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Chief of Engineers: Words of Wisdom

By Honolulu District Public Affairs

(FORT SHAFTER, HI NR 32-08) At a joint Honolulu District/Pacific Ocean Division town hall meeting in late July, Chief of Engineers Lt. Gen. Robert Van Antwerp shared many words of wisdom and announced a new Corps of Engineers slogan, “Building Strong,” which parallels the Army’s slogan of “Army Strong.”

“We’re part of the Army and we need to stay a part, because we have a big part,” Lt. Gen. Van Antwerp said. “Next time we go to war, I guarantee you wherever that is, heaven forbid, we will think about the reconstruction part before we go.”

The Corps has nearly 800 “civilian soldiers” deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan and employees in 33 different countries, he said. Fighting the Global War on Terror is part of a multifaceted leap in the operational tempo of the Corps.

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2-2-2 CHIEF WISDOM

“We have never had a workload like we have now,” said Van Antwerp. “The green light is on right now to hire to our requirements. We are going to have a mountain of work until about 2012-2013, so we need to bring the right people on board to get that done.”

He said growth doesn’t concern him because being busy is preferable to being idle and he recalled work force downsizing and downgrading while assigned to the Los Angeles District.

“Don’t worry about reduction in force at the other end of (the increase),” Van Antwerp said. “Normal turnover and retirement in the Corps of Engineers is such that at the right time we’ll slow it down. But right now, let’s hire it in and let’s hire permanent Department of the Army civilians. That when we look back, we’ll say we built this Corps to last.”

Because of understaffing, he said every district needs to recruit. To be “built to last,” the Corps needs a full range of staff from interns and summer hires to those who have served for 40 or more years. Part of the challenge of hiring the right people for the right job is availability. He said the nation this year will have 75,000 engineering graduates, but businesses need 100,000. He added that foreign engineering students who used to stay in the United States after graduation now often return home because of the opportunities there.

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3-3-3 CHIEF WISDOM

The general said that typically the Corps military programs budget is around \$6 billion. At the end of this fiscal year, an unprecedented \$28 billion of construction will be under way. A normal civil works budget is \$5 billion, but this year it will be \$12.5 billion, much of it going to New Orleans. The Corps Engineering Research and Development Center usually has \$500 million per year, but this year it has \$700 million.

On top of that, the Corps has exploratory projects with the Department of Energy on solar and wind power and a project for Department of Homeland Security to build a fence along the U.S. and Mexican border.

“I’m not trolling for more work,” he said. “We have enough to do. But we had some work come to us.”

He briefly discussed Corps project authorization and how it tries to ensure those extra projects added to the president’s budget are necessary, which happens through prioritization and cost-benefit ratios. This period of heavy workload also brings unusual training opportunities using existing projects.

The general also said the Corps also has to “steal ideas shamelessly” and “share ideas willingly,” which is why there is (Corps) regionalization, centers of expertise and communities of practice.

After taking command, Lt. Gen. Van Antwerp said he found so many different strategic lists that he decided to come up with a single campaign plan.

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4-4-4 CHIEF WISDOM

“The campaign plan is then turned over to the divisions and districts for the implementation plan because you’re the center of gravity,” Van Antwerp said. “You’re the ones who get it done.”

His “Seek Ye First” jar—12 walnuts and 2 ½ cups of rice—is the visual aid he uses to show how “if the walnuts representing the campaign plan go in first, then the rice representing everything else will fall into place.”

The next step is a structure of the right people, thought and action to excel, which is the theme of the book “Good to Great” by Jim Collins.

He said that employees who have a passion for what they do are the “right people on the right seats of the bus.”

“The Corps will know it’s going from good to great if it delivers superior performance every time, makes a unique and positive contribution to this nation and others, consists of employees setting the standard in their profession, and is built to last.”

He said the Corps is well on its way toward going from good to great - not for the sake of the Corps, but for the good the nation.

“We can make an impact on this country for the good, and we have the opportunity,” Van Antwerp said. “It all comes down to the districts delivering. Our part is to resource you to do it.”

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