

# Changing of guard

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By **KENNETH KESNER**

Courtesy of the *Huntsville Times*

Clarence Tidwell has a COLSA Corp. business card that reads: President - Again. He has led the company three times since it was founded in Frank Collazo's Huntsville garage in 1980.

"I think it's too late for me to come back again," Tidwell, 76, joked recently in his office overlooking Cummings Research Park. "It's been fun."

"I think he did pretty good the first two times," said Dr. Richard Amos, who will become the COLSA president Jan. 1.

Amos, 47, was deputy to the commanding general of the Army Aviation and Missile Lifecycle Command at Redstone Arsenal for four years, was a Department of the Army civilian employee for more than 25 years and was hired last January to become COLSA's president.

He's spent the past 12 months as a senior vice president and chief operating officer, getting acquainted with the firm and its people.

"We wanted to get him deeply involved in the culture of the company and all before he took over," Tidwell said. "Because it's a lot to expect to take somebody from a military environment and stick them in a commercial environment and expect them to know everything from day one."

"It's been super. It's been a fantastic opportunity for me," Amos said, adding that a lot of companies don't have the opportunity to do business this way. "But Mr. Collazo made a dedicated effort to allow me to be an understudy for a year."

He said it was a special privilege to get to work with Tidwell, who had built a tremendous reputation during his own years in the Army's senior executive service.

"To have an opportunity later in my career to really work with him every day and learn from him every day, somebody that I had known of for such a long time and respected for such a long time, it's been a tremendous blessing for me," Amos said.

He has found, as Tidwell did, that the financial and contract issues are similar between government and private industry work, and that the people and personnel problems are almost identical.

"There are a lot of differences and it's been a steep learning curve for me," Amos said. "But that part, the people part, the leadership part, is the same in both places, I think, and that's been kind of a comfort to me."

"Probably the biggest difference is the 'new business aspect,' " said Tidwell. "Running existing contracts is kind of the same in both places. But you have to constantly be looking for new business (in private industry) in order to keep growing, or to keep it level."

He speaks from a lot of experience. Tidwell was first general manager-president of COLSA from December 1995 through January 1998. He said Collazo asked him to come back from retirement to fix a Middle East contract they were having problems with, and he ended up as president from 2001-03.

In late 2006, Tidwell said, Collazo asked him to come back again until the company found the right person to be the next president.

"I told him I'd be happy to - if he'd start looking," Tidwell said, adding that he is planning to do a little part-time work and get back to a lot more fishing.

"I sincerely appreciate Clarence's 20 years of service to COLSA," Collazo said in a statement. "He has led the company very successfully, and I am looking forward to Richard taking the company to new heights in the future."

Amos isn't too worried about taking COLSA's reins during a big downturn in the national economy. He said Tidwell had left it in great shape and pointed to what he said about sometimes having to work hard just to stay even.

You know, that may be the mode that we're in for the next year or two until the economy begins to pick up," Amos said. "We've had a great year this year, I think a very solid performance year for the company."

Tidwell said the company did about \$145 million in revenue in 2007.

"We haven't totaled up for 2008," he said. "We don't see a growth in revenue this year, but hopefully we'll be close to the same total."

COLSA has about 930 employees, 600 of them in Huntsville. About half of those work on Redstone Arsenal for the Army Aviation and Missile Lifecycle Management Command, the Missile Defense Agency, Missile Intelligence Agency and NASA. The company has long outgrown Collazo's garage. COLSA now has three buildings on its campus at Cummings Research Park, where the other 300 come to work.

So they'll be starting 2009 in a good position, Amos said, and will constantly be looking for new work. If the economy worsens, "we may have to hustle a little bit harder. But I think we're well structured for that. And we know what our opportunities are."

In Huntsville, those opportunities include the thousands of new jobs and work coming to Redstone Arsenal over the next couple of years with the Army's base realignment and closure plan, Tidwell said.

Although primarily a defense-related company, COLSA has positioned itself to work with a number of government organizations, he said, such as the Army, Navy, Air Force, NASA, the Department of Justice and others. That may help the company smooth over any bumps in the economy or changes in programs.

"Nothing stays the same," Tidwell said. "So you have to anticipate and be able to deal with it."

"We do have a small commercial component for the business that is doing pretty well this year and we think we have some opportunities to grow that," Amos said.

They are also looking to build on the company's international work.

"That's one of the things we think is a strength for us, that when the economy in this country flattens a little bit, we do have opportunities abroad," he said.

Wherever COLSA is seeking work, it remains very grounded in the Rocket City. It's a coincidence, they said, but both Tidwell and Amos are Huntsville natives - Tidwell went to Huntsville High, Amos to Grissom.

And speaking of coincidences: Both are also graduates of Auburn University, both retired from civilian Army careers, and both married high-school sweethearts named Joyce.

"I think it's kind of appropriate that both of us have Huntsville backgrounds," Amos said.

He pointed out that Collazo is very supportive of community initiatives and has deep roots in Huntsville - his children and grandchildren live here - even though he moved here after a career in Army.

"It's kind of a Huntsville success story and very much a Huntsville company, even though we have offices in other places around the country. It's very much a Huntsville corporation," Amos said.