



by Brennan Randel

Four months into my first assignment out of flight school, I thought my career was over. Our unit was conducting aerial gunnery at a range north of El Paso. Because an Apache can only transport the pilot and the co-pilot, most of us took a bus to the range and then swapped in and out of the five pre-positioned aircraft when it was our turn on the range.

After taking the bus and waiting several hours for my designated turn, it was finally time. I walked out to the aircraft parking area, finished the pre-flight, and started putting my gear on. That's when I realized my error. I left my flight vest—required by regulation for flight—at Fort Bliss.

“Hey, Justin,” I said to my instructor pilot. As the new platoon leader, I technically outranked him, but by all relevant measures of authority, he was in charge.

“What’s up, sir?” he snapped at me, as he usually did in those early days.

“I left my flight vest.”

“Where? On the bus?” he asked.

“No, it’s in my office.”

I wouldn’t have blamed him if he punched me in the face. Up to that point in my young career, our relationship was so rocky that it wasn’t entirely out of the question (we overcame my initial missteps—he later became my biggest advocate in earning the designation of pilot-in-command).

He told me to standby while he took out his phone to call our company commander. I almost tried to stop him, but figured it wouldn’t matter. He was going to fix the situation, even if it meant taking it straight to the top.

“Sir,” he began when my commander answered the phone call. “Lieutenant Randel forgot his ALSE vest in his office. Could you please bring it out here?”

Maybe my commander was the only one who could bring the vest. Or maybe Justin wanted to inflict as much pain as possible to teach me a memorable lesson. Whatever the reason, my commander drove nearly an hour to bring me a critical piece of flight gear.

Of course, it didn’t end my career. It didn’t even matter a week later. I was just a dumb lieutenant doing dumb lieutenant things. But it didn’t *feel like it* at the time.

Nor was it the only painful mistake I would make.

There was the time I accidentally power washed a flight data probe off the aircraft (it was an expensive part).

And the time I flew commercial air to Utah to pick up an aircraft and forgot about a flare tucked away in my helmet bag (the TSA suspended my PreCheck privileges for two years for that smooth move).

Or the time I flew over a restricted area in one of my first flights as a pilot-in-command (I almost had my designation revoked, save for the grace of my commander).

We all make mistakes throughout our careers. They can often feel disastrous. But then, miraculously, life moves on.

But what about mistakes that don't go away so quickly? While I can't offer personal experience on the matter, Gen. (Ret.) Stanley McChrystal can. McChrystal was the commander of all U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan in 2010 when an embedded *Rolling Stones* reporter wrote [a devastating—albeit disputed—account](#) of McChrystal and his staff making disparaging remarks towards political leaders, among other unprofessional behavior.

As a result of the backlash from the article, McChrystal tendered his resignation and retired shortly after. He recently [reflected on the ordeal in an interview](#) with Joe Byerly on the [From the Green Notebook](#) podcast.

He was shocked by how quickly his career spiraled downward. He figured he could someday be fired for incompetence but found it inconceivable that his military career would end due to an implication of disloyalty.

McChrystal talked about the ten years since his retirement and how he overcame the shame he felt. He said he had a choice—be an angry retired general and relitigate the issue in the press, or learn from it and move forward.

“Probably the best thing I learned from the experience was not about the media; it was not about leadership—because I felt very good about the job we did there, and still do—it was about how you deal with that kind of situation when your legs get knocked out from under you.”

At the juncture of his post-scandal life, he chose to address his failure head-on which, in turn, inspired him to greater things rather than wallowing in self-pity. But first, he had to shake the feeling that he would never overcome the public humiliation.

“Something happens to you, and you suddenly feel like you’re dishonored or destroyed, or you’ve gone bankrupt or divorced. The first thing to understand is that while it may be talked about in the moment, pretty quickly, everybody else forgets, and nobody cares about it like you think they do. You think that everybody gets up in the morning talking about your problems—they don’t,” he said.

While he still sometimes struggles with the saga, he has learned to look forward and focus on the good things in his life. His focus has been to prove people wrong about the public’s perception of him—if someone met him after reading the *Rolling Stones* piece, he would want them to think the man they know is not the same man from the article.

He decided to be a better man after his resignation than before, and he wanted to prove that his one major failure wouldn’t define him.

When I make mistakes, I am disappointed about not achieving the desired outcome. But even more so—and I’m sure this is something McChrystal would agree with—I am disappointed that I gave others a reason to doubt me.

These errors are particularly discouraging when my mistakes are incongruent with who I believe I am.

In the aftermath of a substantial mistake—be it career-ending or otherwise—we can wallow, or we can overcome. But we can't overcome our mistakes if we can't be honest with ourselves. As McChrystal did, we must acknowledge our failure, show grace to those who held us accountable, and take the time to consider how and why we failed. It's the only way to make progress and implement needed changes to our behavior.

This concept reminds me of an aphorism I've kept close to heart as I navigated my career while interacting with friends and colleagues who are also navigating theirs. "We judge others by their actions, and we judge ourselves by our intentions."

We could do better to judge others by their intentions and judge ourselves by our actions.

But how do we best judge our behavior?

McChrystal got it precisely right when in his podcast interview, he said, "Reflecting is key. If you don't, you start with the assumption that you're right."

*Brennan Randel is an active-duty aviation officer and Leadership Fellow for the [Army's Center for Junior Officers](#). He is currently pursuing a master's in legislative affairs at George Washington University, and you can follow him on Twitter [@BrennanRandel](#).*

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