

Local simulation industry marks historic training pact

April 13, 2010 | By Richard Burnett, Orlando Sentinel

Orlando's training-simulation industry recently marked an improbable 60-year anniversary of what may be the longest military interagency collaboration on record.

Officials gathered last month at the Central Florida Research Park to commemorate a 1950 Army-Navy training pact that launched what is considered the nation's largest high-tech training industry.

The pact formed a partnership between then-fledgling agencies known as the Navy Special Devices Center and the Army Participation Group, originally located on Long Island, N.Y. In the mid-1960s, they moved to the abandoned Orlando Air Force Base, which later became Orlando's Naval Training Center. In 1988, they moved to the research park as anchors of the then-nascent, 1,400-acre development near the University of Central Florida.

In prepared remarks on March 19, Jim Blake, the Army's top training executive in Orlando, told the audience: "Most relationships seldom last a decade. But today we can talk about how two services created a bond lasting six decades and that grew into a big family, Team Orlando."

'Co-captains' of the team

These days the Army and Navy agencies would be considered the "co-captains" of Team Orlando, a nickname local leaders have adopted for the cluster of military organizations and high-tech companies in or near the research park.

After several name changes through the years, the agencies are now known as the Army Program Executive Office for Simulation, Training & Instrumentation — PEO-STRI — and the Naval Air Warfare Center Training Systems Division, or NAWC-TSD for short.

The agencies alone employ more than 2,500 military and civilian workers in development and contract work related to military-training technology for the armed forces. The Army group awards about \$3 billion in contracts annually; the Navy's contract total approaches \$1 billion.

They have attracted other government training operations to the region, including the Air Force Agency for Modeling and Simulation; the Marine Corps Systems Command's training-contract operation; the Army's Simulation and Training Technology Center; a Coast Guard training unit; the Joint Advanced Distributed Learning Co-Lab; the Defense Acquisition University; and the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center.

Meanwhile, an industry has grown up around the military-contracting agencies, including more than 100 companies, corporate divisions or offices, according to the National Center for Simulation, the industry trade group based in the research park.

More than 17,000 jobs are tied to the work in the Orlando area, economic development officials say. That number grows to as many as 25,000 people if Brevard, Volusia and other surrounding counties are included.

The military's collaboration with UCF and the research park have also been critical to the Army-Navy partnership, said Capt. Harry Robinson, the commanding officer of the Navy's training-contract agency. Overall, it has helped the joint effort in Orlando lead the way for U.S. Defense Department advances in high-tech training, he said.

A model for other regions

Local officials say the Orlando training-simulation complex has become a model for other areas of the country with high-tech training operations, including Huntsville, Ala., and the Tidewater region of eastern Virginia.

"What was a building in the woods at the end of a two-lane road is now surrounded by developers of the finest simulation and training capabilities in the world," said Blake, the Army's Orlando training chief.

He said the unity and collaboration of the agencies in Orlando have survived and flourished despite the organizational differences that sometimes arise.

"Over time the family has stayed together," he said. "We take time out on occasion to renew the rivalry of competition, but when it counts, we pull together."

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