

# Dennis Kelly

## Don't Forget Where You Came From

Every American has some personal attachment to the tragic events of September 11, 2001. For Dennis Kelly, that connection was his cousin. "He was a firefighter in Ladder Company 11, one of the closest to the World Trade Center," Dennis explains. "He was making a difference up in the South Tower that day, and he went down with it, trying to save people's lives. Ever since then, I've felt that the counterterrorism mission has been part of my own."

Dennis wasn't sure where that mission would take him. In fact, it took seven years for him to find the right niche. But now, as the President and CEO of A-T Solutions, a company committed to support the counterterrorism missions of its clients, he has found his place serving the armed forces, the intelligence community, law enforcement, and even international partners in a coalition dedicated, much like his cousin was, to helping make the world a better and safer place.

"I do what I do because I want to make a difference," he says simply. "To me, this has always meant being connected to government somehow." Dennis started his career in the Navy, serving his country for six years before venturing into the defense contracting industry, where he has remained ever since.

A-T Solutions was founded in April of 2002 as a Service Disabled Veteran Owned small business by Ken Falke, a retired Navy bomb technician. It grew through consultative engagements focused on the bomb and improvised explosive device (IED) threat to a company of 175 employees doing \$35 million in annual revenue. In February of 2008, Ken sold a majority interest in the company to CoVant Management and CI Capital, a private equity company. A-T Solutions had grown out of the small business categorization, and Ken knew he needed a COO to

help him take the company to the next level, so CoVant introduced him to Dennis. Knowing he could learn a lot from Ken and then likely move into the top leadership role of the company when Ken retired, Dennis competed for the position and won, coming onboard to help put in place infrastructure, business development processes, finance and accounting processes, and other key pieces.

In 2010, A-T Solutions began to go after larger, longer-term contracts, diversifying their portfolio beyond the IED threat, so that today, they do intelligence work to get "left of boom," or to prevent an event from happening. To facilitate this proactive dimension of the company, they bought two intelligence companies in 2009 and 2010, integrating them to form their intelligence group. They also acquired a small software company in Boise, Idaho, that had been their partner for many years in developing a post blast investigative tool to be used by federal law enforcement and the military. Ken did, in fact, retire, leaving Dennis to take his place at the helm of the company, and today, A-T Solutions is 812 employees strong and recently passed \$200 million in revenue. Enjoying almost 20 percent organic growth in 2012, it's poised to grow between 15 and 20 percent again this year, with a solid pipeline of opportunities and its sights set on further diversification internationally.

Along the road to where he is today, Dennis has always kept close a tattered, leather-bound copy of *A Blue Jackets Manual*, the book of basics about being a sailor given to every Navy recruit. The leather-bound copy, however, was given to him by his first private sector boss, Bob Hunte, who had also served in the military. Inside, Bob had scrawled a note that read, "*Don't forget where you came from.*"

"That touched me deeply," Dennis



remarks. “It essentially said that I came from humble beginnings and would do great things in my career, so don’t forget your roots and the hard work it took to get there. It reminds me that, even if you’re CEO of a company with 800 people working for you, it wasn’t all that long ago that you were one of those people.”

Indeed, it wasn’t that long ago that Dennis was just a kid growing up in a blue-collar family in New Jersey. Neither of his parents went to college, but what they lacked in schooling, they made up for in unparalleled standards of honesty and integrity. His father was a truck driver, and his mother was a waitress who then went into selling insurance. Recognizing that they would have gone further in life if they had pursued their own educations, they taught Dennis the importance of learning and told him that he had to go to college, though they didn’t have the funds to send him or the experience to guide him there.

As a kid, Dennis dreamed of becoming a pilot from the first time he flew in a plane at the age of eight. He also remembers being deeply moved by watching his mother and grandmother volunteer on a rescue squad in New Jersey. “It impressed me so much that they were making a difference in the community, helping people who were injured in accidents,” he recalls. “Serving the community in such a vital way became such a part of my philosophy that I joined an ambulance corps myself toward the end of high school.”

While he was still a child, though, Dennis participated in Boy Scouts and liked to fish or ride bikes with friends. An early and invaluable lesson in hard work came when a family friend gave Dennis the gift of a horse and a saddle, under the condition that, if a day came when Dennis could no longer keep the horse, he give it away free of charge as well. A neighbor, Alvin Reese, agreed to keep the horse on his farm, as long as Dennis paid him back through manual labor. “It’s interesting how the term ‘hard work’ means different things to different people,” he muses today. “Looking back as a businessman, if I add up the number of hours I worked for him and the kind of work I did, you might say he got an extremely good deal out of the bargain. But in the end, the experience wasn’t about money. It was all about learning how to work hard and be responsible.”

The Kelly family, however, was apt to move around often within the state, and it soon came time for Dennis to bid his horse farewell.

“We would joke around that we were like gypsies,” he remarks. “I think my parents were always reaching for something better, which was hard at times, but it really taught me how to embrace change through life, which has served me well.”

Dennis made his first buck working a paper route in New Jersey. His parents divorced, and when he was 14, his mother, newly remarried, moved down to Florida. His father moved to Florida and remarried as well, and Dennis spent his high school years there.

Because the family had only modest means, Dennis was expected to work through high school to provide for his own expenses, including clothes and his car expenses, so he got a job as a bag boy at the grocery store. “I didn’t put as much emphasis on school as I should have, simply because there weren’t enough hours in the day,” he says. “Like any kid at that age, I was trying to find my way and what I wanted to do in life. That’s when I met a teacher and retired Navy Commander, Joe Vaden, who was the Commanding Officer of the Navy Junior ROTC unit at my high school.”

Dennis’s life would never be the same. The experience was what one made of it, and he became the equivalent of a master craftsman, taking on every responsibility that was offered to him and participating fully in the opportunity to the point that he took on the post of Operations Officer and discovered his latent love of leadership. “That’s when I realized I wanted to be part of something bigger than myself,” he says. “Commander Vaden challenged me by asking what I was going to do with my life. Every semester, every grading period, he wanted to see my report card. He took a deep interest in me and was almost like a second father. He really set the foundation for me in terms of what I’ve done since then, and to this day, we still keep in touch.”

Upon graduating from high school, Dennis was accepted into the Navy’s Advanced Electronics Program as a sonar technician, so after completing boot camp in San Diego, he went on to Basic Sonar School, followed by Basic Electricity and Electronics School, followed by a maintenance school for a specific sonar system. For the first two years of his Navy career, he was in school. He then spent another two years in Yokosuka, Japan, on a deployed ship with the Midway Battle Group. “I saw so much in the Asia Pacific Region—Hong

Kong, the Philippines, Australia, Thailand, and Singapore,” he enthuses. “It was a great experience, but after that, I wanted to get back to my family on the East Coast.”

With that, Dennis was stationed on a ship in Charleston, South Carolina, where he received Mediterranean deployment and served as part of the battle group that conducted the operation against Libya in 1986. That ship then went into a yard period in Norfolk, Virginia, before having a port change to Newport, Rhode Island. It was there that Dennis met his future wife, Michelle. “She wasn’t thrilled about marrying a sailor who would leave for six to nine months at a time, so I decided to leave the service, but I still wanted a role where I could support the government,” he explains.

That’s when he came across a company called Analysis & Technology (A&T), which had a job opening for someone with expertise in sonar to design tactical decision aids that could predict the performance of a sonar system in a particular environment. Though the company was probably more interested in finding someone with an officer background, Michelle knew someone who worked there and was able to get Dennis an interview with Bob Hunte. The two hit it off, but the next morning, Dennis had to ship out to Guantanamo Bay for refresher training. When the ship stopped in Earl, New Jersey, for a weapons unload, he remembers walking out on the pier to call Bob and see if he had any news about the position.

To his great surprise, Bob reported that they wanted to offer him the job at a starting salary of \$27,000, and to Bob’s great surprise, Dennis accepted on the spot. “Don’t you want time to think about it? Don’t you want to negotiate a little?” Bob had asked. But Dennis replied that the deal was done. He was in.

By the time he left the Navy and started as a Systems Engineer in 1988, Dennis had a year of college credit under his belt thanks to the College Afloat program, so he enrolled in night classes at Roger Williams University to finish his bachelor’s degree. Working full-time and going to school while starting a family didn’t leave him with much free time, but his focus never wavered. Rather, his ambition only grew. Shortly after joining A&T, he took Michelle to a company Christmas party. “She was amazed by how nice everything was, and I told her that someday, I’d be CEO of a company like that,” he says. “And when I made President

and CEO of A-T Solutions, she told me she still remembered that night.”

It wasn’t that Dennis was necessarily interested in being a businessman, however. More so, he felt driven to lead. He had left the Navy as an E-6 First Class Petty Officer, and he carried that love of leadership into his business experience. “I love leading a team of people in tackling tough problems, whether they’re technical issues as a Project Manager, or the more strategic, mission-oriented challenges I face today as President and CEO. I think of myself as a snow plow, with a troop of people behind me who need to get to their objective. My job is to push the obstacles out of the way so people can get to where they need to go.”

Through the next several years, Dennis was promoted to VP of Analysis and Technology. Then in 1999, A&T was acquired by Anteon. “I knew I could handle change, but I knew nothing about acquisitions, so I read up on it to get an idea of what to expect,” he explains. “Whenever there was a meeting with the new company, I wanted to attend and learn everything I could. Because of that, the Anteon folks learned who I was, and as things changed over that next year and people above me opted to leave, I was promoted three different times until I was running the Newport operation of 400 people.”

Several years later, Anteon asked Dennis to consider moving his family to Fairfax to serve as their Senior VP for Business Development. He went for it, and in that capacity, he was responsible for the growth of the company. Everything was going smoothly until one day, the company’s CEO, Joe Kampf, called him into his office to say that he wanted Dennis to become his new Senior VP for Corporate Communications and Investor Relations. Dennis had no experience in the field and said he appreciated the offer but was going to stay put, prompting Joe to look at him and say, “Do you think I’m asking you what you’d like to do? No; I’m explaining to you your next assignment. I need you to do this job, and I know you can.”

“He told me that, if I wanted to be CEO of a company one day, the position would be the perfect rounding out of my capabilities,” Dennis remembers. “And he was absolutely right. I went into that job kicking and screaming, but I stuck with it, and after two years, I knew I had built the skills I needed to make my next move.”

That’s when a headhunter contacted him

about Tech Team, a publicly traded parent IT company looking for someone to run a wholly owned subsidiary. Indeed, Dennis had been a mover and shaker, acquiring and integrating companies and growing the business from \$30 million to \$90 million in a few short years. Dennis accepted the position and continued his trend of learning and improving even more, but he stayed in touch with the Anteon senior leadership team. Joe Kampf was also chairman of CoVant, so when the company purchased A-T Solutions, he knew Dennis was the perfect person to call.

Today, Dennis leads A-T Solutions with a focus on the collaborative style of decision making that has allowed him to garner such success throughout his career. "I tend to seek out a fairly wide range of input in making decisions," he says. "Asking advice like that is a natural way of developing mentor relationships, and mentors were critically important to me throughout my career in moments where I need to decide whether to go left or right."

Just as influential as any mentor has been his wife, Michelle. "From the time I got my first job, to the nights she would help with my homework when I was getting my degree, to the support she continues to give me today, she's been here every step of the way to support me," Dennis says. "When I have a particularly tough problem at work, she's my sounding board. If she thinks my thinking is wrong on a particular subject, she'll help me see the other point of view. She's invaluable."

Having raised two incredible sons, the Kellys are actively involved in the Catholic Church, where Michelle plays piano in a choir and serves as a CCD teacher and Dennis is a member of the Knights of Columbus. As a Eucharist minister as well, he goes house-to-house once a month delivering communion to home-bound individuals who can't make it to church. The EOD Warrior Foundation, as well, holds a special place in his heart.

In advising young people starting their careers today, Dennis reminds us that it's okay – and to be expected – to start at the bottom. "You'll

get jobs that seem menial and are not what you went to college for, but do the best job you can and exceed expectations, no matter what job it is," he encourages. "Don't whine about making a pot of coffee. Go the extra mile. If you do that, you will get the attention of management, and you'll move up the ladder. Don't be overly focused on compensation in the early part of your career because, at that point, it's really not that important. Perform well, and the opportunities will follow."

Beyond that, Dennis's life is a testament to the distances one can go by remembering where they started. As he empowers those around him to save lives through counterterrorism efforts today, he makes a point every day to get out from behind his desk and roam the halls of A-T Solutions, understanding the pulse of the company through the perspectives of his employees. "I also have 125 brave souls in Afghanistan that do great work over there, so I go there twice a year to meet with them, eat with them, and sleep in the same conditions," he says. "It's important to see the world through their eyes and to never forget where you came from. Because integral to where you come from is why you're doing what you're doing and who you're doing it for, and those are things that no one can afford to lose sight of."

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