

# CALL SIGN CHAOS

## Lessons on Leadership From an Iconic 21st Century Marine

By Col Mary H. Reinwald, USMC (Ret)

After arriving in Iraq during a July 2007 visit to the region, LtGen James N. Mattis, left, takes a moment to talk to Cpl Brian E. Bell, center, and Cpl Gregory L. Souza, right. (Photo by LCpl Brian L. Lewis, USMC)

Anyone who spends even just a few minutes with former secretary of defense and retired Marine General James N. Mattis quickly realizes that his so-called nickname of “Mad Dog” is completely inappropriate for such an intelligent, rational and deliberate man. His new book bears the far more appropriate moniker by which the general is actually known. “Call Sign Chaos: Learning to Lead,” co-authored with Bing West, contains reflections and lessons learned by a giant of the Corps whose successes leading Marines in both Afghanistan and Iraq are the stuff of legend. Gen Mattis spoke with the editors of the *Marine Corps Gazette* and *Leatherneck* on May 28 and discussed his upcoming book and the leadership philosophy he honed over more than 40 years in uniform.

The book’s title, like everything Gen Mattis does, was deliberate. “My troops never called me ‘Mad Dog.’ It was ‘Chaos,’ it was ‘Six.’ It was never that thing made up by the press. That was never an accurate moniker.”

With service in Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Desert Storm and in Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom, Gen Mattis has an exceptional combat record, but it is his intellect, judgment and knowledge of history that ensure his place in the pantheon of iconic Marines. Coupled with his command of two combatant commands, U.S. Central Command and Joint Forces Command, and, of course, his recent service as Secretary of Defense, few leaders of any service have the incredible record of James N. Mattis.

West, a Marine veteran whose service in Vietnam stood him in good stead years later when as an embedded writer he accompanied Marines young enough to be his grandchildren on patrols in Iraq and Afghanistan, is one of the legions of Marines, veteran and active duty, who look up to Gen Mattis. “When the 1st Marine Division went to Baghdad in 2003, I kept seeing General Mattis at the points of attack at one place, another place.” But it wasn’t only in Iraq that West saw Mattis. “I first knew him as a one-star, then a two-star, then a three-star, then a four-star, but the commonality was that he was always where the action was, and he was immediately with the troops. He just had that essence of getting along with the troops,” West said.

The general still feels a responsibility to those troops and others. “I benefited from all the reading I’d done [and that] I was required to do by commanders who insisted I read,” Gen Mattis said. “I was reminded that I had some lessons that I’ve learned along the way that I pass on in the same spirit that I’ve benefited from,” he continued.

### Lifelong Love of History

The lessons the general learned along the way were in large part due to that devotion to reading and studying history. “I took responsibility for

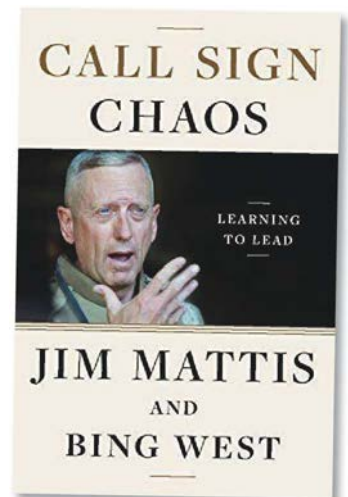


SGT JOSEPH R. CHENEY, USMC

**LtGen James T. Conway, left, consults with MajGen James N. Mattis in central Iraq on March 30, 2004. LtGen Conway was the commanding general of I Marine Expeditionary Force and MajGen Mattis served as the 1stMarDiv commander during the initial phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom.**

my own learning and I was never at a loss when I ran into the enemy.” The former Task Force 58 commander remembered being on a site survey in late 2001 as he prepared to take his Marine Expeditionary Brigade into Afghanistan. “I remember looking down from a P-3 when the admiral had asked if I could get the Marines from the Mediterranean and the Pacific together and move against Kandahar.” Then-Brigadier General Mattis had no doubts. “As I was circling that night, I could see very clearly from 100 books. I could see very clearly that the Taliban senior leaders or generals were dumber than a bucket of rocks. And so I took advantage. Thanks to Marine Corps coaching, thanks to the [Commandant’s Professional] reading list, thanks to Quantico, thanks to doing my homework, I knew exactly how I was going to nail them. And I didn’t care how brave their boys were. I didn’t care how many artillery guns or rockets they had. I knew that we were going to destroy them there in those opening battles after 9/11.”

A native of Washington, Mattis graduated from what is now Central Washington University with a degree in history. His love and appreciation of all facets of the past have been clearly evident throughout his many decades as a Marine. The new Director of the Marine Corps’ History Division, Dr. Edward Nevglowski, retired Marine lieutenant colonel, met then-Major Mattis when Nevglowski’s father, retired CWO-5 Alexander



**Gen Mattis said that the leadership lessons that he and co-author Bing West included in “Call Sign Chaos” can be applied to military or civilian life.**

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LISA FERDINANDO



GYSGT MATTHEW M. SMITH, USMC

**Above: James N. Mattis, Secretary of Defense, left, and Gen Joseph F. Dunford Jr., Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, conduct a joint press conference at the Pentagon, Aug. 28, 2018.**

**Left: The two Marines had previously served together during Operation Iraqi Freedom when then-Col Dunford, left, as the CO, 5th Marines, worked for then-MajGen Mattis, right, during his tenure as CG, 1st MarDiv.**

**“Operations occur at the speed of trust. And once you are running on trust, and you are rewarding initiative and aggressiveness ... you get brilliance in the basics and then you reward the initiative of aggressive implementation.”**

Nevgloski, was the drill master at the Naval Academy Preparatory School in the early 1980s. At the time, Mattis was the school’s battalion officer. While visiting his father at work, the junior Nevgloski often saw Mattis, who took an interest in the future Marine and encouraged his love of history.

“We talked about Marine Corps history and military history in general,” said Nevgloski. “He’d ask me what I was interested in, and, later, if I was reading anything specific. He always rattled off a number of books and authors. I recall him recommending ‘The Campaigns of Napoleon’ by David Chandler,” Nevgloski continued.

Other suggestions included James Webb’s “Fields of Fire” and “A Rumor of War” by Philip Caputo. According to Nevgloski, Mattis told him that both of those classics would not only give him an idea of what war was like but also describe the moral and ethical challenges of leading Marines in combat.

“He also reminded me, more than once, how history affords us the opportunity to learn from someone else’s experiences—good or bad—and





CPL ZACHARY DYER, USMC

that if you read enough, you will never really be surprised or caught off guard,” said Nevglowski, a retired infantry officer.

The general provided additional recommendations for professional reading during his recent interview with *Leatherneck*. “I think for all Marines, read E.B. Sledge’s ‘With the Old Breed’ or read Ms. [Gail] Shisler’s book, ‘For Country and Corps [The Life of General Oliver P. Smith]’ about the commanding general of 1st Marine Division who brings the division out of being surrounded at Chosin Reservoir. I would recommend those two books because they will remind everybody that we’re not going to ask any more of our troops in the future in terms of grit than Marines have proven capable of delivering in the past. We need to know that we will not be asked to do anything more than those veterans in their past.

“For those in higher ranks, those who will have to make the operational, even strategic, decisions or provide advice to the operational and strategic leaders or be those leaders themselves, I don’t think

you can go wrong if you read three books. One is ‘The Memoirs of Ulysses Grant.’ The other one is ‘Defeat into Victory’ by Field Marshal Slim, and the other one is Liddell Hart’s book on Sherman [‘Sherman: Soldier, Realist, American’]. Even when the chips are down, even when it’s hard to come up with other options because of the situation you face, in those books you can find mental models for what you need to do in order to find your way out of the situation. Then you need to employ effectively what you have learned.”

### Leadership Lessons for All

Many of Gen Mattis’ leadership lessons apply beyond the Marine Corps. He believes that organizations, whether civilian or military, should reward the right behavior while also delegating decision-making authority as far down the chain as possible. “Operations occur at the speed of trust. And once you are running on trust, and you are rewarding initiative and aggressiveness, it doesn’t matter whether you’re in business or

**LtGen James N. Mattis, commander of Marine Corps Forces Central Command, speaks to Marines with Marine Wing Support Group 27 in Al Asad, Iraq, May 6, 2007.**



COURTESY OF LT COL EDWARD NEVGLOSKI, USMC (RET)

Above: The Marines who were assigned to the staff of the Naval Academy Preparatory School in the early 1980s included Maj Mattis, left and GySgt Nevgloski, right.



When he was a lieutenant colonel, Mattis commanded 1st Bn, 7th Marines during Operation Desert Storm.

**“The kind of a unit that needs ‘Mother, may I,’ doesn’t delegate responsibility because they don’t trust that their troops are disciplined enough or effective enough on their own to make good decisions—those units will become basically irrelevant.”**

marketing. It doesn’t matter whether you’re playing football or you’re a coach on the battlefield. You get brilliance in the basics and then you reward the initiative of aggressive implementation.” He added, “In the Marines, our greatest honor is fighting alongside our comrades. Our troops going into the fight deserve commanders who clearly state the mission.”

And according to the general, this approach ensures that even the most junior members of an organization are appreciated. “Everybody knows

how important they are. Right down to the youngest Sailor and Marine or the youngest kid or gal fresh out of college in your business.”

Using a story from his time in Iraq as an example, he described young Marines showing him how lessons were passed down the chain of command and implemented. “When a funeral procession goes down the street, a Marine patrol on the street stops and takes their helmets off as a sign of respect. I never taught them to take their helmets off. They knew to take their helmets off because they were there not as an occupying or dominating force. They were there trying to give the Iraqi people a fresh start. And I think that when you have that level of initiative going on, a hundred things are happening that you don’t control, but they’re exactly what you need to carry out that clearly articulated aim.”

### Preparation for the Future

“Call Sign Chaos: Learning to Lead” serves not only as an outstanding source of leadership lessons for organizations but also individuals. It includes advice for military professionals on how to prepare themselves for the future—physically, mentally and spiritually. “Future conflict is going to be more unrelenting. There will be everything from robots and information operations that are demanding constant adaptation. But I think what you have to do is make certain your small unit leaders are physically the toughest guys in the unit. If someone can’t do the pull-ups ... if they can’t do the run in good form and still be able to fight at the end of it, if they can’t pick a machine gun off the back of a Marine who’s got the flu and carry it for him for a while, if they haven’t done enough homework that as fast as the situation changes, they’re able to accommodate it, integrate it, and have a mental model for it. And if spiritually, they don’t have a reservoir of spiritual strength that will allow them to take the tragedies of conflict, of combat, in stride, you’re not going to be able to delegate the authority down.

“And because of information technology, cyber attacks and all, we know we’re going to lose communications at times—they’ll be up and down, up and down. So the kind of a unit that needs ‘Mother, may I,’ doesn’t delegate responsibility because they don’t trust that their troops are disciplined enough or effective enough on their own to make good decisions—those units will become basically irrelevant. And the ones that have tough guys who know what



they're doing, can create affection inside the unit, and can keep exercising initiative and aggressiveness, they're going to have to be prepared to do all that sort of thing. And if you can't do that, then you simply will not be a player in future conflict because it's going to be so chaotic."

### Communications

Given his significant and impressive record in command billets from the platoon to the combatant command level, it should come as no surprise that Gen Mattis has much to say about commander's intent and communications up and down the chain of command. "Can he [the commander] say what it is that he stands for and what it is [he] will absolutely not stand for?" And the general recognizes that in today's world where young Marines and other servicemembers are bombarded by a variety of communications, there has to be greater emphasis on the commander's persuasiveness. "Let's assume that leaders are good leaders, then it's not any more difficult to lead [in today's technologically dominant environment]."

But he is quick to point out that the leader who is a throwback to the strong silent type will have issues in a world where Marines have access to almost limitless amounts of information 24/7. "The strong silent type will find his troops are listening to someone who is more vocal or getting their values off of the Internet. And those may or may not be ones that we're comfortable with.

"Can [the commander] go out in front of an 800-man battalion and give his intent in very plain and clear language?" Leaders should be talking to their Marines and emphasizing what it is that they stand for while coaching to achieve what they want, according to Gen Mattis. He also added that commanders must be able to articulate what they need done yet leave a lot of leeway for subordinates to accomplish the mission.

His co-author, Bing West, continued the discussion on communication by referring back to the now classic letters that Gen Mattis sent to the entire 1st Marine Division when he served as the Division's commander during the early days of Operation Iraqi Freedom in Al Anbar Province. "Those two letters made quite clear to everyone in the division what the commander's intent was and I think they are models for what any senior commander has to do to convey what he wants his troops or whatever his subordinates are in business to do."

Gen Mattis emphasized how crucial it is for leaders to do the right thing. "I used to tell the troops that if taking a shot at a terrorist across a crowded marketplace, they also take a chance on killing a woman or child, don't take the shot. Hunt him down and kill him another day but don't do something that you can't live with personally or that's just going to create more enemies."

March 2003

## 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division (REIN)

### Commanding General's Message to All Hands

For decades, Saddam Hussein has tortured, imprisoned, raped and murdered the Iraqi people; invaded neighboring countries without provocation; and threatened the world with weapons of mass destruction. The time has come to end his reign of terror. On your young shoulders rest the hopes of mankind.

When I give you the word, together we will cross the Line of Departure, close with those forces that choose to fight, and destroy them. Our fight is not with the Iraqi people, nor is it with members of the Iraqi army who choose to surrender. While we will move swiftly and aggressively against those who resist, we will treat all others with decency, demonstrating chivalry and soldierly compassion for people who have endured a lifetime under Saddam's oppression.

Chemical attack, treachery, and use of the innocent as human shields can be expected, as can other unethical tactics. Take it all in stride. Be the hunter, not the hunted: never allow your unit to be caught with its guard down. Use good judgement and act in best interests of our Nation.

You are part of the world's most feared and trusted force. Engage your brain before you engage your weapon. Share your courage with each other as we enter the uncertain terrain north of the Line of Departure. Keep faith in your comrades on your left and right and Marine Air overhead. Fight with a happy heart and strong spirit.

For the mission's sake, our country's sake, and the sake of the men who carried the Division's colors in past battles—who fought for life and never lost their nerve—carry out your mission and keep your honor clean. Demonstrate to the world there is "No Better Friend, No Worse Enemy" than a U.S. Marine.



J.N. Mattis  
Major General, U.S. Marines  
Commanding

### "Mattisims"

Many of the general's sayings have become engrained in the culture of the Marine Corps including "First, do no harm" and "The most important 6 inches on the battlefield being between your ears."

Perhaps the most famous of all is "No better friend, no worse enemy," a phrase Gen Mattis found from the Roman general Lucius Cornelius Sulla, 138B.C-8 B.C. "In other words, discriminate," Mattis said explaining the iconic phrase he used in the letter of March 2003 to the Marines of 1stMarDiv. "Don't let the enemy make you hate all Iraqis. How can you clearly convey what you want, and how can you go as often as possible face to face with your troops and emphasize it personally so they know that you know you want them to destroy the enemy? No mistake about it, you're there to break their spirit, but at the same time, you've got to keep your honor clean to put it in words of 'The Marines' Hymn.' "

**MajGen Mattis' famous "Message to All Hands" was sent to the entire 1stMarDiv when he served as the Division's commander during the early days of Operation Iraqi Freedom, making clear what he expected of his troops.**



**James N. Mattis served as the 26th Secretary of Defense from January 2017 to December 2018.**

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**Taking Care of His Marines**

LtCol Mattis commanded 1st Battalion, 7th Marines during Operation Desert Storm, and it was during this time that the future four-star general experienced his best day in the Marine Corps. As one of the assault battalions of Task Force Ripper with the mission of breaking through the vaunted Iraqi minefields, Mattis

had received devastating casualty estimates for his unit before they opened the minefield for the rest of the Division—estimates were up to 400 Marines from the battalion's 1,250 men would be lost. "But the best day was when we broke through and got through the second minefield. We had some vehicles knocked out, we had some lads wounded but the best day was realizing we'd gotten through and I hadn't had one guy killed despite all the forecasts of disaster in the minefield. While combat always has exciting moments, so long as you have strong, disciplined NCOs, the outcome of any fight is not in doubt." He also noted that it was the last time he brought all of his Marines home alive from an operation.

His worst day in the Corps would come more

than a decade later during Operation Iraqi Freedom when his 1stMarDiv had advanced deep inside Fallujah but was ordered to pull back. "We were literally on the cusp of getting Zarqawi and the rest of them." The general's frustration was still clearly evident more than 15 years later. "They were running out of ammo. They hadn't stockpiled ammo for the fight—they hadn't anticipated it. I hadn't wanted to go in that way, but once we were underway, I didn't want to stop; being told to stop and pull back after we'd lost that number of Marines and Sailors. That was a rough day."

Bing West adamantly agreed with Gen Mattis' assessment of that day in Iraq and elaborated even further. "I was with 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines on that day, Easter Sunday 2004 in Fallujah. We could hear over the radio that the terrorists were really confused. We knew roughly where this bastard Zarqawi was, and I believe if General Mattis had been permitted to finish, it would have changed history because he would have been able to smother the Sunni terrorists who were killing Shiites that [later] provoked the civil war."

**Personal Reflections**

When asked what his favorite time as a Marine was, Mattis recalled his early days as a young infantry officer. "There's no doubt in my mind the most enjoyable job was being a second lieutenant infantry platoon leader where the physical toughness and the mental abilities are on full display to your troops." The general was blunt as he said, "There's no hiding from your Marines at that level. They see you in the mud with them. They see you making decisions on calling fire or on medevac or humping the hills or doing as many pull-ups as they can do, plus one."

As high as his expectations are for those lieutenants, Gen Mattis' tolerance of mistakes from young Marines may be somewhat of a surprise. "You're tolerant of mistakes but absolutely intolerant of a lack of discipline, coaching out any bad habits during peacetime. That's the same unit that cannot maintain low DUI rates, no drug abuse, no sexual harassment; that's the same unit that cannot maintain fire discipline in a fight because you either lead a disciplined life, or you do not," he said. "Consider every week of peace your last week to prepare your Sailors and Marines for combat."

When asked what his most impactful job was, Gen Mattis' response is likely to be echoed by his Marines. "Commanding

**"CALL SIGN CHAOS"**  
LEARNING TO LEAD

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**JIM MATTIS**  
AND  
**BING WEST**

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COURTESY OF COL CHRISTOPHER WOODBRIDGE, USMC (RET)

1st Marine Division—23,000 Sailors and Marines. That unified Division, that Division in its prime was probably the most impactful but I would also say that I was learning the lessons all the way through about how to lead in a very confusing kind of war situation.”

So, who did one of the finest Marines to ever wear the uniform look to for inspiration and mentorship throughout his own career? The general didn’t hesitate when asked that question, quickly responding with numerous names starting with Corporal Wayne Johnson, his first platoon sergeant. As he continued, the names Gen Mattis provided were an impressive reflection on his lifelong practice of learning from everyone, regardless of grade. “Over the years there’s just been a host of them. A lot of NCOs, obviously. Gunnery Sergeant Collier at OCS ... I still remember the lessons he’d give us.”

Gen Mattis related a story from decades ago when he was an officer candidate. “GySgt Collier once chewed me out for my time on the obstacle course at Camp Upshur. He was chewing me out because my time on the obstacle course was slower than it had been a day or two before, but frankly, I’d been pacing the other guys there and I could beat them without going faster. And he said, ‘If you’re not going to give 100 percent, just get out. I’m not interested in somebody who comes in here and says ‘I think I’ll give 99 percent.’ He said ‘Let me be blunt. I’m going to be 100 percent dissatisfied

with you. Ninety nine percent is failure in my book for someone who’s going to be an officer in the Marine Corps.’ ”

Gen Mattis has several other names on his list of influences including LtCol Carl Mundy [later the 30th Commandant of the Marine Corps] and Gen Tony Zinni, former Commander, U.S. Central Command. “Basically I just went from one great mentor or leader [to another], but all the way along, I was very fortunate to have mentors of all ranks from lance corporal and corporal all the way up to four-star generals and former Secretaries of State George Shultz [and] Henry Kissinger, and former Speaker of the House of Representatives Newt Gingrich. I’ve learned all along the way.”

Six years into his retirement from the Marine Corps and less than a year after his tenure as Secretary of Defense came to a close, the general reflected on his decades of service. “I was always amazed that the Marine Corps allowed me to stay in the ranks so long. It was a joy to wake up every day. Once in a while the lads would get me in a little bit of trouble with their high spirits, but I could go up and see an assault unit getting ready to go into Fallujah. In most cases most of an infantry company is not old enough to buy a beer legally. I miss those guys and their spirits more than anything else, but I know the Marines will carry on. I have a great deal of confidence that they’ll overcome every challenge.” 🍻

**The Marines of 1/7 reunited with their battalion commander, Gen Mattis, 25 years after they participated in Operation Desert Storm in 1991.**