

## Flying Under the Radar

By Connie J. Schlosberg ©

I arrive on Peterson Air Force Base, Colorado, early this Monday on an unusually cool morning. The meridian that lines the street of Peterson Boulevard is landscaped with magnificent aspen trees and grass that's greener than Ireland. A couple of guys - dressed in bright green-yellow colored uniforms with *bd Systems* labeled on the jackets - are trimming the edges of the grass. The aspen leaves have already started to turn a buttercup yellow. Not far from the runway, I park in a lot by a construction trailer that was converted into an office building. Across the street, I find a large brick building with the number 350 located on top of the glass doors. As I step out of my car, I can smell gasoline so strong that it nauseates my stomach. The sun is still rising and I notice the panoramic view of the snow-capped Pikes Peak mountain range. If I squint a little, I can see the spectacular Garden of the Gods just below it.

I take a deep breath because I'm a little nervous about meeting the subculture I've chosen for my research – the infamous government auditors. Pictures of weasel-eyed, anal retentive oafs dance in my head. My father used to be a part of that subculture. Since he was always reserved about his line of work, I've been curious on what it is all about. My father is a fairly conservative, straight-laced Republican type and I'm more an unconventional hipster.

Inside Building 350, the lobby looks brand new complete with freshly polished white marble-looking floors. More glass doors and an information board to direct me if only I can figure out the foreign acronyms. The Quality Program Management Division is to my right. A clean but dimly lit office, I'm greeted by a large poster with a giant stop sign. *Stop! No contractors allowed past this point without an escort.* Since I am not a contractor, I was told that I can walk

right in. No one is there to greet me. I head towards Freddy Herrington's office since he is Chief and Deputy Director. Freddy is a nice middle-aged man with a receding hairline and Texas accent. He shakes my hand loosely as if he is afraid to break it. I'm sure my small frame is the reason. He tells me a lot of the auditors are not available at the moment, but I can walk around and get a feel for the place. I pass the blue and gray labyrinth filled with cubicles the size of coat closets. A lot of the cubicles are empty. Most of them contain a Formica desk top with one chair and an overhead bin for files and books. Each one has a computer with a flat screen monitor. Cubicles may reflect the personalities of their occupants. One has a pirate flag hanging on a gray partition. Another has posters of Thule Air Base, Greenland – one of the Air Force sites that they audit.

I peek into a quad area of desks where I introduce myself to Nicole, a young, attractive intern, who is quietly tapping words on her keyboard. I smell roasted Irish crème coffee brewing somewhere and a faint scent of musk perfume. She is sending an email to the commander at Thule Air Base concerning a missing \$205,000 check for the Danish company, Greenland Contractors. Nervously tapping a pencil on her monitor, she says "Greenland is owned by Denmark and since we are occupying Danish territory, we need to hire both Greenlandic and Danish people. Americans can't contract with the United States Government there. This missing check will create massive headaches for our government because of the fluctuation of value between the dollar and the euro." Now, they have to track down the carrier they used to mail the check.

An auditor with an emerald earring in his ear and blonde highlights is standing next to her. He is Jim – nickname Baby Face – who is leaning up against Nicole's desk reading the Peterson's *Space Observer* newspaper. Jim chuckles "You'll have to escalate this up to

Stephanie. She's at the same level as the commander. No point in taking this problem on yourself." Stephanie, I learn, is their big boss. She's the director of the Quality Program Management Office. I see Nicole's nose turn up while she hears Jim's words. I ask "Is that such a bad thing to bring this to Stephanie's attention?" Both of them look at me and laugh. Neither one responds to my question. I guess Stephanie is not someone you want to address problems with. The looks on their faces told me that they didn't like dealing with authority.

I hear a loud shrilling voice coming from around the corner. I leave Nicole and Jim to see what the noise is about. Freddy is talking with a heavysset man named Ken. They are arguing over where they are going to eat for lunch. Freddy wants to have fish and chips at the Clubhouse by the golf course. Ken is in the mood for steak sandwiches at the commissary. From out of nowhere I see Dennis, a gray-haired man dressed like he's ready to play golf. "Hey Freddy, why do you want to eat that greasy fish? It's the end of the fiscal year. They have no money. They'll be skimpy on the French fries." Freddy shrugs his shoulders and grabs a pack of Marlboros from his shirt pocket. "Let's go out and smoke and talk about it." They ask me to join them for lunch. I look at my watch. It hasn't turned 11:00 a.m. yet. I agree to meet them for lunch and they tell me that they'll come back to get me.

Meanwhile, I see Rod, who is Chief of Quality, talking on his cell phone near his office in the front of the building. He jokingly refers to it as "the city". Since the office is so huge, the auditors broke down the place into areas: city, suburbs and country. Rod says the guys out in the country rarely make their way to the city. I think this is due to the fact that the supervisors and lead personnel sit up front. No sense in calling attention to yourself.

Most of the quality guys like to work alone at their desks staring into the vapid blackness of their monitors. Rod says "My guys are nose to the grindstone type of people. The Quality

section involves multiple inspections at all levels in the Air Force. We shouldn't even be here in this office. We should have our own entity. I keep lobbying for it with headquarters, but keep getting pushed down." He continues on about how many write ups he would complete against the office if he was in the capacity to do so. His shifting eyes and glances down at his watch indicate to me that is time to move on.

Just as I am about to meet with Stephanie, Freddy, Dennis and Ken approach me to join them for lunch. Accompanying them is Laura - a tall brunette dressed up in a black pantsuit. She handles all the reacquisition contracts on the base. Roger, another supervisor, decides to tag along. He hunches his shoulders so far over that I didn't realize how much taller he is from everybody else. I ask them where they decided to go to eat. Dennis yells, "As usual, Freddy won. We're going to the clubhouse."

All six of us try to hop into Freddy's green Blazer. Freddy and Roger take the front seats while Laura, Dennis and I squeeze into the back. Ken gets an idea that he is going to sit in the trunk since there is no room in the truck. Freddy warns him that there are no jump seats back there. He pops open the back window and slides his robust frame into the trunk. About ten seconds later, I hear heavy breathing and tapping sounds on the window. "Open...Open the window. I got to get out," Ken shouts. Freddy turns off the engine, jumps out of the truck and opens the back door. Ken runs out panting with sweat dripping from his shirt. Laura yells out to him "Kenny. I can drive. We can take two cars." Ken waves his hand as if to say no and keeps running towards Building 350. The other auditors are laughing. He gets claustrophobic so no one understands why he jumped back there in the first place. As we drive off to the Clubhouse the jokes start flying. Am I in a Seinfeld episode?

At the Clubhouse, their demeanor turns more serious. The Clubhouse is decorated in dark cherry wood colors reminiscent of an upscale restaurant. It's midday so I can see views of the full mountain range with the golf course right underneath it. Golfers are practicing the swings outside but inside is fairly empty. As fancy as it looks in the dining area, the kitchen is typical cafeteria-style food. We line up to order our food, and of course, there is nothing on the menu for me since I'm a vegetarian. I settle for some trail mix and a fruit bowl. The kitchen reminds me of a high school cafeteria with older ladies cooking in the back and a bunch of noisy "kids" waiting in line. The auditors start laughing again about Ken, telling me stories about his quirky habits.

We sit at a large table near the fireplace. Laura starts talking about the utilities contract for the base. With the war in Iraq, there isn't enough money budgeted to pay the utilities for the next twelve months only enough for eleven. She says "Civil Engineering is going to have to carefully conserve energy because if they don't, the bill won't be paid and that can lead to repercussions against the Air Force from Colorado Springs Utilities." Now I know why their office is dimly lit. They've been instructed to use as few lights as possible. The only thing that saves them is that the sun is still bright during the day since it is still summer season. The worry is when the weather changes to cold.

"Such the life of a government worker," Laura tells me. "You get used to working in reduced working conditions." Freddy, Dennis and Roger chime in. "We bring in our own pens and pencils, small printer cartridges, things like that. Whatever it takes to get the job done, so long as it is reasonable," Freddy says. They boast about how important their mission is in getting the contracts and contractors working properly that they are willing to sacrifice financially for it.

In the background, I hear dishes and utensils clanking in the kitchen with some quiet chatter coming from some of the other tables. Freddy looks up at the clock and motions to get up. Everyone else follows his lead. As we walk out to the parking lot, a siren wails and a strong male voice comes over the loudspeaker known as the Giant Voice. “This is a test. If this is an actual emergency, you will be instructed on what measures to take.” The message repeats a couple of times. I’m the only one who stops and flinches at the reverberating sound it makes. The auditors proceed with business as usual. It is funny how casual yet charismatic these people are. As I say my good-byes, I wonder what more traits there will be to find.