

ALL THINGS FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT PODCAST

The New Chapter for SDFM

Featuring Rich Brady, CEO of The Society of Defense Financial Management (SDFM)



Welcome to the All Things Financial Management Podcast, presented by Guidehouse and the Society of Defense Financial Management. I'm your host, Tom Rhoads. Join us as we discuss top of mind issues facing defense financial managers.

TOM RHOADS: Today we have with us as our government guest, Mr. Rich Brady, who is the CEO of the Society of Defense Financial Management. Mr. Brady, thanks for being here with us today.

RICH BRADY: Great. Thank you very much, Tom. I appreciate it.

TOM RHOADS: No, we appreciate you and the time that you're giving us. We know how busy you are. Would you mind taking just a moment and share with us your background and maybe what brought you to your current position as the CEO of the Society of Defense Financial Management? Or maybe in other words, Mr. Brady, just share with us your story.

RICH BRADY: Absolutely. Again, thanks, Tom. I spent 32 years in the Marine Corps, 32 years, seven months and one day to be exact. I like to always add that day on there because the Marine Corps saw fit to put that on my DD214, so it must have meant something. But started out as a prior enlisted Marine in the Marine Corps Reserves. Did that for four years before I got my commission and served for almost 30 years as a commissioned officer in the Marine Corps, retiring in 2021. Throughout my career, my primary MLS, Military Occupational Specialty, was financial management, so I did that intermittently throughout my career, but also had the opportunity to command at the platoon level, the company level, the battalion level, and at the O-6 level as well.

In the financial management field a couple of the key positions I had were the Comptroller for 3D Marine Division. I was the commander/director of the Marine Corps Financial Management School, and I was also the G8 Chief Financial Officer for Marine Corps

Installations Command. I ended my career actually over the last four years in service as the commander of United States Military Entrance Processing Command or USMEPCOM. Most people who serve in the military know of MEPCOM through the MEPS stations, where all enlisted service members for all services must come through for their medical evaluations, their academic testing, their background checks, all of that work.

But when I retired in 2021 or was nearing retirement, I knew I was going to go back to financial management, and so I actually started talking to a lot of the audit advisory and consulting firms here in the D.C. area. I was wanting to move out of government into the private sector, and that was all moving along pretty well, and the opportunity at the American Society of Military Comptrollers came up. I went ahead and decided, I talked to a couple of folks, and decided to submit my resume and cover letter thinking, "Well, if nothing else, maybe I'll get a chance to talk to the board, talk to the search committee, and tell them where I think the association should go in the future." As they say, one interview led to a second, a second to a third and a third to a job offer so I guess they appreciated the vision that I laid out for the organization.

I started here in November of 2021 while I was still technically on active duty. I was on terminal leave. I didn't officially retire until December and started in November of '21, as I said, about two and a half years ago. It was a great fit, a great landing spot for me as I was coming out of the military because it's a community that I was very familiar with and allows me to continue to support the defense financial management workforce, not only on the government side, but on the commercial side as well.

Outside of ASMC/SDFM, I'm also on a couple other boards I think worth mentioning. I'm currently the Global Chair of the Board of Directors for the Institute of Management Accountants, which is another professional association of finance and accounting people who work in the private sector. I'm a board member of the Marine Corps Association, which is the Professional Association of the Marine Corps, and I sit on the board of advisors for Geocase case. It's a think tank, a civil society group in the country of Georgia, and that kind of goes back to my time as a military attache, defense attache in the country of Georgia where I was assigned from 2013 to 2015.

TOM RHOADS: Mr. Brady, it clearly sounds that the depth and the breadth of your experience have made you uniquely qualified for this position, and I know as a member of the Society, I'm glad you're here and glad you're here spending time with us today. You just wrapped up, or I guess we just wrapped up the 2024 Professional Development Institute in Phoenix, Arizona, with a record attendance I might add both in person and online. Can you share with us what some of the highlights of the event were for you?

RICH BRADY: No, absolutely. It really was a very successful event. As you mentioned, this was our largest PDI in history. We had just over 5,200 in-person attendees and just shy of 3,000 virtual attendees so almost 8,200 defense financial managers participated in this PDI. You know, our previous largest in-person PDI, in-person attendance was over a decade ago in Orlando where we had about 4,600. So we exceeded that this year by almost 600 people, and you could see it there in the convention center. It was just really a great event from start to finish.

Our theme this year was building unity in the FM community, in the financial management community because we really are trying to build up the profession, build up that sense of community still coming out of the COVID pandemic. I know we still have a lot of people who are working remotely, in a hybrid environment and did for many year, and so we want to really help the department, help our corporate partners build up this sense of community.

Around that theme, we had 112 educational workshops. We had an exhibit hall with 80 exhibit booths, including Guidehouse. Thank you very much to Guidehouse and team there, Tom, for your support. We had six plenary sessions, including the Honorable McCord, Secretary of Defense Comptroller who spoke. We had a lot of social and networking opportunities as well. Tuesday evening, we had the early arrivals reception, almost 2,000 attendees at that. We had the exhibit hall reception on Wednesday night, followed by the CDFM reception, which we do every year. Almost 500 people attended that CDFM reception. And then finally the big event was our community chapter fair. Again, all around that trying to build the community. We had a big outdoor community chapter fair on Thursday evening. The numbers, we're still looking at them, but it looks like it was just over 3,000 people who attended that event on Thursday night.

But the big announcement was our rebranding where we officially changed our name, unveiled our new name, moving from the American Society of Military Comptrollers to our new identity, the Society of Defense Financial Management.

TOM RHOADS: I had the privilege of being able to attend the PDI this year, and I have to echo your sentiments. I thought it was fantastic in terms of content, in terms of social interaction, networking. It was just a great venue and a great place to where we could really engage with each other and sense of community, but also participate in continuing education and professional development. So I think it's well done to you and your team for putting that together this year.

RICH BRADY: Thank you, Tom.

TOM RHOADS: So Mr. Brady, can you share with us a little bit about how do defense financial managers support the warfighter and the operational mission of the DOD?

RICH BRADY: Yeah, I think it really comes down to, ultimately it comes down to outcomes. If you think about what we do, the output of what we do is really the financial records; financial reporting, payments, all of that. But the outcome, what we really all want is increased military capability, and we get that increased military capability through improved decision making through data analytics and decision support. We get it through improved use of resources, so knowing what resources we have and being able to manage them better. Finally, really ultimately aligning our financial strategies, our financial plans with the strategic plans, those operational plans. I think it's important to remember in this profession, and most people know this, that our proximity to the battlefield does not determine our contribution to the fight. We don't necessarily have to be forward deployed to be able to influence what takes place on the battlefield.

We need to make sure that service members who are deployed are paid regularly and routinely and in the correct amounts. We need to ensure that the contractors that are supporting us in a forward deployed location are paid. We need to make sure that the fuel is provided and the ammunition, all of that, and ultimately that long-term modernization plans are funded. So we in the defense financial management community have a direct impact on military capability. That's why our new tagline under our new name, Society of Defense Financial Management, is advancing the mission of national security because again, that's the outcome that we're all driving towards.

TOM RHOADS: Thank you, Mr. Brady. You mentioned earlier about the name change that was announced at the PDI in Phoenix. What led you to now? What brought you to the decision that now is the right time to make that change?

RICH BRADY: Yeah. That's a great question, and a lot of people have asked that as we went through this process. So it started a little over two years ago. I just was of the belief that our logo, everything, our overall brand needed a little bit of a refreshing. A lot of organizations, whether you're in the private sector, the public sector, not-for-profit sector, go through this process and undertake rebranding initiatives to position themselves for growth by revitalizing their image, adapting to changing market dynamics or aligning to evolving customer preferences. For us, it was all of those things.

So we first reached out to some rebranding companies, put out an RFP. We did some interviews, and we narrowed down to one and started working with them and started the process with a series of surveys and focus groups. There was a market analysis, a competitor analysis done. In late 2022, about a year and a half ago, the company came back to us and said, "Hey, we don't always recommend this, but we think in your case, we actually recommend a full name change, logo change."

I think it's important to kind of go back and look at our history to understand why we came to this point. We started out in 1948 as the Society of Military Accountants and Statisticians. In 1955, we changed our name to the American Society of Military Comptrollers. We don't know what happened to the statisticians, but we absolutely want them back. Over the next almost 70 years or so, the community, the profession, continued to evolve. At that time in 1955, the majority of the members of ASMC were in the military, and they were all comptrollers. But over time, again, the profession changed. The practitioners who practiced it continued to evolve as well. It was no longer just the domain of the military and the role of comptrollers.

In today's financial management workforce, we see really a diverse array of backgrounds and expertise. It's a mixed workforce of military, government, civilian, contractors and commercial professionals, and they work not only in controllership, but also in accounting, policy, analytics, audit, data management, data analytics, program management, budgeting, dispersing. So this name change is really a reflection of the evolving profession over the last 70 years, and it's intended to be more inclusive of that broad diversity we see in the profession. So that's what brought ... And don't get me wrong, it was not an easy decision. It was not an easy decision for the board. There's a lot of nostalgia associated with the term American Society of Military Controllers.

But the board felt, and I strongly feel, if we want to one, represent our members today and two, position ourselves for future growth, we needed to go through this name change. I'll offer one other thing. It's interesting if we look at our certification, the Certified Defense Financial Manager Certification, it was started almost 25 years ago in 2000. At the time, they named it the Certified Defense Financial Manager Certification. They didn't call it the Certified Military Controller certification. So my sense is that even 25 years ago, there was a recognition that the profession was evolving. So in some respects, we as ASMC are catching up with that evolution that's taken place, again to position ourselves for future growth.

TOM RHOADS: Thank you, Mr. Brady. We like to wrap up each episode with some advice for early careerists that may be listening today. So knowing what you know now, what advice would you give to a new careerist who's just starting out in the workforce?

RICH BRADY: Yeah, I get to ask this question a lot. Even when I was in the military, I was a Colonel in the Marine Corps before I retired, and a lot of people say, “Hey, what is it going to take to make Colonel?” Or now I get the question a lot from finance accounting professionals, “How do you reach a CEO position,” or, “How do you become a senior executive in government?” There’s a lot of different models, taxonomies you could look at for this, but I kind of boil it down to three things, and I’ll throw them all out there and kind of talk through them a little bit.

Number one, show up early. Number two, work hard. And three, be a problem solver. Let’s talk about that first one, show up early. You’ve got to be present to get noticed in an organization. Right now, we’ve got a lot of people that are working remotely or work in a hybrid environment that just aren’t being noticed or recognized by their organizations. So there is some concern that these early careerists today may be held back just because they’re not present as much as future generations of early careerists were.

Unfortunately, some of the data is coming in supporting the fact that they’re not developing and not getting promoted at rates of people who are working in office full-time. So part of that, again, showing up early is showing your organization that you care and that this is important to you, and you want to be a contributing team member.

The second, work hard, to me, that just kind of goes without saying, and it might be tied to my military, my Marine Corps background. My view is, “Hey, this is what you’re getting paid for.” There’s a piece of integrity tied to this as well, that you shouldn’t be doing personal things on company time. Again, that’s kind of how I was brought up. I know today that we’re much more blended where people blend their personal time. We’re still getting the work done right, but ultimately, you’ve got to work hard if you want to advance your career. Nobody gets to one of these positions by taking the easy route.

And finally, solve problems. When you get to a senior leadership position, all you’re doing all day is solving problems. So you need to become very adept at being a problem solver and not just a problem identifier. Identifying problems and pointing them out is really the easy thing. So if you’re an early careerist and you’re going up to your supervisor, your boss, and saying, “Hey, I’ve got an issue here,” offer some solutions. Show them that you’re trying to think through the process, because that’s what they’re going to be looking for when they’re looking to promote people is people who can be problem solvers.

Ultimately, again, when you get up to those highest level, you’re solving some very strategic level issues with not a lot of information. The ambiguity increases at the higher levels because again, you’re working strategic issues usually under long-term timeframes where there’s less certainty, less facts available to you. So you got to develop those skills early. So show up early, work hard, and learn to be a problem solver.

Finally, I would say supporting all of that is be a lifelong learner. We live in this age of digital transformation in a volatile, uncertain, chaotic and asymmetric world, VUCA world, as they call it and so we have to be lifelong learners.

In the finance and accounting profession, yes, you’ve got to have the basic blocking and tackling of financial management down. That’s the stuff that gets you the standard capturing, recording and reporting of financial information. But if you want to move up in your career, you’ve got to upskill and get some of the soft skills, change management, leadership, improve your not only IQ but EQ, but also lean heavily into digital transformation technology because that’s going to be a key enabler in the future.

I like to, when I talk about being a lifelong learner in this day and age, I actually like to go back to last century and a book written by Alvin Toffler. The book was Future Shock, where he said, “The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read or write. It will be those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.” So always be a lifelong learner if you want to continue to advance in your career.

TOM RHOADS: Such great advice. I had to smile to myself because I remember when I first started out, I asked a mentor of mine for some career advice, and the first thing he said to me was, “First and foremost, I’m a problem solver.” It just resonated with the feedback that you just gave. So thank you so much for your feedback, and thank you so much for your time and appreciate you being with us today.


RICH BRADY: Absolutely. Thank you, Tom. And thanks to Guidehouse for all that you do for the defense financial management community.

TOM RHOADS: Thank you. Thank you for tuning into All Things Financial Management, an SDFM podcast series sponsored by Guidehouse. You can find all our episodes at SDFM.org and at guidehouse.com/allthingsfinancialmanagement.

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