

## Transcript TrustTalk Interview Admiral Rob Bauer

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### **Voice-over:**

Our today's guest is Admiral Rob Bauer, formerly Chief of Defence, the highest-ranking military officer in the Armed Forces of the Netherlands. He was elected as Chair of the Military Committee of NATO in Brussels where he started in June 2021. As the Military Adviser to the Secretary General and the North Atlantic Council, Admiral Bauer is NATO's most senior military officer. In his first podcast interview he talks about his career in the Royal Netherlands Navy, the crucial role of trust in the military training and operations and the international retreat from Afghanistan. He speaks of military personnel as highly educated and trained professionals, who do not conform to popular stereotyping, about ethical choices in combat and the difference between trust and performance. Your host today, Severin de Wit

**Interviewer:** If there is one profession where trust is quintessential, it is the armed forces. Trust is the bedrock of the military profession, so it is for that reason that I ask you to be interviewed for the TrustTalk podcast. Thank you for being our guest today.

**Rob Bauer:** Thank you. And looking forward to this conversation. It's actually my first podcast that I'm in. You have a first

**Interviewer:** Even better, thank you. I assume that you have come across trust issues in your career. What is your main takeaway from these experiences?

**Rob Bauer:** Well, first and foremost, I think having trust in people and being trustworthy yourself is basically two sides of the same coin. And trust is not something you can fake. I mean, you have to be authentic because otherwise people will not believe you. People will immediately know when someone is not honest when it comes to trust. So that is crucial. And trust is a two-way street. So I mean, you do not only have to trust your subordinates, but your subordinates have to trust you as well to make it actually work.

**Interviewer:** We come to that a little later in the podcast. You were at the Royal Netherlands Navy. Is trust an important element during military training exercises and operation?

**Rob Bauer:** Yes. The interesting thing in the Naval Academy, which is the place where we have conduct officer training in Den Helder, in the north of Noord Holland, there's a mantra which is basically above the door when you enter the Naval Academy and it is in English: "Knowledge is power, but character is more". And in Dutch: "kennis is macht, karakter is meer". And so trust is related to character, very much. And during the years at the Naval Academy, that was basically ingrained in all of us. And the reason why trust is so important is because in battle in a war, if you don't do what is agreed or if you don't do what the procedures are, it is actually the difference between life and death. And so you have to trust your mate who is next to you, who is looking after you as you are looking after him. And that is based on mutual trust and leaving no one behind in the battlefield, even when they are wounded or killed is part of the same trust.

**Interviewer:** In military vocabulary, a term that often appears is "mission command". As a start for our listeners, what is mission command?

**Rob Bauer:** Mission command is that you do not say what people have to do, but you have to explain to people what they have to achieve. So the purpose and the goal is basically what you talk about and the way people reach that goal is actually less important. But you have to give guidance and direction and guidance within which they can move to achieve that goal. And this is very important and it comes basically from the old days. You have to imagine that when a ship left the Netherlands in the 17th century to conquer, for example, a nation somewhere in the world, the captain of the ship opened his orders at sea and then read, "go to - what is now South America, go to Brazil - and conquer this particular city. Then he went to that particular place. The voyage itself was difficult and people got sick etcetera. So when he then arrived at the place, he then saw no Brits, but Portuguese. Am I still to conquer the place? Well, the order was to conquer the place. That was the goal, whoever is there. So then the captain of the ship did what he was ordered, came back to the Netherlands and then was decapitated because we actually had a treaty with the Portuguese that didn't allow for that to happen. So you can have a problem with mission command. But there was, of course, no telephone at the time, to the

mobile phone to make a phone call. Hey, the situation has changed. So mission command was there for a reason because you could not be so specific.

**Interviewer:** I understand that the philosophy of mission command is guided by six interdependent principles among which building cohesive teams through mutual trust. How did you achieve that trust while you were a commander of the Royal Netherlands Navy frigate "De Ruyter".

**Rob Bauer:** Yeah, it was interesting. I became a commanding officer of De Ruyter in 2005 and I was the first commander of not the commanding officer, but the first commander, it's a rank of an air defense and command frigate where the previous ones were all captains, one rank higher. And as a result, the department heads were then also later on lowered in rank. But when I arrived, there were a number of commanders as well that were even senior than I was, who were a department head and then were later changed. So after, let's say, two months, three months, we had a relatively young team with that brand new ship. It was the second of the class and or the third of the class, of four ships, and we had to undergo a very intense workup program to basically accredit us fit for operations. And that took about twenty-five weeks. And at the end of that period, you went to what I call the School of Frigates in the south of the UK, in Plymouth, where you conduct a five-week program. And at the end of that program, you get a final mark, which is either unsatisfactory, just satisfactory, satisfactory, very satisfactory or the highest mark is good.

**Interviewer:** Not "excellent"

**Rob Bauer:** No. And so what we did is with every training event, you get such a mark. And then in the end, the overall mark. But after every training day, we came together as a crew and we discussed the results. And I never said, I want you to reach a very satisfactory or good. But I always said, I think we can do better because I'm convinced that we haven't reached the highest level as a team. And although we lack experience, we are younger, therefore have more energy and we need to work very hard to do well. So in the end, that worked. And such a discussion with your team is actually based on trust because I expect something from them, but they expect support from me when things are difficult. So it is a two-way street. And if you then do that and you allow what I did, a lot of space, decision space, for the people below me, then

with the proper guidance and direction within which they have to manoeuvre, can manoeuvre, then basically you ask them to be themselves and to be as, how do you say, creative and as working hard to reach the result, not necessarily my way, but their way. And actually, that worked. So but not all people are actually comfortable with such a freedom because there are people that actually say to you, just tell me which task I have to perform, and then I do it, instead of talking about a goal which you want to reach together. So part of the program was also to basically train, educate people to change their way of working if they were not comfortable with that because in the end, I honestly believe that if you allow that freedom, then people with that type of freedom will achieve much better results than when you basically say, do this and report when the task is done.

**Rob Bauer:** I think it is, that was not something that I knew from the start. So basically, I learned that lesson years earlier in the period 1994-1996 on another frigate when I was department head. And at one stage the senior chief and three subordinate chiefs, sergeant-majors, I invited, and it was the event happened, the meeting happened in the cabin on board of the ship of the senior chief. And I set them down and I talked about, you know, this is I'm new here, I was 32 years old. I knew and I want to achieve this and we're going to do this. We're let's say if you're at a crossroads, so we go left, I said, basically, instead of right. So I said, we go left. And within seconds, I saw that the sergeant-majors actually didn't want to come left with me. So I finished my, it was basically a statement, I finished my statement. They left the cabin and I was irritated because I knew that it was going to be a problem.

**Interviewer:** They didn't tell that

**Rob Bauer:** They didn't say, it was their facial expression that basically showed that they didn't want to cooperate with me on my direction. And then the senior chief brought me coffee and set down again, and then he asked this deadly question: so sir, how do you think that went? And so I grumbled, well, yeah, they're not willing to go along with what I want. And then he said, he looked at me, and said, sir, there's basically two ways in situations like there's two possibilities in situations like this. The first possibility is that you enforce basically what you want, but then you have to expect that you will drag three times 90 kilo through the mud. That will cost you a lot of energy and you will achieve maybe maximum 50 percent of what you wanted to achieve. Or, and that's the second option, he said, you listen to what they say and

what they might change to your direction, which then leads to maybe, let's say, 80 percent of your original goal. But the difference then is that they will make it work for the full 100% because they

**Interviewer:** are fully behind it.

**Rob Bauer:** are fully behind it. And so then you will achieve 80 percent. And then he stood up and whilst leaving his own cabin, he said to me, sir, but of course, the choice is yours. And I knew immediately, of course, what the right decision was, but I was actually too proud and too stubborn to.

**Interviewer:** recognize

**Rob Bauer:** to, well, not recognize it, but basically to admit at that time. But the next day I did. And this senior chief, Arie Brinkman. He was 40 years old at the time. He's still alive, is, I invited him for my change of command ceremony as when I became Chief of Defense and we now and then still have a telephone conversation, and he is, he's never too overenthusiastic towards me. He's always like two feet on the ground, and he still tells me what he thinks. But it is very important because basically this was about being able to listen, being able to make sure that you not only show you trust them, but you allow them to trust you as well.

**Interviewer:** Further in the podcast, I have a question on that same situation with Hill 101. We'll come to that. I would like first to talk with you about your new position at NATO. Trust among NATO members has been challenged recently with the U.S. initiated retreat from Afghanistan. NATO is still very dependent upon the US, but can we still trust the U.S. as a reliable and predictable partner?

**Rob Bauer:** Yes, we can. Yes we can. And of course, you've heard all the discussions on leaving Afghanistan and the way we left Afghanistan, both internationally and in the different capitals of all the nations, but I would say despite those discussions that on the military level this has not led to any problems of distrust. I think that the evacuation operation where 120,000 people were evacuated from Afghanistan, both international people and Afghans was a successful operation and trust played a very important role there as well, because this is about

intelligence sharing, sharing aircraft, sharing force protection during that operation. So no, I don't think that there's a problem with trusting. There is, of course, the fact that there's difference of opinions in the alliance and that is not only now over Afghanistan, but that has happened over the last 72 years several times. So that is actually not strange in any relationship, I would say, there is differences of opinion and sometimes struggle, tensions. But the fact that we are now successful in making sure that every time again and again we reinvent ourselves and that this successful alliance is not only there for 72 years, but has grown from what is it, 9 in 1949 to 30 now, and the growing part is actually a proof that more and more nations wanted to become part of this club, despite the fact that it is difficult sometimes to reach an agreement. And the fact that there are now a number of nations still asking to become a member is an even further proof of that. So I would say the reason that a nation, even within the alliance is angry with another nation in the alliance is understandable, and that happens regularly. But nations are pragmatic very often, for good reasons, because it is never about one thing. So they have to balance all their interests. And the fact that we have shared values and shared interests is, in the end, much more important than the differences that are there and the and the fact that we sometimes argue with one another

**Interviewer:** On the website of NATO. I read that your personal mantra is "Expect the unexpected", and this question is a little lengthy and I apologize for that. It reminds me of a popular Kung-Fu TV series in the 1970s, at least when I was younger, it was very popular, I think you are a lot younger than I am, so I'm not sure you are familiar with Kung-Fu.

**Rob Bauer:** I don't know how old you are, but

**Interviewer:** 69

**Rob Bauer:** and I'm 58, so almost 59.

**Interviewer:** So when in the series, when two young warriors, Kwai Chang and Ho Fong, tell Master Kan that they have been robbed by a man, quote, "with a kind face and a gentle manner". Master Kan asks what they learned from the encounter and then Hong Fo, one of the two guys, responds: "never trust a stranger". Master Kan sends him away. He then asks Kwai Chang the same question, who then says: "expect the unexpected". After which Master Kan

replies: "deal with evil through strength, but affirm the good in men through trust. In this way we are prepared for evil, but we encourage good". Does that in any way come close to your thinking about "expecting the unexpected"?

**Rob Bauer:** Yes, it does. But there's another meaning to me as well, because if you look at Sun Tzu's "The Art of War", it's a military theorist, Mr. Sun Tzu, who said "speed is the essence of war and take advantage of the enemy's unpreparedness, travel by unexpected routes and strike him where he has taken no precautions". So the thing in military operations is that we have to think in terms of risks. By definition, you will never know enough of the enemy to be sure of success in battle. So if after one day of war, 30 percent of the people is dead, 40 percent of the material is broken and you're almost out of ammunition. Then you can either surrender or if you don't want to do that, you cannot stop the war because of the fact that it becomes too risky. So the second day of the war will come and there trust comes into play because your whole brigade, battalion, crew of the ship, squadron will know that as well, that the risks are going up. And why are they still following you? First of all, for the higher goal, which is to defend the nation or to and that's important. That's very important. But in the end, it is very often much smaller because it is they look at their commanding officer who they hopefully trust, and he will then say, follow me and they will go into the next day of the war. This whole concept of thinking in terms of risk is difficult in a society, which is almost a zero-risk society by now, in our present society, where we actually do not accept any risk anymore. And the pandemic, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that there are still things that you cannot prepare for, that there are still things that basically are suddenly there, like droughts, like wildfires, like terrible storms, things that are, you know, are uncontrollable. And still, you then have to deal with them. And the military, the role of the military in the COVID-19 pandemic was very often to restart organizations again, in hospitals, in care homes, in food banks. Because basically, with all the regulations and rules that are there in our society and control mechanisms and what have you, there's a very little path on which they can walk and do the work. And suddenly there were basically not on that path, but they were next to it and they said, we can't do our work anymore. And then we came in and said, so where do you want to go? You're there. Ok, then go there. Yeah, but that's not on the path, yeah, forget about the path. It's a crisis. Do it, because that's what we do in a war. There is no rules. There is no plan. There is chaos. And in chaos we have to function. And that's basically what we did. We took them by the hand and we started walking. And then after a while, they thought, hey, it's actually possible,

there's no one arresting us, there's no one, we don't have a fine because we're not on this little path. And we and then we said, good luck and we went to the next hospital or the next care home or the next. So that skill is, something we know and we have to know because of the nature of war.

**Interviewer:** U.S. military chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark A. Milley said in an interview in 2017 "we must trust our subordinates. You give them the task. You give them the purpose, as you just mentioned, and then you trust them to execute and achieve your intent, your desired outcome and your purpose". You just mentioned that. But the example he gave I love that in relation to what we discussed earlier about military command. He said "an officer is ordered to cease hill 101 as part of a larger battle plan. And the purpose is to destroy the enemy, and the young officer sees Hill 101 and the enemy is over on Hill 102. So what does he do? Does he do what General Milley told him to do, cease Hill 101? Or does he achieve the purpose destroy the enemy on Hill 102? The answer, Milley said in the interview, is that the officer disobeyed the order to seize the first hill because following that order would not achieve his commander's purpose. Instead, he takes to the other Hill and he shouldn't have to call back and say, hey, boss, can I go over to 102? Trust your subordinates, you just mentioned it. That's key, isn't it?

**Rob Bauer:** Yeah, it is key. But again, it's a two-way street. So the subordinate that decides not to take Hill 101, but takes Hill 102 because that's where the soldiers are, that's where the enemy is, which he has to take out. He also trusts his commander because he trusts the commander not to be angry with him, to basically not take Hill 101, but take Hill 102

**Interviewer:** and disobey him

**Rob Bauer:** Because he then achieves the higher goal. The higher goal is to destroy the enemy, not to take a hill, whether it's name 101 or 102. The destroying of the enemy is not the hill is about the soldiers that are on one of the two hills. So that's why the subordinate takes hill 102, in this example.

**Interviewer:** It's a little surprising for most laymen, like myself, where you have the idea that in the military command structure use I as an officer tell you, soldiers what to do, and you're not supposed to question that or bring in your own opinion about what to do.

**Rob Bauer:** But if you talk about misinformation, I think we have a lot to do because in terms of the stereotyping that is there with regard to the military, is that we all have a moustache that we all shout and scream to each other and that people do not think in the military. And we have highly educated, highly trained people with highly high technology equipment with extremely difficult tasks which encompass space, the sea, all the land, cyber, so and the air, which is below level space. So our organization has is basically sort of a mini society. It encompasses education and training centres. It encompasses maintenance facilities. It encompasses offices where there's higher staffs, lower staffs. It encompasses the execution bit itself. So it is a very complex organization which requires thinking people, not only shouting people. So I think there's a lack of knowledge, which partly has to do with the fact that we stopped activating the conscription. I mean, we still have conscription because you get a letter, my children have gotten the letter. Even my daughter, now it's nowadays it's all men and women, but we do, not call them in. And the advantage of the conscription was that everybody in a way knew the Armed Forces through conscription. And now, since we are a professional Armed Forces, the advantage is it was necessary because there's too much education and training necessary to become effective and therefore the time for conscription was not enough. But the disadvantage is that there is a certain disconnect with society. So without knowing enough of the Armed Forces, people then turn to stereotyping.

**Interviewer:** One often hears that performance is about competence and trust is about character. The US Navy Seals have concluded that trust is more important than performance. They believe that a medium performer with high trust is much better for a team than a high performer with medium trust. When they go to a mission, trust is absolutely essential. Would you agree with that?

**Rob Bauer:** Yeah, it comes back to my earlier statement in the Naval Academy, where it is about knowledge is power, but character is more. Yes, I do agree. In the end, especially when it comes to it, is always a combination. It's not. It's not black and white. I don't think the Seals mean it that way. But when it comes to a lot of one of the most difficult situations in the Armed

Forces is the ethical choices that a commander or a soldier has to make. And to give you an example of that. Mart de Kruif, he retired as the Army Commander in the Netherlands, a couple of years ago, he was commanding officer of the Regional Command South in Afghanistan in the period 2008, 2009, 2010, and he commanded 40,000 troops and then one on one day there was a Canadian forces that were at that were attacked by the Taliban, and they were in a very dire situation. So they asked for air support, which is the fighter aircraft bombing basically, the positions of the Taliban. So those aircrafts were sent by Mart de Krijf to that position. He had given that order and then whilst they were en-route to that position, he got information through intelligence that where the Taliban were in a house, there was also women and children.

**Rob Bauer:** And he then had to decide, am I going to bomb the house and therefore help my soldiers? But as a result, I might kill, not wantonly, but as a result of that, the children and women, or do I not bomb the house as a result of women, children and therefore basically not disobeying, but not helping or rescuing my soldiers. He decided not to bomb, to not execute the bombing? The next day, or two days later, the Canadian officer who was in command of that unit and lost a number of soldiers as a result of the generals' decision, stood there in front of his office and was extremely angry with him not executing the bombing. And then that is an ethical decision about what is more important. It's not black and white. Very often it is not black and white. It is a form of grey, which is and it's up to the commanding officer in the split second

**Interviewer:** and in difficult circumstances to decide

**Rob Bauer:** yeah, and it's not right or wrong. It is given the circumstances. What you did and the only thing you need to be able to do is to explain why you did it without necessarily judging whether it was right or wrong. So but I think yes, and the Seals, it is not only applying to the Seals, I think we have about a little over three million men and women in uniform in NATO, and they all have their own background and unique set of skills. And I think that is the foundation of our strength, because they all bring with their background the different qualities, but without their trust, and I explained earlier why trust is so important for a soldier because it is actually one of the essential skills or things you need in the battle on the battlefield, that the ability to

trust your mate next to you to do what he was ordered as you are doing that for him. And without trust, their work I think would be impossible.

**Interviewer:** Admiral, thank you very much for being available for the podcast. I thought it was a very interesting interview, your first podcast, thank you for TrustTalk to be the first one. I wish you good luck at NATO and a lot of wisdom and hopefully see you later.

**Rob Bauer:** Yes, absolutely. Thank you for coming over to Brussels.

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