

End of Career Oral History Interview
James Nelson - Civilian Executive Assistant - Iowa Army Ammunition Plant
End of Career Interview: 1983-2014

Pleasant: Today is March 25th, 2014 and Keri Pleasant is interviewing James (Jim) Nelson. He is retiring soon from Iowa Army Ammunition Plant and the purpose of this interview is to capture his thoughts on his career and Iowa's immediate history. Could you please state your position title here at Iowa?

Nelson: I'm the Civilian Executive Assistant for the Commander and I have been in this position since 2008.

Pleasant: I'd like to lead off with you providing some background information about your life, where did you grow up?

Nelson: I grew up in Mediapolis, Iowa which is small town just north of here about 20 miles off Highway 61. I was born and raised there and went to high school there. I left and went to Colorado for college at Western State College in Gunnison, Colorado and also the University of Colorado. My major was in Business Administration and Accounting. I moved back to Iowa in 1981 and have been here ever since. The reason I came back was that I had started working in Denver after I graduated and worked out there for about eight years. I loved it, but it was a growing city/environment and after I got married, we decided Iowa was a nice place to raise the kids. We wanted to move back closer to my family

Pleasant: Was your first position at Iowa Army Ammunition Plant when you returned?

Nelson: No, actually, I worked for a Certified Public Accountant (CPA) firm for McGladrey Hendrickson, CPAs before I started here.

Pleasant: What led you to federal service with the Army?

Nelson: I began my federal career with the Treasury Department - Internal Revenue Service (IRS) in Denver after I graduated from Western State College. It was an interesting story. In my senior year I was taking a tax class and the professor made everyone in the course take an interview with the Internal Revenue Service. He made it mandatory to pass the class. He was trying to get all the seniors to at least go out and gain some interview experience. He said, "you may not want to work for the IRS, but I want you to complete the interview." So, reluctantly, I and several others in the class did the interview and surprisingly they were very quick to say I was just the type of person they wanted with great grades and if you are interested in applying, here is the application. I jumped on it because it was a job and they said they'd let me know in two weeks. That was my first experience knowing that the government doesn't always react as quickly as they say. I didn't hear anything in two weeks, and I went ahead and graduated and still didn't hear anything. So, my wife and I moved back to Iowa. For the summer, I worked as a laborer at a grain elevator in downtown Burlington because the

job market was not very good at the time. Then one day in October, I got a letter from the IRS indicating that if I wanted the job I had to be back to Denver in two weeks. I jumped on the chance and we moved back to Colorado and I started my federal career. It was one of the best and most interesting jobs I've ever had. I was an Internal Revenue Agent and I got to work on some fraud cases, examine different companies and large cases involving oil companies, banks, and more. It was great experience.

Denver seemed to be growing and getting too big for our style. We moved back to Iowa and I got my CPA certificate and my career goal at that time was to be a CPA. I started working for McGladrey Hendrickson and realized that that wasn't really the environment I really cared for. Two years of it was enough, it had demanding hours and I was just starting to raise my kids and I could see I wasn't going to be able to spend as much time with them as I wanted to with that particular profession.

There was a job open at the ammunition plant for an Accountant so I applied and since I had prior federal service, it was a fairly easy transition. I got hired immediately and started here in October 1983.

Pleasant: The government must have allowed you better hours with more flexibility.

Nelson: It was better hours, better flexibility and I knew the way the federal government worked. Federal jobs have been very premium jobs. They pay well, have vacation benefits and are hard to beat. It fit my lifestyle a whole lot better. I'm glad I took that step.

Pleasant: Your first position was as an Accountant, how long before you switched into the contracting field?

Nelson: I had to look some of this information up (laughs). I lost track. I was an Accountant for around seven years, then a Supervisory Accountant, and then I was a Contract Administrator and then Supervisory Contract Administrator, and then finally the CEA. There was a transition to each of those steps within my career.

Pleasant: What are the most significant lessons you've learned that have contributed to your success across your career?

Nelson: Each job had its own set of technical skills that you needed to know, but as I worked through each one of those, I could see that the direction I wanted to go was towards a management and leadership role. In each of my jobs, I looked to expand my knowledge and get involved in other aspects of the business. For example, with the accounting perspective I wanted to know more about the contracting process, which led me to the contracting position and the acquisition workforce. What I learned from each job was that you can never know too much and never be secure in knowing only your role in a specific job. Some people are comfortable with that, but I always wanted to know more about production, safety, environment, and more. They are all linked and

part of the operations here, so I expanded my knowledge, continued to educate myself and provide whatever I could to each of those areas. That is the path that I followed.

Pleasant: Can you discuss various highlights or areas of focus that you have encountered in your current position?

Nelson: The significant accomplishment that has helped our staff the most is when we obtained our ISO certification. That came about from JMC looking into the utilization of ISO on processes throughout the command. Many contractors use the ISO standards. The directives we received from the headquarters was to become ISO compliant. At that time, I looked at it and thought if we were going to be compliant, why not just become certified. I went to our Commander, Colonel Benjamin Nutt (who is now the JMC Chief of Staff) and we discussed it. I told him that I didn't see any sense in putting the effort in being compliant unless we just go all the way and become certified. So we went down that path. At the time, we had an opening for a Quality Division Supervisor and we got a fellow with some great experience and we were able to prepare our ISO system, processes, and documentation in a four month period. The entire staff was involved, and we achieved certification on the first round. We were the first GOCO (government-owned, contractor-operated) Army Staff to become ISO certified. Our entire staff is very proud of this and it has proven its worth. I feel like we've established our standard as being the highest and we continue to look for improvement. We have occasional corrective actions and areas to look at, and that is part of the process, to make changes. ISO certification has really shown the Iowa staff is at the top of the GOCOs in my opinion. We've assisted several of the other plants in obtaining certification, we've visited them and showed them our process, and we've been a model installation in that regard.

Pleasant: Are there any other accomplishments or highlights that would like to discuss?

Nelson: I'm very pleased with how our staff has worked together as a team. You have to work amongst many personalities and skill levels within several career fields on our staff. We have individuals who are very good within their realms, whether it be safety, environmental, contracting, etc. The CEA's role that I've tried to facilitate is to make each of the areas cohesive and work together, because they all affect one another. Our staff has adapted well because we have good people. I've enabled them and made them relevant to the entire process to make sure the Army gets value out of this particular contract.

Our role here is to administer the contract to make sure it is in compliance with all the terms. We have very good success along with challenges from time to time.

When COL Nutt transferred commands, I was the first civilian to be placed in charge of the installation, as an interim manager. I feel that was a very fortunate opportunity to be given that trust. You are responsible for everything. Commanders have a very tough job in making sure everyone does their job, everyone goes home at the end of the day

in the same or better condition than they arrived. After September 11th, 2001, the environment we work in is totally different than it was in the 1980s and 90s. There are so many other things to be concerned with. So I'm very proud that I was trusted with that responsibility during that timeframe.

Pleasant: Since you were here in the 1990s, did you notice major differences in the buildups for Operation Desert Storm and OEF/OIF?

Nelson: Our activity hasn't changed significantly during any of those specific campaigns because the items we produce, medium and large caliber ammunition, 120mm tank rounds, artillery rounds, the majority of that is for training. Although during the Iraq War, we did provide 120mm rounds directly to the theater, the majority of our production goes into storage at the GOGOs. If needed for a particular war effort, they are shipped. But our activity didn't really jump in leaps and bounds. Lake City AAP's production of small caliber increased significantly, on the other hand.

Pleasant: What are Iowa's major successes in connection with the current wartime operations?

Nelson: We were the first GOCO plant to go to a no-cost facilities contract through competition. That started in the 2006 timeframe. We went through a plant competition and our contract was put up for competitive bids. The contractor here, American Ordnance, came up with an innovative approach which was asked for in the solicitation. What they arrived at was a transition of workload from Milan Army Ammunition Plant to Iowa AAP, which they jointly operated with this plant. It was quite an imaginative effort, and one that we pondered long and hard. It made sense, but it was a heck of a lot of work. They had to transition equipment, processes, and make/renovate facilities. It required a lot of money and investment on their part. But they were able to successfully do that. That is a significant change to Iowa's ability to produce a larger range of munitions.

The contractor has always been a very technical and engineering loaded organization and they can build just about any munition that needs to be made. Especially in the warhead pressing area. We have a lot of different presses here and our contractor has pursued making specialty weapons for whoever needs them. We used to produce large caliber 120mm tank rounds and artillery. We still make all the salute rounds, only made here. We are now producing the 40mm grenade rounds, the Mine Clearing Line Charges (MICLICs), we've pressed C4 and we make M112s. We produce a number of medium caliber rounds and component parts. The transition has been a real challenge, but also was completed with a lot of enthusiasm and with the future of this plant in mind, to keep Iowa AAP relevant to the Material Enterprise. It's still ongoing, but the optimization they had in the contract has been implemented. The 40mm test range is completed, the MICLIC is up and running, the C4 extruder is running, and the pressing operations for the 40mm is also under operation.

Everything has transitioned, and now we need workload that continues to support the cost of owning a 19,000 acre government owned facility. All the costs of maintaining this facility are put into the product cost, and that is how investment is recovered. That is difficult if you don't have enough workload to support the requirements to maintain the security force, the safety staff, engineering and maintenance staff on buildings and facilities that are in some cases 60 and 70 years old. In some cases they are crumbling, falling apart, and need maintenance. That is the challenge now. How do we continue to support and make ammunition at a reasonable cost that the government wants to pay. It's obvious with competition out there that contractor operated facilities that aren't on a government installation can make ammunition cheaper because they don't have the overhead we have. It is a tradeoff.

Pleasant: It is the age-old problem that we face within this business.

Nelson: Yes, it is and we are meeting it head on right now.

Pleasant: Iowa gained a significant amount of mission, is there anything that Iowa has lost as a part of BRAC or other actions?

Nelson: We haven't lost capability, we still have the capability to do anything we've produced in the past. Some of the things we used to do, like Gator mines, we could still produce if required. It has just been a transition in the types of weapons and ammunition that the Army has a need for. So, the capabilities are still here but the orders are not.

Pleasant: Are there any other ways that Iowa AAP has evolved across your career? Are there any other significant changes that helped the plant thrive?

Nelson: We've had steady workload, but it's getting tougher. We aren't getting directed workload at the same pace as we used to. It is more competitive and cost is the biggest factor now. I believe that Iowa has shown that we can make a quality product that works every time, that Soldiers can trust and that's the most important thing. It is a safe product. We are making IMX (insensitive munitions) rounds right now. The challenge is making them within the constraints of the Army's budget.

What has transitioned from earlier years in the 1980s, 1990s, 2000s; everything used to be cost-reimbursable contracting, which gives more flexibility. We've converted virtually everything to fixed-price now. That's a whole different world because the contractor has to have a sharp pencil. There is a lot of competition and money is hard to come by, so price is important. It doesn't always outweigh the factors of safety, security and quality but it is a key consideration. If they can't produce ammunition at a cost the government is willing to pay, someone else will get the work. That has happened. We have lost some contracts for Modular Artillery Charge System (MACS). The contractor made an investment in that based on their own analyses, and once they made their initial award, the contract went to someone else. Now they have bid on it again, and did win some

work back, so they are putting the MACS line back in operation. That is just starting back up now. It's an ebb and flow, which is good for the Army.

With sequestration, we read it in the papers everyday. General Via was here and he said "keep doing what you are doing, but there will be changes in the future." The future will be different, and there will be some changes in the way we do operations. But we are still relevant, so we are trying to follow that path. It's sometimes difficult to interpret exactly what the strategy for the future is. Should we continue to concentrate on medium caliber ammunition? Is there going to be enough workload to support that? Should we look at strategies for pursuing other lines of business? There are many questions.

The Armament Retooling and Manufacturing Support (ARMS) program is available, but we have a hard time marketing 60-70 year old facilities for someone to utilize. The intent of that program was good to put unused facilities to work, but the interest is not there. There are too many disadvantages to it, so it is not the cure for offsetting a majority of the over head. American Ordnance still pursues the program; we did have the possibility of a fertilizer plant coming here. A couple years ago, we received a proposal to put a \$2 billion facility/operation within our plant. The process we went through was quite a painstaking process with the environmental assessment. Eventually the fertilizer plant moved down to the south of the Burlington area on private land. I think it is a better solution and still provides a boost to the local economy. It is the biggest construction project in the state of Iowa.

Pleasant: That's a good tie in to my next question – how does Iowa interface with the local community and what challenges does it face?

Nelson: The plant has been here since 1939 and has been an integral part of the SE Iowa area and Burlington, Iowa. It's pretty rare to come across anyone who hasn't either worked here or had a family member work here. My oldest sister worked here in the 1960s, my oldest brother also worked here in the 1960s part time and then came back and worked for 34 years in the computer field. The plant is well known. The days of being somewhat secretive in our operations came from the fact that the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) operated a line here until 1975. Their activities were not well known to the public for very good reasons, but we've transitioned that secretive perspective in the last 15 years, and the plant is becoming more open. We bring many people in for visits and host several media events. We've held leadership luncheons to bring in community leaders to show them what we do here. We brought in City Councils, Mayors – not the Governor yet – but local and federal Congressmen, Senators and they are supportive of our actions. There has been some negativity expressed by the media concerning some of the environmental issues that have persisted at Iowa AAP; as they do at every one of the Army installations that has manufactured ammunition, because of the methods used for discharging pollutants. We are facing those continually today.

Pleasant: What unique or difficult situations did you handle or deal with in the management of contracts here at the plant?

Nelson: We don't reduce any requirements, we hold the contractor to the standards of the contract. We look for ways of improving processes. If we see something that doesn't make sense within the confines of the contract, we try to find solutions. That becomes an issue of contract modification. If it's in the contract, you still have to do it, so we have those issues we continue to work through. For the most part the working relationship is good. We have an award term contract. One of the first award terms at any of the production installations, and many of the other installations are now following that in various forms. We've led the way in that regard. There are issues in that award term that the contractor is always working to fix. The longevity of the contract goes up to 25 years and it's important to them for their longevity corporate wide to get the extensions of the contract. We are evaluating that all the time.

Pleasant: Are there any changes in the way JMC or Iowa AAP conducts business that you would suggest?

Nelson: That is a very big loaded question! The CEAs or Deputies used to attend the Commander's Conference at the headquarters and I found those very beneficial. Now only the Commanders are allowed to attend, but there is great value to meeting your counterparts at the headquarters. I would suggest they find a way to incorporate the CEAs or Deputies back into these meetings.

At the installation level, our focus and energy are put towards contract administration. We get a lot of inquiries from higher levels. It's hard to manage information requests and every organization goes through this necessary part of the business. But it does distract from our primary mission, when we have limited staff. It goes with the territory, but we do the best we can.

I've been under 16 Commanders here, and I've seen a lot of transition. Thinking back to my first Commander in 1983 to the last Commander in 2014, the ability for Commanders at this level to really command has changed. There are a lot of new things they need to be learning and be aware of. It is a difficult job for them to be responsible for everything, but I've also seen that their ability to truly command has diminished. There is more oversight and less ability to actually command. I don't know if that is by design or just the way the materiel enterprise has transitioned. It can be a frustrating job for our Commanders. What I try to do is make sure the Commander is aware of all his responsibilities, give them what I can see is the best guidance to form their actions and answers to higher levels of supervision. It's a balancing act and each Commander is a little different, but they are all very focused on doing the best job they can.

Pleasant: Do you have a specific Commander or style of leadership you enjoyed working under the most?

Nelson: Oh, I love them all for different reasons (laughter)! Every individual has different strengths and weaknesses, and it's just like myself. I have both strengths and weaknesses and whoever takes my place, will do things differently and correct some of the things I haven't done well. But I've done many things I'm very proud of.

Pleasant: Great answer. What do you see as the biggest challenge facing the plant in the next five years?

Nelson: Workload. Cost. Availability of funding. Sequestration. These are affecting everyone. With the contract as it is designed, it puts the burden on the contractor to go out and find business. But they are aware of it and it is what they signed up to do. I don't know that it was envisioned to be as severe with the sequestration as it may have appeared back five or seven years ago. That will be a real challenge for our contractor to stay profitable.

Pleasant: What would you declare your most successful professional accomplishment across your career?

Nelson: We touched on some of this before. The ISO certification has led to the highest standard for the workforce. Our safety program is tops. We had a command inspection review/assessment and we had no findings. That is a testament to how well our staff knows their requirements and what is expected. I mentioned being the first interim civilian manager of the plant during transition of Commanders. I'm very proud of that. I've had a number of challenges and I faced every one of them and did the best I could in every situation. Hopefully I leave the plant better than it was when I arrived.

From a personal standpoint, my proudest accomplishment is raising two daughters that I'm very proud of. They are doing great things. My family is very important. I have six brothers and sisters that I get together with all the time, and we all still live in southern Iowa. Most of our children have spread out across the US. That's how the world is these days, the world is smaller than it used to be because of our ability to communicate, but it's not the same. I wish my daughters lived near so I could see them more often. But I like the fact that they are out where the opportunities are.

I've been very fortunate that I've had a career that I was able to thrive in and continually raise myself in the ranks to be the top civilian at the plant. In the back of my mind, that was my personal goal. When I saw opportunities come along, I pursued them and I am a real believer in continuing to educate yourself and get training to help you achieve the next level. That's why I pursued an MBA, and that has been one of the best investments I've made in my time. It was very challenging. I took Organizational Leadership for Executives (OLE) that was the best Army course I had ever taken. It taught me to appreciate people for what they do and help make them relevant. I realized not everyone would see things how I see them, and to get the job done you have to sacrifice some of your own ideas and let someone else complete projects their

way. I've been fortunate to have a 38 year career, I never dreamed that I would be with the Army this long and it has been rewarding. I have no complaints.

Pleasant: What are your future plans for retirement?

Nelson: My perspective has changed and I'm really excited about it being a new opportunity to start my second or new life. I've got a lot of interests and I like it out West. I like elk hunting in Colorado. I want to see some things in this country, but not necessarily outside of the US. If the opportunity comes along, fine, but there are so many great places to see in this country. I'll travel, work for community organizations. In raising my two daughters, I've always told them that as you go through your life, we will always do some things we shouldn't have done or were negative, but we always have the opportunity to do something positive. You can always help someone in need. Even though you will do some negative things, always try to offset that by positives so at the end of your life you end up on the positive side doing more good things for this world. That's my philosophy I've passed on to them and tried to live for myself. I have so many things to be thankful for and so many people don't have many of the things I could take for granted, so I want to help out others where I can. Hopefully, when my day comes and when I'm no longer here, I'll be on that positive side.

Pleasant: Excellent philosophy and words to live by. I have no further questions at this time. You can or discuss anything you'd like to add to the interview or we can finish up and I thank you for your time today.



Jim receiving Meritorious Civilian Service Award from LTC Michael Triplett – March 2014