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10

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20

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Lessons From the Past

'WAR ROOMS' PRESENT HISTORY TO ACQUISITION PROFESSIONALS TO HELP AVOID PITFALLS

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Students learn about naval aviation history in the Navy aviation war room.

GENERAL DYNAMICS INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

The dictionary defines a “war room” as “a room at a military headquarters in which strategy is planned and current battle situations are monitored.”

That definition can be extended to gathering and displaying information to see how and when decisions have been made in a historical context to be better prepared for the next battle campaign.

A group of war rooms have been maintained in Crystal City, Virginia, just outside Washington, D.C., to help U.S. Navy and Marine Corps program managers and Navy acquisition professionals. These rooms are themselves a carryover from the CNO’s Surface Combatant Study for the 21st Century, which was commissioned in 2005 by then-Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Mike Mullen and created by a team led by retired Vice Adm. Wayne E. Meyer to study and recommend a future surface combatant force structure and supporting infrastructure.

General Dynamics Information Technology, along with its subcontractor Strategic Insight, maintain and instruct the war rooms taught in the Program Manager’s Workshop in Crystal City.

The evolution of the Navy war room takes a look at naval warfare through history, focusing on five threads — general versus special purpose ships, joint, force structure threats and the shore establishment. The main war room serves as the final integrating war room for the course.

The evolution of the Navy and main war rooms feed and are fed by the other break-out war rooms: organization of the Navy, which lays out the history of how the Navy has been organized over time; materiel and acquisition, which looks at the nation’s historical development of its materiel establishment and what influenced it; Naval aviation, which looks at history of naval aviation development and the tool involved in acquiring naval aviation articles of war; shipbuilding, which looks at the processes and tools involved in acquiring warships; and program managers, which offers in-depth case studies focused on acquisition programs as they related to the geo-political and fiscal realities of the time. The war rooms offer insight into successful submarine programs, such as Polaris, surface programs, such as the Aegis weapons system and aviation programs such as the Super Hornet.

In establishing and developing the war rooms, re-

searchers scoured the Library of Congress, National Archives and Navy History and Heritage Command, pulling together actual source documents and piecing together what actually happened. They even dispel some myths propagated through secondary sources over the years.

“These were working war rooms,” said King Dietrich, a retired Navy captain who now works for General Dynamics Information Technology as the program manager workshop coordinator. “Admiral Meyer would come and hold court for discussions that would last for hours. The war rooms were designed to answer questions. Flag officers rotated through the war rooms and offered their insight and input, and so they were really dynamic rooms.”

While the SWCS 21 effort was completed more than a decade ago, the war rooms live on after they were converted to teaching war rooms. That’s because the intellectual capital assembled for the rooms was too valuable to discard.

Sean Stackley, then the assistant secretary of the Navy for research, development and acquisition, now with L3Harris, decided to capture and retain that intellectual capital when the study was sunsetted and formally share it with leaders in the acquisition community, including program managers, deputy and assistant PMs, major program manager equivalents, such as commanding officers of the warfare centers, members of integrated product teams and design teams. The new course, which debuted in 2015, was dubbed the Program Manager Workshop.

“The purpose of the war rooms changed,” said Ralph Lee, a retired Navy captain and the General Dynamics program manager for the war rooms. “We evolved into a formal course of instruction, with learning objectives, with experts teaching experts in a seminar format.”

The instructors guide the students through each of the war rooms and help them to consider the historical and empirical analysis and the synthesis of the information.

“The war rooms are strategically focused and take the long view of things,” Lee said. “We don’t look at mathematical models or wargames. We focus on empirical and historical analysis.”

Statutory Students

Any individual being assigned to an acquisition category I or II, or ACAT I or II, as program manager or deputy program manager is required by law to attend a series of senior Defense Acquisition University courses, with course material applicable to all services.

“They are OSD courses, which necessarily teaches material which is common to all DoD programs,” said Lee. “The Program Manager Workshop is a Navy course, which highlights those things Navy does differently due to the unique requirements of building ships.”

Lee said the course is offered eight times a year with eight students, while also supporting individualized team training throughout the rest of the year.

“Our primary target is the nearly 200 Department of the Navy students — the ACAT I and II PMs and DPMs that are statutorily required to attend [Defense Acquisition University], as well as the lower ACAT PMs and DPMs. However, any senior acquisition professional, including, major program manager equivalents, commanding officers or senior civilians at the warfare centers, and senior team leads on the path to becoming PMs or DPMs,” Lee said. “We get to about half of the statutory people targeted per class, so we still have a number of students we want to target the course to at outstanding at any given time due to the continuing rotation of the PMs and DPMs.”

“These PMs and major program manager equivalents had to go to the DAU courses, but it also makes sense to add a [Department of the Navy]-specific requirement to have them also attend the PM workshop and get a more detailed Navy perspective,” added Dietrich.

Rear Adm. Casey Moton, program executive officer for Unmanned and Small Combatants, said the workshop “immerses acquisition program managers in an interactive environment with guest speakers and case studies of historical Navy programs. Learning the common aspects of what worked — and what didn’t — for past naval acquisition programs will help current Navy program managers succeed in their efforts to acquire technology and systems for the fleet.”

There are some overarching requirements that acquisition professionals from all services have to comply with,

such as common statutory requirements, DoD regulations and the presidential budgeting process. But the Navy is different in several ways, as buying a warship is different than buying a group of combat vehicles or aircraft coming off a production line. The Navy has ACAT III and IV programs, which the Air Force does not, for example. Even some of the Navy's internal processes are different.

"The Navy is different, and does things differently," Dietrich said. "The course aims to explain how and why this came about."

"A process is a process, but acquisition is a people business," Lee said. "We have different deployment locations, durations, corrosion issues and support infrastructure than the other services. Not everything can be taught by process alone. The process is a framework, but no two teams will ever get the exact same outcome from the same process. The problems and issues will be approached differently by people with different program requirements, experiences and abilities."

"That's why it's important for Navy acquisition professionals to understand their cultural history, their DNA, and where they came from," said Dietrich. "They're not getting that at DAU."

"The value of the war rooms is as much from the questions they prompt as the answers they provide," Lee said.

"We understand the war rooms because we built them," Dietrich said. "There are literally ... up to 600 artifacts up on the wall in any given room, and depending on what the students want to talk about, the instructor might speak to only 40 or 50 of them specifically on a given day, depending on the students and direction of the discussions. So, the course is a little different each time we teach it."

Everyone's an Expert

Dietrich said if the students ask about something that isn't part of the curriculum, there is enough depth of knowledge within the teaching staff that the participants can take a deep dive into it.



The war rooms help acquisition professionals avoid mistakes of the past and emulate successful programs.

"When you are looking at the wall, your eye can take it all in and connect the dots in many different ways. It prompts discussion. The students learn as much from each other as they do from the course of instruction, and the connections with other acquisition professionals who can help them going forward," he said.

According to Lee, the value of the course is also in the peer-to-peer discussions and the connections.

"It exposes participants to a lot of information and actual experience, and in provides discussions in the seminar where everyone in attendance is already an expert."

Lee said there is no cookbook solution in the course that makes you a successful program manager.

"Acquisition is just way too complicated and requires critical thinking about the specific issues for that program," he said.

"This isn't a course that teaches PMs how to do their job. It is educating them to help with making the high-level synthesis of the important issues, to exercise critical thinking and learn about what has and hasn't worked for the Navy, so they can make decisions based on those experiences in the past, and to make those valuable connections for the future," Dietrich said.

Capt. Casey Plew, commanding officer of Naval Surface Warfare Center Dahlgren Division and a Program Manager Workshop graduate, quoted George Santayana, who said those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it.

"This course is not just the history of naval acquisition, it is the history of our Navy," Plew said. "If we are going to get after the threats, soonest, the lessons are all here." ■