

Top Gun: Gene Renuart Moves Out Smartly As Senior U.S. Domestic General; Extends Hand To Mexico

By Martin Edwin Andersen

It was at the beginning of Operation Desert Storm, and Saddam Hussein's forces were still able to rain Scud terror down on the streets of Tel Aviv, Israel, and the U.S. military barracks in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. The Commander of the 76th Fighter Squadron, Victor E. "Gene" Renuart Jr., today head of the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), and the U.S. Northern Command, was sent at the head of a formation of 12 U.S. Air Force A-10 Thunderbolt IIs into far western Iraq on a "Scud hunt."

The pack of Warthogs, as the A-10s are commonly known, didn't find any of the missiles (whose military value lay in the ease with which they moved on transporter-erector-launcher vehicles, or TELs) that day, but "we were able to find and attack and destroy Scud-related equipment—refueling trucks, transporter launchers," Renuart (REN'-yoo-ahrt) recalled in an interview. "Certainly they were out there for a purpose [and we had to move] pretty effectively before they could continue firing into Israel or Saudi Arabia."

General Chuck Horner, the commander of the 9th Air Force who also led U.S. Central Command Air Forces (the totality of U.S. and allied air assets used during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm) colored the room purple the next day in telling his staff how the Warthogs, led by Renuart, had saved their collective "behinds." (In fact, not only did the 174 Warthogs pressed into service by the U.S. Central Command during Desert Storm hunt for Scuds; they also knocked out nearly half of the 1,700 Iraqi tanks that were destroyed from the air, as well as hundreds of self-propelled artillery guns and armored personnel carriers; proved invaluable in search and rescue operations, and demolished Saddam's bridges and roads.)

Renuart remembered that while during his long career he has flown "a lot of memorable combat missions," the combat over Iraq that day was "not only a good mission that had purpose, but also, clearly was recognized by our leadership that the A-10s were making a big contribution."

Knowledgeable observers have noted that the efficient, cheap, durable and safe if ungainly looking air-to-ground fighter that GIs called "the friend of the grunt" had been in the gun sights of a phalanx of brass, enamored with other more sophisticated and vastly more expensive aircraft, though these were less useful in the War on Terror. The mission he flew, Renuart recalled, "really allowed us to demonstrate what the A-10 could do for the effort, not just in close air support, but in a variety of other missions as well."

The story is more than a three-beer tale, the kind veterans justifiably proud of their service use to relive past valor and to regale comrades. Renuart's friends and admirers say that his ability to synthesize and draw attention to what is really important in the Sturm und Drang of battle, in war or in the bureaucracy, are hallmarks of his 36 years of military service. His focus on "jointness" and what that means for those fighting on the

ground, or on water, as well as in the air also shows, in the words of one naval analyst familiar with the A-10 debate, “an ability to view the bigger picture—looking out for the interests of the armed forces, not just those of his specific service.”

NORTHCOM’S RELATIONSHIP WITH MEXICO, A WORK IN PROGRESS

Since March, Gene Renuart has been the top domestic general in the United States, replacing Adm. Timothy Keating at the helm of the newest combat command with responsibility for NORAD—which protects the airspace over the United States and Canada—and NORTHCOM, the force that protects U.S. territory from inside that territory, both headquartered at Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado Springs, Colo.

NORTHCOM’s unique role in defending the homeland extends beyond just military concerns, charged with deterring, preventing and defeating threats and aggression inside its area of coordination, which includes air, land and sea approaches encompassing the continental United States, Alaska, Canada, Mexico, and the surrounding water out to approximately 50 nautical miles. (It does not include either Hawaii—which is the responsibility of the U.S. Pacific Command—or Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, the responsibility of SOUTHCOM). NORTHCOM’s statutory responsibility also puts Renuart at the center of DoD efforts to achieve “jointness,” as well as to enhance inter-agency cooperation, with civilian authorities, providing a variety of defense support efforts for state and local elected leadership, including consequence management operations.

Renuart took command at a particularly interesting juncture in U.S.-Mexican relations, as the 2008 national elections in the former have made bilateral ties to the latter a major issue, while Mexican President Calderon’s commitment to confront organized crime offers new opportunities for both countries. In a recent interview, held in his office overlooking the fabled Pike’s Peak, Renuart expressed optimism that NORTHCOM’s role can build a positive dynamic, calling it part of a “pretty complex environment” in which the United States has, in the past, been “strong-willed.” As NORTHCOM grows, he said, “having good communication and improved understandings with Mexico helps us to understand, and modify, the peaks and valleys of those relationships; to understand the sensitivities of how long a history the United States has with Mexico, and also to understand how they see themselves, both as they look north towards the U.S. and Canada and as they look south into Central and even South America and what kind of leadership role to play.”

NORTHCOM, he added, focuses its relationships with Mexico in two key areas. During the recent North American Leaders summit in Montebello, Canada, on August 20-21, President Bush emphasized that the U.S. and Mexico share joint responsibilities for dealing with the common objective of having less violence on both sides of the border in the fight against transnational organized crime and narcotics trafficking. Mexican President Felipe Calderon has identified the activities of the narco cartels as a threat to Mexico’s development and national security, and has committed his government to fighting the cartels and restoring the rule of law throughout Mexico. The Department of Defense and NORTHCOM say they are ready to respond to any Mexican requests for

assistance, given that President Calderon has directed his military to assist civilian law enforcement in cracking down on the cartels.

“In our military-to-military relationships we try to take advantage of training programs through programs like International Military Education and Training (IMET) that allow Mexican officers and, hopefully, even NCOs ... to get a better understanding of how we view joint operations, how we view military support to the homeland, and the importance and the threat of transnational organized crime and narcotics trafficking to any government, ours or Mexico's,” Renuart said.

The attacks on natural gas pipelines in central Mexico last July 5 and 10, he added, may be a bellweather of how, “if occurring on a much broader scale, a force like the drug cartels or terrorists can try to hold a nation hostage because of that, then it has clearly a strategic impact ... So we try to build exchanges, training opportunities, cooperation opportunities, discussion forums, to allow us to share ideas with the Mexican military and reach a common ground, a common understanding and a common view of how we can work together.

The second area of NORTHCOM’s relationship with the Mexican government is a traditional theater security cooperation role that mirrors that of other combat commands. Renuart noted that the Mexican government is “looking at ways to take advantage of new technologies to support the key centers of gravity that they see in their country. Energy security is a perfect example. [The Mexicans] have offshore drilling areas. When [they], like many other nations, hear al Qaeda say, ‘We will attack the energy resources of countries which are sympathetic to the West,’ it makes people nervous, because they've demonstrated at least an ability to have an impact there ... [The Mexicans] are looking at ways to modernize their naval components, their air and surface defense of key infrastructure elements--the way they do force protection around critical infrastructure within the country. So there is potentially a traditional foreign military sales, foreign military funding, education, training, theater security cooperation relationship here.”

A STRONG ADVOCATE OF DOD’S REGIONAL CENTERS

Before assuming his current position, Renuart served as the senior military assistant to the Secretary of Defense. As the director of strategic plans and policy for the Joint Staff, he provided strategic direction, policy guidance, and planning focus to develop and execute the National Military Strategy in support of global national security operations, politico-military affairs, international negotiations, and organizational issues through coordination with the combatant commands, the services, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, defense agencies, other government agencies and international organizations.

Less well-known is the fact that Renuart is the son of a Canadian immigrant who grew up in the increasingly bilingual (in Spanish) Miami metropolitan area, or that he is the highest-ranking U.S. graduate of CHDS’ sister institution, the Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies (NESA). He is a strong advocate of the role played by the Regional Centers, based on some very practical experience, saying that the “interface that can occur in those centers is valuable beyond what I think we can describe.”

“An example: When the tsunami hit in Indonesia, some of the first phone calls that were made at my level, at the three star and at the four star levels in the Pacific, were to senior leaders in that region who had been graduates or students at the Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS), who had been involved in a series of consequence management planning exercises and who had been trained in how to orchestrate federal response to a large disaster,” he recalled. “And so ... you could have instant access to the very senior most leaders in the countries of Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, India, you name it, because there was a personal relationship there. And the personal relationship came because they had participated in some of those same programs that our regional centers all over the world provide.”

In addition, he said, the Regional Centers offer “the opportunity to have very frank discussions in those classrooms and in those seminars [that] provides the U.S. a better understanding of how we are viewed internationally and its not very well in a lot of places. I think it’s important not only for the countries to express that concern but for us to listen to it. And that helps to shape (our response).”

THE BACK STORY

As a youth, Renuart attended Christopher Columbus High School in Westchester, Florida, one of the country’s top Catholic secondary schools, founded by the Marist Brothers, and wore a shirt and tie every day “much to my chagrin.” (He still keeps in regular contact with one of his teachers there, now the school president, Br. Kevin Handibode.) Renuart describes himself as a “typical Florida kid,” one who spent most of his days “marveling at things that flew and things that went on the water.”

Renuart’s late father, a French Canadian who fought with the U.S. Army during World War II, later owned his own custom cabinet shop. His mother, who just turned 80 years old, now lives in Los Altos, California, and is by all accounts, “pretty feisty.” His three sisters and a brother are all younger than he, and family reunions are bi-coastal affairs.

Sports were, and are, very important and his mentors were usually coaches from baseball, basketball or tennis, including the flamboyant participant at Wimbledon in 1954, Beryl Penrose, and Renuart’s own dad. In fact, a tennis scholarship brought him to Indiana University, where he graduated in 1971 with a Bachelor of Science degree in production and industrial management. (Brother Kevin had suggested that Renuart might consider going to a technical training school rather than to college. “I was determined to prove him wrong and I did – barely – so I remind him of that every once in a while” he recalls, laughing.)

While at Indiana, Renuart got by on athletic scholarships and raced bicycles. (Bloomington, Indiana, where the university is located, is the site of the 1979 film *Breaking Away* starring Dennis Quaid about the Little 500 relay race at the school). More importantly for Renuart, riding on the team allowed Renuart led to meeting his future wife, Jill, whose sorority was cosponsoring a big campus festival with his Sigma Chi fraternity. By his senior year, they were engaged. Although Scott Woolery, a friend

of Renuart's for nearly four decades, remembers the future general as "very driven, very focused" in college, he says that his Sigma Chi pledge brother has commented over the years that, "if he hadn't met Jill, he might not have graduated, that she kept him on the straight and narrow." (In 1975, Renuart went on to earn a Master of Arts degree in psychology, from Alabama's Troy State University.)

Today, the Renuart family includes two sons, both of whom share the couple's passion for public service. The oldest Ryan, 32, graduated from the University of Florida with a degree in landscape architecture. He spent nearly 10 years in the Air Force and the Air Force Reserve, including three combat tours in Afghanistan and Iraq as a combat rescue helicopter gunner. The younger son Andrew, 29, is a former Peace Corp volunteer in Senegal and began his second year of medical school at the University of Pennsylvania this fall, having spent the summer working in a clinic in Thailand.

And what does the top domestic general in the United States have for reading material on the night stand next to his bed, he was asked? Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Team of Rivals*—the Civil War history in which Lincoln's manner of dealing with subordinates, firmly pushing his own policy but in a way that retains collegiality—is no surprise. Renuart himself defines leadership, in part, as being "tough but fair," as "being approachable and honest, [and] having integrity to do the right thing always."

And the general's other literary choice du jour? *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, the final book in J.K. Rowling's recently concluded series.