INTRO: Welcome to All Things Financial Management, an ASMC podcast sponsored by Guidehouse, where we discuss all things under the auspices of the comptroller's office and address top of mind issues in the financial management community.

TOM RHOADS: Good morning, my name is Tom Rhoads. I'm a partner with Guidehouse where I work with clients across the DOD and other government agencies to transform and optimize their financial management functions. I'll be your host for today's podcast. For those of you who may be new to this podcast series, let me take just a moment to provide some background on the American Society of Military Comptrollers. The American Society of Military Comptrollers, or ASMC, is the non-profit, educational and professional organization for individuals, military, civilian, corporate, or retired involved or interested in the field of defense financial management. ASMC promotes the education and training of its members and supports the development and advancement of the profession of defense financial management. The society provides membership, education, and professional development and certification programs to keep members in the overall financial management community abreast of current issues and encourages the exchange of information, techniques and approaches.

And with that, I'd like to introduce our guest for today. Today we have with us Mr. Carlos Rodgers, a member of the Senior Executive Service. He is the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Financial Management and Comptroller. Mr. Rodgers oversees the budgeting, cost estimating, and financial operations of more than $205 billion in annual resources that support the Department of the Air Force priorities in accordance with Congressional, Secretary of Defense, and Secretary of the Air Force direction. Additionally, he was responsible for the professional development of more than 12,000 military and civilian members of the Air Force Financial Management Community. Mr. Rodgers, thanks for being here with us.

CARLOS RODGERS: I'm happy to be here.

TOM RHOADS: Can you tell us about your background and what brought you to your current position as the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Financial Management Comptroller? In other words, Mr. Rodgers, can you share with us your story?

CARLOS RODGERS: All right. Well, I was thinking back over my career and what shaped it, and one of the things that even got me interested in the Air Force, and just for history's sake, I grew up as a military brat, so we moved around. I grew up on military bases, but I wasn't really thinking about a career either as military or civilian in the Air Force, but when I was interviewing at the end of college, what interested me is the mission. And so, I looked at different corporate jobs and different... And I had really a number of good opportunities, but it was the Air Force mission that really attracted me, the type of work, and I was very interested to do that work. And so, I ended up being selected into the Air Force PALACE Acquire intern program, and I landed at Scott Air Force Base, and that was really a great place to be because I had some wonderful mentors.

And I always go back and talk about the mentors because it shaped how my career has unfolded. So, I had two lieutenant colonels and a civilian that were the primary people that mentored me. They focused on three things. One is it was very important for me to focus on my job performance and delivering results for wherever I was working. They drilled that in, how key that was, and over and over we talked about that. A second thing that they thought, and again, talked to me about was developing goals over the long term. And so, I did develop goals of where I wanted to be in my career, and then the last thing was perhaps the most important thing of the things they talked about was getting experience across the Air Force, and that shaped how I've navigated my career because I started off working in an operational command, what is now Air Mobility Command at Scott Air Force Base.

And I recall having a meeting with my lieutenant colonel budget chief, and he asked me to develop some long-term goals, and I showed them to him, and I was thinking about a lot of jobs there at Scott Air Force Base. You have a number of missions there, TRANSCOM is there and DISA is there, and he looked at it for about five seconds and said, "Hey, try again, and here's a clue, you're not going to be on Scott Air Force Base." And so, what he encouraged me to do from that operational experience is to take a job in a support command, and at the time there was an Air Force Communications Command that was there, and it did some of the things that you see Air Force Materiel Command do today, but I took that job, I followed his advice, and it connected me with some other mentors.

And I ended up going from there to another operational command, and so this was the pattern that I was trying to achieve as part of my goal, get as much experience as possible. And so, I ended up down at Hurlburt Field in AFSOC, Special Ops Command, and that was a great experience because it was a new command. And so, I got involved in a lot of things that I probably wouldn't have at the grade that I was at, and from there, after working some years, I wanted to move on to another support command. And so at Eglin, there was an opportunity to work in test and evaluation, so I did that and I maneuvered myself into the acquisition and worked on a number of major defense acquisition programs. And I didn't intend to stay at Eglin for my entire... Or at least for a good amount of time, but I was getting promoted and getting additional responsibilities and growing, and I did that.

And so after working there, my next move was what? Again, try to get into another operational command or come to the headquarters. And so, I had an opportunity to come to the headquarters here to work in SAF FMB. When I was on the way, or at least planning to come up, there was an opening at the F-35 program, and so I ended up getting an opportunity to serve there, and the F-35 was probably the most dynamic of the experiences that I had working in a joint environment. And previously I'd worked in a number of what I thought were joint programs, acquisition programs when I was at Eglin, but I never really understood what joint meant until I went to the F-35 because working in that program, in order to really do it effectively, you had to do it from an OSD perspective.

You could not do it from a Navy or Air Force perspective, and so from there, the things that I gained from that is I had and developed relationships at the OSD level across many of the different functions there from Comptroller to Acquisition and Sustainment, just a lot of deep relationships there. I also got a chance to see the Department of the Navy and the Department of the Air Force a little bit of the behind the scenes in the POM. Just because of the size of that program and its importance, you get involved in a lot of things in different ways, and that was very, very unique. Another of the key experiences that I got out of F-35 was the congressional lens over on the Hill, so I spent a lot of time over on the Hill and in many cases it would be the PEO, program executive officer and myself over on the Hill briefing committee members and PSMs.

So, I was able to develop a number of relationships, and that was just a huge level of experience in those different areas, and while I was seeking to do an operational assignment or headquarters assignment after working at Eglin, I think F-35 was a test in a number of areas that set me on the course to being able to be in the position that I'm in today. And so, I ended up applying for the Director of Budget Investment here in SAF FMB, and I got that position, and again, had opportunities to use a lot of the networking that I gained out of the F-35, including my Hill relationships, which propelled me into the Deputy Director of Budget job, and then here I am and I look back at my career and I look at all of the things that happen, whether I was working in an operational environment or working in a supporter environment, working in different levels and collaborating, learning how to collaborate, and learning how to maneuver inside the building were just hugely important.

And that's really how I think I was able to get to this level and to get into this key position. And so, I'm very fortunate to have had mentors from back at Scott that basically pushed me to look across the Air Force and try to get broad experience and then also push me to focus on my performance and delivering results. So, I always go back to that beginning because a lot of the guidance that I received from those mentors shaped what happened and what my roadmap was as I carried out my career. So anyway, that's my story. That's how I ended up getting here. It was really a deliberate effort to get operational acquisition experience, and what was important about that is not just getting surface or touch points, but really getting deep experience in these areas. And so, I think that has really helped me to be able to be in this position today.

TOM RHOADS: It's an amazing journey, Mr. Rodgers, and if someone were to have gone back in time when you were an intern and said, "Some day, Mr. Rodgers, you're going to be the Principal Deputy for Financial Management, helping to run the financial operations of the US Air Force," what would've been your reaction to that back then?

CARLOS RODGERS: I would not have believed it. I would've said, "You're kidding, there's no way that I'm going to do that," and that's something that I've shared with other people that through your career, there's opportunities for advancement by setting some goals and working hard toward those goals. And so my journey wasn't easy necessarily, there's a lot of difficult jobs, but I tell other people that it's possible to do this and possible to get in these key positions if you are willing to do all of the things that are necessary to build that experience space that you need, and that was really the important thing for me. When I had a goal back in the early part of my career was to be maybe a MAJCOM Deputy Comptroller or Chief of Financial Analysis. That's actually where I thought I might land, but all of the experiences that I've received in these various assignments have helped me and propelled me to where I am.

TOM RHOADS: It's a great story, and the Department of the Air Force recently published its Financial Management Strategic Plan, and I really like the FM vision and the FM mission. I'm just going to read those so I don't make a mistake on those, but for the FM vision, it's financial excellence powered by airmen, fueled by innovation. And then for the FM mission it's, provide fiscally responsible resource management, auditable and timely financial services and actionable decision support to deliver air and space capabilities for our nation. What are the Air Force's strategic goals for this to support your mission, and why is this so important to have this guiding document?

CARLOS RODGERS: Great question, so there are three goals. One of them is to develop and retain a highly skilled FM Team. The second one is to harness technology and standardized processes and data analytics to support auditability, and the third is to optimize resources, mitigate risk, and support our customers. And so, one of the reasons why we have sort of refreshed the goals and the Honorable Kristyn Jones who became ours SAF/FM last summer, came on board and wanted to take an opportunity to set us on a course in these areas.

And when you think about our three goals that we have that I outlined, they touch all of the things that we have to do as an FM to continue to serve the department in the best light. And so, I think this was a great time to be able to change because it also coincided with some of the changes that are occurring with our secretary and some of the focus areas that he had. So this refocus, if you will, of the FM mission and goals that we had in this strategic plan line up well with what we're doing across the Air Force, and I think we'll get the financial management community in the right place going forward.

TOM RHOADS: That's great, and the FM mission says financial excellence powered by airmen, and I noticed that developing and retaining a world-class workforce is the first goal in your strategic plan. How do you plan to do this in today's competitive environment for talent?

CARLOS RODGERS: You're right, the competitive environment, and we have different environments around the country. In the national capital region, it's a competitive environment, and so we recognize that we have to be very deliberate in our action. Well, I think one of the things that we, as we started looking at this ability to develop and retain talent is we have to spend some time understanding what happens, why do people stay, why do people go, or why do people leave FM? And we've done a lot of work to understand the workforce and to get some feedback from the workforce, and then the other part of it is we've had to adapt some of our processes, so that we could meet the needs of the workforce today. For example, during the pandemic, all organizations did some level of telework, but as we got out of the pandemic, we looked hard at being able to provide those kinds of capabilities for our workforce in all areas, and across all of our divisions and directors and in all of our locations.

And so, we're using or trying to use those kinds of tools, so that we can meet the employees of today and what they're expecting, and then the other thing that we're trying to do is make sure we understand where our high performers are. And so, we have been doing some work to identify who those high performers are in our various elements of our organization, and then determining ways that we can incentivize them to stay with and retain them over the life of their career. And so there's various ways to do that, but in some cases it has to do with making sure we have done the work to define those career paths and the assignments that those individuals can take, so that they continue to develop and continue to grow.

And those are things that are going to be important for us over the long-term as we go down the path on this goal. And so we have a lot of work to do in this area, but we feel that we have to look at all aspects of what it takes to retain the workforce, as well as looking at being able to go out to colleges and other places and work with our personnel center to allow people to understand what kind of jobs we have and where they may be able to fit in with us. And so, that's the journey that we're on in this particular area.

TOM RHOADS: When you go out to colleges to recruit new candidates, what do you share with the candidates about the value of pursuing a career with the Air Force? How do you convince them that this is the place to be?

CARLOS RODGERS: I've done this several times in my career and I hope I can do this more. What I try to talk to them about is some of the things that I was able to do, some of the roles and responsibilities and some of the types of work that I have been able to do, and I use myself as an example, and I've encouraged other people as we do this, and we talk about this to describe some of their experiences, so people get to know what it's like and what types of mission we have and what kinds of jobs that we have. I think sometimes when people think about government jobs or civil service, they think of a big bureaucracy, and if you're not familiar with the military, in some cases you may not even understand what kind of work that we do in the government.

And I think it's important for all of us to explain that, to provide examples of things that we do and the focus areas that we have so people can get a better sense for the type of work we have because that's sort of what happened with me. And again, that was some years ago, but I feel like there are people out either graduating from college or maybe working in other sectors that will be interested in this type of work. And so the key is, can we get out a message to them? Can we communicate with them and connect with them, so that they will apply for our positions?

TOM RHOADS: I noticed, Mr. Rodgers, that in the FM mission, one of the principles is to have auditable and timely financial services. So, audit obviously is a priority for most of services today. How's the Air Force harnessing the power of technology and innovation to support audit efforts and enhance business processes?

CARLOS RODGERS: We have a number of things that we're doing in this area. So, one of the things that we have focused on is we have created a financial air and space community space in the DOD Advana. So, this will allow us to basically have one location for our authoritative data sources, and the ideal over time is to be able to standardize processes across all of our organizations here in the headquarters, as well as across the MAJCOMs and this Financial Air and Space Team Resource is FASTR.

A community space is our path for the future to have essentially address that standard process piece of this. And so, we've moved some of our systems on to the cloud in this environment, and we've also made plans to move other systems, but the idea is to streamline the work that we do and to create, again, authoritative sources of data that all of our both MAJCOMs and field COMs can use, and that we feel like will put us on a path to be auditable in the future, but it also will help address some of the issues that we have with manual processes and manual workarounds and those sorts of challenges.

Another area that we have been working very hard on is robotics. So, we have put together a number of different processes that essentially get us out of some manual processes. You can use robotics to do a lot of things, and we have over 40 different applications that we have put in place over the last several years and we will continue to do this. And in some cases, some of these things have helped automate some of the things that we have to do as a financial management community, and we believe that automation and using robotics can be a game changer for us in the form of saving and reducing manpower. And if we can reduce manpower on some of these tedious routine tasks, we believe then we can just sort of repurpose or allow those people to do other higher priority analysis. And so, those are just a couple of examples of some things that we think will help us in a number of ways, including ultimately becoming auditable in the future.

TOM RHOADS: Great. Thanks, Mr. Rodgers. So, we'd like to wrap up each episode with some advice for our new careerists. So knowing what you know now, what advice would you give a new careerist who's just starting out their career?

CARLOS RODGERS: So, I'll just mention one other bit of information about me. So, I mentioned that my father was in the military, so we moved around a lot. So, I went to 11 schools from kindergarten to 12th grade. We moved almost every couple of years, and so one of the things moving around does is it makes you resilient, but the other part that it did for me is gave me some optimism about what I could do. And so if I had to advise people in their career, given my background, I would advise them to lay out a plan that incorporates some geographic mobility because they can really enrich their experience across their career. And so as I mentioned, I moved a couple of places, but if I could have, I would've moved even more because I wanted to get broad experience.

And that was very much like my life growing up as a child. Some people don't like to move because it's a change and there's risk and opportunity, but I always felt like I gained something when I moved, and I was always excited to move when I was a child. And in my career, I've gained a lot when I have moved and gone to other locations and learned new missions. And so, one of the things that I would tell people is as they get in into the service and start to work, as they lay out their plans for their future, it's important for them to not limit the opportunities and to be willing to be geographically mobile and move to different locations because you'll be enriched by the experiences. Each command that I've worked in has had a different culture, and I wouldn't have understood that if I had not moved around. And as I said, if I could go back again, I would've moved even more because I felt like that has been a huge part of what has gotten me to this place today.

TOM RHOADS: What great advice and what a neat perspective on moving. That's great, thank you for sharing that, and thank you for your time. I know how busy you are and I appreciate you being with us today.

CARLOS RODGERS: Well, thank you.

TOM RHOADS: Thank you.

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