

PARTNERS *in* CONTRACTING

Jointly manned centers demand
proper training in cultural complexities

by CPT Michael Mignano

Contingency contracting officers (CCOs) are force multipliers worldwide, supporting Soldiers, Airmen, Sailors, and Marines in multifaceted operations ranging from counterinsurgency to disaster relief, by ensuring that critical resources and services flow uninterrupted. It is a complex responsibility.

In addition, many Army-operated contingency contracting offices are jointly manned and individually augmented. It is imperative that these augmenters quickly grasp not just the procedures, policies, laws, and regulations unique to their operating environments and the host nation, but also the Army's and Air Force's divergent assessment models, contracting jargon, operating instructions, and cultures. These distinctions present unique challenges and rewarding experiences for joint contracting center leaders, as well as their subordinates.

The Army currently assesses CCOs between their seventh and tenth years of service. New Army CCOs are required to complete additional advanced individual training and a one-year developmental assignment, and to

obtain Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act Level I certification in contracting before they conduct contingency contracting operations. This model is designed to ensure the well-roundedness and maturity of its leaders, but it is in stark contrast to the Air Force's approach to CCO development.

The Air Force accesses its CCOs immediately upon graduation from their basic airmen and officer basic courses, and then slowly immerses them in the contracting field. Before deployment, Air Force CCOs are required to complete advanced individual training, career development courses, and typically three years of varying job assignments. Because the Air Force accesses its CCOs so early, they are prepared to deploy as senior airmen and first lieutenants, in contrast to the Army's staff sergeants and senior captains.

WORKING TOGETHER

An Airman and Soldier work together during *Operation Joint Dawn*, a joint training exercise for contractors from Jan. 24 to Feb. 4, 2011. (Photo by Ed Worley, U.S. Army Contracting Command.)





RANK IS IMMATERIAL

Contracting authority and CCO warrant levels are not based upon rank; however, CCOs are warranted based on their education, experience, certification levels, and contracting knowledge. This system in which rank is immaterial often translates into an Air Force first lieutenant or staff sergeant having more contracting authority than his or her Army major supervisor, crisscrossing the lines between command authority and contracting authority.

Furthermore, while the *Federal Acquisition Regulation* offers a common contracting framework between services, the Army and Air Force each use their own jargon and operating procedures. When poorly managed, these factors create turbulence for Joint Contracting Command (JCC) leaders and their subordinates.

To combat these inherent challenges, COL William Sanders, 410th Contracting Support Brigade Commander, and Air Force Col Thomas Robinson, Air Education and Training Command Contracting Division Chief, took advantage of the new Fort Sam Houston, TX, joint basing initiative, in which dozens of Army and Air Force support functions in the San Antonio area are combining, by partnering their organizations in a garrison environment.

As a result of a formal memorandum of agreement signed in November, the 802nd and the 902nd Contracting Squadrons incorporated a four-person team from the 916th Contingency Contracting Battalion into their training programs.

BROADER UNDERSTANDING

“Being embedded with the Air Force has broadened my understanding of their internal structure and CCO development, and will be invaluable when we work together in a contingency environment,”



JOINT ENDEAVOR

Lt Col Eric Obergfell (foreground) gives guidance during an 802nd Contracting Squadron command and staff meeting. (Photo by TSgt Nicole Cleland, 802nd Contracting Squadron.)

said SSG Wesley D. Hilderbrand, 682nd Contingency Contracting Team, 916th Contingency Contracting Battalion.

“The senior noncommissioned officers and field-grade officers the Army is transitioning into contracting bring broad operational depth, which is valuable in training our junior officers and airmen, while we add value to [the Army CCOs] through our rigorous contracting training programs,” said Air Force Lt Col Eric Obergfell, Commander, 802nd Contracting Squadron.

Not only have the teams from the 916th integrated into Air Force contracting operations, but they also participate in a wide variety of activities, including physical fitness programs, tactical field exercises, and social events. By fostering mutual trust and respect, this far-reaching relationship allows the CCOs from both services to share contracting knowledge and to better understand one another’s culture. As this partnership matures, the 916th hopes to share opportunities with the 902nd and 802nd to participate in upcoming operational contracting missions in support of U.S.

Army South’s humanitarian assistance and other requirements.

Since the program’s inception, three of the 916th’s CCOs have completed their development training with the Air Force; two have been slated for operational deployments where they can bring their experience and training to bear.

The joint initiative has shown that training CCOs between services can be done successfully and simultaneously benefit both organizations. As CCOs participate in similar training programs, they will gain the experience and tools to better serve as JCC leaders and subordinates.

CPT MICHAEL MIGNANO is a Contract Management Officer for the 682nd Contingency Contracting Team, 916th Contingency Contracting Battalion, 410th Contracting Support Brigade, Fort Sam Houston. He holds a B.S. in accounting from the University of Central Florida and an M.A. in management and leadership from Webster University. Mignano is Level II certified in contracting.