

## **Bravo Zulu: Stavridis moves to increase SOUTHCOM's visibility, credibility in 32 countries in the region**

*By Martin Edwin Andersen*

One thing certain about Admiral James G. Stavridis, the new commander of the United States Southern Command, is that he moves fast and plays hard, something reflected in the very competitive figure he still cuts on the squash, tennis and basketball courts. Which is good to know, now that Stavridis is the first naval officer to head SOUTHCOM—responsible for all U.S. military activities on the land masses of Central and South America, the island nations of the Caribbean, and the surrounding waters south of Mexico; in all, the home to 32 sovereign states.

In the two months since assuming command, Stavridis has been very aggressive in getting out and meeting people with whom he will be working and partnering, in order to maximize SOUTHCOM visibility and credibility in the region. Not only has he already visited all of the command's eight components, including Guantanamo, plus Colombia, Honduras and El Salvador, but is also planning a fast break in the coming year to other countries on his priority list. ("Think Brazil," he has told associates.)

In the short time he has been in Miami, Stavridis has hammered home key elements of his command philosophy, which include the much underused word—"civility"—and creativity. And he is clearly someone pleased to be getting the message out.

The choice of this Navy man should not have come as a surprise. In addition to graduating with honors at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Stavridis earned a Ph.D. in international relations from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, where he won the Gullion Prize as the outstanding student in 1983. In 1992, he graduated with distinction from the National War College.

"I've worked with navies and the other militaries in the region," Stavridis notes. "I've had an Argentine ship assigned to my carrier strike group, my Spanish is improving. ... So rather than saying, 'Okay we've got to put an Army officer down there,' I think the folks making the decision looked at who had the qualifications that fit the best." Not that being a naval officer is without significance. Stavridis admits that he "will bring a different set of eyes to the problem in an area of responsibility that has a very large maritime component."

"He's outgoing, he loves dealing with people and is extremely personable," says one two-star admiral who has sailed with Stavridis and who asks not to be quoted by name so he can speak freely. "He is an incredibly positive leader, perhaps the sharpest commander I have ever seen on a ship."

*Loving It*

“I love the job I am in now,” Stavridis allowed in a recent interview. “I love Miami. I love everything about the culture in Latin America. It just intrigues me greatly. I was born in south Florida and it’s wonderful to come home.” And that is saying a lot. As commander of the *USS Barry* (DDG-52) he was deployed in Haiti, Bosnia and the Persian Gulf as part of *Operation Vigilant Warrior*, where the ship won several coveted awards. As the sea combat commander with the *Abraham Lincoln* Battle Group he received the Navy League’s John Paul Jones Award for inspirational leadership.

“Another post that I loved was being the admiral in charge of the carrier strike group, sailing through the Arabian Gulf, doing combat missions over Iraq, Afghanistan and the Horn of Africa in support of *Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom*,” he added. “It was a marvelous, marvelous tour.”

Those who have sailed with Stavridis say his shipboard command style is likely a key to the way he will run SOUTHCOM. They point to his openness to listening before making a decision, his lack of preconceived ideas, and his practicality. Stavridis’ emphasis on team playing is reflected by his constant emphasis on the group, rather than on individuals, himself included. The decisions that he makes, they say, conscientiously weighs risks, benefits and costs. “He’s close to his people,” says one.

One of those upon whom Stavridis left a lasting impression was Argentine Navy Captain Julio Graf, a recent CHDS visiting scholar. Graf sailed with Stavridis when the latter commanded Operation Solid Step at the head of the *Enterprise* Carrier Strike Group, a joint voyage around the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea in 2003 designed to promote greater interoperability between the Argentine and U.S. navies. Graf had met Stavridis nine years earlier when the American was the commander of a destroyer and he was the chief of operations for that vessel’s Argentine sister ship.

“When he was my commander, I had to make a difficult decision, and he let me know I could count on his counsel and support,” Graf recalled. “And although his choice proved to be the correct one, it carried with it certain risks. When I said goodbye to him we were on the high seas in the Atlantic, and he accompanied me on the deck of the *Enterprise*. He took the Surface Warfare Officer pin that he was wearing and gave it to me, saying, ‘From one sailor to another.’”

### ***The Back Story***

Stavridis’ father served as a colonel in the Marine Corps and the family lived in Athens from 1962 to 1965 while the older man, who remains today one of his heroes, was the US naval attaché there. His paternal grandparents were immigrants from Greece. Stavridis recalled with feeling the fact that “the whole immigrant experience is very real to me, part of my life experience.”

Stavridis’ grandfather immigrated to the United States in the 1920s, opening up a restaurant. I love to cook,” the SOUTHCOM commander says. “I have been around cooks and cooking my whole life and my mom is a wonderful hand in the kitchen.” Was

cooking the road not taken, he was asked? “It is,” he responded, laughing. “That is a very perceptive question. That is a pursuit that would be of interest to me in another, parallel, life.

Stavridis says that the passions of his youth are still those that move him now—and also include reading and playing sports, particularly racket sports. In high school he played varsity tennis and even junior varsity basketball, “counter-intuitively because I am not the tallest guy in the world, but I love basketball.” Then, like now, Stavridis was 5’6” — “on a good day.” He also played tennis and squash on the varsity teams at the Naval Academy.

“My other activities tended to revolve around writing,” he recalled. “I was the editor of my school newspaper in high school, at McClintock High School in Tempe, Arizona, for my last two years. At the Naval Academy I was the editor of the *Log* magazine, which is the publication of the Naval Academy. I was also involved in leadership opportunities—I was what was called a midshipman commander, and was one of the brigade leaders as a first classman, or a senior.”

Stavridis says he grew up wanting to be an officer in the Marine Corps, like his dad, and went off to the Naval Academy convinced that was his path. However, while at the Naval Academy he went off to sea on a ship. “I loved it,” he said. “I knew immediately then that what I wanted to do was to be a captain of a warship. So I followed my father’s steps into the service but veered off from the Marines into the Navy.” The Florida native received his commission from then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. “As he likes to say,” Stavridis noted, Rumsfeld “promoted me to ensign in the United States Navy in 1976 and thirty years later—in 2006—he promoted me to my fourth star as a full admiral.”

Stavridis, who has been married 25 years, met his wife, Laura Hall, when he was eight and she was three years old in Athens, where her father was the assistant naval attaché. “We played together as small children, our families stayed in touch over the years and we met again and fell in love when I was a young junior officer in the Navy in the early 1980s,” he recalled. “We got married in 1981.” Their oldest daughter, Christina, is an American studies major at the University of Virginia, and is thinking about law school or a career in journalism. Julia, a sophomore in the Miami public schools, is a passionate figure skater and a good student, her father proudly offers.