

Ronald J. Youngs: DCMA's Man Behind the Closed Door

by Mr. Tom Gelli, Chief, DCMA Congressional Affairs

*His primary work venue is one of vaulted doorways, flashing warning lights and robustly insulated meeting rooms humming with piped-in white noise. It has been described as a “tech-era speakeasy,” a sanctum from where those well-veiled defense programs — special access programs — are ushered along unrevealed to the public eye. And he’s the company’s alpha inside-man. Yet, it’s his personal vehicle, there in the Defense Contract Management Agency (DCMA) parking lot that unceremoniously blows the cover on his double life. You see, it’s all those hockey sticks, baseball bats and oversized sports gloves neatly arrayed in the back of his sedan that drop the dime on a one ... **Ronald J. Youngs**, who, this past January, found himself front and center as the newly selected director of the DCMA Special Programs Division.*

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A 16-year veteran of DCMA, Mr. Youngs holds bachelor’s and master’s degrees from California State University (Northridge), as well as a master’s of strategic studies from the United States Army War College in Carlisle, Pa. This married father of four boys is rumored to have a zippy slap shot and a cache of baseball cards tucked away on a closet shelf. There also are whispers about his penchant for solving — and even creating — crossword puzzles. And while his job environment is necessarily cloaked in secrecy, the man himself, as the following interrogation reveals, is not.

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Tom Gelli: Given the importance of information security in the Special Programs arena, do you at times feel like the boy in the protective bubble?

Ronald Youngs: To some degree, I do. In this world, one must think twice before hitting the "send" button. Though we're concerned about protecting DCMA-sensitive material, we're even more focused on protecting our customers' sensitive data and information. Certainly, an acute awareness of information security pervades just about everything we do.

TG: Although the Agency's Special Programs element has existed for roughly 20 years, its existence wasn't publicly acknowledged until July 2005. What impact has this "coming out from behind the curtain" had on your operations?

RY: It has had a significant impact in two ways. First, it has improved our interface with customers, many of whom were either not aware of our existence or not aware of the services we could provide them. Consequently, they weren't taking advantage of what the Special Programs Division had to offer. Now that the Special Programs Division is acknowledged, customers have easier access to us and our services. They are pleased about that. Second, coming out from behind the curtain has substantially reduced the time, effort and administrative burdens spent on upholding that veil, so to speak. We can divert those energies to where they're better needed.

TG: Clearly, your operating environment is different from that of DCMA mainstream operations. Is your mission different?

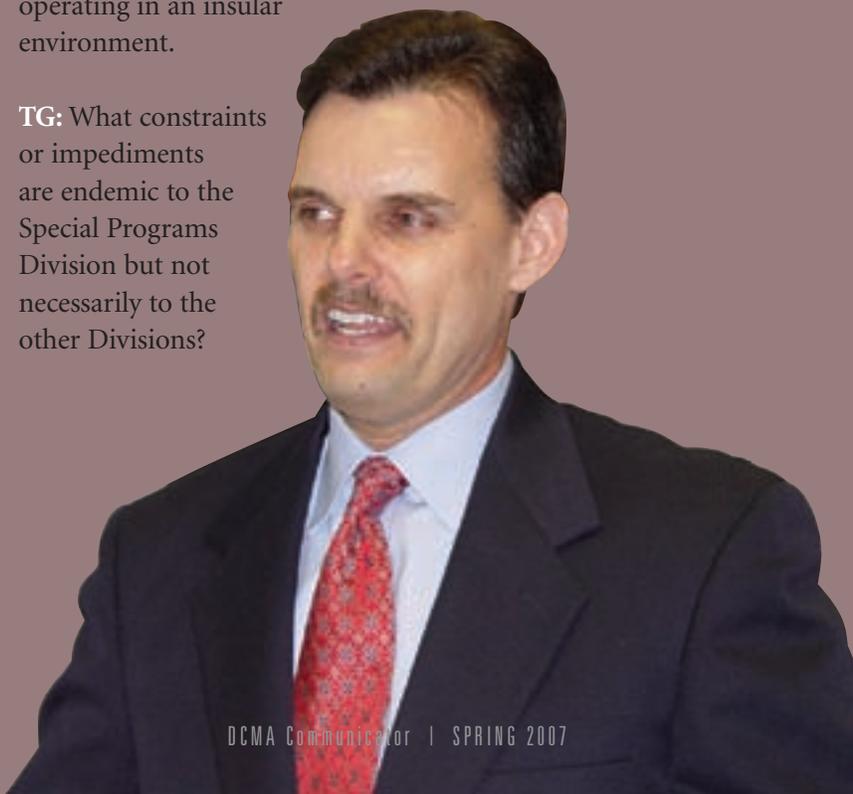
RY: No. Our mission, in terms of performing contract administration services, meeting customer outcomes and identifying performance commitments that allow us to influence those outcomes, is no different from that of mainstream DCMA. However, there is a difference in *how* we conduct our business. For example, unlike mainstream DCMA, Special Programs Division, because of its secure environment, does not engage much in Web-based information exchange. Nor does it make extensive use of automated tools, such as [Mechanization of Contract Administration Services (MOCAS)]. In fact, our contracts come to us in paper form, primarily because our customers' special-access communities still operate in a paper environment. In effect, we sacrifice a bit of efficiency to achieve heightened security.

TG: Same customers, as well?

RY: Pretty much so, consisting of the military services and other defense and federal activities. However, the customer groups we deal with are very much like us in that they're operating in an insular environment.

TG: What constraints or impediments are endemic to the Special Programs Division but not necessarily to the other Divisions?

(Right) Mr. Ronald J. Youngs, director, DCMA Special Programs Division. (Photo by Ms. Julia Wyant, DCMA Public Affairs)



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RY: Because of security precautions, we sometimes struggle to get our arms around new work. It can take as long as 18 months to get a person fully cleared, even after coming on board. Similarly, we cannot simply flip a switch to accept oversight of a special-access program. We need time to get ourselves ready to accept new work and to deal with issues of personnel readiness and site security. Often, in the past, we were not brought into the picture until engagement with the customer's program was imminent. We found ourselves behind the power curve, scrambling to get ourselves ready to accept and perform the work. To remedy this, we recently appointed two customer liaison representatives to engage with our key customers so that we can gain earlier insight into emerging program requirements. This will enable us to better identify the skill sets, duty locations and options for satisfying the customer's requirements. We're closing the time gap between when we're notified of the work and when our resources are arrayed to do the work.

TG: Obviously, high-level clearances are part and parcel of your world. Given the stringent security concerns, do you have difficulty getting and keeping people?

RY: Yes and no. This kind of work is not for everyone. The secure operating environment can cause frustration. What would be a routine administrative task in other offices, such as making a phone call or sending a fax, can be a multi-step exercise in ours. Also, the information we deal with often must be kept segregated. Some of our people have two or three computers on their desks. Yet, for the most part, our folks love the work here. We're on the cutting edge of technology, we provide a valuable service to our customers and we make a real difference in support of the warfighter.

TG: Now, you grew up in southern California during a time of, shall we say, cultural change. Is it correct to assume you didn't spend your nights on the Sunset Strip or at the Troubadour?

RY: [Laughter] Well, it's interesting, growing up in southern California and winding up at a defense agency in Washington, D.C. I guess the roots of my [Department of Defense (DoD)] career stretch to my father, who worked 30 years at Litton Data Systems. You know, we associate southern California with palm trees, surfboards and the glittery nightlife of Hollywood or the Strip. Actually, the defense industry is a huge presence there. I started my government career at AFPRO Hughes Aircraft in 1984. At that time, Hughes employed nearly 100,000 people in Los Angeles County. Add to that Northrop Grumman, Rockwell, McDonnell-Douglas and the other large defense-related firms, and you have an immense employment opportunity. It's not at all unusual for a southern California kid to pursue a career in the defense or aerospace industry, including the government side of the house.

TG: Okay, so you weren't making the club scene. I understand a more probable Saturday night venue for you might have been Chavez Ravine [Dodger Stadium] or Anaheim Stadium.

RY: [Laughter] True. I'm a big baseball fan and always have been. I'm an aficionado of the 1960s, and there probably aren't too many trivia questions from that era I couldn't answer. I grew up going to Dodgers games, but, oddly enough, the first game I saw at Dodger Stadium didn't involve the Dodgers. It was a Los Angeles Angels game, and the visiting team was the Washington Senators. I was with my father and grandfather.

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Actually, I still play baseball in a men's 48-and-older league composed of teams from Virginia and Maryland. I play shortstop next to lawyers, dentists, teachers and real-estate agents. We still have a passion for the game and its many facets, which softball doesn't offer. I'm fortunate to still be able to run the bases, dive for grounders and even catch up to a fastball occasionally.

TG: '61 Yankees or '76 Reds?

RY: Wow. Being a Dodgers fan, I can tell you that's not a pleasant choice. Because of their sheer power, I'll go with the Bronx Bombers. Mantle and Maris were at the top of their game, and the team still had three more consecutive pennants awaiting it. I think Whitey Ford and Ralph Terry had a combined 41-7 record. But it's a tough call. The Big Red Machine of the mid-70s was a juggernaut with Rose, Bench, Perez, Morgan and Griffey. Can't go wrong with either team.

TG: *Boys of Summer* by Roger Kahn or *Ball Four* by Jim Bouton?

RY: That's an interesting one. Of course *Boys of Summer* was about my beloved Dodgers — the Brooklyn Dodgers, though, who were a little before my time. Kahn's writing is absolutely beautiful. But, I'll have to go with *Ball Four*, which is still found on top-100 lists of general-interest books. I find Bouton's behind-the-scenes insights and less-than-flattering observations about major league baseball players and their arrested development to be entertaining as well as applicable to many aspects of everyday life.

TG: DCMA is strongly embracing performance-based management (PBM). Is the Special Programs Division doing likewise?

RY: Absolutely. We're in lockstep with the rest of the Agency and getting the word out to all parts of our division. We fully expect to do like the mainstream product divisions and resource to performance commitments. We expect to have the infrastructure in place to carry it out by fiscal year 2008. I recently visited one of our [contract management office (CMO)] locations and was given a rundown on its PBM efforts, including what it's doing with voice of the customer and cause-and-effect analyses. It exemplified what every good organization should be doing. Ironically, though, because of the nature of that CMO's mission, very few people are going to know about its PBM success. The folks there tell me they're not doing it for the recognition but rather because it's the right thing to do — and those are their words. So, yes, the Special Programs Division is committed to the adoption of PBM. It is as meaningful to us as it is to any element in the Agency.

TG: Does the secure environment pose special challenges to you in establishing customer outcomes?

RY: Yes, largely due to the constraints associated with communication about special-access programs. Even for those programs I've been briefed to, I can't simply pick up a telephone and discuss that program on an unsecured line — even with the customer. Such discussions often must take place in a venue that has been cleared for sensitive communication. This makes it difficult to set up meetings and to have those one-on-one discussions by which we educate the customer on our PBM approach, capture the voice of the customer and convey the level of support we will provide to ensure desired outcomes. Conversely, though, there are some advantages we have in establishing customer outcomes because we're collocated with many of our customers and have ready access to many of

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them. It is at those locations that we’re seeing our most resounding PBM successes.

TG: Do you have much interplay with the Defense Contract Audit Agency (DCAA)?

RY: We do. In fact, DCAA has a sister organization to us, and it supports the special-access program community. We have a great working relationship with them and meet quarterly with their key personnel, who are firmly committed to helping us meet our priorities.

TG: It’s a free Saturday afternoon. What might we find you doing?

RY: I guess it depends on the time of year, but most likely I’d be doing something family-related. With a wife and four sons, I often have several things on my Saturday calendar. For many years, the boys were active in hockey, lacrosse and the performing arts, and my weekends were often spent chauffeuring the kids and attending their various games, performances and practices. Now that the boys are in high school and college, there’s a better chance you’d find me doing yard work or simply relaxing with my wife, Loretta, and catching up on each other’s busy life.

TG: After a tough day at the office, are we more likely to find you staring at a computer screen, at a television screen or out the screen door?

RY: [Laughter] Probably a TV screen. When I get home from work, my kids are usually on the computer doing homework, playing games or socializing. I’m in front of a computer most of the day, so I don’t mind being exiled to the television and unwinding for awhile. Later in

the evening I can reclaim the computer and do what I need to do. I do a lot of reading, as well.

TG: Any notable books you’ve read lately?

RY: Well, I’m currently reading a World War I chronicle presented from the perspective of the tommies in the trenches and the key commanders. It’s *To the Last Man* by Jeff Shaara, whose father, Michael, you may recall, wrote *Killer Angels*, a definitive account of the Battle of Gettysburg. Just finished Bob Woodward’s bestseller, *State of Denial*, and James Swanson’s *Manhunt*, an absolutely gripping account of the 12-day hunt for John Wilkes Booth following Lincoln’s assassination. Also enjoyed *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time* by Mark Haddon, a fictional story presented in the voice of an autistic boy who sees the world and his seriously dysfunctional English family much differently than you or I would. I was enticed by the title, which is taken from a work by one of my favorite writers, Arthur Conan Doyle, of course, the creator of Sherlock Holmes.

TG: Until recently, your three CMOs — East, West and South — were headed by military personnel. Those command positions have now been civilianized. What was the rationale for the conversion?

RY: That decision is traceable to a series of discussions we had with Brig. Gen. [Edward] Harrington, [former DCMA director]; [Mrs.] Sallie Flavin, [former DCMA deputy director]; and Maj. Gen. [Darryl] Scott, [former DCMA director]. We wanted to achieve greater continuity of leadership in the special-access arena. Not only did it take a long time to get military personnel cleared and onboard, there

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was a steep learning curve for operating in a secure environment — even for long-time acquisition professionals. We felt we could improve the flow of operations if we cut down on military turnover. The decision also reflects concern about a continuing decline in the number of military billets allocated to the Agency. The conversion had nothing to do with the level of support or the proficiency we were getting from our military leaders, many of whom advanced to other positions in the Agency and continue to render outstanding service.

TG: Which is harder ... sending a fax from one of your secured stations or finding ice time in northern Virginia?

RY: [Laughter] Yeah, I think finding ice time. I used to play a lot of ice hockey in years past. I started playing as a young man in California and continued during my stint at DCMA Wichita [Kan.] in the early '90s. After I came to the Washington area 10 years ago, I was the third leading scorer in a men's league. But ice time was always at a premium, and games were often played late on weeknights. After a while, it just became too hard to play late and go to work the next morning. I still get the urge to lace up the skates but for pick-up games only. My sons, one of whom played junior hockey for the San Antonio Diablos of the Western States Hockey League, have gotten me hooked on in-line skate hockey, which is a little easier on this aging body.

TG: You have the distinction of being DCMA's first graduate of the Defense Leadership and Management Program (DLAMP). Did that help prepare you for your new position?

RY: Without question. DLAMP gave me

rounding in multiple aspects of DoD operations and really caused me to think about one's propensity for and approach to leadership. My mentor throughout the program was the now-retired Carol Covey, who was the head of cost and pricing policy at [the Office of the Secretary of Defense] and who helped me every step of the way. Completing the curriculum with its emphasis on leadership definitely solidified my commitment to becoming a leader in DoD. There's more to becoming a leader than just wanting to be. Not only do you need to know the job, you need to know yourself. You must do what it takes to prepare yourself, assess your true willingness and be sure of your desire. As Mr. Ernst has said, it takes aspiration, ability and engagement. DLAMP made it clear to me that I was ready for the next leadership rung in the special-access program world.

TG: Speaking of leadership in that secretive realm ... Maxwell Smart or James Bond?

RY: Maxwell Smart, hands down. Hey, we've got to give proper respect to the "cone of silence."



(Above) Mr. Ronald J. Youngs (right), director, DCMA Special Programs Division, speaks with Mr. Tom Gelli, chief, DCMA Congressional Affairs. (Photo by Ms. Julia Wyant, DCMA Public Affairs)