

Controlling the Seaport

NCO Makes Most of Her Time Training With Industry

By Jonathan (Jay) Koester - NCO Journal

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Tonia Montgomery moves confidently around the seaport of Virginia International Gateway in Portsmouth, Virginia. Everyone seems to know her, and as she shows a visitor around she is constantly stopped by people needing something done. She answers every question, fixes every problem, smoothly moving on to the next crisis.

Watching her — calm, confident and competent as chaos reigns around her — it would be hard to guess that she doesn't really "belong" at the port; that, in fact, she was "Sgt. Montgomery" six months ago. As part of the Army's Training With Industry program, Sgt. 1st Class Tonia Montgomery is working for a year as an operations assistant manager for Virginia International Terminals at the Gateway.

Soldiers in the TWI program can sometimes have a hard time making an impact in the industry to which they are assigned. The assignment is only for a year, and a large place like the Gateway can be hard to find your way around. So how did Montgomery become such an

the Gateway can be hard to find your way around. So how did Montgomery become such an essential part of operations so quickly, emerging as a trusted employee when it's not even her true job?

"I guess caring," Montgomery says. "You have to have the right personality to come in here and want to do it and get it done right. That's really all it is — wanting to know how it works and being able to go out and do it. Then, being confident enough to go do it on your own. Making sure your bosses know you are confident enough to do it on your own. You learn more and more each day, then, suddenly, here I am today. Now, I can answer most questions."

In the Army, Montgomery is an 88H (cargo specialist) and does a lot of the same work at the Virginia port. She works mainly on the land-side operations at the port, making sure drivers and their trucks have as smooth a path as possible as they drop off and pick up loads.

"As an operations assistant manager, we take care of any issues between the in-bound gate and their outbound point," Montgomery said. "That could be anything: Bad scans at their portal; they are sitting in their lane and haven't been serviced in an hour; they have a damaged box, or it wasn't placed on properly. We keep it calm down there and keep it moving.

"I like to make chaos into smooth," she said. "I like to be aware of everything that's going on so that I know exactly what move I can make before I make it. I enjoy doing it. I want to make the military look good, and I want to keep the program alive because I think it's an excellent program."

Michael Shepard White, an operations assistant manager for Virginia International Terminals and Montgomery's supervisor, said Montgomery's zest for the job helped her quickly integrate into the port culture.

"Sgt. Montgomery is very awesome," White said. "She gets in there and she not only learns what we're doing, she takes an active part in everything we're doing. Everything I can do, she can do. I'm very proud of that."

Montgomery's experience in the Army, where NCOs are required to look at the overall operation, has helped her as well, White said.

"One of the things I noticed from Sgt. Montgomery is that she sees the big picture," White said. "She understands what has to take place. When there is a truck coming in, and that truck is going to have problems at the gate, or at the row, or whatever the problem may be stopping that truck from getting through the gate and back out on the road, she is on top of it.

"Sometimes in industry, folks don't have to look that far ahead because that next step isn't

theirs,” White said. “Somebody else has another piece of the pie, so you’re just mainly concerned about your egg. In the military, you have to be concerned about the total pie because you could be part of any step at any time. If Soldiers take that knowledge and bring it into the civilian world, they’ll do very well in the civilian world.”

White participated in the Training With Industry program as well. When he was an Army officer, he spent a year at UPS. But he admits Montgomery has taken her role in the program a step further than he did.

“You could do a lot at UPS, but you couldn’t do a lot of hands-on stuff,” White said. “But she’s taken the initiative to say, ‘OK, this needs to happen, and this needs to happen. I can do this part, and I can do this part.’ If she can’t do that part, she’ll ask questions and go from there. So that’s great.”

Asking questions, lots of questions, is a large part of what has helped Montgomery at the Gateway, she said.

“I’m in a position where I can ask anybody any question and I won’t sound dumb asking it because I’m not here. I don’t know the daily realm of things,” Montgomery said. “So, it helps me see a better picture. I ask so many questions. I asked a lot about the managers: ‘Where did they come from? Did they come from a different port?’ It gave me a lot of ideas about what I might want to do and what my master’s degree should be in one day.”

Watching how the port operations work and asking questions has helped Montgomery as she begins to look down the road at her future after the Army.

“I am at 21 years in the military, so I have to think about my future and about whether I want to stay in the transportation field,” Montgomery said. “I’m still young, and I still have a little bit of growth I have to get done. I just have to decide what I want to do, and this program helps because it shows me everything about how a port works. I think it’s a great experience, especially if I try to come back to the port industry. I think I’ve learned a lot from here.”

That knowledge will help the Army, too, when Montgomery serves her utilization assignment back at an Army unit after working at Virginia International Gateway.

“I believe it will help during real-world exercises when we, as leaders, have to facilitate a commercial port,” she said. “Knowing how a port works in a commercial environment will help. Knowing what all you need to actually ship something out of here will help. I think learning that aspect of it will definitely be helpful for the military side.”

That desire to help the Army while also planning for her future is what has made Montgomery a good NCO, and made her an important part of work at the port.

“I have a drive to know because one day I will have to retire from the military,” she said.
“Everyone has to. That day will come, and I want to be prepared.”