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THE GOLDEN TOUCH: NAVAIR financial manager reaches 50 years of service



Alethea Contee enjoys her plank holder parking spot at the Navy and Marine Corps Small Tactical Unmanned Aircraft Systems Program Office (PMA-263) where she recently marked 50 years of government service, including 30 years with PMA-263. (U.S. Navy photo)

NAVAL AIR SYSTEMS COMMAND, PATUXENT RIVER, Md. —When Alethea Contee began her career with NAVAIR in 1966, she was a recent high school grad serving as a clerk-typist. Fifty years later, Contee has ascended the professional ladder, and celebrated her golden jubilee as a civil servant Sept. 26 with her teammates in the Navy and Marine Corps Small Tactical Unmanned Aircraft Systems Program Office (PMA-263), where she has worked for the past three decades.

According to NAVAIR's Total Force Strategy and Management Department, Contee is one of 10 of the more than 27,200 current civilian employees at NAVAIR to reach the 50-year milestone.

BACK IN THE DAY

A solid work ethic, fortitude, and confidence to do the job well set the foundation for Contee, PMA-263's deputy lead business financial manager (BFM).

After graduating from Frederick Douglass High School in Upper Marlboro, Maryland, she

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told her mother she wanted to take the summer off “because when you start working you’ll be working the rest of your life.”

Her first office at the Main Navy and Munitions building in Washington, D.C. sat just west of the Washington Monument along Constitution Avenue from 17th to 21st street, and at the heart of numerous social movements and rallies. She witnessed the heightened security efforts in the wake of riots and looting after Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination in 1968, and three months later, the Poor People’s Campaign march, which brought a wave of nearly 5,000 demonstrators to the lawn behind her building for six weeks. The Vietnam War was also underway at that time, drafting many of her friends into military service, some of whom never returned.

Due to the nature of the clerical work she and her co-workers performed, concentration was paramount. She said there was no room for distractions since they used an original typewriter to draft Navy memos and correspondence.

“Despite what was happening outside or in our personal lives, we needed to stay focused on the work,” Contee said. “We were not allowed family pictures or personal items at our desks and everyone knew the expectations. I know it sounds like harsh work conditions to us now, but I didn’t know any different.”

While not a fan of the phrase “back in the day,” when Contee reflects on the early years of her career and how she was taught to be a professional, she is grateful for the structure and consistency.

“I’m just glad I started out in [the Main Navy building]. That whole environment was a good learning experience for me,” she said. “It wasn’t easy; it was rough coming through that period, but I wouldn’t take it back for anything.”

She said she was “always reminded of why you were here. You knew who you were working for and you were being paid by the tax payers to do a good job.”

She still feels that way, today.

In 1970, the Main Navy and Munitions building was scheduled for demolition, forcing NAVAIR to relocate to Jefferson Plaza, in what is now known as Crystal City, located in Arlington County, Virginia. Shortly after, in 1977, Contee advanced from an administrative to a professional position, transitioning to a planning officer and then, in 1979, program analyst for the airborne strategic communications program (PMA-271). NAVAIR permanently moved to Patuxent River, Maryland in 1996 with Contee in tow.

UAS FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

She became an original member of PMA-263, the first unmanned aviation program office at

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NAVAIR, in 1986 when she joined the program for remotely piloted vehicles as a budget analyst.

Contee has seen many UAS programs come and go over the years across multiple services, which required numerous budget and funding processes and procedures. Consequently, her experience grew with each new start and new budget challenge.

"Her exceptional financial management skills coupled with her sound business management advice were instrumental in the development of acquisition and budget strategies for the new UAS programs within PEO(U&W)," said Julie Blankenbaker, deputy PEO(U&W) and business financial manager for unmanned aviation.

Mike Shetty, PMA-263 principal deputy program manager, recognized Contee's wealth of knowledge and experience within the diverse program office.

"She knows the financial management arena and how to manage the complexity of various kinds of money with multiple end users, and understands the varying processes across the services to make it all work," Shetty said.

Contee credits that diversity and the overall UAS mission for keeping her within the unmanned BFM community for so many years.

"It is the driving force," she said. "Unmanned systems were being deployed in place of the warfighter, which kept them out of harm's way. I saw what these systems were able to accomplish and wanted to see what was next."

PAY IT FORWARD

Contee believes in hard work, but also in professional competence. Her mentorship and professional development goes beyond just the financial management team within PMA-263. She works with new military BFM's and other team members to help them better understand their role, the complexity of the programs and specific budget requirements. Over the years she has received more than 100 awards, recognitions and letters of achievement.

"I look at the folks I've touched along the way and it's gratifying to see how well they are performing," Contee said.