

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCERhttp://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/local/355570_commander19.html**Seattle native has a passion for soldiers' welfare***Last updated March 18, 2008 11:09 p.m. PT***By MIKE BARBER**

P-I REPORTER

Forty years ago, dissent over the Vietnam War exploded through the nation and in Seattle. Pete Chiarelli, then a senior at Queen Anne High School, was preparing to enter Seattle University and Army ROTC training in the fall.

The spring of 1968 saw the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, President Johnson's move not to seek re-election and the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy. Two years later, a bomb with the force of 20 sticks of dynamite exploded in an ROTC classroom at the University of Washington. That same year, the annual ROTC review day moved off campus to Fort Lawton, closed to protesters but open to civilians by invitation only.

"I told my father, watching all that, I said I wanted to graduate from high school and go into the Army," Chiarelli recalls.

But his father, a butcher who had passed on to his son the working-class ethic and sense of service, advised against it.

"He said, 'You are not going to do that. If you are going to go in, you want to go as an officer and graduate from college and go through ROTC.' "

Today the former Magnolia resident, who played on the golf team in high school and hung out like other kids at Al's Hamburgers, is Lt. Gen. Peter W. Chiarelli (pronounced ka-relli). Soon the butcher's kid from Magnolia might be running the American war effort in Iraq.

For the last year he has been deeply immersed in the wars of this time, in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as national security concerns worldwide, as the senior military adviser to Defense Secretary Robert Gates.

Chiarelli, 57, known for a magnetic personality and thoughtful leadership, took the post more than a year ago after serving two tours in Iraq. He arrived with a reputation for passionate devotion to his troops and their families and for advocating the change in strategies now practiced by Gen. David Petraeus.

Recently, Chiarelli, a 36-year veteran, has been mentioned by some Defense observers as a possible successor to either Petraeus or Adm. William Fallon, the head of Central Command whose responsibility stretches from the Horn of Africa to Afghanistan. This month, Fallon announced an abrupt retirement, rumored to be prompted by disagreements with the Bush administration.

"It's nothing I can talk about. Right now I am totally dedicated to the secretary of Defense," Chiarelli said of the rumors about him. He was interviewed by telephone from his office, which is in the Pentagon next door to Gates' office

Chiarelli attributes such notions to inside-the-beltway speculation from Defense observers and reporters trying to guess which generals are available to take the job.



MUHANNAD
FALA'AH /

AFP/GETTY IMAGES
Peter Chiarelli grew up in Seattle and graduated from Seattle University and the University of Washington.

"I will go someplace, but I don't know where that will be yet," he says. "If asked to go back to Iraq, I will go back.

"Don't make this sound like I'm pounding on my chest," he asks. "I've just done what my country asked me to do. I've served with some great people. There is incredible bravery in Iraq. In my position as corps commander and division commander there, please don't compare me with the kids (U.S. troops) walking the street every day, looking the devil in the eye."

Seattle sports a passion

With salt-and-pepper hair, kind eyes and a trim frame, Chiarelli strikes a confident command figure, yet speaks with an approachable, down-to-earth tone.

In his current job, Chiarelli advises Gates and often travels with him.

It's quite a feat for a man who never was east of Spokane until he joined the Army.

Chiarelli grew up on "the 3400 block of 31st Avenue West," he says with affection.

"It was a wonderful place to grow up. We did all the stuff Seattle kids did -- went to Seattle Rainiers games at Sicks' Stadium," Chiarelli says. Chiarelli's father, Peter F. Chiarelli, fought in World War II and received the Silver Star. His mom, Theresa, who now lives near Fort Lewis, was a homemaker. His only sibling, a sister, still lives here.

Chiarelli and his wife, Beth, who is from Portland, have three children who also live here.

Seattle sports are a passion, especially the Mariners. He retains season tickets to Huskies football games, a tradition he and his dad, who died in 1987, began in the 1950s.

"I just lived and died over the UW football team. I was 10 years old when they won their first Rose Bowl," Chiarelli says. "I will have good seats when I retire."

"Distinguished" graduate

Chiarelli graduated from Seattle U., where he met Beth, in 1972, and the couple have made 27 moves in the Army since then. Chiarelli was commissioned a second lieutenant and assigned to Fort Lewis. He missed going to Vietnam. He also considered leaving the Army after four years but stayed for a chance to teach at West Point and to earn a graduate degree at the UW through a program to which the Army and Navy sent promising officers.

He came away from the UW in 1980 with "a wonderful teacher and lifelong friend, Brewster Denny," whom he still phones at least once a month. "He is one of those people who just captured me. He is such a fountain of knowledge and always recommends books to read."

Denny, 83, and retired from the UW graduate school of public affairs he founded and served as first dean, says Chiarelli is one of the school's "four or five most distinguished graduates."

"When he first got to Iraq he sent me a picture of a little Iraqi girl sitting in a sewer, and that was his symbol of the problem out there, that we had to take care of the people. A lot of good stuff started on his watch," Denny says.

Before the war, Chiarelli served two tours in NATO under Supreme Allied Commander Gen. Wesley Clark,

one as executive officer in Kosovo.

Chiarelli counts Clark -- who unsuccessfully sought the Democratic presidential nomination in 2006 -- as well as retired Gen. Eric Shinseki, the former Army chief of staff, as mentors.

A proponent of the Army transformation to 21st-century warfare, Shinseki was a lone voice in 2002 in forecasting the cost of warring on Iraq. His testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee that securing postwar Iraq would take "hundreds of thousands" of troops to forestall an insurgency and restore public services drew public rebukes from then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and Rumsfeld's deputy secretary, Paul Wolfowitz.

"To me Iraq is what it is today. I don't like going into the histrionics of how we got there," Chiarelli says. "I'm not saying it is not a valid question, but historians can handle that."

Leadership tested early

Since 2001, Chiarelli's career has been marked by extraordinary timing as he took over key commands just as crises exploded, testing early not only his leadership but also his emotions.

As a new brigadier general, Chiarelli arrived for his first assignment at the Pentagon a few weeks before 9/11 to take a hot-seat job directing Army operations.

His new commander advised him that the worst thing that could happen would be a major national crisis within the next six months.

Chiarelli was still learning his way around the building when the Pentagon was attacked. He was in the basement operations center, a big room full of monitors and computers, only "one wedge" of the five-sided building away from the impact area.

Suddenly, in the ensuing chaos and heroics, the Army operations he was prepared to direct around the globe were at home. For the next three years, Chiarelli says, he was so busy he had only a few days off.

In March 2004, Chiarelli was a major general taking the 1st Cavalry Division from Fort Hood to Baghdad.

He had been in Baghdad for 10 days, with the division still getting to full strength, when an early notion that coalition troops would be peacekeepers was shattered in a hellacious 48-hour firefight in Sadr City. In the first few hours, eight of Chiarelli's troops were dead -- including Casey Sheehan, the son of antiwar activist Cindy Sheehan -- and 70 more wounded.

ABC senior White House correspondent Martha Raddatz, embedded with the unit in 2004, captured it in her 2007 book, "The Long Road Home."

Raddatz saw Chiarelli as a good leader with a heart who emotionally felt the cost of war. After the battle, Chiarelli called his retired mentor, Shinseki, but got Shinseki's message machine. Too raw to talk to his wife but needing to talk, he said, "Sir, I've lost eight kids," and wept.

Chiarelli today recalls that the division lost 169 soldiers that year. He committed himself to sending handwritten notes to the parents or wives of each one.

"Over a couple hundred more lost arms and legs. It's tough. I will never forget." It's a practice he kept up when he later assumed a larger command, writing more than 600 letters.

"When you haven't done it (combat) before, you make a stupid promise that you will bring everybody home. I said, 'I will bring them all home.' Well, we lost 169."

Chiarelli had only eight months at home with his family before he was again called to Iraq, this time to command Multi-National Corps-Iraq, the No. 2 ground commander. He missed his youngest son's high school graduation and left his wife "with an empty nest and my dog."

He was there scarcely three weeks when allegations of the killings of Iraqi civilians several months earlier by U.S. Marines in Haditha surfaced. He launched the investigation.

Later, he stood before a stunned 4,000-member Stryker Brigade from Alaska to explain why, on the eve of their expected departure home, they had to remain in Iraq.

Frankly, he told them, it was "a kick in the stomach" and that they, as a Stryker Brigade, were the most capable force in the Army for providing security as well as nation-building and humanitarian aid.

Beware the fence-sitters

An experienced teacher and writer, Chiarelli co-authored two papers in recent years that are considered influential in helping to change Iraq strategy from its beginnings under Rumsfeld to the counterinsurgency focus favored by Gates and carried out by Petraeus.

One paper emphasizes the need to balance providing security in Iraq with winning the peace by supplying basic needs, including clean water, electricity, plumbing and sanitation. Another discusses the dangers of military and civilian leaders being too optimistic about "essentially unpredictable" military operations.

"When I was in Baghdad I realized this thing was more than what we called 'kinetic,'" Chiarelli says of the first paper. "You couldn't kill all the bad guys. There are three kinds of people, those who fight you, those sitting on the fence and those supporting you."

The goal, he said, is to "prevent those sitting on the fence from joining those against you."

He doesn't think the story of incredible nation-building efforts has gotten out, partly because the military hasn't adequately told it, and partly because reporters have been too confined by terrorists to Baghdad to see it.

Victory in this war, he says, won't look like victory in other wars.

"If we had a USS Missouri, we wouldn't put it in the Gulf and have a big surrender signed," Chiarelli says. "That's not going to happen. We probably won't even have a peace treaty." It may be, he says, that "we will get into a state (of stability) where we can live with it."

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