentions.

I recall a conversation during my assignment to Embassy Moscow in the late 1980's with the senior-ranking officer in the Soviet military. He said to me, "I've come to learn that the American people don't want war, but the hard reality I have to face is that you have an incredible capability to wage war. And I must look at your capabilities, not your intentions." This was Marshal Akhromeyev, a marvelous military leader, probably the finest military leader that the Soviets ever produced. And you know, when you think about it, his perspective was not too different from the way we looked at the situation. While we had differing views on how dangerous the Soviet intentions were, in the last analysis we...like the Soviets...looked closely at our respective military capabilities with a view toward covering ourselves in the event the worst were to happen.

MS. MOUND: Your story illustrates perfectly the linear world of the military profession.

GENERAL ROKKE (Ret.): Yes. It was a linear world. You measured your predicament, if you will, by counting ships, planes, tanks, and soldiers on the ground, and then tallying up those numbers to determine the overall military balance. The "bottom line" was driven largely by military force structures. And, frankly, as an intelligence officer, I was usually right in my assessments because the Soviet Union was quite predictable. They were a big, cumbersome bureaucracy. Easy world.

MS. MOUND: What about today?

GENERAL ROKKE (Ret.): What I just described is not even remotely similar to the world we face today. We still have the possibility

of nation-states, so-called peer competitors emerging, and we can't forget that. But the active wars we have at the moment are with players who, in many cases, are not nation-states. We are dealing with tribes; we are dealing with religious fundamentalists of various backgrounds. It's far more difficult to assess opponent capabilities or to predict the future. We have gone from a finite number of players, if you will, to an indefinite number. Today a single individual has access to an enormous amount of information. That can make anyone dangerous in terms of what harm someone can inflict on an opponent. So the world we have today is a non-linear world, and a non-linear world is far more difficult to deal with in terms of our security predicament than that linear world in which I was raised and participated in as a military officer.

MS. MOUND: Is this non-linear world an entirely new challenge?

GENERAL ROKKE (Ret.): Quite frankly, Vietnam was a non-linear challenge. We didn't recognize it, and that is one of the reasons we didn't do as well in the Vietnam conflict as we might have. But clearly our experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan are in the category of what is now called "irregular warfare." And increasingly the way we deal with that challenge goes beyond blowing things up. I don't care whether you are the Air Force, Army or Navy, irregular warfare has less to do with traditional notions of military destruction than it does with working on attitudes, hearts and minds. That's the new challenge. If we have learned anything in Iraq, we have learned that no matter how brilliantly we conduct traditional military operations -- and our military operation in Desert Storm was, I believe, spectacular -- we can still lose a war if we don't understand that

more complicated, non-linear challenge which still lies out there after we have destroyed the enemy's military force structure. And this new challenge has to do with the attitudes of our opponent, the attitudes of our allies, and the attitudes in Cedar Rapids and Des Moines. So the objectives of the new challenge are much more complicated. They must include articulating a story in such a fashion that it is acceptable, indeed hopefully supported even by our opponents, and most certainly by our allies, whether they are in Paris, London, Rome or in Boise and Peoria.

MS. MOUND: Have we been successful articulating the story of a non-linear world?

GENERAL ROKKE (Ret.): Quite frankly, we are still learning, I think, how to deal with this new challenge. And in a dramatic way, it is changing the very nature of what it means to be in the profession of arms. Now we have folks like Gen Petraeus, whom I consider to be one of the most brilliant military leaders that our military has produced since World War II, effecting dramatic transformations in the culture, if you will, of the United States Army. The young captains, majors and lieutenants who are being assigned today to places like Afghanistan and Iraq, are doing very different things from what the lieutenants, captains and majors did in that old linear world that I talked about. They are now being forced to acquaint themselves with the cultures in which they serve. They are learning relevant languages. They are worrying about producing electricity for the locals. Now, when you look at the United States Air Force, it turns out that the C-17 can be one of our most effective weapons in dealing with the conflict because when the USAF hauls relief supplies or something else of a similar nature into a foreign airport, we are communicating

something about who we are as Americans. That has a very important impact on the wide spectrum of attitudes that we're hoping to affect.

MS. MOUND: Let's talk about implications. What attributes do you see as imperative for future Air Force officers who will be serving in a non-linear world?

GENERAL ROKKE (Ret.): Let's step back and ask the fundamental question: What is the Air Force Academy all about? What's the fundamental dynamic that takes place at the Air Force Academy? From 1958 to 2010, I've been assigned here for at least one tour of duty in each of six decades, except one. And while my perspective of what we are all about as an institution has evolved over time, I believe that the language we're using right now is spot-on. I'm not sure we have come to fully understand the implications of "developing leaders of character" but I think we are definitely on the right track.

Generally speaking, what goes on here at the Academy is a reconciliation of three factors. The first has to do with the changing nature of the profession that I've already discussed. The second has to do with the changing nature of the young men and women who come here as cadets. The third factor is what doesn't change -- our core values.

I've watched successive generations of cadets, and the young men and women attending the Academy today are different from their predecessors. The so-called "Millennials" began attending the Academy around 2000. I'm one who likes this Millennial generation, and among the reasons why is because they are very demanding, with regard to excellence. Previous generations of cadets, including my own, sometimes showed a tendency to look at their

cadet experience as a ride up an escalator....and at the end we wanted two things: a commission in the United States Air Force and an academic degree. And, incidentally, we didn't want the Academy to "mess around" with us too much on our way up. Leave us alone, and don't be too hard on us, was often our attitude. This generation says, "Yes, we want to be commissioned at the end of our four years here, and we want a good academic degree as well, but we're also interested in having a quality experience." Indeed, they want a quality experience as cadets, even if it means more effort on their part. I like that. And I also would acknowledge that hasn't always been the case with earlier generations.

MS. MOUND: What about the third factor, our core values – Integrity First, Service Before Self, and Excellence in all we do.

GENERAL ROKKE (Ret.): I think each of these is spot-on. The rhetoric is right. And you see these core values displayed at the Academy and throughout the Air Force. And, quite frankly, while we all don't use exactly the same language, each of the other military services also promote these three core values.

MS. MOUND: Let's discuss each, one at a time. What about 'integrity'?

GENERAL ROKKE (Ret.): No one argues with the notion of integrity. No sane person would make the argument that you don't need integrity when you have a license to kill, which is the military situation. So at the end of the day we are all in agreement that having integrity is essential. To be sure, inspiring cadets to live lives of integrity has its challenges, but the theology, if you will, behind the notion of integrity is sound.

MS. MOUND: What about 'service before self'?

GENERAL ROKKE (Ret.): Ah, service before self. My wife reminds me that, during our 35 years of military life, we moved 24 times. Well, you don't move a family 24 times without appreciating the notion of service before self. And that's the easy stuff. We just had a remarkable ceremony honoring Lt Schulte\*, and that demonstrated, of course, the ultimate notion of service before self. My point is, like integrity, service before self is a philosophical concept that we all understand and appreciate.

MS. MOUND: What about 'excellence in all we do'?

GENERAL ROKKE (Ret.): This is the hard one, because we all have different ideas about what excellence involves. Certainly, we must have this quest for excellence if we're going to be good at our profession. But I hope we can really look hard at how we articulate and effect this core value within the Academy's academic culture. What I'm suggesting is that the fundamental dynamic of the Air Force Academy involves reconciling our constant core values, including excellence in all we do, with a changing profession and with changing generations of cadets. And that's an exciting reconciliation process. It's like a marriage in the sense that we must keep working at it or it's going to collapse because of the dynamic natures of the profession and the students. If we try to deal with Millennial generation cadets in the same way we dealt with preceding generations, I will guarantee you we'll fail. As a matter of fact, I would suggest that a real challenge we face may be that the Academy, as an institution, remains fundamentally a product of the linear age I just talked about. And now we have students who are extremely

sophisticated, if you will, about the non-linear age that they have experienced and are asking “What’s going on here? Why is it that this institution tends to have such a linear quality, when it’s preparing us for a world that’s totally non-linear?”

MS. MOUND: Are you suggesting that there is a tension between the notion of ‘excellence in all we do’ and the sort of education the Wing is receiving?

GENERAL ROKKE (Ret.): Yes. I think there is a tension. Now, when it becomes serious, of course, is when this tension translates into cynicism, when the cadets perceive that Academy rules or programs are “knuckle-dragging.” And if the institution doesn’t deal with this tension in a mature way -- and I believe the Air Force Academy currently is dealing with this tension in a very effective manner -- but if it were to fail to deal with this tension, I’d predict with a high degree of probability that we will have a very cynical cadet wing. And they will ride that escalator to the top but, frankly, be counting the days until they can get out of here and get out into the “real world.”

MS. MOUND: Let’s talk about cadet training and education. In your opinion, how can we best educate, train and develop the character and leadership of our cadets?

GENERAL ROKKE (Ret.): I’m very comfortable with the approach that places a premium on balance. We cannot predict with precision what the future is going to hold. I studied German as an Air Force Academy cadet, and my first assignment was to Japan. I didn’t get to Germany for almost 20 years after I had studied German. And in the meantime, I had to learn Russian because of an assignment to the Soviet Union. Well, that’s an example of trying to predict what’s going to happen in the future,

in terms of very specific academic choices that are made by cadets and staff at the Academy. So my advice would be, to both the institution and to the cadets, cover your bets. Now, the institution has done this, I think, very effectively with its balance among the basic sciences, the engineering sciences, the social sciences and the humanities. There is a reason why we stretch cadets across that academic spectrum: to cover our future bets. We have gone through periods when we needed more engineers and now we’re in a period when we need people who understand the human terrain, we need people to learn second languages and become aware of different cultures.

Our challenge as an institution is to instill a broad spectrum of capabilities in our cadets, so when they are sent to Japan rather than to Germany, as I was, they can respond in an agile fashion. We should try and produce in our graduates an agility and a curiosity because they will need these attributes throughout their career. As military officers, they will never be quite sure what challenges will come their way, and we need to prepare our cadets for that.

MS. MOUND: What about developing leaders?

GENERAL ROKKE (Ret.): We need to provide the qualities that they will need as they move from follower to leader, so to speak, and are forced to deal with the surprise, with the uncertainty, with the unpredictability of that non-linear world. In today’s environment, a leader who cannot adapt quickly will be a failure because the world is changing so rapidly. The character dimensions, as I suggested earlier, have a certain consistency over time that relates to our three core values. But surprise will also test character and leadership.

MS. MOUND: What do you think about the

nineteen outcomes that the Air Force Academy has recently adopted? Several of these focus on character and leadership.

GENERAL ROKKE (Ret.): I think developing these outcomes was very useful. The process forced us to ask questions, for starters, about whether we have things right at this institution. I was involved in writing the Strategic Plan and this also was a healthy process for us because it forced us to ask interesting questions. I remember, in the course of the discussions associated with drafting that plan, having arguments about the extent to which we want audacity on the part of our graduates? Now, I'm not arguing that we want to create a whole graduating class of rebels, but I am suggesting that, in a world where change is taking place at the present velocity, we better have some folks out there who, both as followers and as leaders, have the guts to take on a sacred cow every now and then and make the institutions in which they serve more responsive to the fundamental challenges that a dynamic, non-linear world brings.

Is this perspective consistent with the profession of arms? Or do we want essentially automatons who march up that hill when they are told to do it, but don't spend a lot of time worrying about whether there is a better way? My point is that the strategic planning process was important because it forced us to discuss critically some of the "heritage notions" associated with our Academy. For example, we place a lot of emphasis on flying. We should. After all, we are the Air Force. But we have to come to grips with the hard reality that the number of cockpits available to our graduates is declining. And at the same time, the number and the complexity of new professional challenges we face, as we have talked about earlier, is dramatically increasing.

MS. MOUND: You have been involved in the Center for Character and Leadership Development for many years. What do you see as its future?

GENERAL ROKKE (Ret.): I think that one of the reasons I'm so excited about the Academy and the expanded mission of the Center is that I sense a thirst on the part of the current generation of cadets for a more thorough, a more sophisticated approach to how we deal with the challenges that we have been talking about during this interview. The Center for Character and Leadership Development is poised to take a hard look, a sophisticated look at the nature of the profession, figure out what it is, and then set forth the implications of these changes for how we teach and develop character and leadership. And it may well be that we will find that there are some differences in those implications, relative to what they were back in the 'brown-shoe days' when I was a cadet -- or quite frankly, relative to what these practices were even two or three years ago.

I look at the Center not as a lecture hall that provides an endpoint for a legion of cadets that march over from the terrazzo and are forced to listen to a presentation that eighty percent of them would prefer to have avoided. Instead, I look at the Center as an exciting place, as a kind of yeast for this bread-making business that we're in here at the Academy, where things of interest will be going on that will attract cadets on a voluntary basis. And if we do this right, if we bring in interesting and quality presentations, we can make this change happen. And if we are successful, in transforming the Center into a kind of community center for cadets who want to increase their knowledge about the profession for which they are training and being educated, if we get to those cadets under the circumstances I've described,

then real learning will take place. We will not have an audience sitting there with their brains locked, semi-awake, looking at their watches in the hopes that they can get out sooner rather than later. On the contrary, we may have fewer cadets in the audience, but a more dynamic, interested group who are there because they want to learn about their profession and where their profession is heading. They will come to understand better the relationship between their current lives as cadets and the challenges they will face when they graduate.

MS MOUND: You're so right. Cadets are always talking about the challenges of leading peers.

GENERAL ROKKE (Ret.): The hard reality is that some of the most difficult leadership challenges are those that are encountered when dealing with peers, and we have cadets throughout the cadet wing who are in leadership positions dealing with their peers. That's tough. I don't care whether they are cadets or three-star generals, that's a real challenge. And what the Center can do is work through the rationale for exposing cadets to that kind of a leadership challenge while they are at the Academy and minimizing the probability that they will walk away with a cynical feeling about their cadet experience. It will also help them as followers if they understand how difficult it is for a classmate to be a leader and have to tell them their shoes look like he or she has just come from the barn. Or when a classmate must ask when was the last time they changed their uniforms or visited the barber. Learning to deal with these kinds of issues is not irrelevant, by any stretch, to the challenges they will face as a Captain or a Major or a Lieutenant Colonel, or even a flag-ranking officer.

MS. MOUND: Any final thoughts?

GENERAL ROKKE (Ret.): My bottom line is that I think we may have the perfect storm in place. First, we have a generation of Millennials serious about having a quality experience during their four years as cadets. Second, the Air Force Academy's leadership team has moved forward with an expanded vision and mission for its Center for Character and Leadership Development. Together, these forces have the potential for creating a dramatically more interesting approach to character and leadership development.

\* First Lieutenant Roslyn Littmann Schulte, Class of 2006, was killed in action outside of Kabul, Afghanistan on 20 May 2009, by a roadside bomb. Lieutenant Schulte is the United States Air Force Academy's first female graduate killed in action in the Global War on Terrorism, and was posthumously awarded a Purple Heart and Bronze Star. She was also posthumously awarded the National Intelligence Medal for Valor for her efforts to teach Afghan military officials how to gather and interpret military intelligence. At the time of her death she was establishing the foundation for a new era of military strategy with the Afghan military, and creating political bonds that will endure for decades to come.