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Sakhalin Pep Talk From 'Old Blood and Guts'

- By [Max Delany](#)
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WikimediaU.S. General George Patton

From the beaches of Normandy to the wilds of Sakhalin, sometimes we all need a little pep talk.

But a leaked e-mail from a top Sakhalin Energy executive, exhorting his pipeline engineers in the style of U.S. General George Patton, has prompted one international newspaper to ask its readers, "Is this the worst motivational memo ever?"

In the memo, deputy CEO David Greer borrows heavily from Patton, lifting whole passages of a bloodcurdling speech delivered by the gung-ho World War II general to his troops on the eve of D-Day, in 1944.

"Lead me, Follow me or Get out of my way," Greer writes to his staff in a phrase lifted straight from Patton's speech.

"Success," the e-mail then says, "is how we bounce when we are on the bottom."

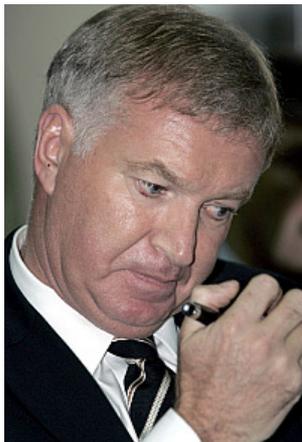
Greer's memo, which was leaked to an anti-Shell web site, [Royaldutchshellplc.com](#), appears to show the pressure that he and his fellow managers have been under, as it talks of "the risk of becoming a team that doesn't want to fight and lacks confidence in its own ability."

Last December, Shell and its Japanese partners ceded majority control of the \$20 billion Sakhalin-2 project to Gazprom after a sustained 1 1/2- year campaign of state pressure over purported environmental violations.

Apart from that pressure, workers on the remote project also face the potentially demoralizing combination of harsh weather conditions, isolation and a lack of established infrastructure.

"When everyone of you were kids, I am sure that you all admired the champion marble player, the fastest runner, the big league football players," Greer writes, borrowing another line from Patton, who was known by the nickname "Old Blood and Guts."

"Personally, I, like most others, love winning. I despise cowards and play to win all of the time," Greer continued.



Ivan sekretarev / AP
Sakhalin Energy's David Greer

Mercifully perhaps, Greer left out some of the gorier parts of Patton's expletive-laden speech, in which he exhorted the U.S. 3rd Army to kill the enemy with the phrases: "twist his balls and kick the living shit out of him," "rip them up the belly" and "shoot them in the guts."

Patton achieved great successes after the D-Day invasion of France by copying the Germans' blitzkrieg tactics. His charge toward Berlin came to an abrupt halt, however, when his tanks ran out of gas.

In substituting "pipeliners and engineers" for Patton's "American he-men" heroes, however, Greer's memo reads more like a cross with a pep talk by David Brent, the haplessly self-deluding boss from the BBC's television comedy show "The Office."

Dated April 18, shortly after Gazprom formally took control of the project, the memo suggests that morale among staff may be ebbing.

After opening with a jaunty "Pipeliners All!" Greer quickly moves to confront any negative vibes among his staff.

"From the outset, I want to assure you that despite the mutterings on the day and the challenges ahead, I have total faith in you and our collective ability to complete the task ahead," he says.

"However, some of the comments and body language witnessed at the Bi-annual Challenge meeting do suggest that [the phase-2 development project] is running the risk of becoming a team that doesn't want to fight and lacks confidence in its own ability," the message says.

Telephone calls and e-mails to Greer for comment this week went unanswered.

A spokesman for Sakhalin Energy confirmed that the e-mail was genuine, but declined to comment on Greer's management style and said that bosses should be judged on their results.

"Some people may mock it, some may like it and some dislike it but you can't really judge a manager on one e-mail," Ivan Chernakhovskiy said. "Motivating in general is just good practice."

As yet, the company did not know who had leaked the e-mail, Chernakhovskiy said. "It is regrettable that certain individuals anonymously put this on a public web site," he said.

One senior Sakhalin-based employee who received Greer's e-mail refused to comment on staff reaction when contacted by telephone. Other employees either said they had not seen the e-mail or refused to comment.

Further calls to the company's headquarters in Sakhalin went unanswered.

The environmental official who led the charge against Shell's management of Sakhalin-2, Oleg Mitvol, said Greer's bombastic memo had made him laugh. It was very much in Sakhalin Energy's style and highlighted the cause of the project's troubles, Mitvol said.

"Everyone thought that the problems with the pipeline on Sakhalin were all because of me, but now from this text you can see that the problems have to do with Sakhalin Energy and some of their managers," Mitvol said by telephone Friday. "Do they think that they're starring in a film or something?"

Reactions posted on the Financial Times' Internet forum ranged from mocking to supportive, with one post chiding the newspaper for its "gleeful, school-playground-style humiliation."

But some comments praised Greer for his leadership qualities in a vein that even Patton might have been proud of.

"I, having worked for the company can attest to how much of a good leader he is," wrote one person who posted a comment under the name Mary Ann B.

"One of those larger-than-life characters. Boundless energy, charismatic, with a firm hand, brutally frank, highly committed and puts the people's welfare first. ... People loved him, people hated him. But even those who hated him could not deny he was the best man for the job," the comment said.

In Russia, where cake and certificates are more traditional motivational tools than bombastic e-mails, management consultants said Western-style techniques were becoming more common, even if Greer's memo had gone a little over the top.

"Of course there is a difference in culture if you talk about personal lives, but in business there are generally accepted managerial standards and techniques," said Allan Gamborg, a Moscow-based management consultant. "Maybe sometimes there is more of a need here for such things, but the buttons you want to push are the same."

Speaking at a recent seminar in Moscow to leading Russian businessmen, former General Electric CEO Jack Welch ridiculed the common Russian practice of handing out certificates in attempt to motivate staff.

"I hate certificates. I hate plaques. I hate those things," said Welch. "I like money. That is the best motivator, along with job content."

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