

# The Role of a Noncommissioned Officer in a Joint Forces Environment

The Defense Logistics Agency's senior enlisted Soldier discusses the unique opportunity and responsibility of leading a predominantly civilian workforce in a joint force environment.

■ By Command Sgt. Maj. Charles Tobin

As the senior enlisted leader for the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA), I have a unique and dynamic joint military-civilian assignment. About 95 percent of the agency's more than 25,000 personnel are Department of Defense civilians. The remaining 5 percent are active duty and reserve military members.

Traditionally, the senior enlisted leader of an organization advises the commanding officer on all matters pertaining to enlisted personnel, but because DLA is mostly civilian, I advocate for all employees. Unusual? Absolutely. But it's an example of how different a military-civilian environment can be from one that is only military.

## Becoming a Joint Forces Fan

Today I'm "all in" for the joint experience, but I didn't always feel this way. Not long ago, many service members, including me, saw a joint assignment as a dead end because it separated us from promotions and other opportunities the services provided.

In 2005, after serving more than 20 years in the Army, I received my first joint assignment at the U.S. European Command headquarters in Germany. The Army was all I had known, so I was not prepared to adapt to the joint assignment. I tried to impose the Army culture on the joint environment and received a lot of pushback. It was a learning experience.

After my time in Germany, I participated in several joint operations in Afghanistan and exercises in the U.S. Pacific Command and also some

special operations exercises. These experiences made me realize the advantage of being able to apply all of the services' diverse skills and capabilities to one mission. With each joint experience, I became less of a skeptic and more of a fan.

## The DLA Way

I experienced culture shock when I arrived at the DLA headquarters at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. The mostly civilian workforce makes the agency completely different from a service command and even from most joint organizations. In addition, DLA's customers include all of the services, the combatant commands, and many non-Department of Defense agencies.

I had never dealt with organizations like the Department of State or the Federal Emergency Management Agency in past assignments. Working at DLA has given me a completely new perspective.

When I speak to military members, I always emphasize how important joint assignments are to their careers. I stress the importance of flexibility. A joint environment is different from a service environment—not better or worse, just different.

I try to dispel the myth that joint assignments are a dead end for promotions by talking about instances when joint assignments contributed to promotions. I also stress that, to boost their careers, noncommissioned officers (NCOs) and petty officers have to be willing to leave their comfort zones and take some calculated risks.

I have met enlisted service members who took joint assignments and were rewarded with a wealth of knowledge and experiences that are invaluable to their military careers. Their respective services benefit by getting leaders who can think critically and strategically and adapt to ever-changing environments.

Networking is another rewarding aspect of joint assignments. For example, in my job, I have the opportunity to reach out to a variety of enlisted leaders all over the world. When I give an overview of DLA to these leaders, they are amazed at the range of DLA's activities. I understand their feelings because, before I arrived, I underestimated the scope of the agency.

I visit senior enlisted leaders to network and build relationships. I try to maintain a dialogue with them about DLA's support to the warfighter. I always ask, "What can DLA do to support you better?"

Outreach is important because I want to inform these influential people about the capabilities DLA offers. I encourage them to let their commands know about the support that DLA can provide. I want them to know that when they are out in the field, DLA is often nearby and can help them carry out their missions.

In a traditional service environment, senior enlisted leaders take care of their people. At DLA, the only difference is the people that I advocate for extend well beyond the enlisted community.

The most important factor con-



*Command Sgt. Maj. Charles Tobin, the Defense Logistics Agency's senior enlisted leader, and Sgt. 1st Class Byron Briscoe shake hands during a Defense Logistics Agency briefing in Caserma Ederle in Vicenza, Italy, on July 27, 2016. (Photo by Antonio Bedin)*

tributing to DLA's mission success is its employees. DLA has representatives all over the United States and the world. I have met DLA personnel serving the warfighter in remote places. Often, these employees work as the sole DLA representative in a service component command or on an installation. When I meet them, I let them know I am their advocate.

### **Why I Do What I Do**

The people make me passionate about coming to work every day. My role at DLA is about logistics and sustainment, but it really comes down to people.

When I attend DLA town hall meetings in the United States and abroad, the DLA director gives me time to speak to the workforce. I use my time to thank employees for what they do in support of the warfighter. I feel that sometimes they don't get the credit for all they do, so I want to make sure they know their work is appreciated.

The director and I get a lot of positive feedback from customers, and I want to make sure I pass it along to the workforce. They are the ones

who do the work, so they deserve the credit.

I also take time every day to talk to a Soldier, Sailor, Airman, or Marine. I like to find out what's on their minds and what they care about because I never want to lose touch with the enlisted community.

When I arrived at DLA, I did not want to impose my own agenda. My number one goal was to support and promote the agency's goals, vision, and mission. I figured that if I did that, I would be supporting the director and the customers at the same time. It helped that DLA had established a first-rate vision and mission and comprehensive strategic goals.

I am enthusiastic about DLA's values of resilience, innovation, integrity, diversity, accountability, and excellence. I live by these values, and I love talking about them to the workforce.

Looking to the future, I think enlisted positions at DLA will become more competitive. I have seen a definite increase in interest from enlisted personnel in DLA assignments because of the promotion opportunities and joint experiences these assign-

ments offer. NCOs and petty officers who come to DLA are hand-selected, and we look for high performers.

I worked hard, but I never dreamed that I would be selected as the senior enlisted leader of a dynamic agency like DLA. Serving with the talented men and women who continue to serve warfighters has been the highest honor of my career.

For up-and-coming enlisted leaders, my advice is to do your best in your current assignment, and don't get so locked into your service culture that you can't adapt to a joint environment. As enlisted leaders, we must learn to be adaptive, agile, and strategic because joint is the way of the future.

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Command Sgt. Maj. Charles Tobin is the senior enlisted leader of DLA. He holds a master's degree in management from Webster University. He is graduate of the First Sergeants Course, the Sergeants Major Academy, and the Force Management, Keystone Leader, Inspector General, Battle Staff, and Jumpmaster Courses. He is also a graduate of the Basic Airborne and Air Assault Schools.