

## **Transcript of Stripes interview with Lt. Gen. David M. Rodriguez**

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*The following is a transcript of Stars & Stripes reporter Heath Druzin's Dec. 29, 2009 interview with the Commander of the International Security Assistance Force Joint Command, U.S. Army Lt. Gen. David M. Rodriguez.*

**DRUZIN:** Can you start off by talking a little bit about the IJC and how it fits into the overall picture here in Afghanistan?

**RODRIGUEZ:** Well the ISAF Joint Headquarters is a 3 star level headquarters, much like the Multi-National Corps Iraq level of headquarters was; so we command the regional commands and conduct the day to day operations and all the operational tactical operations that go on in the Regional Commands.

**DRUZIN:** How has your day to day work changed since General McChrystal issued his new way forward? Can you tell me a little bit about how things are changing?

**RODRIGUEZ:** Well, you know, we are working very hard to conduct embedded partnering and become much closer to the Afghan security forces, who we partner with very closely of-course, but also the Afghan people and the Afghan government. So we work very, very, closely with all of them so that we understand what's really going on in the complex human terrain out there that makes up Afghanistan. And of-course we've got some other great guidance from the leadership here about the tactical directive and the driving directive, and things like that, and all those things are focused on protecting the people, so that we are serving the people of Afghanistan as best as we possibly can during the conduct of our operations.

**DRUZIN:** And can you tell me a little bit more about the embedding; I was just out in the South, I was with an MP Company who has taken it quite literally and they were moving into the Police sub-stations and live there 24/7 along with their Afghan counterparts so can you tell me a little bit more about that and just the importance of that embedding to the overall strategy.

**RODRIGUEZ:** Well, we think that's critical to the strategy and we have to do this so that we build the relationships that are so very, very important here; which is why they are living with them, operating 24 hours a day. Because when you build those relationships, the trust grows between us and the Afghans; it's also a great link to the Afghan people who are here to serve in the long run and then we ask them to hold us accountable and we attempt to hold them accountable in a type of shared responsibility; and we want them to hold us accountable so that we are doing things in an Afghan context the way they would because sometimes that's different than what we would think initially. And then we try to hold them accountable to best serving their people being good leaders and good stewards and public servants. And then we think that is also the best way to develop the capacity of the Afghans to lead this themselves; so that's the other reason we are working very close to them all the time.

**DRUZIN:** And can you talk a little bit about that end goal you talked about with the Afghans taking responsibility for themselves, so, what is the 'end goal' for this embedding process?

**RODRIGUEZ:** Well, for each organization at every level, we are attempting to embed at every level we possibly can and what you are really trying to do is build their ability to sustain their security for their country. And then continue to get on a track that is increasing in capability all the time so that they gain momentum and they are able to sustain that momentum as they get more effective over time.

**DRUZIN:** And then also, just looking forward; how do you balance COIN strategy with the need for still big military operations like the big push in Arghandab and other districts that are still problematic, how do you strike that balance?

**RODRIGUEZ:** That's a great question and a great challenge for all our leaders to do the right thing at the right time at the right place, and they have to make judgments about that. In the old days we use to talk about tactical patience and tactical aggressiveness and you have to apply those at the right time and right place. If you mix those at the wrong time you are going to be in trouble; well it's the same thing here, we're trying to balance, and again, when you roll up into a village with one machine gun on top of a MRAP it's not too easy to interact with the people; but now when you are on a road that's got some IED's, and that's the threat and stuff; that's the time to be like that. So, again, there just adjusting to the local conditions and mitigating and managing the risk out there to get as close to the people as they possibly can. But again, different situation, different places, then you want to be as protective as you can so it's the judgment of those great leaders out there make every day and I hope you got to see some of that when you were out there, you observed that embedded partnering because there is no 'one-way', one-size fits all out there and that's what we are asking those leaders to do.

**DRUZIN:** So, this is something that's being left to the discretion of a....

**RODRIGUEZ:** You've always got, no-matter where you are and everything, you've got somebody to check you. That's what we have higher-headquarters for, no matter where you are; but a, there asked to make judgments, and again, there are supervisors and chain of command always checks everything, but this is part of the thing where you have to trust people to do the right thing sometimes because you can't be there everywhere and there asked to make thousands of decisions but unfortunately one might not work out right but for the most part it's gone pretty good and those leaders and supervisors are making good decisions and we think that's the way to do it in the long run.

**DRUZIN:** What kind of changes can we expect to see on the ground in the coming months with the surge and with the kind of different strategy; what's that going to look like?

**RODRIGUEZ:** Well, as you know, we have right now some pockets of pretty good security right now in certain areas and as these 30,000 additional troops flow in we hope to be able to connect those and expand them and so that the Afghans have a greater sense of security and a better trust and confidence in their future. As security grows, of-course, things grow with it, and the governance grows, development and all those good things that will help provide a better opportunity in the future for Afghanistan, education, health, those kind of things so as you know there lots of people; whether it be government organizations, non-governmental organizations out there trying to help and sometimes they are being

limited by security so we really want to expand those security areas and connect them so they are more continuous so that it helps support the development of local governance and economic rehabilitation.

**DRUZIN:** President Obama said that he wants to start drawing down troops by July and there has been some different takes on that, what is your take, what does that mean, that deadline?

**RODRIGUEZ:** Well it a, again, I think it means just what he said, in 2011 we'll start drawing down forces and you can look at that time many different ways. If you are looking at it one way, the enemy thinks you're quitting. And if you look at it from some of the way the Afghan leadership looks at it, it's encouraging or inspiring them to hurry up and give it all that they have to improve as fast as they can, and again, the conditions on the ground at that time will dictate the pace and rate and those things and I think it will be a deliberate decision making process that will include all things from how the security, how the governance is doing, how the Afghan leadership is doing everything they can to improve so that's the decision, and we're moving forward with it; again, you can look at it in multiple ways, looking at it positively it's a, I think the Afghans for example, it's interesting that the Army has recruited more people this month than they ever have, and again, it's a sense of urgency and it also shows that it's not open ended and again, it's the shared responsibility by the International Community as well as the Afghan leadership.

**DRUZIN:** And what does that deadline do for you? As far as how you conduct operations; does that kind of increase the tempo?

**RODRIGUEZ:** No, I mean, there's not a whole lot of ways we can increase the tempo of what we're doing anyhow. You know, but again, continue to go all out to do everything as fast and effectively as we can; and anyhow, no matter how long we have, so, again what we really have to do in the partnership, embedding partnering also includes embedding with all our Afghan civilian partners as well as the civilians who are out here working just as hard as the military is to develop governance and development throughout Afghanistan, so we'll just have to partner with all them and coordinate our efforts and communicate and lead toward the same goal, but everybody has the same goal, shares the same goal, it's a great situation.

**DRUZIN:** You mentioned the Civilian side of things, that's another thing I wanted to ask. There is suppose to be a civilian surge alongside the military one and the military mission is obviously, they're kind of becoming one; how do you, how do those come together and how do those work together?

**RODRIGUEZ:** Well, when you go out there some places and you can see just like you saw the embedded partnering, there's embedded civilians out there too, that are working alongside their military counterparts and again, as they, together you know, work with the people and the government and the security forces and everything and all come together and they all lend their expertise in different areas and we need all that expertise to be able applied wherever we can so we're very fortunate to have some great civilians out there who live alongside us and work alongside us in some pretty rough conditions and everything and do a great job and so we're thankful for all of them that are out there and looking forward to more that are coming.

**DRUZIN:** How important is the governance piece to a successful military campaign as far as getting the Afghan government more responsive to the people, reducing corruption, that kind of thing?

**RODRIGUEZ:** In a comprehensive approach it is all important, because it is all how their government and leadership take care of their people and serve their people. So the governance piece is very, very critical. And again, you are not going to solve the challenges of Afghanistan without all of that working and all that improving; gaining the trust and confidence of the people that this is the way for them to move to the future.

**DRUZIN:** Can you talk a little bit about the partnership between different nations here. I was just out Helmand with Estonians; it's a really tiny contingent but the guys are on the front line and they don't really have any caveats on their troops. Some other nations have more limited role; how's that working and do you feel like everybody's pulling their weight right now?

**RODRIGUEZ:** Yeah, well again, for the military out there everybody is pulling their weight and pulling as much as they can so different nations have different caveats; there's plenty of places to help out with all the caveats anybody has so you just have to get them in the right place, right position to maximize their effectiveness; and it's just like anything else when you put a big team together, there are strengths and weaknesses, and there are caveats and no caveats and you just combine them at the right places and right missions to get the maximum effectiveness out of all the forces here and you know it's an incredible partnership when you think about it, 43 nations out here with a common goal of trying to make a difference for the future of Afghanistan.

**DRUZIN:** How does that actually work day to day, dealing with other nations and getting everybody on the same page?

**RODRIGUEZ:** We're a combined headquarters and just like ISAF headquarters up here, the ISAF Joint Command is the same way, we have members from all the nations and you work through the challenges of different backgrounds and different cultures, but it's the same thing that you do working with the Afghans. It's all part of the same solution, you work together and figure out how to maximize the effectiveness of the team, and just work through it, and it works very, very effectively and there's some incredible contributions by many of the NATO nations; incredibly brave soldiers and civilians out there all over the place, it's really inspiring.

**DRUZIN:** Can you talk a little-bit about the South. That's been a, that's suppose to be a real big push there for the surge, the south, can you talk about what we are going to see there and just how vital that is to improve things down there.

**RODRIGUEZ:** The South is obviously critical to how Afghanistan goes in the long term because that was the spiritual home of the Taliban, it's also the Helmand river valley there is huge production center for all of Afghanistan and is effective as it could be for part of the region, and of-course you have the huge city of Kandahar in the crossroads the importance of that to the whole southern area of Afghanistan and then you've got the commerce routes that take the goods into Pakistan and down as well as up to Kabul so it's a...Kandahar is a huge crossroads that's very important for Afghanistan and even around Kandahar there's a huge farming production capability and then same thing for the Helmand river valley

so it's important, it's also an area where there is a high density of people and then the population center of operations and the ability to protect the people best as effectively as we can, that's very important to us and to Afghanistan and we came about this plan by working with the Afghans so they understand the importance of that area, the high density of people and what it does, what it provides as far as opportunity for the government to take care of its people so that's where we're going to focus for those reasons because that's where they think is best too.

**DRUZIN:** When you say you came about this plan by working with the Afghans, can you talk a little bit about that?

**RODRIGUEZ:** Sure, it's really important to understand that we partner at every level so we put a combined planning effort together with the Afghans, together we went through the whole planning process like you do for any other military operation; and when you do it together like that you combine the strengths of those teams so we learned a lot going through that process and the Afghans did too. And I think at the end of the day we came up with a better product, a better plan because of working together like that; just like team-mates.

**DRUZIN:** Obviously, a major focus is the Afghan National Security Forces right now...

**RODRIGUEZ:** Absolutely.

**DRUZIN:** Where is that effort and what needs to happen right now to improve them?

**RODRIGUEZ:** Well, as you know we are trying to build up the Afghan National Security Forces as fast as we can; I'm responsible for training the 'field-force' out there and then NTMA/CSTCA is responsible for institutional training; so we partner together to do that; and again, after you leave the institution you get through the basic training and you go out to the field, and you know, training is constant, and so, training the field of force one of the key ways to do that is the partnering because again, when you work that close together you learn a lot from each other and it increases the effectiveness of our operations and also, we think it is the best and fastest way to develop the leadership capability in the Afghan National Security Forces, which is really going to be the thing that sustains it in the future.

**DRUZIN:** And where are they right now? The Army and the Police?

**RODRIGUEZ:** They are in a wide range of capabilities dependent on, of-course, their partners and how well they've been able to effectively train to develop that leadership, and literacy, and so they work on both of those things all the time so as to grow those leaders and then the Police, we started a little bit later, developing, putting a lot of effort into the development of the Police; and then the Police was a fielded force already, versus growing the Army from the bottom. So we've got a little bit more to do on the Police, relatively speaking, but I think we'll be able to make some progress; the other thing is, as we get more of these 30,000, it's really about 37,000 at this point with the NATO contributions, which are very important to that effort, here that a we'll be partnered with more people out there...the more that you can partner with the faster you can develop that capacity to sustain themselves and serve the people.

**DRUZIN:** In talking to Soldiers that are getting ready to undertake some of these programs and get closer to the people. There is some, obviously, there is at least some short term increased risk. You have to take the (vehicle?) closer to the people, you have to assume some of that. So what do you say to troops out there who have to undertake that risk; what do you say to them to buy into that?

**RODRIGUEZ:** It's kind of like making friends. Whether in Afghanistan, tea is important, whether it is the 3 cups of tea, like Mortenson says or anybody else but it's just building those relationships. Fortunately for us, you know, for the military, we've done that, when we went to basic training, or when we went to different schools and everything so they're kind of adept at that to begin with, now they've got to understand obviously that there is a difference in cultures and everything but they do a great job of building those relationships and because the military is built on trust to begin with, because they trust the guy on the right, left, they trust the leaders and they know that the people below them and putting a lot of trust in them so those relationships are at least in part come natural to military people but you know it is built on relationships, trust, it's figuring out how to do that and they've got to make some judgments as they go through that, it's certainly a risk but the benefits are worth the risk.

**DRUZIN:** In the similar vein, there's been increasing public skepticism about what is happening here. What do you say to Americans who are looking at the calendar and saying we've been here so long, what's happening, why is this worth it. What do you tell them to re-assure them that it is worth staying the course?

**RODRIGUEZ:** Well, again, I think that the national leadership has made this a priority to send some incredible amount of resources over here, in treasure both of men and women as well as fiscal resources to build a place that does not allow terrorist and extremist groups to operate here; and so that's of course at the top of the line of what we are trying to do here; and then whether it can work and we can solve this challenge, the people of Afghanistan will be the ones to tell you that best because they want a decent life and have a better opportunity for their children so, and again as we work closer with them than we ever have throughout the depth and breadth of where we're conducting operations they will change their outlook on life from one of fear and distrust and uncertainty that they've had to live with for the last 30 years to one of trust and confidence in their government; trust and confidence in their security forces, trust and confidence in the International Security Assistance Force efforts here.

**DRUZIN:** How long do you think it will take? Obviously, a drawdown in July does not mean that we are leaving so...

**RODRIGUEZ:** Right.

**DRUZIN:** How long will it take?

**RODRIGUEZ:** When you say 'it,' what does 'it,' mean; you know?

**DRUZIN:** Right.

**RODRIGUEZ:** Again, we want to turn around the momentum here pretty don-gone quickly in the next 12 to 18 months so that again things start moving up, and so as that security areas grow and then people

again start gaining trust and confidence, momentum starts moving forward and as the capacity of the Afghan government improves and the security improves, that starts growing the momentum and the belief that the people have deep in their hearts that this is going to work and everything in the long term and turn this thing around; and then again it's really going to be based on several factors, on how fast we draw down the conditions on the ground and when you hit the momentum point where that starts growing, then things happen very, very-very quickly, no, we'll all be here for a while, with a, obviously you transition to a security assistance type relationship, allied type relationship; I think that would go on for several years as they fully develop their capacity to serve the people and of-course it will change over time from less of a military support to a majority of it being civilian support over time as they continue to build that sustainable capacity to serve the people.

**DRUZIN:** It's almost 2010 now, what are some of the things that have gone wrong in the past and how do we, how do you avoid that in the future, going forward?

**RODRIGUEZ:** Well again, the partnering piece is a big part while we are trying to solve that and part of the challenge is to ensure that we do things in an Afghan context and ways according the Afghan culture to best protect, serve and work so I think some of those challenges we have to overcome to get a little bit better, we've had some practices that sometimes have been harmful though well meaning, whether it be how we work through contracting or paying people or any of those things, there's a lot of things we've learned over the years just like everything else, and adapted in order to overcome that; and the growth and the learning of the complex human terrain out there is a big part of what we have learned over the years so it's a different solution for everything for a different part of Afghanistan because what solves the challenge in Kabul doesn't solve the challenge in Kandahar nor does it solve the challenge in Nuristan, so, it's a wide arrange of challenges and you've just got to understand there's different challenges out there and different solutions and you have to be able to be flexible and adaptable to understand those things before you try build a solution; and better than anything you can just listen to Afghans on their solution, which is pretty don-gon-good almost every time.

**DRUZIN:** What does victory look like in Afghanistan? I think some people have had different views on that, but what do you see leaving behind eventually?

**RODRIGUEZ:** Well again, victory in Afghanistan is an Afghanistan that can govern itself well enough to prevent the rise of extremism; extremism can find a home here easily. So again, you have to have security forces that can secure the people, you have to have a government that can provide for the basic services and take care of its people and then you have to have a people that have a belief in and confidence that their government and their security forces can take care of them and is going to provide them an opportunity for their future.

**DRUZIN:** We touched on this a little bit, how do you increase the understanding between Soldiers and Afghans, because sometimes there is a culture clash and sometimes there is a lack of understanding so how do you increase that?

**RODRIGUEZ:** Well, for us we listen more than we talk. But as you get down there, and I hope you saw that down there with the embedded partnering, when you are close together, and when you build those

relationships, again, they tell you what you are doing right, they tell you what you are doing wrong and again, I think it's just a relationship that...

That's interesting I ask them all the time; what would you say to the people who say that we can't work with a Muslim Nation and all of them tell me the same thing, that they should come out and see because this is about trust between two different peoples and all that is possible and all the areas of Afghanistan and that they should all come out and see what the relationships are and see they are built on trust, mutual trust, and dignity and respect, just like human beings anywhere. Treat them properly they respond properly and work with us. But it's not going to be the same; you can't expect their culture to be the exact same as ours. We just have an understanding and the acceptance; and we move on past that very, very quickly.

**DRUZIN:** One other question about governance because that does seem to be real key.

**RODRIGUEZ:** A critical part, it absolutely is.

**DRUZIN:** What happens on the military side; where do you fall in as far as tackling corruption and governance and trying to improve that their responsiveness to the people.

**RODRIGUEZ:** Again, when you are with them, you make sure they are not doing anything wrong; serving themselves before they are serving the people.

Try to make it easy, it's like a war crime, you don't stand by and allow that to happen, so we don't stand by and allow their governance to take advantage of the people; a lot of that is relationships, it's about leadership, and just making sure they're doing the right thing to serve their people and then of-course the partnership and the Afghan people, their government is just like every other local government, they look at their district leader, they look at their district police chief, it's kind of their government; so down there on the ground that's who they are working with; they are working with the government, the service men and women, the security forces and all of them as a team build those relationships and also build that capacity to serve their people so again, it's a team at the lowest level. You go into these security meetings and they all government officials because they are all part of the solution here and that's how we support their efforts to develop their governance and then of-course when you have great civilian experts out there they can really make a difference you know provide the expertise; we all support and help them to do their job better however we can. Part of the challenge of-course, is just a situational understanding of a, like I've talked about, the complex human terrain out there, so much of what we do is to help provide that situational understanding to as many people as we can so that they know what to do, when everybody knows what's going on they all fill in the holes in the right places at the right time. It's kind of like a self-synchronizing system.

**DRUZIN:** What has been the biggest short-coming for the Coalition forces and what have you been doing to improve that?

**RODRIGUEZ:** Probably the understanding of the 'Afghan Context' probably. So I think that the biggest thing in addition to trying to prepare and educate our people, trying to get them to gain a situational understanding of their areas because they are different every place and then again partnering

piece is aimed at doing that because when you partner that close they bring strengths and understanding of things that we don't understand so I think that all that is focused on trying to get a better understanding for the people, better understanding for how the Afghan systems operate and how we can best help them make their system work better and not impose our system.

**DRUZIN:** Those are all the questions I had; is there anything I didn't cover that you wanted to mention?

**RODRIGUEZ:** We again, partner all the way up at our level so it's a, in the operations center, we have people from the Minister of Interior, Minister of Defense; besides for bringing all of their expertise to our operations center; combined planning and combined operations is helping out tremendously. When I travel, I travel around with the Afghan leaders, we travel together, again, they see 70% of the things and I don't see 30% of things because they know what to look for, so all that is part of it. It goes from the top to the bottom to learn a rural understanding of how you can best help them so that's part of the experience for all of us.

**DRUZIN:** When you say travel, when you do battle-field circulation?

**RODRIGUEZ:** Yes, all the time. We've stayed at Afghan bases and they've stayed at Coalition bases. We travel all through the area together with the leadership. They're out trying to do the same thing, trying to educate and improve their efforts, educate themselves to get a good understanding of what's going and solve problems and make it better for everyone.

**DRUZIN:** I appreciate your time.

**RODRIGUEZ:** Thanks for going out there and hooking up with a 'partnering team' out there. How were they doing? Don't you think they were doing pretty good?

**DRUZIN:** It was just getting started.

**RODRIGUEZ:** You saw the beginning of how you start to build those relationships.

**DRUZIN:** Exactly. I'm very interested though and I'm hoping to come back in a couple of months and see how it goes.

**RODRIGUEZ:** Well, you saw the beginnings of it and how some things are easy and some things are harder but they all adapt and figure out how to overcome; it's pretty amazing. Thank you very much.

**DRUZIN:** Thank you.