
Security Assistance Perspective: Product Assurance

By

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“You did what? - Come On!”

Scene: Office of the Directorate for Product Assurance, U.S. Army Security Assistance Command (USASAC), New Cumberland, Pennsylvania. A Foreign Military Sales customer representative is in a discussion with two USASAC Quality Assurance Specialists . . .

Customer: “. . . I’d REALLY like to know what your people can do for me.”

First

QA Spec.: “. . . no kidding, I helped convoy some tactical vehicles across Cameroon and Chad over underdeveloped, desert roads to support the friendly factions when Chad was in civil war. Didn’t have a bath for six days, and when I did it was under a fire hose at an abandoned airport.

Customer: “. . . And you, what did you do?”

Second

QA Spec.: “I was there when trucks were delivered to the Palestinian Police Force—helped take the initial ones off a C5-A just before the Secretary of State arrived, and then later took the rest off in Egypt for convoy back across the border.”

Customer: “Sounds like you’ve done some interesting things . . . have you done anything . . . normal?”

First

QA Spec.: “Yep, a couple of our Quality Assurance Specialists have been deeply involved in helping deliver new modernization weapon systems to the Royal Thai Army. They worked closely with the Joint United States Military Advisory Group and several of the U.S. Army Materiel Command subordinate commands to assist the customer in receipt and deployment of new equipment.

Customer: “Do you only do quality work?”

Second

QA Spec.: “To be honest, we get involved in a whole spectrum of logistical matters. We’ve helped the State Department in South America on several Drug Interdiction Programs to determine the logistical infrastructure before delivery of equipment. We’ve also helped in resolving ammunition problems with several European and Mideast customers. We even had some specialists travel in support of Desert Storm.”

Customer: “I need to understand more about your job . . .”

First
QA Spec.: “Well, let us try to explain it better . . .”

THE TASK

As you may have gathered from this conversation, sometimes we know little about what missions or jobs are being performed by various elements in our Security Assistance (SA) community. The United States Army Security Assistance Command (USASAC) strives to assure that our Security Assistance (SA) customers and Security Assistance Officers (SAOs) are satisfied with delivered weapon systems and related purchased hardware. It is our aim to deliver the equipment in excellent operational condition and make sure the customer has all necessary tools, spare parts, and training to successfully operate and maintain the materiel.

The success of this effort embraces a continuing effort to assure product quality within the quality network establishment that monitors manufacturers, depots, and arsenals, and achieves customer satisfaction upon delivery. One element of this quality network is the USASAC Product Assurance (PA) staff located at New Cumberland, Pennsylvania.

PRODUCT ASSURANCE’S EVOLVING ROLE

Product Assurance (PA) has evolved over the past years from a “total inspection” environment into one in which we stress the quality involvement of each employee—thus eliminating the past requirement to inspect at each manufacturing/repair operational phase. The old on-line inspector with a clipboard and rubber stamp is just about gone. Today’s environment calls for Total Quality Management (TQM); the “government inspectors” of yesteryear no longer exist within most manufacturing/repair facilities.

Most current PA staff members are tasked to review quality requirements for support to the materiel acquisition world, assess quality trends that fall outside the normal limits, and respond to special quality requirement missions. These employees include Quality Assurance Teams for SA deliveries and Quality System Reviews/Assessments in support of procurement.

Each of these new ways of conducting quality assurance—many of which are resources driven—have necessarily been applied to our SA Foreign Military Sales (FMS) programs. These trends have modified how we in government do business. These changes, however, are not viewed as decreasing the customer’s expectations to receive equipment and materials that fully meet contractual requirements.

USASAC’S PRODUCT ASSURANCE ROLE

The USASAC Product Assurance staff has been assigned to develop and manage the executive level SA program. This mandate requires operating within the realm of total visibility of any quality aspect impacting life cycle support of materiel for our SA customers. Our PA scope of functional operations entails our staff involvement, as required, for each separate mission’s operational aspects in every SA function. This scenario incorporates the customer’s requirements, case preparation, procurement and/or acquisition from Department of Defense (DOD) stocks, delivery, sustainment, logistics, maintainability, operability, deficiency adjudication, and, most of all, customer satisfaction.

Responsibilities and work processes at the Army Materiel Command (AMC) Major Subordinate Commands (MSCs) are not duplicated by the USASAC PA staff. Rather, the PA staff handles out-of-control situations where no other technical base exists to achieve viable results. The PA staff performs multi-faceted logistics functions, based on a core product quality discipline, operating as the technical/quality “overviewer” for the SA customer.

WHAT SHOULD THE SA COMMUNITY EXPECT?

The SA community is aware of the DoD downsizing, and the potential consequences for the SA community and its customers. This perspective is not written to downplay the downsizing events that have occurred due to economic pressures. However, we must realize that what used to be known as a robust SA capability has had to change with the times, just as the DoD and U.S. forces activities have learned.

The USASAC motto, "Strength in Cooperation," necessarily assures that we achieve the same level of intensity to support the SA customer within the "new order" of doing business with less - less resources, less manpower, and new organizational parameters. Again, it must be remembered that just as the modus operandi of the military services changes, so also will the programs and requirements of the SA product assurance.

Alarmists may complain that today's equipment and materials do not meet the requirements of the past. But today's quality programs can and do achieve reliable and sustainable goods and materials for the user. There are now, however, differences in how the U.S. Government assures quality programs.

A case in point is that quality, from the manufacturing level to the depot repairable program, is not accomplished as it was in the past. The Defense Contract Administration Service, as well as the AMC' MSCs, no longer accomplish in-process inspections during manufacturer/rework. Many contractors are allowed to operate under Contractor Performance Certification Programs and allowance for Best Value/Blue Ribbon contracts (contracting awards for known quality programs). These initiatives within the acquisition community recognize contractors who have a commitment to TQM, allowing a reduced Government in-plant quality assurance involvement.

Also, with Quality Assurance staffs diminishing, the MSCs no longer sit on the doorsteps of contractors, arsenals, ammunition plants, and repair depots. Dollars for reviewing quality programs, requirements, and for inspecting in-coming and outgoing goods (surveillance) are limited under the new quality programs being initiated at both contractor and government facilities. However, the new "quality philosophy," in which QA employees validate their own work are currently in place to assure that success stories highlight the change of emphasis within the manufacturing world.

DO YOU NEED PA HELP?

To help assure that USASAC's SA customers are satisfied with their purchased weapon systems and materiel, our Product Assurance staff remains a continuing, stabilizing influence. Its mission is to assist as technical advisor to the USASAC staff, represent the Command on sensitive deliveries, staff and field Technical Assistance Field Teams to assist SA customers with serious hardware/system problems, investigate complaints, interface with interorganizational Quality Assurance activities, perform ammunition/surveillance support, and assist in various logistical issues.

In addition, USASAC Country Program Managers (CPMs) at Alexandria, Virginia, are the Command's interface with our foreign customers, our Product Assurance team, and the entire Security Assistance community. They can put you in touch with our Quality Assurance specialists when help is needed.

Changing times do not necessarily result in dissatisfied SA customers; all in the SA community must be vigilant, and persevere with any and all resources at hand. The mission will be accomplished and we will continue on the road to Total Customer Satisfaction.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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