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Tortora reflects on his time as commander, Huntsville Center

By William S. Farrow

July 26, Col. Nello Tortora will relinquish command of the U.S. Army Engineering and Support Center, Huntsville to Col. Robert J. Ruch. Tortora assumed command on July 28, 2009.

During his tenure, he identified three challenges he faced as commander and how he faced those challenges.

“The first challenge was just the tremendous workload the Center was experiencing,” Tortora said. “When I arrived in 2009, defense budgets were surging as a result of the convergence of many significant events: two overseas contingency operations; significantly increased military construction and operations and maintenance budgets, and stimulus-funded projects from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. This convergence resulted in the perfect storm for all of USACE and placed some incredible demands on Huntsville Center.

“We faced these challenges by doing a number of smart things,” Tortora said. “First, it is all about people. Making sure our team was resourced and ready to accomplish the mission. Making sure the troop-to-task ration was right. We grew the Center by 160 people and focused on hiring people with the right skills to get the job done. Second, we focused on delivery of the project, product or service on time. This was extremely difficult given the demanding timelines we were up against. We were successful by listening to our customers, ensuring that processes and systems were in place and adjusted as needed, defined expectations, tracked schedule, cost and quality metrics and focused all effort on delivery to meet our customer requirements. Easier said than done, but our people got it done. Third, we had to organize for combat. We had to adjust our organization to support the Army. A great example was having the vision to realize the significant need of our ordnance and explosive expertise in overseas contingency operations. We decided to stand up and resource an International Operations Division leveraging our program and project management, technical and acquisition expertise and projecting it into Iraq, Afghanistan and other parts of the world. This is a huge success for the Center and makes a significant contribution to saving Soldiers’ lives in OCO.”

Strategic planning

Tortora said the second challenge was developing a strategic plan for the future – looking to 2020.

“What became clear is that after the surge in budgets there would be a downturn in defense spending, and we would need to adapt our organization to best serve the needs of the Army and the Defense Department,” Tortora said. We set out to do this in early 2010 by first assessing what we were doing and whether or not it would lead us to where we want to be as an organization. Then asking, are these missions we should continue to put our effort into? And are there missions we should further develop or are there new missions we should develop?

“We leveraged some of the best and brightest teams in the Center to analyze our 40 programs and assess what we were doing and whether or not we needed to change anything,” he said. “The key is we wanted to determine where we add the most value to the USACE enterprise and our customers and then as a follow-on, in our Implementation Plan, what would be our focus on enhancing our value.”

The teams asked basic questions: which of our programs are most aligned with our Charter? which are we most passionate about? what drives our economic engine; and what do we want to be best in the world at?

“We found that our highest ranked programs were those that had strong proponents here, in Headquarters and within our customer organization,” Tortora said. “They are programs that have their foundation in one of our Centers of Expertise. They provide a significant amount of in-house work; are stable programs in terms of funding; our contribution adds great value for our customer; they are directly linked to our charter; they have a manageable level of risk; and they employ the resources of all our functional areas within the Center.”

The analysis helped the team develop a set of lines of effort for the future, develop a strategic plan and form the annual IPlan that details specific actions to achieve the outcome specified in the Center’s lines of effort and the USACE Campaign plan.

“I am very proud that our team has published the Center’s first strategic plan based on our lines of effort that will continue to form the actions we need to take to achieve strategic outcomes,” Tortora said.

Energy goals

The third challenge was to adapt to the Army’s significant challenge and new emphasis on meeting mandated energy reduction goals, he said.

“This required us to quickly stand up a new Energy Division to help the Army meet its energy goals,” Tortora said. “It was also a great opportunity for Huntsville Center to showcase its expertise and ability to develop and execute innovative programs and acquisitions. The best example of this is the new Federal Renewable and Alternative Energy Power Purchase Agreement ID/IQ. This large and complex acquisition will contribute immensely to meeting the Army’s goal of leveraging \$7 billion in private sector finance for renewable energy projects. Bold in its conception, it is a perfect example of the Center’s culture of innovation and being first with the most to support the Army. Our new Energy Division has stepped up to the demand and is delivering on programs and projects that are helping achieve Energy Security.”

Tortora said the most exciting aspect of his job at the Huntsville Center is the people.

“I have never been someplace where there is more passion about what we do,” Tortora said. “Likewise, the technical expertise is the foundation of what we do, and our technical experts are a humble group who are making an incredibly positive impact. Being on this team has been an extremely humbling experience. It is a team that demonstrates Army values in all they do, is extremely proud and passionate about their work; understands that we must deliver for service

members and their families; and has fun doing it. Their dedication to USACE, the Army, and the nation is what excites me.”

Evolving mission

“I am not convinced that everyone always understands the importance of adaptability, innovation and that we must lead in this regard,” Tortora said. “The old adage that the only thing constant in the Army is change holds as true today as ever. We must always understand our customer’s mission and requirements and as there are changes adapt and innovate to add value to their mission. The medical program is always a great example. We started out just procuring MRIs and doing minor renovations to install the new equipment. Looking to add value, our Medical Support Team developed a Medical Repair and Renewal, Medical Furniture and Maintenance programs that just this year executed \$500 million in work.”

Tortora said he sees the future of Huntsville the same as the past. He said we must continue to leverage our foundation expertise to develop programs, acquisitions and projects that support the Army, DoD and the nation. To do this, we must continually assess the environment we are in and then adjust, adapt, innovate, implement and deliver.

Mission accomplished

Now that his 27-year Army career is coming to a close, Tortora recalls a few memories he has of his time wearing the Army uniform.

“There have been so many great memories it is unlikely that I can do justice to any of them,” Tortora said. “Most of the great memories are not about anything I did, but what we were able to accomplish as a team. The great memories are about the relationships ... personal and professional. I consider myself blessed to have met my wife, Karen, while we both served in Honduras. Twelve years later we were blessed when Nicholas was born. The fun and loving family memories while serving at some 20 different addresses will always be cherished.

“The memories from the great leaders I served under,” he continued. “I consider myself so incredibly fortunate to have served under the command of some of the most positive, genuine, caring leaders ever; selfless leaders who coached and mentored me throughout my career.

“Certainly, the memories of the officers, non-commissioned officers, Soldiers and civilians that I have had the privilege to serve will be unforgettable,” Tortora said. “Their list of accomplishments is too long to cite. They met every challenge, exceeded every expectation, and displayed initiative and courage in service to our nation in peace and war. They inspired me each and every day and serving with them is the highlight of my career.

“I am humbled and deeply honored to have served as commander of the U.S. Army Engineering and Support Center. This is the perfect way to end a 27-year career. Thanks to each of you that make our nation, Army, and Corps of Engineers great.”