

Experience Runs Deep At Levels For Public Affairs Professional

Redstone Rocket

By Kari Hawkins, AMCOM June 17, 2015

REDSTONE ARSENAL, Ala. -- With a mix of experience and opportunity, Art Forster has enjoyed a public affairs career that has taken him around the world to support both military and private industry leaders, given him plenty of challenges to test his capabilities, and left him with lots of stories of overcoming media situations and building community relationships.

It's been a career of blessings for Forster.

Now, the seasoned public affairs professional who serves as the director of Public and Congressional Affairs for the Army Contracting Command and who has a combined 48 years of public affairs work in the Air Force and the federal government along with a stint with private industry, has decided retirement is the next step in a life defined by a legacy of public service.

"This has been a great life, a great career, and I have been blessed in so many ways," Forster said. "A good part of it has been luck to be in the right place at the right time working for the right people. It's all worked for me."

Although the first in his family to choose the public affairs profession, both Forster's father and father-in-law were career Air Force men who were combat-decorated World War II veterans. Both of his sons have served in the Army, one as an artillery officer at Fort Sill, Okla., and the other currently as an Army doctor with the 173rd Airborne Brigade in Vicenza, Italy. Forster, a retired Air Force colonel, is a decorated Vietnam War veteran and the recipient of several military and civilian honors, including the

Aviation/Space Writers' Association Public Affairs Officer of the Year and, recently, a Department of the Army Civilian of the Year Award from the Redstone/Huntsville Chapter of the Association of the U.S. Army.

Forster's retirement ceremony will be June 29 at 2 p.m. at the Army Contracting Command, 106 Wynn Drive, with ACC commander Maj. Gen. Ted Harrison officiating. It will be especially meaningful for him to end his career at Redstone Arsenal, which is home to a community of about 45 public affairs professionals.

"I think we have a good system of working together here at Redstone," he said. "We support individual commands in individual offices, but we come together as a team to support all of Team Redstone."

Forster's career began in 1967 after earning distinguished military graduate honors at Florida State University and commissioning as an Air Force second lieutenant.

"When I was in ROTC at Florida State, I qualified for pilot training and that's what I wanted to do," he said. "But an eye problem discovered during summer camp training disqualified me from flight training.

"I asked myself, 'What do I like to do?' I knew a little about public affairs and I enjoyed writing. In my first assignment at Offutt Air Force Base, Nebraska, I found I loved public affairs."

His second assignment took him to Vietnam, where Forster served with the 600th Photo Squadron at Tan Son Nhut Air Base in Saigon as chief of Night Operations Photography.

"I managed a program that documented air strikes by AC-130s gunships in Laos. It was classified at the time. AC-130s attacked trucks and troops coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail at night," Forster said.

"We'd get the film couriered to Saigon, where I'd sit with the film editor and edit the film,

and then present it to the 7th Air Force commander and staff. It was a very exciting time because our film basically verified the efficacy of the AC-130, which remains a potent weapon system today."

Following Vietnam, Forster married his wife Janet, and attended graduate school at the University of Denver, compliments of the Air Force.

"After three years of service, I basically made it a commitment to make public affairs my career. Since then, I have served at every level of public affairs from the wing level all the way up to the Pentagon and the Department of Defense," he said.

"The Air Force became a great way of life for me and Janet. She made it possible for me to excel and was totally supportive of all that I did. We moved 17 times during our 44 years of marriage. I couldn't have a better life partner."

His career included assignments in public affairs at such places as Barksdale, Peterson and Maxwell Air Force bases as well as with the Office of Public Affairs for the Secretary of the Air Force at the Pentagon. His assignment with the 306th Bombardment Wing (a B-52 bomber and KC-135 tanker unit) at McCoy Air Force Base in Florida is particularly memorable because of the tragic crash of a B-52 in a populated area of Orlando in March 1972.

"It was like a bomb going off. It killed a little boy and injured several people on the ground, and killed all eight on the bomber," Forster said.

The crash occurred on Good Friday about mid-day. Forster was in the office when the call came in.

"We practiced responding to aircraft crashes all the time. We were trained to respond, and this particular phone call was real," he said.

"The B-52 was one of three that had taken off. It was full of fuel. It developed fire in two of its engines. The pilot circled back to make an emergency landing. But he didn't make

it and he crashed in a populated housing area at the end of the runway."

Forster was the first Air Force public affairs official on the scene. He assisted with establishing a central point for providing information and interviews to the media, escorted media at the crash site and worked with military leaders to conduct press conferences.

"The situation underscored the value of training for me," he said. "You hope you never find yourself in that situation. But if you practice and hone your skills, and if it does happen, then you are ready to react."

In 1986, as the public affairs director for the North American Aerospace Defense Command, Air Force Space Command and the U.S. Space Command in Colorado Springs, Colo., Forster served as spokesman for Defense Department recovery efforts following the loss of the space shuttle, *Challenger*. During the Gulf War in 1991, he served as the Air Force spokesman and media relations chief in the Pentagon, where he provided information to the media about Air Force people and operations.

"At that time, a lot of people were not familiar with the different weapon systems we were using. Our technology had grown so much and we were using smart bombs quite extensively," Forster said. "By using aircraft strike video, we were able to show the world the effectiveness of air power. My job was to tell that story."

He then served as public affairs chief for the U.S. On-Site Inspection Agency at Dulles International Airport in Washington, D.C. and had the opportunity to travel to Russia and Eastern Europe during arms control treaty inspections. His last assignment prior to retiring was as director of the Air Force's Eastern Region Public Affairs Office in New York City.

In 1996, Forster joined the public affairs firm Hill and Knowlton, and worked nearly eight years providing communication counseling, media and crisis communication training to senior executives of global corporations. He then joined the Department of Defense as a civilian public affairs professional, working first for the Defense Contract Management

Agency, then with the Federal Election Commission followed by his current position at the Army Contracting Command.

"Job knowledge, confidence in working with senior leaders, and relationships with national and international media have all been instrumental in the success of what I've done," he said. The challenge in Forster's civilian public affairs career has been "building something from the ground up, hiring good people and fulfilling leadership expectations. I believe that I've left each organization a better place than when I joined it," Forster said.

No matter how much communications technologies expand and the public affairs mission changes, Forster said it will always remain, at its very basic, a people business.

"It's about relationships. It's about building trust and credibility with people who you work with, and with the leaders you support," he said.

"You need to be knowledgeable. You need to know your organization, understand the mission, anticipate problems and be prepared to respond to crisis situations."

Forster has especially enjoyed mentoring and encouraging his staff members, and giving them the tools to move on to new opportunities.

"I have always encouraged my folks to look for different opportunities and not stay in one job or organization for their entire career," he said. "They need to broaden their perspective to be a more rounded, experienced practitioner. They need to make themselves competitive by gaining new experiences that will make them more valuable at their next job. They should look for jobs where they can lead and work with senior leaders. It's very rewarding and satisfying."

Earning the trust and confidence of senior leaders is vital to being an effective public affairs specialist.

"Even if you have the right answer, if the answer is not received as being credible by

leaders, then the answer will not be heard or accepted," he said.

In retirement, Forster and his wife hope to travel to visit their sons' families in Europe, which include five granddaughters. He hopes to improve his golf game, take in a few more football games at his alma mater Florida State, and do community volunteer work.



