

Ensuring the customer comes first

Matthew Montgomery | DCMA Public Affairs

I magine being on the flight deck of a ship at night — the wind is blowing, visibility is limited and you're desperately trying to replace an aircraft component. You're starting to make progress, only to find out your last six hours were pointless because the replacement part doesn't work or fit right. Being frustrated is an understatement.

Experiences like these are what have shaped the work ethic of Don Carter, Defense Contract Management Agency San Diego quality assurance specialist. He spent 20 years in the Navy as an aircraft mechanic and retired in 1995 as a chief. He has a Federal Aviation Administration mechanics airframe and power plant license and now provides quality assurance oversight to more than 24 contractors in the San Diego area.

"I've been on the receiving end of components that did not work and it used to infuriate me," said Carter, who experienced the above example on more occasions than he wants to remember. "Now I'm on the process side of making sure those situations do not happen to someone else."

To accomplish this, Carter and his colleagues from the DCMA San Diego contract management office build relationships by working with contractors to ensure quality parts are delivered as outlined by the customer. Whether it's reviewing processes, easing the communication between contractor and customer, or inspecting parts for



Don Carter (left), DCMA San Diego quality assurance specialist, discusses the inspection of aviation components with Jerry Jackson, DCMA San Diego administrative contracting officer, during a site visit. The team works collectively to foster strong relationships throughout the contracting process — something vital to program success. (Photo by Matthew Montgomery, DCMA Public Affairs)

compliance, the motivation for Carter is the same.

“We are the watchdogs. We make sure the parts work like they’re supposed to the first time, every time,” said Carter. “We have guys in uniform overseas that rely on the equipment they use to function properly. I would hate to be the one responsible when a product fails to work and their life is on the line.”

Taking care of service members is one of the driving forces for Carter. He feels a personal responsibility to ensure every product he inspects is ready to go. Jerry Jackson, DCMA San Diego administrative contracting officer, works with Carter on a number of contracts and is just as serious about his job.

Jackson works very closely with the quality assurance representatives and contractors to ensure contracts stay on track and meet deadlines. For him, maintaining strong relationships throughout the contracting process is vital to program success.

“We expect contractors to be quality focused and willing to stand behind their products,” said Jackson. “They shouldn’t cut corners to appease anyone – the end user should be their focus.”

Jackson and Carter agree, although they have a vested interest in success, quality has to start with the contractor because they are ultimately the ones responsible for their products.

Carter said a great example is the

“The small contractors are every bit as important as our large contractors because the large contractors often use the smaller contractors to build and manufacture the parts they need for larger systems.”

— Jerry Jackson, DCMA San Diego administrative contracting officer

‘contractor of one’ he inspects. The owner is also the only employee – thus the smallest contractor possible. The company manufactures and repairs aircraft engine components and tooling.

“I make everything from engine components to ground support equipment and assemblies,” said Eddie H., who founded the company about five years ago. “I take everything from scratch raw material all the way to the finished product. Quality is the number one issue for me because it starts and ends with me.”

Eddie has a unique background. He has worked for a number of large defense contractors and has both engineering and manufacturing degrees and experience. Because he is a one man company, he uses the full scope of his experience to pick up on subtle nuances and possible problems

with production data.

“When I see there is a problem with the data, I point it out to DCMA because I know the end user, our armed forces in the field, need a proper quality product,” said Eddie. “I know when they get the end item, they use it without thinking about it being right.”

Jackson said healthy relationships and expertise throughout the contracting process enable these types of issues to be resolved quickly. The process can be cumbersome, but the payoff makes it worth the effort.

“You never want to ignore a contractor’s issues, especially when they are right,” said Jackson. “When concerns are expressed by the contractor and validated by the QAR, they come to me and we call the buying command to get them addressed. Sometimes the drawings need to be modified, other times the contract needs to be adjusted. Regardless, being able to make these slight adjustments quickly can save the buying command, and ultimately the taxpayer, money.”

Carter said a good example of this relationship is a recent issue he worked involving the machining of a part for a tow-bar application. According to Carter, one of the parts called for interference fit tolerance of nine-one thousandths of an inch. The extremely close fit was because one part was being made to slide snugly into the other. The problem was the dimensions of the drawings didn’t factor

Machined parts await final touches before being ready for shipment. DCMA quality assurance specialists randomly select parts from the group for inspection and to test tolerances. (Photos by Matthew Montgomery, DCMA Public Affairs)





Don Carter, DCMA San Diego quality assurance specialist, inspects a machined part against the contract specifications to ensure it is within the specified tolerances. (Photos by Matthew Montgomery, DCMA Public Affairs)

in the plating, priming and painting of the part. The contractor realized once those three processes were complete, the part would no longer fit. They immediately called Carter to seek assistance.

“To resolve the issue we got in contact with the buying command’s engineering services and relayed the issue to them,” said Carter. “In cases like this we’ll get the contract, or blueprints, modified so the contractor can continue with the building process.”

Maintaining effective lines of communication with contractors, regardless of the size, is an important aspect of DCMA’s role, said Jackson.

“The small contractors are every bit as important as our large contractors because the large contractors often use the smaller contractors to build and manufacture the parts they need for larger systems,” said Jackson. This means solving problems at

the smaller facilities can have a positive ripple effect on the overall product.

Being able to resolve issues quickly, and working with contractors to catch problems early in the process, is an aspect of the job Carter finds rewarding. “I love what I do,” said Carter. “Especially when I get to get out from behind a desk and go visit my contractors. I get to get down, get dirty and see the manufacturing process.”

This flexibility, however, doesn’t mean he cuts them any slack when it comes to inspections. “Because of my military background, I have very high work and quality standards,” said Carter. “It’s black and white with me – either it’s wrong and we need to see why and fix it, or it’s right and we need to get it out to the field so they can use it.”

