Building Strong

Lt. Gen. Robert L. Van Antwerp fortifies USACE for the future.

Written by: Jan Tegler on January 9, 2011

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Official photo of Lt. Gen. Robert L. Van Antwerp, chief of engineers and commanding general of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers from May 2007-present. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, FT Eyre

Ask Lt. Gen. Robert L. Van Antwerp what he's most proud of as his tenure as USACE chief of engineers and commanding general nears its conclusion and he'll tell you over and over, "It's our people."

From day one on the job, Gen. "Van" has sought to improve the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) by strengthening its greatest asset – the dedicated Soldiers and civilians who execute the command's vital missions around the world. Armed with a strategy now known Corps-wide as the "Campaign Plan," Van Antwerp has made the development and recruitment of human capital a priority. In parallel, he has encouraged USACE personnel to cultivate a culture of innovation from the division and district levels right down to the individual.

This focused effort has already paid dividends. In 2009, USACE hired 8,213 employees and in 2010 are projected to hire another 8,000. They come to the Corps with a variety of experience and an enthusiasm that is helping to re-energize USACE. Retention has also been emphasized and the Corps is looking ahead, working to prepare for any "talent gap" that may arise as aging workforce members retire.

In addition, new and existing personnel are being encouraged to develop individual plans that move them forward and dovetail with the operational plans and I-Plans, or Implementation Plan, of their division. Work toward professional registration (professional engineering licenses and project management professional certification, as examples) is on the rise with the objective of a more qualified Corps of Engineers than ever before firmly in sight.

The benefits of human capital development are magnified across every mission area as the workforce continues to more thoroughly apply Van Antwerp's direction to "share ideas willingly and steal ideas shamelessly."

The fruits of the concept are manifested not only in improved collaboration among USACE teams and individuals but between the Corps and a range of organizations and agencies with which the command has often been at odds. From tribal relations and contractor interaction to environmental preservation and reconstruction, Corps personnel are reaching out and listening as never before, seeking fresh perspectives to solve complex problems and build on proven principles.

The emphasis of the 52nd chief of engineers on people shouldn't come as a surprise. Prior to his assumption of command at USACE, Van Antwerp

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Chief of Engineers Lt. Gen. Robert L. Van Antwerp presents an award to Jeremy D. Laster, a structural engineer for USACE New Orleans District, who was recognized in February 2010 as the "Most Promising Engineer or Scientist in Government" for his work in the design and development of the Hurricane and Storm Damage Risk Reduction System in New Orleans. "Jeremy Laster is a bright young star in the Corps of Engineers," the chief said. Van Antwerp's Campaign Plan emphasizes the development and recruitment of human capital in the Corps' workforce; Laster exemplifies that priority. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Navy, Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Elizabeth Vlahos

assumption of command at USACE, Van Antwerp served in a variety of Army leadership roles both inside and outside the Corps where he invested great effort in attracting, developing, and supporting human capital. None was more notable than the tour that preceded his current command.

In 2004, Van Antwerp became the chief of Army Accessions Command (AAC) at a time when Army recruiting needed a shot in the arm. Having underperformed in previous years, the command topped its goal for recruitment by 2006 under his leadership. It was also during Van Antwerp's tenure that the command launched a new slogan. After consulting with cadets and new recruits AAC coined the motto, Army Strong®.

So when the former West Point football player took over USACE in May 2007, he took the same idea from the playbook he developed at Accessions Command. After talking with a wide range of Corps personnel, Van Antwerp and USACE leaders adopted the phrase that describes the organization's foundation for meeting the challenges of today and the future – Building Strong®.

Nearly four years later, Van Antwerp is still working on transforming USACE, even as the command has taken on a historic workload both at home and abroad. With the end of his tour in sight (Van Antwerp will turn over command in May 2011), the Corps' enthusiastic leader gave *Serving the Nation and the Armed Forces* a snapshot of where USACE stands as 2010 winds down and what 2011 will bring.

The Workload

When Van Antwerp spoke with us for *Serving the Nation and the Armed Forces* in 2009, the Corps was facing an "unprecedented workload." Legacy operations and maintenance work, the Obama administration's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) stimulus package, and a shift in combat zone operations from Iraq to Afghanistan had pushed USACE activity to record levels.

According to the USACE commander, the Corps took on $45 billion worth of work by the end of 2009.

"A normal year's worth of work for the Corps represents about $12 billion," Van Antwerp said. "This year [2009] is off the charts but what a great time to be in the Corps!"

If 2009 was a banner year, 2010 has proven just as busy. ARRA work went forward with a dual purpose, allowing the Corps to do much-needed maintenance and construction on key infrastructure (particularly in the water resources area) and aiding the government's attempt to spur the economy via "shovel ready" projects.

Chief of Engineers Lt. Gen. Robert L. Van Antwerp stands with Capt. Karl VanFlorcke aboard the Dredge McFarland. During the visit, Van Antwerp presented the deck, engine, and steward crew of the McFarland with certificates of recognition for their work on the Southwest Pass of the Mississippi River January to April 2010. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Sarah Rivette

The work associated with the stimulus package was on top of projects already under way. Work to complete the $85 billion Army Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC 2005) and military construction mission as required was ongoing. So too was the rebuilding of a $14.6 billion flood-damage reduction system, or levees, in and around New Orleans, La.

Support for Overseas Contingency Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan carried on while USACE's more traditional missions demanded full attention, including a disaster-response effort in the wake of the earthquake in Haiti as the year began and a similar response after flooding in Tennessee in May.

By the end of August 2009, the Corps had executed more than $17 billion in Civil Works. "It was a truly remarkable feat," said Van Antwerp. "Particularly when you consider the supplemental and the ARRA funds, we finished up the year with a 98 percent obligation rate!"

The trend went on unabated this year with the Corps on pace to execute projects exceeding $35 billion, including $23 billion for military construction. Looking ahead, the Corps' commander anticipates $38 billion worth of work for 2011. But with new additions to the workforce and the collective expertise and energy of current USACE personnel, Van Antwerp sees no reason why the challenges posed by another record workload can't be overcome.

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An aerial view of the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA) New Campus East complex being constructed at Fort Belvoir, Va., June 30, 2010. Along with NGA, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Baltimore District and part of the North Atlantic Division is managing design and construction of the $1.7 billion facility as part of Base Realignment and Closure 2005 programs at and around Fort Belvoir. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Marc Barnes

The Campaign Plan and USACE Culture

More than three years into Van Antwerp's tenure and three years since the launch of his Campaign Plan, the concept is working well, resonating with leaders at every level of the Corps. It remains the "box top" for the USACE jigsaw puzzle, providing a clear picture of the goals the organization is pursuing and focusing the command's civilian and military workforce on its most important tasks.

Van Antwerp is keen to point out that the "human element" is still the prime focus of the Campaign Plan. New initiatives in recruiting, developing, and retaining the Corps' workforce are being instituted while others are under development.

Significant strides have been made in transforming the way USACE recruits the engineers and professionals of tomorrow. Van Antwerp cites progress in both immediate growth over the last year and in how the command is positioning itself to grow the team for years to come. In 2010, the Corps established the USACE Recruitment Program to compete more aggressively with other agencies for applicants in the future.

Van Antwerp and other Corps leaders expect that competition for talent will get tougher as the economy fully recovers, as baby boomers retire, as competition increases for those in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (referred to as STEM occupations), and as today's newest generation enters the workforce with limited work experience. The Corps' goal is to ensure that USACE stands out by emphasizing its unique mission, unparalleled work experiences, service to the nation, and the opportunity to work in the U.S. and abroad.

Three quarters of the way through 2010, the workforce had grown by more than 3,000 people. Van Antwerp noted that the Corps was closing in on a workforce of more than 39,000 – a direct reflection of its ability to better retain and recruit.

Building the workforce is more than just putting bodies in seats he stresses. It's also about getting the right person in the right position and preparing for a changing workload. Van Antwerp says USACE is looking for professionals with experience in energy, automated engineering applications, and other cutting-edge technology so that the Corps can continue to serve the nation as leaders in engineering. USACE also remains committed to recruiting a diverse workforce to meet technical and leadership competencies.

The Corps has always had a "can do" culture said Van Antwerp, but he added that USACE is making great strides in creating a "culture of innovation." The notion of tapping the best of the Corps' internal knowledge, while simultaneously seeking input from a wide range of USACE partners and external stakeholders to overcome long-term challenges, has taken hold. As mentioned, the Corps now works with groups that frequently opposed it in the past. There's a growing recognition that the command can get more done by considering unfamiliar ideas rather than rejecting them.

Contingency Support in Afghanistan and Iraq

In 2009, it became clear that USACE support of operations in Iraq was winding down. By autumn, multiple district offices had been inactivated along with a division headquarters as the workload there decreased. As Van Antwerp observed, it was good news. The majority of the projects (nearly 5,000) scheduled for the Corps in Iraq since 2004, when it stood up operations, were complete.

At the same time, the USACE mission in Afghanistan was growing. Two district offices were up and running by August 2009, with a division headquarters established as the year wound down. Plans initially called for the headquarters to fall under the Joint Force Engineering Command (JFEC), supporting the Afghanistan Engineer District-North and AED-South.

As it turned out, the USACE "plug part" of the JFEC, the Joint Program Integration Office, did most of the interface with Afghanistan-North and Afghanistan-South. According to Van Antwerp, the JFEC will soon stand down and the reserves will no longer provide the JFEC commander. The new theater engineer will be Brig. Gen. Mark W. Yenter. He will be the USFOR-A ENG (U.S. Forces, Afghanistan-Engineer) instead of the JFEC commander.

Regarding the shift in contingency support from Iraq to Afghanistan, USACE's commander says that he doesn't really see a shift but more of a "ramp down" as projects are completed in Iraq. Overall, Van

A new office and barracks building for the Afghan fire department at the regional training center at Camp Parsa, Khost province, Afghanistan, was designed to suit Afghan tastes and practices. So far this year, deployed Corps service members and civilians have been working hard in partnership with other agencies to help provide the basics to the war-torn country; USACE continues infrastructure projects valued at nearly $2 billion

Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Afghanistan Engineer District-North, Paul Giblin

Antwerp feels the wind-down in Iraq has progressed well and he indicates that the Corps will continue to support the mission with on-the-ground engineering expertise, both uniformed and civilian. Since 2003, USACE personnel have made more than 10,000 deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Over the past six years, the Corps has invested more than $4.5 billion in construction in Afghanistan, mostly building Afghan police stations, army bases, roads, airstrips, and other infrastructure projects, plus facilities for U.S. and coalition forces.

In 2010, the two districts, North and South, have played a vital role in international efforts to establish a secure and stable environment in Afghanistan while increasing its reconstruction effort, valued at $3.2 billion in fiscal year 2010. Van Antwerp highlights initiatives including the construction of the Afghanistan National Police training facility in Wardak province (which will provide training for 134,000 recruits by 2011) and the construction of the Afghanistan National Army's Khair Khot Garrison, which will support more than 3,400 Afghan soldiers by winter 2010.

In 2009, Van Antwerp spoke about his excitement for tackling the difficult challenge of managing water resources in Afghanistan – a key initiative for getting the country on its feet. In 2010, deployed Corps personnel have been working hard in partnership with other agencies to help provide the basics to the war-torn country. USACE engineers have performed watershed assessments in 16 provinces across the country. The assessments identify sound and sustainable engineering locations to build small, water irrigation and hydropower dams to support stability, economic growth, and job creation.

In southern Afghanistan, Van Antwerp reported that the Corps has begun the final leg of the country's $500 million "Ring Road," a highway system that loops the rugged mountain terrain and sparsely populated countryside to connect to its major cities.

Military Construction, Civil Works Projects, and the Gulf Oil Spill

The Corp's military construction workload remained at a high tempo in 2010 as the command worked toward completion of the roster of projects dictated by BRAC 2005. In all, the military construction workload from fiscal year 2006 through fiscal year 2013 exceeds $73.2 billion. That's before the addition of work called for by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, which provided an additional $3 billion in military programs alone.

The Corps will wrap up most of the work from this unprecedented program in 2011 according to Van Antwerp, completing construction (as required) by September 2011. Additional work resulting from the Army's restructuring and re-stationing will also be completed.

Van Antwerp notes that there is still an enormous amount of military construction work ahead, including $20.3 billion worth in fiscal year 2011. An example of the challenge is the Army's largest military construction project since the Pentagon was built in 1943, the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency New Campus East. The campus occupies the site of what was formerly known as the Engineer Proving Ground, in Springfield, Va.

Construction continues on the Inner Harbor Navigation Canal Surge Barrier, dubbed the "Great Wall of Louisiana," is one of the main perimeter structures of the Hurricane and Storm Damage Risk Reduction System. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Back toward America's Heartland, pressure is on to complete of the rebuilding of the New Orleans levee system, now referred to as the "Hurricane and Storm Damage Risk Reduction System." Van Antwerp has committed to finishing the project by June 2011. The goal is to transform what was once a patchwork of levees, floodwalls, and pumps into a true system that will provide 100-year-level perimeter protection against hurricane storm surge to Greater New Orleans.

The project includes the "Inner Harbor Navigation Canal Surge Barrier," the Corps' largest-ever design-build Civil Works Project. At almost two miles long, the $1.3 billion project is being called the "Great Wall of Louisiana." It's one of the key components of the Hurricane and Storm Damage Risk Reduction System. Another is the nearly $1 billion West Closure Complex, a gated surge barrier containing the largest drainage pump station in the world, now 40 percent complete after only one year of construction. More than 270 construction contracts have been awarded for the mission with more than $9 billion of funding committed to the huge project.

Finally, USACE has been responding to the effects of the massive Deepwater Horizon oil spill, which occurred in the Gulf of Mexico in April 2010. In early May, the Corps announced permitting guidelines for cleanup, employing Nationwide Permit 20 to authorize activities involving containment and cleanup of oil and hazardous substances.

Some friction with Louisiana officials resulted from a proposal by Gov. Bobby Jindal to create barrier islands to keep oil from the state's coast. USACE did not immediately issue permits to allow the project to proceed and faced criticism from state officials over the issue. In June, portions of the plan were eventually approved. As of

this writing, the Environmental Protection Agency was urging the Corps to turn down a request from the state to build 101 miles of sand berms to stop oil from contaminating shores and marshlands.

Reflection

Just less than halfway through 2011, Van Antwerp will step down as commander of USACE, leaving the growing team of Corps Soldiers and civilians to carry on with the organization's historic workload and move forward with the "good to great" vision he articulated for the command.

Van Antwerp is quick to express his enthusiasm for USACE, characterizing the opportunity to lead the Corps as an "incredible privilege." He's proud of the way in which Corps personnel have stepped up to deal with extraordinary responsibilities at home and abroad, and equally moved by the "expeditionary civilians" who have answered the call for overseas contingency operations and always responded to disasters in an exemplary way.

Through it all, the people of the Corps of Engineers have inspired him.

"If I am remembered for anything, I would want it to be the love I have for the people and mission of the Corps," Van Antwerp affirmed. "We did it together!"

This article first appeared in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Building Strong® Serving the Nation and the Armed Forces 2010-2011 Edition.

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