Interview with Keck Center Board of Governors Chair General William Crouch, ’63 (Retired Army)

By Genevieve Collins ’22

As a soon-to-be graduate hoping to serve in the US government, your time in the military is particularly interesting to me. I understand that you attended the Army and Navy Academy before matriculating at CMC. When did you realize that you wanted to spend your life’s career in the service of your country? How did your time at CMC prepare you for military service?

I attended the Army and Navy Academy, which is a boarding school for boys from the fifth grade through senior year. Before the Academy, I was not performing very well in school. A number of people suggested that boarding school would be helpful, including two retired, two-star major generals who had come out of WWII as division commanders. I serendipitously got to know them and received strong counsel from them, and they advised me that the Army and Navy Academy would help with my organization, discipline, and academics. While at the Academy, I began to think through post-graduation plans and hoped to attend one of the military academies. But some relatives of mine – one was a professor at Vanderbilt and the other a professor at UC Berkeley -- strongly recommended CMC. They felt that CMC, which was of course Claremont Men’s College at the time, would be a good fit, since it would allow me to transition from a boys’ school to a small men’s college focused on business and government. I still hoped to transfer to a military academy, but once I started at Claremont, I realized that the school had a large ROTC department which was motivated by the draft. The philosophy was, if you are going to concentrate on either business or government and you want to become a leader in your field, why would you end up as a private when you could end up as a lieutenant through ROTC? This motivated many of my classmates and myself to take ROTC with the thought that we would have four years of academics, a few years in the army, and then enter a civilian pursuit. My parents were supportive of this plan, as I had no intent at the time of becoming a career soldier. So, ROTC was a significant part of my years in Claremont. I graduated in 1963. In the same week, my fiancé Victoria graduated from Scripps, I graduated from CMC, we got married, and then I was sworn into the army and appointed a second lieutenant. I went on active duty a few weeks after graduation, and from there we went to Fort Knox in Kentucky.

Despite thinking otherwise, you did go on to become a career soldier. In 1993, you assumed command of the US Army in Europe, and three years later you assumed an additional role as commander of NATO Land Forces in Central Europe (LANDCENT). First, could you give me a sense of the security challenges in Europe when you assumed these two positions? Second, what was the rationale behind your serving as commander in both positions, at the same time?

In 1993, we were just coming out of the last vestiges of Cold War service in Europe. US Army in Europe by that time was about 100,000 troops with contributions from the Navy and Air Force. The
Berlin Wall had come down, but there was still great uncertainty. There was no longer a Soviet Union, but there were Russian and other forces that were not necessarily friendly. As time proceeded, the war in the Balkans became a real challenge. The US, UK, and others under the guise of NATO, but primarily the United Nations, tried to bring the Balkans War to a close. However, the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) was unable to achieve this: they were not properly armed, they did not have the appropriate mission and focus, and they did not have enough troops. The Serbs captured and displayed in handcuffs many UNPROFOR troops across Bosnia Herzegovina, a humiliation that catalyzed the United States to bring the three warring factions together in Dayton, Ohio. Serbian, Bosnian, and Croat representatives signed up for 30 days of negotiations in Dayton. It took 30 days. The negotiations resulted in a structure formed by NATO with the United States as the lead nation and 37 nations contributing forces, from platoons to divisions. I became commander of 60,000 troops organized in five divisions. The United States provided a 20,000-man first armored division as our contribution to what was then called Implementation Force (IFOR) and translated to Stabilization Force (SFOR). We deployed these five divisions across Bosnia Herzegovina to oversee the disarmament of the former warring factions. We had to get control over a huge number of weapons, from tanks to small arms, munitions, and explosives, and we had to make sure that we had a good system for inventorying, sorting, and protecting these weapons. What we couldn’t stand for was disarming about 200,000 troops, only for those weapons to be raided and used by one of the factions. I had very strict instructions from NATO and the US not to let that happen. But our solution worked. Each NATO country and some outside of NATO were willing to contribute discreet organizations of troops. Those troops had to be trained, equipped, and organized under an overall command and control system. That system became LANDCENT, or Land Forces Central Europe. LANDCENT was a NATO structure that trained, equipped, organized, and deployed the contributions from various nations. I became the commander of US Army Europe, the commander of LANDCENT which became the headquarters for SFOR, and the commander of IFOR, which eventually transitioned into SFOR. So, I was a NATO commander and a US national commander.

From this, it appears that the purpose of NATO in the immediate post-Cold War period was to stabilize Europe. Since then, it seems that NATO has struggled to define its purpose, having evolved significantly since the mid-1990s when you were at the helm. I'm curious how you think the role of NATO has changed in the postwar period.

NATO was a deterrent force in the 1990s. But then we began to be confronted by more challenges that necessitated more forces: an active requirement in Bosnia, then another active requirement in Kosovo, and then an active deployment. In each, there were casualties. But NATO was confronting hostile forces, which are different from what we had experienced in the 1990s. Where did we go from there? Into hot wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, with national commitments and international military organizations that provided the headquarters and resources to be able to perform the kinds of missions we transitioned to over time.
What would you say the role of NATO is now?

The real threat of course is Russia. Who is facing that threat? NATO and the EU. What have we learned out of it? I remember when I was a colonel, commanding a cavalry regiment along the East German and Czech border. As we looked at the Soviets, many of them Russians, on the other side, we attributed tremendous combat capability to that huge organization in the east. Well, believe it or not, once the Wall came down, we started to really examine that, and we realized that they were not as capable as we thought they were. What about now? Well, amazingly enough, the Russians attacked. And as they attacked, they were beat down by a comparatively ragtag army of Ukrainians. There has been a tremendous influx of weapons and capability that NATO, not under the guise of NATO, but as individual countries, has provided to Ukrainian armed forces. Is there a NATO organization backing that up? Yes, of course. And NATO is ready to accept Sweden and Finland who have both applied for membership.

How has the invasion revitalized the Alliance?

Putin has invigorated NATO contributors and shown them that this is a very serious confrontation and heinous attack by Russia on Ukraine. Look at Germany, for instance. Their willingness to provide weapons and increase their total contribution to military force would have been unimaginable eight months ago. The invasion has made a difference. But has it spurred a direct confrontation between NATO and Russian forces? Not yet. How long will this go on for? I haven’t a clue. The threshold for NATO to become directly involved in the conflict is an attack on a member country, as codified in Article 5. If there is a transgression as far as Article 5 is concerned, then there’s no question about NATO’s commitment of force.