

“In addition to being a fascinating and colorful read, this book is an indispensable guide to organizational change.” —WALTER ISAACSON, *from the foreword*

**TEAM**

— **OF** —

**TEAMS**

**NEW RULES OF ENGAGEMENT  
FOR A COMPLEX WORLD**

**GENERAL STANLEY  
McCHRISTAL**

U.S. Army, Retired

with **Tantum Collins, David Silverman,**  
and **Chris Fussell**

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ALSO BY GENERAL STANLEY McCHRYSTAL (U.S. Army, Retired)

*My Share of the Task*

# TEAM of TEAMS

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NEW RULES OF ENGAGEMENT  
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*For all the people throughout history who have wrestled with the shape-shifters. Special thanks to those whose experiences have informed this book, from the military to the private sector to the academic world. Without your brave service and wise contributions this book would not exist.*

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## FOREWORD BY WALTER ISAACSON

Whether in business or in war, the ability to react quickly and adapt is critical, and it's becoming even more so as technology and disruptive forces increase the pace of change. That requires new ways to communicate and work together. In today's world, creativity is a collaborative endeavor. Innovation is a team effort.

This book draws timely lessons for any organization seeking to triumph in this new environment. Based on very real and vividly described situations that General McChrystal encountered as a commander in Iraq and Afghanistan, it describes how organizations need to reinvent themselves. This involves breaking down silos, working across divisions, and mastering the flexible response that comes from true teamwork and collaboration.

I have observed this phenomenon in my own study of innovation in the digital age. The greatest innovations have not come from a lone inventor or from solving problems in a top-down, command-and-control style. Instead, the great successes—the creation of the computer, transistor, microchip, Internet—come from a “team of teams” working together in pursuit of a common goal.

I once asked Steve Jobs, often mistakenly considered a lone visionary and authoritarian leader, which of his creations made him most proud. I thought he might say the original Macintosh, or the iPhone. Instead he pointed out that these were all collaborative efforts. The creations he was most proud of, he said, were the teams he had produced, starting with the original Macintosh team working under a pirate flag in the early 1980s and the remarkable team he had assembled by the time he stepped down from Apple in 2011.

Today's rapidly changing world, marked by increased speed and dense interdependencies, means that organizations everywhere are now facing dizzying challenges, from global terrorism to health epidemics to supply chain disruption to game-changing technologies. These issues can be solved only by creating sustained organizational adaptability through the establishment of a team of teams.

High-speed networks and digital communications mean that collaboration can—and must—happen in real time. The distributed, decentralized, and weblike architecture of the Internet empowers each individual to be a collaborator. Likewise the necessity of real-time innovation and problem-solving requires integrative and transparent leadership that empowers individual team members.

This new environment gave Al Qaeda a distinct advantage, allowing the networked organization to strike rapidly, reconfigure in real time, and integrate its globally dispersed actions. At first, this overwhelmed the Task Force led by General McChrystal, a traditional, secretive, siloed military hierarchy that was configured to solve the problems of an earlier era.

The solution was, surprisingly, found in changing management structures. The U.S. military and its allies had to transform the way the special operations community operated, changing the way it waged the War on Terror.

The experience of General McChrystal and his colleagues, and their examination of the experience

of others, taught them that complexity at scale has rendered reductionist management ineffective for solving these issues in our networked world. Efficiency is necessary but no longer sufficient to be a successful organization. It worked in the twentieth century, but it is now quickly overwhelmed by the speed and exaggerated impact of small players, such as terrorists, start-ups, and viral trends.

Management models based on planning and predicting instead of resilient adaptation to changing circumstances are no longer suited to today's challenges. Organizations must be networked, not siloed, in order to succeed. Their goal must shift from efficiency to sustained organizational adaptability. This requires dramatic shifts in mental and organizational models, as well as sustained efforts on the part of leadership to create the environment for such a change.

General McChrystal's experiences leading the Task Force illustrate how this dramatic transformation is possible in all organizations. After identifying the adaptable and networked nature of Al Qaeda, the general and his team explored why traditional organizations aren't adaptable. One conclusion they reached was that agility and adaptability are normally limited to small teams. They explored the traits that make small teams adaptable, such as trust, common purpose, shared awareness and the empowerment of individual members to act. They also identified the traditional limits of teams, such as "blinks" in the organization between teams where collaboration begins to break down.

The primary lesson that emerged, and is detailed in this book, is the need to scale the adaptability and cohesiveness of small teams up to the enterprise level. This involves creating a team of teams to foster cross-silo collaboration. That way the insights and actions of many teams and individuals can be harnessed across the organization. Innovation and problem solving become the products of teamwork, not a single architect.

Doing this requires increasing transparency to ensure common understanding and awareness. It often involves changing the physical space and personal behaviors to establish trust and foster collaboration. This can develop the ability to share context so that the teams can decentralize and empower individuals to act. Decisions are pushed downward, allowing the members to act quickly. This new approach also requires changing the traditional conception of the leader. The role of the leader becomes creating the broader environment instead of command-and-control micromanaging.

Harnessing and sharing the power and experiences of many teams allowed the Task Force command to adapt quickly to changing events on the ground and innovate solutions that couldn't have come from a top-down approach.

These lessons, as the authors show, apply to business and other organizations as well. General McChrystal is leading an effort, managed at the Aspen Institute, to make a year of national service, military or domestic, an opportunity and an expectation of all young Americans. Participating in a service corps is one of many ways to learn to work as a team, communicate goals, and empower decentralized decision making.

Whatever field you're in, at whatever stage of leadership, these insights and skills will prove necessary to learn. In addition to being a fascinating and colorful read, this book is an indispensable guide to the organizational change and deep appreciation of teamwork that are essential in today's fast-moving environment.

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## INTRODUCTION

“Of course we understand the dangers, we simply have no other choice.”

The Afghan minister of the interior was a slightly built, soft-spoken man with a demeanor of unflinching courtesy, so his statement had the tone of patient explanation rather than indignation or defensiveness. As a young man he'd lost a leg in the Soviet War and walked with an awkward limp, but his intellect, energy, and commitment to reshaping post-9/11 Afghanistan were undeniable. When he spoke, I listened carefully.

We were talking about the Afghan Police, for whom Mohammad Hanif Atmar was responsible, discussing the horrendous casualties they were suffering in isolated stations in Taliban-contested areas. Poorly trained, inadequately equipped, and unevenly led, raw police recruits regularly fell prey to drugs, corruption, and insurgent violence. So it was incredibly frustrating to see the ministry continue to recruit new police candidates and deploy them to operational areas *before* they were trained. But, for a variety of reasons, Atmar felt he had no other option.

Most of us would consider it unwise to do something before we are fully prepared; before the equipment is optimally in place and our workers well trained. But as the reader will discover, that's the situation we found ourselves in. And in researching this book, we discovered that that is the situation leaders and organizations far from any battlefield face every day.

...

The genesis of this story lies in the transformation of an elite military organization, the Joint Special Operations Task Force (described in this volume simply as “the Task Force,” or TF) in the midst of a war. We could compare ourselves during that transition to a professional football team changing from one offensive system to another in the second quarter of a critical game, but the reality was far more drastic. The Task Force's shift was actually more akin to that team's moving from playing football to basketball, and finding that habits and preconceptions had to be discarded along with pads and cleats.

...

But it was anything but a game or a sport. The war against a succession of terrorist groups that had simmered, with periodic outbursts since the 1970s, had gone white hot in the aftermath of 9/11 and the Task Force found itself first in Afghanistan, then, as the fight expanded, in the wider Middle East.

In the spring of 2003 we entered Iraq. What began as a heavily conventional military campaign to unseat the regime of Saddam Hussein had, by the fall of 2003, become a bitter, unconventional

struggle against frustrated Sunnis who increasingly coalesced around a charismatic Jordanian extremist who had taken the name Abu Musab al Zaraqawi. In the years that followed we (I had rejoined the Task Force in October of 2003) found ourselves in a bitter fight that, in the beginning, was as confounding as it was bloody.

The Task Force hadn't chosen to change; we were driven by necessity. Although lavishly resourced and exquisitely trained, we found ourselves losing to an enemy that, by traditional calculus, we should have dominated. Over time we came to realize that more than our foe, we were actually struggling to cope with an environment that was fundamentally different from anything we'd planned or trained for. The speed and interdependence of events had produced new dynamics that threatened to overwhelm the time-honored processes and culture we'd built.

Little of our transformation was planned. Few of the plans that we did develop unfolded as envisioned. Instead, we evolved in rapid iterations, *changing—assessing—changing* again. Intuition and hard-won experience became the beacons, often dimly visible, that guided us through the fog and friction. Over time we realized that we were not in search of the perfect solution—none existed. The environment in which we found ourselves, a convergence of twenty-first-century factors and more timeless human interactions, demanded a dynamic, constantly adapting approach. For a soldier trained at West Point as an engineer, the idea that a problem has different solutions on different days was fundamentally disturbing. Yet that was the case.

Fortunately, the common denominator of the professionals with whom I served was an almost mystical devotion to mission accomplishment. The Task Force was founded in the wake of the Iran hostage crisis failure, and perhaps those images of wrecked aircraft and the burned bodies of American servicemen at Desert One\* still lay behind the force's fierce desire to win. And so in the early 2000s we morphed, and morphed again, in a bitter struggle to first contain, and then reduce, the threat posed by Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).

By early 2008 that goal was clearly in sight, and the Task Force's continual adaptation had transformed it into a fundamentally new organization—one that functioned using distinctly different processes and relationships. Because we were so engaged in the fight, we thought and talked constantly about what we were doing. But it was an experience that could only come into true focus when we had the opportunity to deconstruct and study it afterward, enabling us to draw valid conclusions. That's where this book comes in. In 2010 when I left the service, I joined with several former colleagues to explore whether our shared experience was a one-off occurrence that emerged from the unique factors of post-2003 Iraq, or whether it was a microcosm of a broader changed environment that impacts almost every organization in today's world. We suspected the latter, but began a journey to find out.

...

This book is the work of four very different individuals, three of whom shared wartime experiences, and a fourth who shares our fascination and passion for the subject. Dave Silverman is a 1998 Naval Academy graduate-turned-SEAL who fought in Iraq before deploying on no notice to Afghanistan in 2009 to serve with me in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) headquarters. Chris Fussell is another former SEAL who spent many years at the Naval Special Warfare Development Group, including a year as my aide-de-camp in the Task Force, before taking time at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey to study multiorganization fusion cells. Tantum Collins, or Teddy as we know him, I met later, as an undergraduate in a graduate leadership seminar

that I have been teaching at Yale University since 2010. The incredible impression he made on me led us to ask him to spend his first year after graduation (before heading to Great Britain as a Marshall Scholar to study at the University of Cambridge) leading this effort to capture the conclusions of our experiences and study in this book. I round out the quartet, with a bit more mileage on me than my colleagues, but still more student than teacher in our examination of this critical idea.

The decision to produce yet another book to help shape and lead complex organizations did not come easily. Shelves are crammed with works of varying value, and busy leaders can feel pummeled by contradictory advice from business gurus and management consultants. But the impact of the Task Force experience drove us to test the conclusions we'd reached, because the wider implications for almost all organizations were so serious.

First, although the Task Force struggled in Iraq, we could not claim we were mismatched against a world-class team. Honestly assessed, Al Qaeda was not a collection of supermen forged into a devilishly ingenious organization by brilliant masterminds. They were tough, flexible, and resilient, but more often than not they were poorly trained and underresourced. They were also dogmatic and offensively extreme in their conduct and views. Their strengths and capabilities were multiplied by a convergence of twenty-first-century factors, of which AQI was simply the lucky beneficiary. Much like a Silicon Valley garage start-up that rides an idea or product that is well timed rather than uniquely brilliant to an absurd level of wealth, AQI happened to step onto an elevator that was headed up.

Second, and most critically, these factors were not unique to Iraq, or to warfare. They are affecting almost all of us in our lives and organizations every day. We're not lazier or less intelligent than our parents or grandparents, but what worked for them simply won't do the trick for us now. Understanding and adapting to these factors isn't optional; it will be what differentiates success from failure in the years ahead.

This book won't diminish the challenges or simplify the complexity of succeeding in this new age, but it will serve as a lens through which to understand it, in addition to outlining an approach that can allow an organization to adapt to the new requirements.

To capture the subject effectively, our search moved along two lines. In the first, we founded CrossLead to work with civilian firms facing the challenge of adapting in complex, rapidly changing environments. That effort has grown into an amazing collection of talent—young and mature, civilian and former military or intelligence professionals, academics and practitioners. Through on-site, practical work with client partners, we've seen firsthand the tornado of changing factors—once-comforting constants transformed into variables that defy predictability and challenge traditional models of leadership and management. For many successful organizations, things that once worked superbly now seem ineffective.

In addition to our direct engagement, we also began an effort to study this phenomenon in other domains and theoretical dimensions, to see whether those undertaking serious examination of the subject were drawing similar conclusions. To a great degree, they are. Reviewing published studies and interviewing experts in a wide variety of fields who generously shared their time, we have put our personal experience under the microscope to validate our findings against their wisdom. We don't claim to be academic scholars, but we have been more than willing to let their work help guide us to supportable conclusions.

BUTTERFLIES, GARDENERS, AND TOADS

It is important to state up front what this book is, and what it is not.

This isn't a war story, although our experience in the fight against Al Qaeda weaves through the book. Far beyond soldiers, it is a story about big guys and little guys, butterflies, gardeners, and chess masters. The reader will meet slimy toads, mythical beasts, clanging machines, and sensitive ecosystems.

We hope to help the reader understand what's different in today's world, and what we must do about it. We will argue that the familiar pursuit of efficiency must change course. Efficiency remains important, but the ability to adapt to complexity and continual change has become an imperative. Using our experience in war, combined with a range of examples from business, hospitals, nongovernmental organizations, as well as more unlikely sources, we lay out the symptoms of the problem, its root causes, and the approaches that we and others have found effective. Readers will understand and appreciate the challenges they face, and be able to frame what makes sense for them.

• • •

We do not offer here a series of checklists or a "how to" manual. Instead, in five parts, the reader will journey from problem to solution.

*Part I: The Proteus Problem* opens in Iraq in 2004 where the world's most elite counterterrorist force is struggling against a seemingly ragtag band of radical fighters. We explore the unexpected revelation that our biggest challenges lay not in the enemy, but in the dizzyingly new environment in which we were operating, and within the carefully crafted attributes of our own organization. To understand the challenge, we'll go to factory floors with Frederick Winslow Taylor and look back at the drive for efficiency that has marked the last 150 years, and how it has shaped our organizations and the men and women who lead and manage them. We then examine how accelerating speed and interdependence in today's world have created levels of complexity that confound even the most superbly efficient industrial age establishments. And we'll find, much to our disappointment, that Big Data will offer no respite from the unrelenting demand for continual adaptability.

*Part II: From Many, One* examines both the magic and the myths of teams. The reader will find herself in the operating room of Brigham and Women's Hospital as surgeons work to save victims of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, and lying on the rolling deck of the MV *Maersk Alabama* next to SEAL snipers whose precise shots save Captain Phillips from Somali pirates. We dissect the processes that create the *trust* and *common purpose* that bond great small teams, and dispel the fallacy that it takes Supermen to forge super teams. Then we'll climb to thirty thousand feet in the cockpit of United Airlines' ill-fated Flight 173 in December 1978 to explore the daunting challenges that even well-trained crews face, and study some of the adaptations, like Mission Critical Teams, that have emerged to deal with increasing complexity. Finally, we'll enter the imaginary land of Krasnovia to investigate why so many small teams and firms falter as they grow in scale. And we'll find that even the elite Task Force suffered from the same malady.

*Part III: Sharing* looks at how to deal with the continual change and dramatically increasing complexity that whipsaws us at breakneck speed. From the launch pad of NASA's famed Apollo project that put the first human on the moon, to a blacked-out helicopter putting an Army Special Forces operator on a roof in Fallujah, the reader is introduced to *shared consciousness*: the way transparency and communication can be used in an organization to produce extraordinary outcomes across even large groups. And the Prisoner's Dilemma and game theory will illustrate how the simple concept of *trust* is, in large organizations, anything but simple to create.

*Part IV: Letting Go* probes the history, advantages, and imperatives of truly *empowered execution* in an organization—pushing decision making and ownership to the right level for every action. The reader will follow Commodore Perry’s hulking warships to the coast of Japan and awake with me in Iraq to make on-the-spot decisions on who will live, and who will not. Through a fifteen-inch plastic model we’ll pursue the model of “Eyes On—Hands Off” leadership. We’ll then look at the leaders we’ve traditionally sought, and why they are perhaps an endangered species in the new environment. Finally, the reader will sit at my side for the daily video teleconference that I used to shape and drive the Task Force’s efforts, and travel to the small bases in Iraq and Afghanistan where ultimately the job must be done. In doing so, we’ll explore the new, and increasingly important, role of the senior leader.

*Part V: Looking Ahead* opens with a detailed look at how *trust, common purpose, shared consciousness, and empowered execution* drove the successful hunt for Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, travel with Alexis de Tocqueville as he holds a mirror up to America’s face, and argues that to succeed, maybe even to survive, in the new environment, organizations and leaders must fundamentally change. Efficiency, once the sole icon on the hill, must make room for adaptability in structures, processes, and mind-sets that is often uncomfortable.

This isn’t a scientific study or the result of clinical trials. We don’t claim that these concepts are original nor do we offer findings that are the product of years of study by field experts. We recognize there may well be mistakes or conclusions that can be challenged. But we believe that by leveraging the thinking of others to help explain the experience we navigated, readers will find a useful blend of practical and theoretical knowledge to combat the growing challenge we all face.

## AN ENDURING CHALLENGE

In the early summer of 2014, as this book neared completion, Sunni fighters operating under the banner of ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, captured the northern Iraqi city of Mosul and surged southward like an unstoppable wave toward Baghdad. ISIS was led on its surge through Iraq by the charismatic Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, a figure reminiscent of the villain we had faced off against a decade prior and whom we will discuss at length in this book: Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Images of abandoned Iraqi Army vehicles being passed by triumphant ISIS fighters reflected the stunning collapse of the Government of Iraq’s defenses, and with it, its credibility. Veterans of our war watched from afar in sullen frustration as ground we’d taken foot by foot, and yard by bloody yard, fell to yet another extremist movement that advanced with seeming ease despite being outmanned and outgunned by government forces.

The question “Had our success against Al Qaeda been a cruel illusion?” came immediately to mind. But we knew it hadn’t been. What we’d done had been real. Instead, this latest development reinforced some of the very lessons we had drawn. The first was that the constantly changing, entirely unforgiving environment in which we all now operate denies the satisfaction of any permanent fix. The second was that the organization we crafted, the processes we refined, and the relationships we forged and nurtured are no more enduring than the physical conditioning that kept our soldiers fit: an organization must be constantly led or, if necessary, pushed uphill toward what it must be. Stop pushing and it doesn’t continue, or even rest in place; it rolls backward.

• • •

Before we begin, a thought. There's a temptation for all of us to blame failures on factors outside our control: "the enemy was ten feet tall," "we weren't treated fairly," or "it was an impossible task to begin with." There is also comfort in "doubling down" on proven processes, regardless of their efficacy. Few of us are criticized if we faithfully do what has worked many times before. But feeling comfortable or dodging criticism should not be our measure of success. There's likely a place in paradise for people who tried hard, but what really matters is succeeding. If that requires you to change, that's your mission.

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# PART I

## THE PROTEUS PROBLEM

*The soldier held tightly to the twisting figure. The weapon he'd killed with many times before remained hanging at his side; he needed this one alive. His hands, burned dark by the sun, ached as he struggled to maintain a firm grasp. After years of fighting an unpopular war, he would do whatever it took to get home.*

*Menelaus, king of Sparta, the fiery brother of Agamemnon and husband of the beauty Helen, was on his journey home following the ten-year-long Trojan War. Shipwrecked on the [island of Pharos](#), Menelaus was desperate when the goddess [Eidothea told him of her father](#), the immortal Proteus—the Old Man of the Sea. If Menelaus could defeat him, Proteus would surrender the secrets Menelaus needed to lead his men home to Sparta.*

*Defeating Proteus would be difficult because the god possessed a special power: he was a shape-shifter, a polymorph. So Menelaus and his men, [disguised in sealskins](#), lay in ambush on the beach. As Proteus emerged salty and frothing from the roiling sea, they sprang into action. . . .*

*First he shifted into a great bearded lion*

*and then a serpent—*

*a panther—*

*a ramping wild boar—*

*a torrent of water—*

*a tree [with soaring branch tops](#)—*

*But the Greeks clung firmly. Their normal weapons of little use, with each shift, they shifted, with each new challenge, they changed, clenching their legs tight around the necks of animals that appeared, or digging their fingers into the wooden limbs of trees, or wrapping their arms around swirling balls of mercurial fire.*

*The Old Man of the Sea was defeated. By adapting, the Greeks found their way home.*

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*A true story, 860 miles to the east of Pharos, three thousand years later . . .*

## SONS OF PROTEUS

Five muscled silhouettes, midnight blue against the sand-colored sunrise, moved down an otherwise empty street on the outskirts of the El Amel neighborhood in Baghdad. The morning call to prayer had just ricocheted through the urban sprawl and faded into the thick heat. A few blinds opened, then quickly closed; residents knew when to stay hidden. The door of a small house on the corner swung open and the men shuffled inside. It was September 30, 2004, and one of the biggest operations they would ever conduct was about to begin.

The building appeared unremarkable—another ripple in the pixelated waves of tan cinder block that extended to the horizon. But inside, it housed a temporary organizational nerve center that gathered data and disseminated instructions across the city. Maps, photos of targets, and operational checklists covered the walls. Personal gear—weapons and clothes—lay neatly stacked in the corner. Those pulling security watched the street, weapons in hand. The newly arrived warriors greeted the other members of their team—the analytic and intelligence counterparts to their brawn—with bear hugs. They asked about their families, joked about colleagues. They also met three new additions to the team—fresh out of training and recently arrived in Iraq. The young faces betrayed the tangle of confusion and excitement that the older men knew would soon give way to fear.

The group strode through the halls of their safe house, brushing past photos of the cheerful family that used to live here. Men in combat attire settled into the plush mauve couches in what had once been a living room. If any of them saw humor or pathos in the juxtaposition, they did not mention it. They had learned to compartmentalize the emotions of war, to internalize as “collateral damage” the deaths of bystanders, to accept the savagery of the battlefield as an unavoidable step in pursuit of a brighter future. They had long since exhausted any reflexive appreciation of tenderness or irony.

Turning to a map of the target area, the most grizzled member of the unit reviewed their approach. Grabbing three coasters and a fragment of tile that had dislodged from the floor during earlier fighting, he modeled the paths their vehicles would follow and the dozens of potential booby traps they would have to avoid.

Each sweep of his hand represented the culmination of weeks of work: the decryption and reconciliation of intelligence, the gathering and assembly of special hardware. Such was the art of networked warfare they were starting to master. Although only three men were slated to pull triggers, dozens—across levels of command and in different countries—made vital contributions to the operation.

The war’s tactics and the overall strategy differed radically from how they had envisioned fighting. This was not a war of planning and discipline; it was one of agility and innovation. Their unit had developed a rhythm of localized autonomy intercut with frequent communication with their

leadership; superiors would watch from a distance, but today's operation was the brainchild of the men in the room and they owned the mission fully.

For security reasons, no journalists—even the most sympathetic—were allowed to embed with units like this; if they had, they would have witnessed a case study in cutting-edge organizational design, a mesh of synchronization and real-time adaptability that suffused the institutional ecosystem of their fighting force. While in previous conflicts even an elite team of this size would have had little strategic heft, in 2004 their firepower meant that their tactical capabilities were tremendous, and information technology meant that news of the operation could reach global audiences almost instantly.

After a final review and some nods, the men pulled themselves off the couches and moved to the kitchen to grab equipment. Four men would stay behind; the other seven locked magazines into place and tightened the straps on their heavy vests. They chatted about the sorry state of Iraq and what it might look like once they finished liberating it. They decried the shameless tactics employed by their enemy. The fresh arrivals didn't speak.

As the operators walked to the door, the commander felt a crunch beneath his boot. On the floor a framed photo lay nestled in a constellation of glass shards: a picture of a girl, heavily made-up and airbrushed, wearing a cap and gown. Nationality aside, the people who had lived here were not unlike the families these men came from, or might one day rear. This family had done nothing to provoke this; they were guilty only of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The commander had no idea who they were or what had become of them, but he hoped that his work might, in some winding, indirect way, bring them peace. He pulled the front door open.

It was just past nine o'clock, and the temperature had already broken 90 degrees Fahrenheit. They were sweating before they reached their vehicles. For this operation they wore civilian clothes and drove sedans: two Hyundais and a Volkswagen to execute the operation, plus an Opel to monitor from behind—cars chosen to blend with the traffic. After an equipment check, the drivers rolled out.

They eyed every window, rooftop, and pedestrian warily. On a similar operation a week ago, a sniper round had shattered the windshield and blown through the driver's forehead, soaking the upholstered ceiling with a Rorschach test of deep crimson. Eight days later, some of the men in the car could not recall his face. Despite such losses, in the ebb and flow of bombings, raids, and retributions the operatives saw the tide turning slowly but surely toward victory. The war had been harder than any of them expected but their efforts were not in vain.

Today's operation would be complex, and the more moving parts, the higher the risk. Hostile fire was almost inevitable and, as always, precise intelligence on the enemy was lacking.

• • •

The cars drove slowly through crowded streets, through the clamor of vendors seeking customers, parents reprimanding children, and teenage boys harassing hijab-clad girls; through the scents of fresh food, rotting food, and stray dogs. None of the men had been to Iraq prior to this rotation, but the din had started to feel familiar. As they turned the corner of Thirtieth Street, they saw a throng of residents surrounding a newly minted sewage plant, cheering beneath banners celebrating a grand opening ceremony.

The spot where the Volkswagen, their lead vehicle, was supposed to wait had been taken by a dump truck. The drivers adapted wordlessly: the Hyundais circled the block while the Volkswagen found a new spot nearby at 7 Nissan Street. The Opel hung back as its driver feigned interest in a roadside

falafel stand, trying hard to mask his accent. The chaos of Iraqi streets disguised activity that might otherwise seem suspicious.

Then one of the Hyundais found its intended route blocked by construction. The driver pulled into an alternate street, glancing at his colleagues to make sure they had registered the change of plan. Their experience together had built a near-telepathic connection. Twelve minutes later than schedule all four cars were in position. In the three attack vehicles, the men took a moment for prayer and reflection.

A code word, delivered with the callous finality of a voice that had issued dozens of similar commands before, crackled across their radios. The first Hyundai driver took a breath, and ground the accelerator into the floor.

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At the sewage plant ceremony, the outer ring of the crowd consisted mostly of children, more interested in playing with one another than listening to politicians expound on economic revitalization. At the center were fathers and mothers. Smiling faces, framed by black scarves and dark hair, glistened in the heat.

Small bodies thudded against the grille and headlights as the Hyundai punched, full speed, into the group. The driver muttered prayers again before depressing his detonator. Perhaps, in the fraction of a second that it took the radio signal to travel outward from his palm, through the backseat, and toward the trunk, he saw the bloodied jihadist glory into which Iraq had sunk. Perhaps, for a heartbeat, his rage gave way to a pang of regret before the exploding propane tanks and BB pellets in the trunk ripped through the vehicle's steel exoskeleton and tore him apart.

The street, now a mosaic of car shrapnel and bloodied remains, filled with wails. Mothers searched frantically for their sons and daughters. Enemy soldiers—Americans—sprinted to the scene from down the block. They began setting up a perimeter and triaging the wounded.

In the midst of the screaming, nobody heard the Volkswagen approach. Speeding into the pack of soldiers and children who had emerged, stupefied, to collect debris and identify bodies, it detonated its payload.

[Thirty-five children](#) now lay dead; 10 Americans and 140 Iraqis wounded. As the final car careened across a median toward the site, coalition forces opened fire, and the vehicle detonated well south of its target.

But the failure of the third vehicle didn't matter to the men in the fourth, who had already disappeared into the traffic. Operations were rarely flawless. As they drove away, the driver stowed the three small garage door openers he had been keeping in his lap. Had his operators experienced any second thoughts, he would have used these to trigger their explosives. The man in the shotgun seat reviewed the footage he had taken of the strike. Within hours, it would be online—its shock value recruiting dozens more bombers to the cause.

[For Al Qaeda in Iraq](#), the operation was a success.

## THE BEST OF THE BEST

On the day of the sewage plant bombing, I sat in a Saddam-era double-thick concrete aircraft shelter at Balad Airbase, some sixty miles north of El Amel. Laptop computers and plasma displays connected

by an arterial network of wires and cables covered the plywood walls and tables we had hastily built the previous spring. Information flowed nonstop through a “farm” of antennae and satellite dishes in an operations center the size of a basketball court. Specialists scrutinized video surveillance, intercepted communications, captured documents and human intelligence reports, piecing together a mosaic portrait of Al Qaeda in Iraq. The reports they composed were passed on to my subcommander and me, to be used in planning raids with our special operators. This was the forward headquarters of our Joint Special Operations Task Force.

I had recently turned fifty and had been in charge of the Task Force for almost a year. The post was an honor for any soldier. From 1980 to 2003, nine highly respected major generals (a two-star rank) had embraced this responsibility, five of whom went on to wear four stars. These men, among the best planners, coordinators, and strategic thinkers in the U.S. Army, had set an extraordinary precedent.

Their legacy of accomplishment was why we had been brought in to battle Iraq’s growing insurgency, specifically Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)—the most prominent and savage of the many terrorist operations that had sprung up in the wake of the U.S. invasion. The United States and coalition forces had entered Iraq to depose Saddam Hussein, which they did in short order. But AQI posed a different type of threat from an army—small, agile, and dispersed. Fighting them required the special skill set our units possessed.

The Task Force had been built in answer to a previous debacle: the failed rescue of American hostages held by Iranian revolutionaries in 1980. It folded the best special operations units of the world’s most powerful military into a single organization. The Task Force had amassed forty years of experience and amazing accomplishments; by any objective standard we were the finest special operations fighting force in the world—“the best of the best.” But that didn’t seem to be doing us any good now. We had just failed to prevent the deaths of thirty-five children, and were losing a war to a collection of underresourced extremists.

On paper, the confrontation between AQI and our Task Force should have been no contest. We had a large, well-trained, superbly equipped force, while AQI had to recruit locals and smuggle in foreign fighters one by one through dangerous, unreliable ratlines. We enjoyed robust communication technology, while they were often dependent on face-to-face meetings and letters delivered by courier to minimize the risk of detection. Our fighters had persevered through the most demanding training in the history of special operations; theirs had attended a smattering of madrassas scattered across the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa. We could, at will, tap into an unmatched well of firepower, armored vehicles, and cutting-edge surveillance; their technology consisted of IEDs assembled in safe-house basements from propane tanks and expired Soviet mortars.

We were also exemplary in our discipline. Our superior resources had not bred complacency; we were pushing our assets harder than they had ever been pushed. Our operators would wake mid-morning, spend their day reviewing plans and intelligence and briefing the chain of command; then as dusk began to settle, kits would come out, gear would click on, and rotor blades would start to whirl. Through the hours of darkness, small teams would go to work, hitting two, three, ten targets in a given night—each operation meticulously planned and executed, every effort oppressively taxing in the way that only the life-threatening can be. By the early morning, weary warriors would sink into bed for a few hours of sleep and then repeat the cycle without interruption for months on end.

The Task Force’s unique capabilities made it necessary for us to take a leadership role in the fight in Iraq, but the task was on a scale we had never encountered before. Throughout our twenty-plus-year history, we had successfully executed small, precise, surgical operations; we were now being called on to spearhead a war with no end in sight. The tragedy of the September 30 sewage plant attack was an

unwelcome reminder that, despite our pedigree, our gadgets, and our commitment, things were slipping away from us.

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As information streamed in about the bombing, the SIGACT (Significant Activity) report's terse account was augmented with valuable details from Task Force liaison officers dispersed across Iraq—details of the casualties, the backgrounds and ages of the men, women, and children who perished, and of how the men in the Opel had slipped through our fingers. We debated what response we should muster.

But we also had to ask a deeper, more troubling question: If we were the best of the best, why were such attacks not disappearing, but in fact increasing? Why were we unable to defeat an underresourced insurgency? Why were we losing?

## TEAM OF TEAMS

That question, the answers we found, and their implications for the world beyond our Task Force form the basis of this book. With AQI, we faced a fundamentally new kind of threat, bred by a fundamentally new kind of environment. The war we had to wage was not only different from fighting a nation-state; it was different from any kind of war waged in the twentieth century. Insurgency, terrorism, and radicalization are as old as conflict itself, but by 2004 those phenomena had been coupled with new technological variables to create an entirely new problem set. Most people will, fortunately, never be in the position of fighting a violent insurgency, but the technological and social changes that made AQI's success possible affect us all.

In 2004, we were only beginning to understand the gravity of this shift, but in the months that followed we came to understand that defeating AQI would necessitate learning from them. Just as the cohort of young people born in the 1990s and 2000s are considered “digital natives” in contrast to their “digital immigrant” parents, AQI was an organization native to the information-rich, densely interconnected world of the twenty-first century. It operated in ways that diverged radically from those we thought of as “correct” and “effective.” But it worked.

In the course of this fight, we had to unlearn a great deal of what we thought we knew about how war—and the world—worked. We had to tear down familiar organizational structures and rebuild them along completely different lines, swapping our sturdy architecture for organic fluidity, because that was the only way to confront a rising tide of complex threats. Specifically, we restructured our force from the ground up on principles of extremely transparent information sharing (what we call “shared consciousness”) and decentralized decision-making authority (“empowered execution”). We dissolved the barriers—the walls of our silos and the floors of our hierarchies—that had once made us efficient. We looked at the behaviors of our smallest units and found ways to extend them to an organization of thousands, spread across three continents. We became what we called “a team of teams”: a large command that captured at scale the traits of agility normally limited to small teams. Almost everything we did ran against the grain of military tradition and of general organizational practice. We abandoned many of the precepts that had helped establish our efficacy in the twentieth century, because the twenty-first century is a different game with different rules.

Our struggle in Iraq in 2004 is not an exception—it is the new norm. The models of organizational success that dominated the twentieth century have their roots in the industrial revolution and, simply put, the world has changed. The pursuit of “efficiency”—getting the most with the least investment of energy, time, or money—was once a laudable goal, but being effective in today's world is less a

question of optimizing for a known (and relatively stable) set of variables than responsiveness to a constantly shifting environment. ~~Adaptability, not efficiency, must become our central competency.~~

Today, the challenges faced by our Task Force are shared by contemporary organizations, which, like us, developed tremendous competencies for dealing with a world that no longer exists. Since leaving the military and founding CrossLead in 2011, my colleagues and I have studied the difficulties encountered by a variety of businesses and other groups struggling to survive and prosper in a changed world. In the pages to come, we will explore why most organizations today are ill equipped to meet those challenges, and we will lay out, step-by-step, our experience in Iraq, the solutions we found that worked, and the research we have done subsequently into the broader applications of these solutions.

In 2004 those answers lay in the future. We were struggling to understand an enemy that had no fixed location, no uniforms, and identities as immaterial and immeasurable as the cyberspace within which they recruited and deployed propaganda. The utility of the intelligence we gleaned through arduous and dangerous struggle had a disconcerting way of evaporating like the Opel melting into Baghdad traffic on September 30. But we did have a starting point—a name: Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. It was an alias, but the man was real.

## AHMAD AL-KHALAYLEH

Five years earlier, in the Jordanian desert thirty miles east of the Dead Sea, the [doors of the high-security Suwaqah prison](#) opened. A few dozen men emerged, including a quiet man whose flowing Afghan robes cut a stark contrast with the prison clothes of those who surrounded him. He was Ahmad al-Khalayleh, or as he came to be known to the outside world, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

Raised in the industrial Jordanian city of Zarqa in an average, modest family, Ahmad went off the rails at a young age, dropping out of school and turning to drugs and alcohol. His mother eventually shipped him off to a mosque renowned for its [Salafist bent](#) (a deeply conservative strain of Sunni Islam). There, he found his true passion: holy war. He traveled to Afghanistan and Pakistan in search of jihadist glory, hoping to play a glamorous role in fighting the infidel invaders (at the time, Soviets but he was too late: the Soviets were already withdrawing from the decade-long conflict. Ahmad returned to Amman and made inroads with the radical Islamist community there. His participation in a plot against the state landed him in Suwaqah, where he spent five years deepening his resolve, lifting weights, memorizing the Koran, and using acid to [burn off the tattoos](#) acquired in his renegade youth. His time there completed the transformation his mother unwittingly had kicked off a decade earlier from listless thug to charismatic terrorist commander. Fellow inmates came to revere him, prison authorities to fear him. Cowed by his influence, prison authorities allowed him to replace traditional prison garb with the elegant drape of the *shalwar kameez*—the long shirt and baggy trousers bound at the waist and ankles traditional of Afghanistan. This was part of his new identity, as was his adopted name—Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. When the thirty-three-year-old walked out of prison, he was poised to assume what would become a central role in the post-9/11 wars.

He returned to Pakistan, where a new group called Al Qaeda—“the Base”—was taking form. Inspired, he founded a similar organization, Tawhid w’al-Jihad (TWJ)—“the Group of Unity and Jihad.” After a few unsuccessful attempts to join brewing conflicts in Pakistan and Chechnya, TWJ established a [training camp in Herat](#), Afghanistan, that taught physical conditioning, bomb making, and chemical warfare. Al Qaeda took an interest, and the two groups grew close.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq was a dream come true for Zarqawi; finally, he would have a chance to

prove his mettle. TWJ established itself at the forefront of the resistance, shrewdly playing on the fear and frustration of Iraq's Sunni minority, suddenly dispossessed of political power by Saddam's fall. In 2003, Zarqawi engineered a successful bombing campaign that killed hundreds and made a mockery of the occupying coalition's attempt to secure Baghdad. A massive truck bomb at the United Nations headquarters in the [Canal Hotel killed twenty-two](#), including Sérgio Vieira de Mello, the UN's special representative to Iraq. Two months later, in a barrage of coordinated suicide bombings that killed thirty-five and wounded more than two hundred, an explosives-packed ambulance was used to target the [International Red Cross headquarters](#).

Though the sewage plant strike was horrific, it was not out of the ordinary for Iraq in 2004. [By December](#), there had been [more major terrorist attacks](#) in Iraq alone than there had been [in the entire world in 2003](#). In 2005, terrorism in Iraq would claim [8,300](#) lives, the equivalent of almost three 9/11s in a country with one tenth the population of the United States. Iraq, with less than one half of one percent of the global population, accounted for almost [a third of all terrorist attacks](#) worldwide and a majority of terrorism's fatalities in 2005. And it only got worse: the spring of 2006 saw [more than a thousand Iraqis dying](#) on Iraqi streets each month. For families like the onetime homeowners in El Amel, local bombings occurred with the frequency of garbage collection in suburban America.

Saddam had been ousted and tried, but where a time lapse of Iraqi streets from 2003 to 2005 should have revealed an increase in order and democracy, it would instead have shown a depressing descent: shops shuttering, roads deteriorating, fewer and fewer people walking around in public, and the incessant orange flicker of suicide bomb attacks. In 2003, oil-rich Iraq's economy contracted more than [20 percent](#), putting the per capita GDP at \$449—[less than 2 percent](#) of that of the United States. Television news reported the United Nations Development Program's conclusion that conditions were ["dismal."](#)

Iraqis weren't watching it on TV. For them, the experience was visceral. As the fragile edifice of Saddam's government collapsed, [electricity shortfalls](#) crippled Baghdad, eliminating lighting, refrigeration, and air-conditioning. In a city where summer days top 125 degrees Fahrenheit, and simply brushing exposed skin against sun-heated metal can produce a painful burn, this is bad news. Water treatment and [sewage](#) processing plants sat idle, and human waste backed up into the streets, producing an omnipresent, nauseating stench.

A place with a history as great as any on earth—the onetime “Cradle of Civilization”—had become a living hell.\*

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The brutality and mayhem were strategic. Zarqawi's goal was a sectarian civil war between Iraq's Sunni and Shia populations. In destroying each other, he thought, they would also destroy any remnant of a real state, thereby creating a window of opportunity for the Islamic caliphate of his dreams. By strategically targeting Shia Iraqis, Zarqawi ignited a cultural tinderbox, and a sectarian bloodbath swept through Iraq. He had cleverly engineered leverage: each carefully chosen strike of AQI's would see its death toll multiplied by the chain of reprisals it would set off. Victims of suicide bombs were joined by those who met dark fates at the hands of the sectarian militias on both sides of Iraq's religious divide: bodies electrocuted and dismembered in underground torture chambers, or discarded in garbage-filled alleys with their heads still covered by suffocating plastic bags.

Even Al Qaeda grew uncomfortable with [Zarqawi's extremism](#). But its leaders could not deny the

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