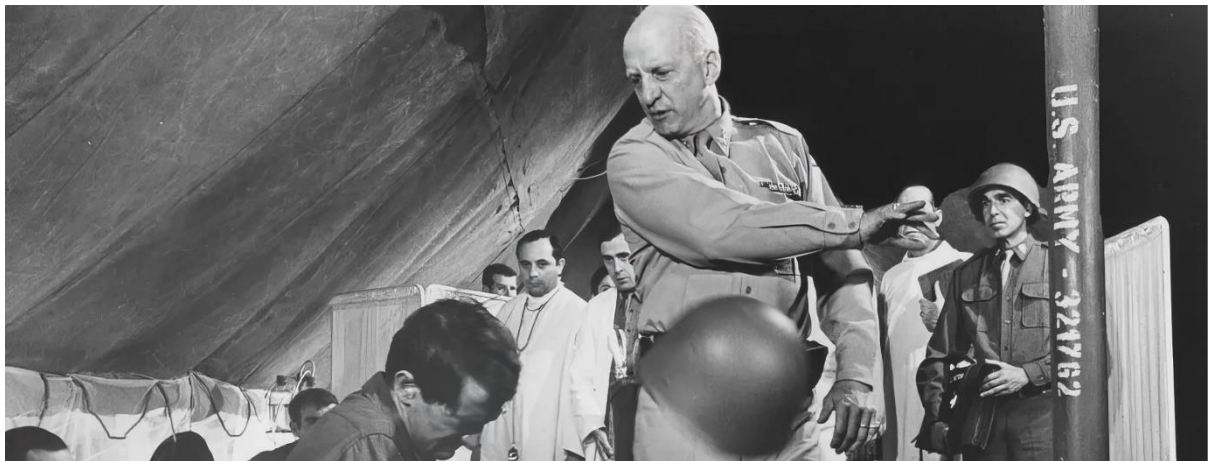


The Most Aggressive Senior Business Executive I Had Ever Encountered

Shôn Ellerton, June 25, 2024

Back in the glory days of 3G telco during the early 2000s, I remember working with an aggressive senior executive who everyone feared.



On a cool, slightly damp, but fresh spring morning in the posh English seaside town of Bournemouth, all the staff from T-Mobile headquarters waited anxiously in an auditorium for the big speech to be delivered by the senior executives. It was an all-out expense paid weekend getaway for all the staff and their partners at one of Bournemouth's luxury 4-star hotels.

Money seemed no object. All meals were catered for, and they were quite opulent I can assure you. The facilities and bedroom suites were excellent, and, of course, all the drinks were provided for. The headquarters being based in Hatfield, all travel to get to Bournemouth was fully paid as well.

The purpose of the grand occasion was to showcase to all the staff the advances made to expand the mobile network. It was also an opportunity for prominent keynote speakers to theorise on the potential of how the grand new world of 3G will take the world by storm. And, of course, there were various awards handed out to those who excelled beyond expectations in meeting their targets.

Various speakers did their bit. Marketing, finance, rollout strategy, and a few other motivational presentations. All the speakers sat in the front row area as a convenient place to be when each came up to the podium to have their say.

Except the last speech.

An oldish-looking wiry man with white hair ambled in from the back of the auditorium wearing a very ordinary looking brown sports jacket and casually toting a duffle bag behind his shoulders with his right hand. He looked remarkably like the famous actor Leslie Nielsen of *Naked Gun* fame except he was smaller and somewhat meaner looking. Despite his relatively shabby appearance in a Colombo sort of way, he exuded charisma. He didn't look like the sort of guy you'd want to mess with.

He walked down the centre aisle with dead confidence and certainty. The auditorium was very quiet, and all eyes were upon him as he sauntered to the stage. When he made it to the podium, he dropped his duffle bag to the floor and addressed the audience with these very words.

“We are at war with America!”

This arresting phrase captured the audience instantly, as most had started to fall asleep listening to mundane matters like EBITDA results and key performance indicators.

“We are at war with America!”. He said again.

During the next twenty minutes or so, he delivered a speech littered with paramilitary phrases on how we must compete with the most aggressive telecommunication providers across the globe making references to Anglo-American agreements on mobile telecommunications protocol and cross-platform technologies. There were some significant differences between the underlying technology adopted by North America and Europe, notably one using CDMA2000 and the other, UMTS. However, we won't delve into those details! However, the speech felt like one of those old Cold War speeches about which superpower is going to get to the Moon first. It was a great speech, but not entirely sure how relevant it was at the time, nor to this day.

Turned out that T-Mobile UK brought in an American heavy-weight telco guy by the name of Frank Mount to fill in the position as Chief Technology Officer. He was a bit of a mystery but, later, most of us had no doubt that he served as some high-ranking official in the military and once served in Vietnam. Apparently, he moved to England at some stage of his life taking command of some heady positions within the UK company, Cable & Wireless. Cable & Wireless were renowned for being a source of ultra-aggressive go-getters, many who took up

employment with T-Mobile and other mobile operators including Vodafone, MMO2, and Orange.

Just to give a little context on the timing of all this.

This was back in the early 2000s, a time of heavy speculation and enthusiasm on the release of 3G. Billions of dollars were spent willy-nilly by the big mobile operators for purchasing radio licences, which, at the time, had all the elements of FOMO, risk, and uncertainty. There wasn't even a 3G mobile phone available commercially. I remember our team piling into the office of one of the directors, a larger-than-life character by the name of Graham. We wanted to see one of the first prototypes of a 3G phone, which didn't look much different from any other Nokia phone. Perhaps a little larger. It didn't do anything because there was no 3G network available to test it on. And just to remember, smartphones didn't exist then, so we had no real idea what 3G could do except that it could potentially deliver real-time video-to-video conversations and provide the ability for someone to watch TV on their phones, when the technology becomes available. We later learnt that 3G never really catered very well for high-speed data connections and it was only during the advent of 4G, the problem was far better resolved.

Money was thrown everywhere. Engineers, technical specialists, and project managers working for one of the big four mobile operators in the UK would likely have access to very nice company cars, five-figure bonuses, and a salary far higher than other industries related to technology and engineering. As for the upper echelons at director level, they were simply killing it.

It was, in essence, the good times.

However, there was a darker element. Many of those having worked in the mobile telecommunications industry during this time, will have, no doubt, remember how aggressive the industry was. The ultra-competitive stance taken by the big four operators seemed openly hostile to those who couldn't keep up with the aggressive pace of the business. Telcos played very much to the heart of the work hard play hard regime. This was, and still is, an industry run like a bit like the military. Telcos had a reputation for attracting the ex-army types, particularly those running as project managers across the various departments. And believe me, some of these characters had a temperament not too unlike that of the famous World War 2 general, George S. Patton, renowned for the occasional slapping or two for those who didn't come up to speed.

In comes Frank Mount, the new CTO.

It did not take very long for Frank to make a name for himself within the organisation. Those who ran into Frank the wrong way came out visibly shaken. In true Patton style, it was alleged that he pulled one of our employees up against the wall by gripping his collar and threatening him to get something done in time. Whether anyone challenged him was debateable considering that doing so would have been quite risky in terms of career advancement in the incestuous telco industry. Frank knew a lot of people.

Despite his anachronistic approach by physically abusing people to get jobs done, he survived his post, much like General Patton did I suppose. Maybe he thought he was descended from the line of Patton or had some heightened motive that adopting the forceful approach returned results quicker than using the softly 'beat around the bush' approach. The results may not have been better, but they were certainly quicker, but at what cost? For some who got on the wrong side of him, quite considerable. Most of the 'casualties' ended up looking for other opportunities as a far away as possible from Frank.

If I had to equate his personality in terms of movie characters, I'd have to say it be a cross between Dick Jones, the very nasty Vice President in [Robocop](#) and of that crazy sergeant major in [Full Metal Jacket](#), interestingly both films of 1987 vintage.

I had my debut with Frank as a technical project manager and designer working to establish rolling out microcellular base stations hidden within street furniture. I was very ambitious and wanted to showcase my ideas to the management. I had three levels of management sitting between me and Frank, the next two up of which were dead set in taking the glory to themselves and to ensure that I was kept in my place. The guy sitting just below Frank, by the name of Graham, was generally supportive but also generally unavailable.

Having had enough of treading around my immediate managers looking for support as if I were in a snake pit, I removed any fear out of mind and made straight for the executive floor with my plans in hand. I've never been there before.

The lift doors opened, and a young woman approached me.

Uh oh!

Was I going to be shown the exit door?

Actually, no. She kindly asked who I wanted to see. I replied accordingly. She said Frank wasn't in, but I'd be welcome to leave my ideas on his desk, and she pointed out his room which was located across this quite enormous board room with one of those special tables which widen out towards the middle to maximise viewing capacity.

As with the other executives, Frank had his own room, which was meticulous and tidy. All perpendiculars and squares. Nothing aloof. I left some material on his desk ensuring that the sides of the paper were also in perfect alignment with the edges of his desk.

I made my way out.

The young woman then said to me before leaving that she will prod Frank to have a look and told me to come back tomorrow afternoon, knowing that he'd be around.

Throughout the rest of the day, I was reviewing in my mind if I did the right thing. Would Frank view me as a brave soul or some little runt jumping rank? I had absolutely no idea. I never spoke to him before, and it would be unlikely that he would know of me being so far down the pecking order.

In any case, it was time to face the music, so to speak.

I ambled back to his office as instructed the next day, and sure enough, Frank was there sitting in his chair, which looked a little too large for him. I knocked on the door and he called my name and motioned me in. Obviously, he was already prepped for my impromptu visit.

In his hands was my presentation which he might have read or might not. I would never know. He didn't dilly and dally about and rather than ask me to take a chair and have a talk or ask me some questions, he plainly said that he had a look at it and will give it to the right people. He then simply said, 'Thanks, Shôn', and I walked back to the land of mere mortals.

Well, that was it. That material would probably go straight back to the very same people I tried to take an interest in it in the first place.

But wait.

There seemed to be some renewed interest on some of my initiatives not many days later. I was asked if I could do some roadshows across T-Mobile's switch

site locations across the nation. For those not in the 'know', a switch office in telco parlance is the next level down from the headquarters. Switch sites house the equipment which controls a whole region of base station towers but not only that, has office space for project managers and technicians which are local to the area.

I took up the initiative and performed my circus act which spurred quite a bit of interest across the technical community within these switch sites.

And there was more.

Not long after, I was nominated a winner of an excellence award and invited to a dinner with Frank along with two other awardees and a few of Frank's closest advisors. He sat at the end of the table in awkward silence while the rest of us conversed about this and that. Somebody during the conversation slipped in the topic of current affairs and weaponry, to which, our once quiet Frank jumped mid-flow into the conversation and talked about the military, guns, and the Vietnam War. As soon as the conversation reverted to more lightweight discussions, Frank clammed up and resumed being a statue again. It was very strange, but also illustrated how he socialised with others.

Here was a leader, albeit, with little in the way of soft skills, if he had any to show at all. However, oddly, he was not hated or disrespected or deemed one of these narcissistic glory-takers. I'd say this for Frank. He seldom made big speeches but when he did, I never felt that he alone would make that difference or make grand declarations of how he would affect major changes across the organisation. He did, grant you, make extraordinary efforts to get things done in a timely manner and had very high expectations from those working for him to do the same. Failure was not really in option according to Frank.

Through the years, I've been taught that the importance of soft skills is required to make a leader. I agree wholeheartedly, however, Frank seemed to be one of those old-school remnants of the past flouting all the modern rules of what qualities today's leaders should have.

Frank certainly left an impression to those who have met and dealt with him. I have worked with many senior leaders during my career, but many of them, should I be asked to recall their names or even their faces, I would struggle to do so. But not characters like Frank. No doubt, the most single aggressive and feared senior leader I've encountered in my career.

Whatever happened of him?

Since then, Frank moved on to other telco ventures, notably taking up the position as one of New Zealand Telecom's top executives who made news in 2010 when he resigned after [the XT mobile network rollout fiasco](#).

For me, he always seemed to be a bit of an enigma and I wish I knew a little more about how such an operator ticks. Perhaps this piece may get me in touch with those who worked with him during more recent years.