



A UNIQUE APPROACH

How 90 days with Special Operations Forces Acquisition, Technology and Logistics helped an acquisition professional build an innovative foundation of knowledge.

by Maj. Dallas Balaban

As I walked into the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) Headquarters in June 2023, my sponsor said, “You will see more in your three months at Special Operations Forces Acquisition, Technology and Logistics [SOF AT&L] than you’ve seen over your entire acquisition career.” I would find out 90 days later that he was right.

My first 59 minutes on the ground were spent touring the USSOCOM Headquarters building, walking through all the SOF AT&L program executive offices (PEOs), touching various materiel solutions and meeting numerous acquisition leaders—among them were SOF leaders and legends who had been portrayed in the movies. Before that time had even ended, I not only felt a high sense of pride in being there but quickly understood how critical the SOF AT&L mission is to the SOF operators.

The intent of the USSOCOM SOF Peculiar Acquisition Development Experience (SPADE) is to introduce personnel to USSOCOM acquisition processes. SOF AT&L leverages various processes, methodologies and mindsets that enable quick-turn solutions, both proactively and reactively, to a variety of SOF mission needs. To propagate this approach and the efficient interpretation of the Department of Defense acquisition processes into the services, highly qualified individuals are selected for this on-the-job training experience. The lessons, skills and insight gained during their tour is intended to build an innovative foundation of acquisition knowledge that can be brought back and used to assist with streamlining non-SOF programs.

The SPADE was formerly called the SOF AT&L Army Ghost Program but changed names in late 2024 to avoid conflict with the U.S. Air Force’s “Ghost Program,” which was initiated in 2007 by James “Hondo” Guerts. The program was named after a special unit that U.S. Army Gen. George S. Patton created to deceive enemies during World War II.

The 2023 SOF AT&L service-specific developmental programs included service members and civilians from the Army, Marines, Air Force and Space Force and provided numerous networking opportunities for these personnel to interact with their acquisition counterparts from across the services.

SPADE falls under PEO Special Operations Forces Warrior (PEO SW). The PEO SW team has a talented group of U.S. Army uniformed personnel and

civilians—many of whom served in the Army Acquisition Workforce—that want to see SPADE participants learn and grow while they are at SOF AT&L. Regardless of the organization you are supporting during SPADE, PEO SW will provide you with many opportunities to learn about SOF AT&L acquisition and the PEO SW programs.

WHAT MAKES SOF AT&L SPECIAL?

The center of gravity and a core enterprise priority that was clear across USSOCOM and SOF AT&L is the recognition that “humans are more important than hardware.” Another consistent phrase I heard across SOF AT&L was: “Our people are the reason we win.” USSOCOM’s people—its force and families—are USSOCOM’s competitive and comparative advantage. In support of the current mission and future mission successes, SOF

AT&L’s PEOs place special emphasis on recruiting, assessing, selecting, educating, training, diversifying, equipping and transforming their innovative and groundbreaking teams, much like the other premier organizations across USSOCOM.

Leaders at the USSOCOM Headquarters, SOF AT&L executive level and PEOs always found time to walk around their work areas and engage the members of their organizations. As a temporary member of Program Manager Tactical Transport and Program Manager Tactical Communications teams, I felt valued from day one. The digital systems and tools SOF AT&L leadership have in place enable transparency of information across the enterprise. As a new team member, you could quickly access critical acquisition documents for your programs while also understanding what the programs around you were doing. Recurring training, driven



NEW WAYS ON DISPLAY

Special Operations Forces Week is the premier gathering for the SOF community and industry, bringing together more than 19,000 attendees, including representatives from more than 79 countries to collaborate on new initiatives and capabilities needed for SOF professionals to compete and win in the future. This year’s event was held in Tampa, Florida, on May 8, 2024.

at the SOF AT&L headquarters level, allowed the workforce to learn and grow weekly as acquisition professionals.

Whenever problems arose at SOF AT&L, acquisition leaders pulled together their team members and key stakeholders at the lowest level, analyzed the situation, developed their courses of action and worked quickly to put the mechanisms in place to implement a fix. Although SOF AT&L had the processes and tools in place to allow for agility, I ultimately observed the “people” who came together to drive rapid acquisition within the programs.

Involving operators early and often throughout touch points and test events was a key theme I observed at SOF AT&L. During my participation in three different events—a tactical handheld biometrics capture equipment operational test and evaluation, satellite communications on-the-move operational test and evaluation and Lightweight Machine Gun - Medium preliminary assessment—I observed that capability sponsors and test and evaluation personnel were always involved in programmatic events and focused on delivering the best capability for the end user. At these events, end users, who were usually operators from the USSOCOM service components, provided valuable feedback at touch points and test events to ensure that the program manager knew if the capability would enable their organization to “win.”

A PECULIAR KIND OF ACQUISITION DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCE

The majority of my time during the summer of 2023 was spent supporting programs and efforts that were located under the Program Executive Office for Tactical Information Systems (PEO-TIS) and primarily consisted of tactical transport and tactical communications. SOF AT&L’s selective placement aligned the unique acquisition backgrounds of myself and other SPADE members so we could all get the most out of our experience. There also were many opportunities to attend and participate in programmatic events across the other PEOs. Throughout my time in PEO-TIS, I was the only U.S. Army uniformed member in the organization, which gave me a unique perspective to share my Army knowledge and experiences while also learning from service members and acquisition professionals across the other services.

The SPADE program allowed multiple opportunities for travel. During my time in the program, I traveled to facilities in three different states, experienced materiel touch points with SOF operators, various test and evaluation events, team building events and numerous engagements with industry. I also interacted with

end users across all USSOCOM component commands and Theater Special Operations Commands.

I came into SOF AT&L with an acquisition background that was primarily satellite communications, but through my participation in integrated product team meetings, programmatic events, conferences, test and evaluation events and SOF Week within PEO-TIS and PEO SW, I left with hands-on experience with and acquisition knowledge of tactical radios, networks, weapons systems, biometrics and vehicles.

Walking out the door of the SOF AT&L headquarters on my last day of training in Tampa, Florida, I left with a general understanding of SOF rapid acquisition (and a tan), but I also had a new mindset that will keep me constantly asking, “How can I propel my future programs and teams at the speed and efficiency I experienced at SOF AT&L?”

CONCLUSION

The SPADE program is accepting applications and has flexible start dates throughout the fiscal year. The program selects high-performing acquisition professionals with two to four years of acquisition experience. If you are selected, your command will incur no cost, as the program is funded through the Defense Acquisition Workforce Development Account.

For those interested, I recommend reaching out early on and beginning the conversation with SOF AT&L. Although SPADE is only 90 days long, you will return with a diverse knowledge and experience that will enable you to be a better asset to the acquisition workforce and to the Army.

SOF AT&L is currently working with the Army Director Acquisition Career Management (DACM) Office to create a new link for additional information on the fiscal year 2025 SPADE program, which will be released in a future monthly email for Army DACM’s “Hot Topics” newsletter.

For more information on the USSOCOM SPADE program, contact Maj. Christian T. Ray at christian.t.ray.mil@socom.mil.

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SWEARING IN CEREMONY

Chris Young is officially commissioned as a major at the Direct Commission Course on August 16, 2024, at Fort Moore, Georgia. Embracing a new role in the U.S. Army, he begins an intensive journey to build his skills from the ground up. (Photos by Chief Warrant Officer 2 Nathan Ramos, USAASC)