

## Interview With LTG Ross Thompson

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**O**n Nov. 28, 2006, LTG Ross Thompson, Military Deputy (MILDEP) to the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Acquisition, Logistics and Technology (ASAALT) met with *Army AL&T* Magazine staff to answer questions about the future of the Army Acquisition, Logistics and Technology (AL&T) Workforce. During his visit to the U.S. Army Acquisition Support Center (USAASC) Headquarters, Thompson stressed the importance of each AL&T Workforce member taking individual responsibility for his or her own career management. He said that you can have all the opportunities in the world as far as education, training and developmental assignments, but it's your responsibility to ensure that the information about you in various databases is up-to-date. He added that individuals must be bold about ensuring that their data is correct and stays correct.

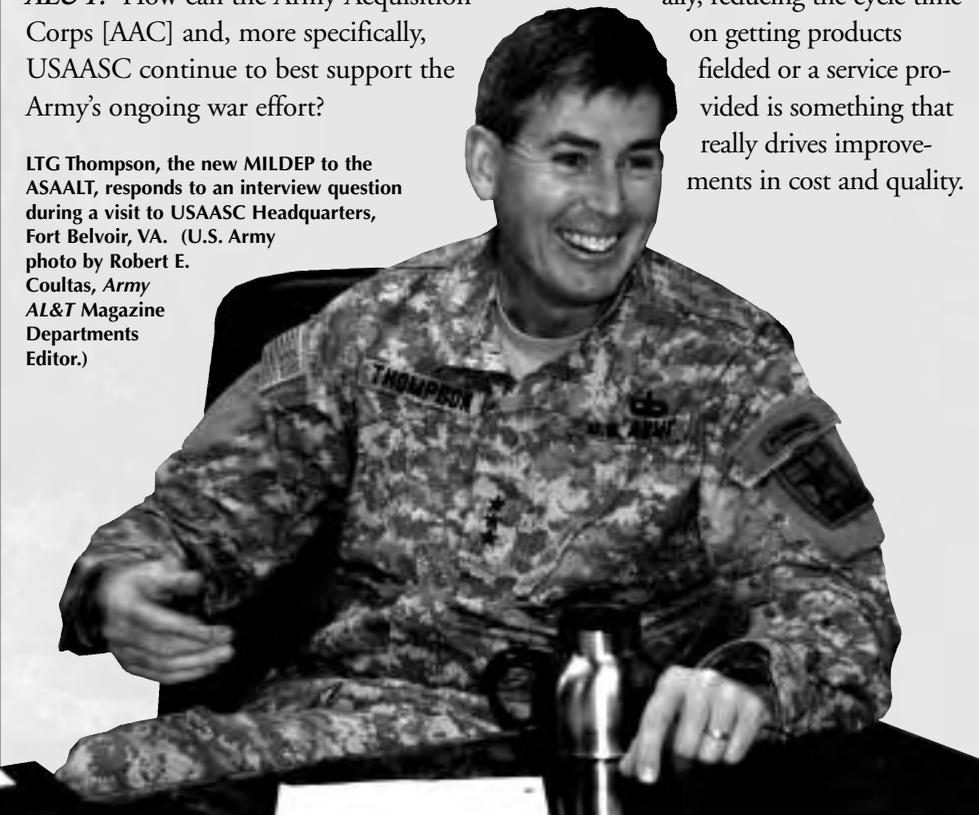
Thompson asserts that the most important thing Army Acquisition Corps members can do is be responsive to customer needs and understand their requirements. Whether it's addressing materiel or contractual service requirements, the acquisition community must provide quality product and service solutions in a cost-effective and timely manner. Here, SPC Andrew Ruhlman and his fellow platoon members from the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Battalion, 37th Armored Regiment, 1st Armored Division, benefit from new communication technology during a patrol in Tal Afar, Iraq. (Photo by SSGT Jacob N. Bailey, U.S. Air Force (USAF), 1st Combat Camera Squadron.)

**AL&T:** As you assume the MILDEP role, what initiatives do you plan to institute to increase the effectiveness of the Army AL&T Workforce?

**Thompson:** I honestly don't know enough about all of the ongoing initiatives right now to say that there's anything new that needs to be added. So the first thing I would say is that we must follow through on the initiatives that are already in place across the board. A lot of procedures have been put in place since the implementation of the *Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act* and the professional management of the acquisition workforce. We must continue to build on those initiatives to make the career opportunities as viable as they can be for everyone in the acquisition workforce. We must also ensure that the training, education and career development opportunities are as robust as they can be so that individuals have all the opportunities that they need to have a successful career.

**AL&T:** How can the Army Acquisition Corps [AAC] and, more specifically, USAASC continue to best support the Army's ongoing war effort?

LTG Thompson, the new MILDEP to the ASAALT, responds to an interview question during a visit to USAASC Headquarters, Fort Belvoir, VA. (U.S. Army photo by Robert E. Coultas, Army AL&T Magazine Departments Editor.)



**Thompson:** I think the best thing the AAC can do is be responsive to the customer — the warfighter. That responsiveness involves providing the right product at the right time at the right price. That takes a lot of hard work, but we've got to understand the customer need, and the customer need from the Army and Joint perspective comes from understanding the operational requirement. It's meeting and understanding that requirement — whether it's a materiel solution or a service solution that we provide through a contract — and providing that product or service in the most cost-effective, timely manner to meet that need. Addition-

ally, reducing the cycle time on getting products fielded or a service provided is something that really drives improvements in cost and quality.

The one metric that I really try to push with people all the time is trying to drive down the cycle time of getting something done. Being able to do a job faster doesn't necessarily mean that we sacrifice quality or increase cost. I maintain that we can go faster, and going faster gives us a higher quality, lower priced product.

USAASC has customers as well, and those customers are the AL&T Workforce. So USAASC's job is to provide the professional development, workforce management and assignment opportunities to the entire AL&T Workforce. USAASC must be re-

sponsive to the workforce's needs because it is people who are the most important asset in any organization. If we want the AL&T Workforce to be responsive to our warfighting customers, providing them the right products and services when and where they're needed most, USAASC must be responsive to the workforce's professional development and training needs and enable them to have all the educational and experiential tools they require to be able to do their jobs effectively.

**AL&T:** The AL&T Workforce is expected to grow from approximately 45,000 to more than 60,000 with the addition of the Corps of Engineers-Civil Works, Installation Management Command and Assistant Chief of Staff for Installation Management AL&T Workforces. How will these groups be assimilated?

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Thompson is a fierce advocate of creating professional development opportunities for AL&T Workforce members through a carefully orchestrated regimen of training, education, experiential assignments and mentoring. He contends that to grow the acquisition community's future leaders, supervisors must use IDPs to further develop their subordinates' skills and abilities. (Army AL&T Magazine stock photo.)

**Thompson:** There's nothing that's really difficult about this, but it's a change for the Corps of Engineers and the installation workforce to be considered part of the acquisition workforce based on their respective career fields. We've got a very good system in place for keeping the AL&T Workforce informed. Now we just have to reach out to those who are assimilating into the workforce and make them aware of why we are making this change in their career management, what steps we're taking to make that change, and then treat each of those individuals personally. We must take the necessary steps to bring them into the AL&T Workforce's fold and make them aware of the tools and the career management assistance that's now available to them through USAASC.

The important thing here is that the AAC has one process, one standard when it comes to contracting. There are 800-series engineers, for example, who perform a certain amount of contracting work, and it's imperative that they be operating at the same professional level as their AL&T Workforce counterparts. We're trying to make the same training opportunities available to them so that everyone is operating at the same level of expertise. This is what makes the most sense for the Army down the road.

**AL&T:** The AL&T civilian workforce average age is 47.75, and 13.76 percent are eligible for optional retirement. Is our civilian workforce heading for a brain drain? If so, what is being done to counter this?

**Thompson:** A lot of people worry about the workforce's collective age and about the number that are either eligible for optional or early retirement. I don't worry very much about there being a brain drain. The reason I don't worry about it is because it's the responsibility of the workforce and leadership to ensure that there are people who work for them who can take their place one day. In my experience at the U.S. Army Tank-automotive and Armaments Command, in particular, we hired more than 3,000 people across the entire Life Cycle Management Command [LCMC] community at eight different installations over a 3-year period. Those 3,000 people dropped our average age by a couple of years. Although we brought in younger people, they weren't necessarily all much younger because we also brought people in laterally who were in their 40s.

I don't worry about brain drain, but we do need to have procedures in place with intern programs, the Army Civilian Training, Education and Development System and the FAST

TRACK program for contracting. We've got to create opportunities for our people. At the same time, I think that the newer people that we bring into the AL&T Workforce are full of great ideas and they see things with a different perspective. Again, my fundamental point is that it's the responsibility of leaders at every level of the organization to develop people to take their place. It's supervisors' responsibility to eventually put themselves out of a job. My job is to find the right people and give them the opportunities so that there are multiple people who have the capability of taking my place and taking the place of the program executive officers [PEOs] — both civilian and military — and to be future program managers [PMs]. That is an inherent responsibility of anybody who has a leadership role, anywhere within any organization.

**AL&T:** According to June 2006 Career Acquisition Personnel & Position Management Information System [CAPP MIS] data, nearly 64 percent of AL&T Workforce members are not certified for their current positions. What can supervisors and leaders do to improve the certification percentages?

**Thompson:** Supervisors and leaders can sit down with the people who work for them, put together their Individual Development Plans [IDPs] and then execute those IDPs. It is both the individual's responsibility to get themselves certified and the leader's responsibility to get the people who work for them certified in their positions. And if 64 percent are not certified in their positions this year, that figure should be something less than 64 percent next year and even less than that the following year. So we need to start from the standpoint that we're not necessarily in the shape that we want to be in today, and then put together a plan to get

there. As I go around and talk to people in different organizations, I will pick individuals at random and ask to see their IDPs, their performance objectives for the year and validation that their supervisors have sat down with them at the appropriate times during the year for counseling. I expect people to do that. So again, that 64 percent figure may be where we are today, but we are going to be better next year and even better the year after that.

Before retiring, LTG Yakovac signed a new policy memorandum addressed to all AAC leaders stating that if individuals are not certified at the required level in their current jobs and they apply for tuition assistance programs, the training will only be approved for programs that go toward their certification requirements. Assistance will not be provided for training that is just good to have. That memo is an ongoing effort to push this number to the right level and each supervisor and PEO out there has been tasked to ensure that happens.

Building upon LTG Yakovac's intent, I would expect performance objectives for everybody needing certification and every supervisor who has people who are uncertified. Certification requirements must become part of their stated performance objectives for that year. I expect people to get rated on those objectives and appropriately recognized or counseled if they don't accomplish those stated objectives. It's that simple.

**AL&T:** One of the challenges for the workforce has been, with the Army at war and the acquisition community directly supporting that effort, training resources haven't been available for some of the resident courses that people need to attend for certification. As a result, training resources haven't always been available when people needed

them. Given the bleak budget projections that we've had for the past two fiscal years, do you foresee the possibility that additional funds will become available for the community to use for certification purposes?

**Thompson:** That's something that I will personally take on. I'm aware that the funding is not where it needs to be for the training. In the big scheme of things in the Army, the funding for needed training is not a lot of dollars. If we're going to say that people are our most important asset and that we expect them to be certified, we've got to ensure that the funding resources are there to offer the training opportunities. If employees do everything that they can to get themselves certified, and a bona fide lack of funding prevents them from attending a required course, that becomes something that's outside of their control and it's an issue that I'll personally look into. By adhering to each employee's IDP, we can create the necessary demand so that the Defense Acquisition University [DAU] knows what courses we need. If individuals are not scheduling themselves for these courses, DAU

doesn't know the Army needs those courses. We have to create the demand, and that goes back to the supervisor and the individual's IDP.

Supervisors need to understand that an IDP starts the demand signal at DAU. IDPs become the aggregation of certification requirements from every AL&T Workforce member. IDPs are the demand signal that gets aggregated up. And it's the Army Training Requirements and Resources System [ATRRS] — because DAU uses the Army's ATRRS — that captures the demands. That is where the courses are scheduled, the instructors are put in place and the scheduling is done. I give great credit to DAU for regionalizing their course offerings over the last couple of years. We no longer have to go away on temporary duty [TDY] for a couple of weeks to get some of these courses. DAU actually comes onsite at major population centers where we've got large densities of the AL&T Workforce, and they really do tailor their programs to meet the demands of the people. If there's enough of a demand, they'll send an instructor onsite and pay the



ARFORGEN, from an equipping standpoint, will ensure that Active and Reserve Component units are cyclically modernized, their equipment upgraded and their weapon systems Reset upon returning from operational deployments so they can respond effectively to future mission requirements. Here, Soldiers from the 172nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team exit a UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter flown by a 207th Aviation Regiment crew from the Alaska National Guard during an aerial traffic control point insertion near Tal Afar, Iraq. (Photo by SSGT Jacob N. Bailey, USAF, 1st Combat Camera Squadron.)

instructor's TDY salary. DAU is very good about that, but it all starts with the IDP.

**AL&T:** Throughout the AL&T Workforce, numerous positions have been designated as critical acquisition positions [CAPs] and, within those CAPs, key leadership positions [KLPs] have been designated. How do these KLPs affect acquisition organizations and do you see a need for updating the process or keeping the positions intact? What is going to be your focus as the MILDEP in terms of managing those positions AAC-wide?

**Thompson:** An honest answer to the question is that I don't know the entire inventory of positions that have been designated as CAPs yet. I know that KLPs are a subset of that. I do know that designation of KLPs is something that has to go from the Army up to the Defense Acquisition Executive [DAE]. So simplistically, that requirement is for PEOs — both military and civilian — and Command Select List positions for Acquisition Category 1 programs. If those are the current designation of KLPs, that sounds about right to me. But again, what I need to do as part of my education as the new MILDEP is to understand that complete inventory of CAPs and KLPs and then determine what needs to be added or removed from that list. What I do know is that USAASC currently manages about 250 KLPs for the community, including all AAC General Officers, Senior Executive

Service members, uniformed and civilian PMs and CAPs GS-13 and above. The DAE doesn't mandate specific guidance, but rather leaves it up to each service's acquisition executive to manage.

Supervisors and leaders can sit down with the people who work for them, put together their IDPs and then execute those IDPs. It is both the individual's responsibility and the leader's responsibility to get the people who work for them certified in their positions.

**AL&T:** Army Force Generation [ARFORGEN] processes help ensure that modular conversion, restructuring and restationing initiatives achieve the Army's objective to be a campaign-quality Joint and expeditionary force. At the same time, Army business transformation efforts are helping the Army improve its ability to man, train and

equip Army operating forces during a period of dwindling resources and heavy operational demand. How is the ARFORGEN process changing how LCMCs and PEOs do business?

**Thompson:** The ARFORGEN process is one of the most fundamental changes that the Army has undertaken in my entire career. We have implemented the ARFORGEN model to synchronize the cyclic readiness of all Army forces, better manage the available force pool and provide some measure of predictability to our all-volunteer force. Our goal is to generate a continuous output of fully manned, equipped and trained forces adequate to sustain one operational deployment in three years for the Active Component, one in five years for the Army Reserve and one in six years for the Army National Guard. It puts predictability into the system that in some cases wasn't always there before. And it allows us — from an equipping

perspective — to tie our cycles of modernization and upgrades for equipment to the ARFORGEN process. So when a unit comes back from an operational deployment, it goes into its Reset and train period. During that period, both the LCMCs and PEOs that are working closely with the LCMCs take the unit's existing equipment and bring it back to full operational condition. Additionally, where opportunities arise, they also modernize that equipment. So it's that cyclic process that puts some stability into the modernization and sustainment system.

I was at PEO Soldier recently and what I told them philosophically, and I really do believe this, is that there are never going to be enough resources for every unit in the U.S. Army to have the latest generation of whatever items that we provide. Whether that's a helicopter, a small arm or a set of night vision goggles, there are just never going to be enough resources. So we're always going to have the latest generation of equipment as well as older versions of similar equipment in the inventory. But tying that to the ARFORGEN process allows us to put the most modern equipment in the units that are getting ready to deploy on an operational mission and give them the right equipment to accomplish the mission that they've been asked to perform. Everyone in the AL&T Workforce needs to understand what ARFORGEN is trying to do and understand how they fit into the process. It's not hard to understand, but they need to pay some attention to it.

ARFORGEN is the cyclic readiness model in process. But one of the Army's major priorities is to make business transformation a reality. Business transformation is about challenging and/or changing the current way we do business. The Army has chosen to use

Lean Six Sigma [LSS] and its disciplined methodologies to transform business operations. I expect the AL&T Workforce to embrace LSS in business transformation. I also expect senior leaders to be sponsors of process improvement events and workforce members to seek opportunities to get Green Belt and Black Belt LSS training, as well as participate as team members on projects.

However, it's not the training that is most important — it's the results that come with working on projects to improve things inside organizations or programs. I get a lot of people who say that they are just too busy to do this. I say, "No, you're not. You should be solving your most pressing problems using the tools and techniques that LSS provides because it is a way of tackling problems and solving issues that is very well proven. It does work. It gives you a common way of addressing problems and issues and a common set of expectations on the right tools and techniques to be able to solve them." So I expect the entire workforce to understand LSS. Not everyone is going to get Green or Black Belt training, but I would expect everyone in the workforce to participate on the teams and help work on a project to improve a process. LSS is another item that I would put into performance objectives — both for senior leaders and other individuals within an organization. And I expect to see that reflected in IDPs as I go around and meet people in the PEO and LCMC communities.

**AL&T:** Secretary of the Army Dr. Francis J. Harvey recently announced the Army Strong campaign as a key component of the Army's recruiting and advertising efforts. Army Strong will specifically address the interests and motivations of individuals considering a career in the U.S. military. As



As the Army further embraces LSS and business transformation processes, AL&T Workforce members will develop the necessary tools and techniques for addressing problems and finding solutions. (Army AL&T Magazine stock photo.)

MILDER, how will you further promote the Secretary's Army Strong initiative within the acquisition community and in potential workforce members that we'll try to recruit into the intern and midgrade levels?

**Thompson:** I think that Army Strong is about the recognition that no matter what your career occupation may be, you will be a better person by embracing Army Values and taking advantage of the opportunities that the Army gives you — whether you are civilian or military. The AL&T Workforce needs to be "acquisition strong" in the skill sets that they have and the things that they do in their day-to-day jobs to provide the best products or services to their customers — combatant commanders and Soldiers. The Army Strong campaign is just getting started. It resonates with the target audiences, which are not just the civilian and military people who we are trying to recruit to work for the U.S. Army. It's also designed to influence the people who are already serving today and get them to understand that there is no greater sense of satisfaction that they can get than serving in or working for the Army. I do believe that the Army, along with the other branches of the military, is the most respected

institution in the country. There's a great sense of personal satisfaction that comes with serving in an organization that is there to serve and protect the Nation and its people.

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