



# NEWS FEATURE

**U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS**

**BUILDING STRONG®**

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## **Profiles in leadership: David “Russ” Tolle**

*Russ Tolle served as the Helmand Area Engineer from December 2011 through June 2012. Before he left Afghanistan, he gave a extensive interview to the district’s Engineering Freedom magazine about his experiences and lessons learned.*

*EF:* First, give me some background-how long were you the area engineer here in Helmand?

*RT:* My UDC date was 5 December 2011 and I reported to the Helmand Area Office on 16 December 2011. I served as the Helmand area engineer until early June 2012.

*EF:* Was this your first deployment?

*RT:* My first deployment was back in 1991-92. The Army Corps of Engineers established the Kuwait Emergency Recovery Office in Kuwait immediately following Desert Storm. Its mission was to rebuild the infrastructure of Kuwait (military bases, government buildings, roads, utilities, etc.) following the invasion and subsequent retreat of the Iraqi forces. I was assigned as the Assistant Chief of the Contract Administration Branch.

Our mission was to definitize letter contracts, which are an open-ended contracting tool. We had to make them less open-ended, with defined scopes of work and costs, reducing risk for the government. If I recall correctly, we had over \$50 million in contract actions that had to be definitized. While that doesn’t sound like much by today’s standards, it was a significant challenge 20 years ago.

We didn’t have email, Facebook, Skype to communicate with our families. And calls to the States were very limited, so if you got a call back to the States every couple of weeks, you were very lucky. From the communication aspect, things are much better now.

A lot of things were similar. You had the same camaraderie—people from throughout the Corps were there to do the mission.



My next deployment was to Dade County, Florida in 1992-92, following Hurricane Andrew. I served as the Tamiami Resident Engineer. We oversaw the recovery and reconstruction efforts of the area between 88th Street South and 152nd Street South. We had multiple missions including water and ice distribution, blue roof (installing temporary plastic tarps on damaged roofs, to prevent further damage to homes), modular schools, port-o-lets, debris collection and removal. I was there for 8 months and fondly remember telling my co-workers that "Happiness is seeing the Dade County Line in your rear view mirror."

In 1996, I deployed to the US Virgin Islands for six weeks following Hurricane Bertha as Area Engineer to oversee the Corp's blue roof mission. We finished the blue roof mission and were ready to redeploy when word came down that a select few of us would need to stay to oversee a vessel salvage mission.

Later on in 1996, I deployed to North Carolina following Hurricane Fran where I served as the assistant area engineer for the Cary area office. Our main mission was debris collection and removal. I remember it actually snowed there before we finally completed the mission and closed the office. The Emergency Management Office issued us sweatshirts since all the "red shirts" we had previously been issued were short sleeve.

In 1998, I deployed to Puerto Rico following Hurricane Georges and served as the Chief of Construction for the Hurricane Georges Response and Recovery Office. Construction had a workforce of approximately 350 personnel and our primary missions were blue roof and debris collection and removal. The traffic in San Juan was complete chaos following the hurricane as all the street lights and traffic lights were non-operational. Intersections were like something straight out of a movie where cars were backed up in all directions and everyone was blowing their car horns. I managed to log 1,000 accident free miles while deployed there, although it felt more like 100,000.

*EF:* What are some of the things that you feel made the Helmand area office work well during your time here? In particular, what do you think are some of the things that you, as area engineer, did to help the office work well?

*RT:* I feel I've provided a sense of stability and continuity to the area and resident office team. Before my arrival, there had been three area engineers (one permanent and two interim) overseeing the office within the preceding 90 days, which was not conducive to a productive and harmonious work environment. Also, I firmly believe in leading by example and trying to add a "personal touch" to the office environment. No single individual, no matter how great their strengths or abilities, can execute the mission alone. It takes a full team effort to accomplish the challenging missions we have been assigned here at the South district.

*EF:* What were some of the things you did at Helmand to establish continuity?

*RT:* As I mentioned, there had been a lot of turn-over.

I wanted to give everyone a sense of stability. I had my initial talks with everyone, and let them know I was going to be there for the next six or seven months. I wasn't going to change things right away, but I was going to look at the operations and see if there were ways where we could do things better, and establish a team atmosphere.

I focused on morale, and getting everyone to work together. I implemented a few standard operating procedures. For instance, we had weekly telephone calls between the area office and the resident offices and we talked about everything that was coming up that week, what needed to be done, senior leader visits, making sure RMS was up to

date, that the job sites were safe and clean. I also focused on personnel—getting performance plans in place and up to date.

It was important to establish processes that let people know what they were supposed to doing, and pulled everyone together. People needed to know that they weren't alone, that their contributions were valuable and that they were needed for the organization to be successful.



We had quite a few issues with our contractors too. The mindset had been that we were going to pull these contractors across the finish line. We would go out and assist them, and no matter how badly they were performing, we were going to pull them across the finish line because we had to get the projects done.

But some of the contractors and projects just weren't performing. They were way behind schedule, quality was bad, and there were safety issues. We changed the mindset. If we had a contractor that was not going to be able to complete a project, we would cut the losses, reprocure and get someone who is going to be able to complete the project.

We started issuing terminations for default almost as soon as I got here. We ended up doing six in the time I was the area engineer. You try to give the contractor every opportunity to perform and get to that finish line, but if they are not going to commit the resources, or the emphasis on safety and quality, or the cash flow and the staffing required, we need to move on to someone who can get the job done and deliver a product we can be proud of.

Termination for default is painful — you're not going to meet the original target date for the project, but you don't want to be late AND deliver an inferior product. It has taken a lot of time in the last couple of months. We had a couple of significant projects, each worth about \$30 million, that we had to terminate, but we feel we'll end up with a much better product in the end.

One of the lessons we learned for the next contingency is to require the contractor to give us payment performance bonds and be more careful about whom we award contracts to. One of the big issues with non-performing contractors is that we have no surety. If a contractor doesn't pay their subcontractors and the subcontractors walk off the job site, or if subcontractors do not produce acceptable quality, we didn't have any leverage to require them to tear the substandard work out and replace it.

When you come into a contingency operation, the first emphasis is getting contracts awarded, getting boots on the ground, getting the recovery underway right away. Sometimes, in our haste to do those things, we don't incorporate all the tools and mechanisms we could in our contracts because we are concerned about delaying contract awards, but I think have found that payment-performance bonds raise level of quality of the contractors.

*EF:* Tell us a bit about working with contractors in this kind of environment, and what people need to expect now and in future deployments.

*RT:* I'll tie this back into the termination issues. In the States, all the contracts have bonding requirements in them.

If a contractor is not performing and you issue a show cause or a cure notice, a copy of that goes to the bonding company, who start to get very involved because they have a financial stake in the outcome.

In 25 years of working with U.S. contractors, I'd only been involved in one termination for default. It never gets to that point normally. The bonding company will step in and have negotiations with the contractor and require him to do what is necessary to finish the project, or they'll bring in someone else or turn the work over to one of the subcontractors. Here, everyone is in an environment that is really unfamiliar, because you don't ever get to termination for default on U.S. projects.

The contracting pool is quite a bit different — in the States, you typically work with large, capable contracting companies. Those companies were in Iraq, but they really haven't come to Afghanistan, so we are dealing with a lot of contractors that we don't know.

The contractors also don't know us — they aren't familiar with Corps methods and processes. Our quality assurance representatives and project engineers have to train the contractors on things like the three-phase quality control system, submitting a pay estimate, or developing a security plan, a safety plan, or an environmental protection plan.

We don't have to do that kind of work in the States, but here you have to get back down in the weeds and work hand-in-hand with the contractor to get these things accomplished — it is a real challenge.

Another challenge is that many of our project engineers and resident engineers are not in roles that they normally perform in the States, where they might be a project manager or a park ranger. Or they might work operations at a lock and dam, or on the engineering side of the house, doing geotechnical work.

Here they are thrust into the role of project engineer or resident engineer or quality assurance representative. They need a lot of mentoring and training. The senior personnel who have experience not only have to train the contractors, but some Corps personnel as well. Our people want to work and learn; they want to be successful, but they don't always have the experience or training.

*EF:* What are the some of the ways you led by example?

*RT:* I always want to be fair and treat people with respect, treat people the way I want to be treated, have open dialog and basically live up to the same set of standards that I apply to everyone. I expect a full day's work out of everybody. In my position, I work pretty long hours. I don't expect everyone to be in the office with me at 1900, but I expect a full day's work. It is important that my staff see that I'm putting in a full day's work. You treat everyone with respect, pull everyone into the team and let everybody know you need their contribution for the team to be successful.

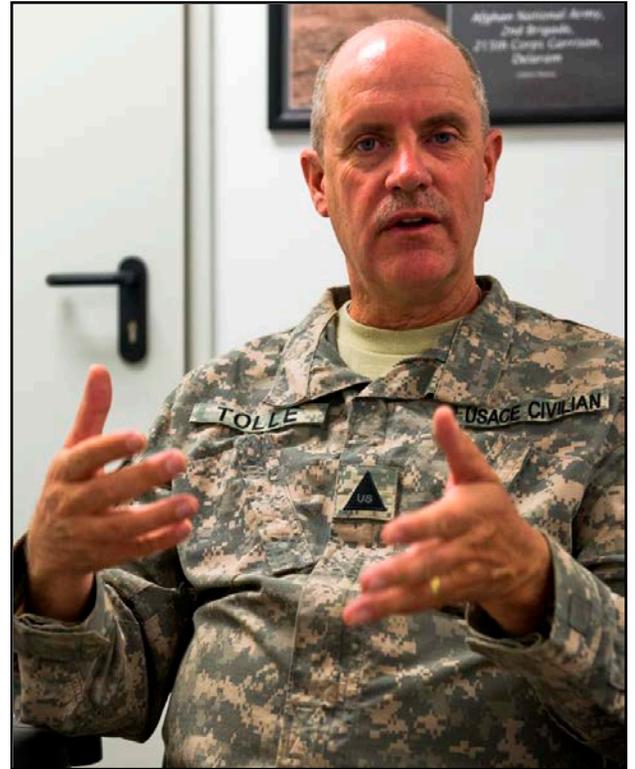
Producing high-quality products is important. I always try to produce a high-quality product, whether it is a letter to a contractor or a memorandum to the contracting officer. Again, you have folks in unfamiliar roles, so you have to help

them, for instance, by giving them a previous letter or memorandum as an example, but I expect that we are going to deliver a quality product, whether it is the building we built or the internal processes.

*EF:* What are some the ways you establish standards?

I tell people that their personal standards should exceed what is on their performance plans. But the key is to make sure that you have performance standards — that people know what they are supposed to be doing. For instance, when you have a quality assurance report, people know the standard for quality assurance reports, that we expect a certain level of documentation in the report. When things come up on a project, a project gets behind schedule, the project engineer needs to know that he should write a draft letter of concern for the contracting officer's representative. Your people need to know what you expect from them — that ties in to standards.

We are dealing with difficult contractors here and people are doing processes that they aren't familiar with. It takes mentors and leaders within the whole organization to help our people and the contractors get up to speed about where they need to be. We want to turn over a finished product to the customer that meets standards — we want them to walk through and say, "this is a nice facility," instead of "we've been waiting on this for two years now and it isn't good." It is very important that we deliver quality products.



*EF:* What are some of your lessons learned or things you would do better or differently if you were doing this again? What are things that we did well that we need to capture?

*RT:* Preparation is the key to success. When I was coming over, I thought I was going to Herat, so I spent a good amount of time going over the organization chart. I looked at the program, the kinds of projects they had. I basically tried to learn as much as I could about the environment, so I would be as ready as I could be. Of course, once I got here and was assigned to Helmand, a lot of that went out the window and I had to start all over again, but I think preparation is one of the key things that anyone can do, as much as you can before you get here.

I also think it would be valuable to establish positions for assistant area engineers. I spent a great amount of time focusing on my administrative contracting officer duties, trying to get done what we needed to do on contracts. When you do a termination for default, it takes a lot of time and effort, a lot of documentation — you have to show you have written letters of concern, interim unsatisfactory ratings, cure notices, show cause, and done everything the government must do to get a contractor to perform. I spent a great amount of time on those tasks.

If I'd had an assistant area engineer, I could have spent more time establishing the processes and doing more of the traditional area engineer duties, versus contracting duties. I didn't get out to the resident offices as much as I would

have liked. In hindsight, I should have visited each resident office every couple of weeks, working with the resident office staff and engineers, helping them with their duties, looking at the projects, giving a little more insight on their operations.

It is a challenge to do both. In the States, resident engineers are normally administrative contracting officers, so they deal with the contractors one-on-one, they do the mods, and take care of most of those duties. Here, I was the only administrative contracting officer with 20 projects and \$350 million worth of work, so it was cutting things a little thin. It is always desirable for resident engineers act as administrative contracting officers, but it can be hard to recruit people with that capability.

I also spent a lot of time getting our manning document straightened out. When I first got here, we had a lot of folks who had moved around and our manning document did not really reflect what we had in terms of boots on the ground. I also had monthly conference calls with the recruitment center in Winchester trying to find people to deploy and fill positions. Recruiting is very tough right now.

*EF:* If you were to stand up a contingency district to rapidly assume a large workload very quickly, how would you do it?

*RT:* I see three distinct phases of any contingency organization. You've got the stand-up period where everyone is coming in, the missions are being thrown at you left and right, and you are standing up the organization with leaders and personnel from Corps districts and divisions all over the world. You are trying to throw everyone together and come up with standard operating procedures. You're assigning people to roles they might not be familiar with, but you need someone to fill that role. If they are qualified, that is great, but if they aren't, you give them on-the-job training and do the best you can do.

Once you've stood up the district, you get into a bit of a stable mode, and that might last a year, or a couple of years. During this phase, your emphasis is going to be not only getting people on the bus, but getting them in the right seat on the bus, so you focus on "I need project engineers." You are trying to recruit people that have experience as project engineers or resident engineers or area engineers, or project managers — you want the experienced folks here.

Then you get the drawdown at the end, where the district is preparing to shut down as it continues to do work. At this point a lot of the folks who want to deploy on a mission like this have already done so, and gone back to the States. Recruiting becomes a little bit tougher and the mission becomes a little tougher — you might not have the battle space owner support that you had six months or a year earlier because they've closed a lot of the small FOBs that provided security throughout your region. Your mission becomes more difficult, for both you and your contractors, but the mission doesn't stop — you still have to finish out all these contracts, you still have to finish things.

One of the things we do for Stateside contingencies is set up standing PRT teams so when a disaster hits, you know right off the bat who is responsible for sending a debris team in, who is responsible for sending a blue roof team in. The responsibilities are shared throughout the Corps districts and divisions. For overseas contingencies, TAD is responsible for standing up the organization on its own. If there were teams established for the different functions — engineering and construction, contracting, project management, all the "J" shops — like we have for contingencies in the States, it might lend itself to rapid mobilization for an overseas contingency mission. You could have individuals pegged against specific billets, or an organization identified to provide someone for the stand-up period.

*EF:* What was your biggest challenge while you were here? How did you overcome it?

*RT:* My biggest challenge has been the pace of the workload. I'm typically in the office from 7 am to at least 7 pm and many, if not most, days still feel I'm just barely keeping my head above water. I've made the statement more than once that I alternately go from "hitting the ground running" to "being dragged behind the train." I don't know that I've actually overcome this scenario, but I make a sincere effort to prioritize my workload, delegate whenever possible, work as hard as I can each day, and then go to bed each night knowing I've given the Army my best effort.

*EF:* What would you like to add?

*RT:* This has been a very challenging assignment. A lot of long days — looking back, the seven months went very fast, but there were days that I wasn't sure I would get through them. It has been very fulfilling — I'd like to think I've accomplished a good bit. Aside from the mission, it has been great to work in a contingency environment with another group of people — that's what I'll remember. I look back twenty years ago to when I was in Kuwait, and I don't remember specific bureaucratic tasks I accomplished — I remember the people I worked with and going out to see the projects. Five or ten years down the road, it'll be the same thing — I'll remember the people. Social media and email makes it easier to stay in touch with them — I've made good friends here, and I intend to keep up with them.

*EF:* Do you have any final thoughts?

*RT:* Listen to your team - many of them have been executing the mission long before you arrive and they possess valuable institutional knowledge. Also, listen to your body - the long work hours combined with the dust, the heat, and the stress of working in a combat environment can impair both your physical and mental health. Just remember - laughter can sometimes be the best medicine. Live, laugh, love.

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