

Interview: Senior Enlisted Leader Marc Wicks - ACT

Written by Malcolm Leeman, Public Affairs Office Intern
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Regimental Sergeant Major (RSM) Marc Wicks is the first British Non Commissioned Officer to serve as Senior Enlisted Leader (SEL) at Allied Command Transformation (ACT).

He brings with him a distinguished service record spanning 28 years, with tours in Northern Ireland, Iraq and Afghanistan. A qualified Physical Training Instructor (PTI), he was the PTI for 42 Commando and in 1998 was appointed to be Physical Training Advisor for the United States Marine Corps officer candidate school. Prior to coming to ACT he was the Royal Marine Corps' RSM, the most senior position within the enlisted ranks of the Royal Marines. He takes over the role from Command Sergeant Major Ludek Kolesa from the Czech Republic who has held the post since 2007.

How would you describe your role as Senior Enlisted Leader of ACT?

As the Command's Senior Enlisted Leader I am first and foremost an advisor to Supreme Allied Commander Transformation (SACT). I'm a lynchpin between every enlisted service member and SACT and the Chief of Staff (COS), discussing and developing policy changes, and issues surrounding education and capability. NCOs and other ranks know that through me they have a voice into SACT's office. In conjunction with other NATO Command Senior Enlisted Leaders I am also responsible for the development and future direction of NCO training within the Alliance.

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What do you hope to accomplish while serving as ACT SEL?

My role here will be a big challenge. NCO development will be huge; we haven't yet got parity across the rank structures through NATO. Also, getting nations to understand the capability of all other nations is very important; we have so much to learn from each other offering real benefits to the Alliance.

With my own experiences and the lessons I've learned in the past, I hope to mentor the NCOs and influence Commanders. I want people here to reflect on the decisions they make today and consider the impact they may have operationally in the future, ensuring that those decisions support the men and woman on the ground.

Ultimately we need to create a cohesive, interoperable team that can respond to a situation as effectively and efficiently as possible. There are twenty eight nations which have to agree and hopefully some of this can come down to my experience and individual manner. The Chief of Staff has said that you need to be swimmer in a strong current in this organisation so it's time for me to put my trunks on and get swimming.

What lessons have you learned from your time in the military?

I've been very fortunate in my career. I've been presented with wonderful opportunities. I left school with very little, working as a zookeeper for three years. I was just a young lad who liked his sports and who went from that to becoming the senior enlisted leader of a NATO headquarters.

I've learned that you have to compete and go after opportunities. The Marines are a very competitive group of guys I've come from –“you just don't get it quietly.” You go up against five, six, seven or eight other very talented blokes and if one of them gets a promotion and you don't, you still know they've got a good guy.

Training is key - if you train hard you can fight easy. Being on operations and being successful in operations is the real right end of what we do. We always train for a degree of conflict. When

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you've been on a training exercise yomping 30 miles through the cold, wet, wind and snow wondering "what are we doing this for?", when it comes to a real conflict situation, when that first bullet comes down range everyone seems to know what to do. Often the reality is much easier than doing the training exercises because you've done it the hard way in training so many times before.

I'm a firm believer in leadership by example, I don't ask people to do things I wouldn't do. I find if you treat people the way you would like to be treated you'll get a lot more done. If people are made to feel part of the team and that they are challenged you can get the best out of them, in the end we're all in the services because we love a challenge.

Life doesn't have to end with the Marines. When I was made responsible for a whole brigade I was thinking, "Crikey how did I get that?" Then I became RSM of the Corps and I thought that was it. I should have been retiring in November and I'm sitting there as RSM of the Corps thinking brilliant, I'm going out at the top of the Royal Marines. When I was presented with the opportunity to compete for the job at ACT, then all of a sudden it's "no, you're not leaving yet, we're going to send you to NATO and do three years there."

Now is my time to see if I can help influence and change things. Wherever you go always make it better than what it was when you arrived. If you do that, then you've accomplished something.

You used to be a PTI for the Royal Marine Commandos, how tough is the training course?

The Royal Marine Commandos training course is one of the most physically demanding in the world. But it's not just about the physicality; it's also the degradation, the tiredness. Our training course lasts for 32 weeks but prepares you to immediately deploy on operations to some of the most austere and demanding conditions in the world.

The tests today reflect on the very traditions that commandos in 1945 used to pass their test. I've always been a believer that some civilians may be physically fit enough to pass the training straight away if they have plenty of rest, good food and nutrition. However, when you have to pass the test with limited rations, lack of sleep, carrying heavy loads, in the wet and cold, and ask them to go 30 miles across Dartmoor, do a swim test, complete an assault course then go

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on a 9-mile speed march, it's a different story. Ultimately it's all about the ability to maintain mental toughness and keep going.

You are often seen carrying a cane, what does this represent? Regimental Sergeant Majors within the Royal Marines all carry a cane of office as a symbol of their position, indicating that they are the Senior Enlisted Rank of a unit – whether it's a commandos unit, reserves or special boat squadron. It's a great thing in a unit, soldiers see the cane a mile away and know who's coming. It's not to be confused with a pace stick which is used by Sergeant Majors in the army on a drill square.