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### Providing Research, Development, Reverse Engineering, Program Management, Ground Vehicle Design and Testing, System Integration Capabilities, Manufacturing and Fabrication for the US Military, Mettle Ops is helping increase the Survivability of Warfighters

Katie Bigelow  
Founder

Mettle Ops

Contact:  
CEOCFO Magazine  
570-851-1745

Interview conducted by:  
Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor  
CEOCFO Magazine

**CEOCFO: Ms. Bigelow, what is the idea behind Mettle Ops?**

**Ms. Bigelow:** Our original goal was to be warfighters, serving warfighters. I am a combat veteran. When I was deciding what I wanted to do once I left the military, I knew I wanted to give back to the soldiers. When I first set out to build my business, I was not sure what direction we were going to go in, but we settled into a natural rhythm. As my business grew, my husband decided to leave his job and join me. That is where the “Warfighters Serving Warfighters” really bloomed. My husband is a retired Army officer and naturally shared my vision. Right now, we are focused on ground vehicle survivability. We work with CCDC (formerly TARDEC) in the ground vehicle survivability office in prototyping armored applications for the new Army ground vehicles.

**CEOCFO: What are you looking at? Where do you come into the picture? Is it before they are designed, in the middle, after to test them? What is the role of Mettle Ops?**

**Ms. Bigelow:** We are in the pre-design phase. We assist in selecting materials, attachments, testing, and design modifications. We also help with the testing by designing and building test fixtures to facilitate testing.

**CEOCFO: What are some of the items that might be different? How do you go about selecting what is right for any given situation?**

**Ms. Bigelow:** There are numerous types of steel, aluminum and other armor products on the market. Requirements dictate which material selections the customer ultimately makes. Essentially, products that provided the most protection for our soldiers at the lightest weight with the best manufacturability win.

**CEOCFO: What type of equipment or testing equipment would you need typically?**

**Ms. Bigelow:** There are different types of testing that is done, both virtual and dynamic. Mettle Ops does FEA Analysis, virtual testing and we contract out all the dynamic testing. This includes environmental testing and blast testing. Blast testing is a significant portion of our testing. In blast events, we need to know armor products can protect the warfighter. We are even concerned with armor attachments which is a key part of survivability. If the enemy is able to blast off the armor, then we have vulnerable soldiers. We have armor attachment products that will withstand a blast event and keep the soldier partially protected.

**CEOCFO: Do you work with a set group of manufacturers and testers or is it really product by product, depending on need?**

**Ms. Bigelow:** It is both. Michigan is our home, and we have a plethora of available manufacturers here that we use, many locally, and some teaming partners and vendors outside of Michigan. We look for the ones with the best capability and that is what differentiates us. We do not just offer our own in-house capability; we offer the best capability that can be found. We see big defense companies focused on manufacturers that will allow them the highest profit margin even if there is something better on the market. What we are trying to do is bring the company with the best service or product to the market.

**CEOCFO:** *What is the competitive landscape? You mentioned big companies, but are there many people in your position that are working in getting the right solution before there is a problem?*

**Ms. Bigelow:** Yes. Our company is not unique as far as what we are offering the government. There are numerous program management companies with engineering services, whether they are one-man operation or a large government OEM. It is incredibly competitive and not easy to get the opportunity with the government to show what your company can do.

Sometimes the focus ends up being more on who can do it the cheapest as opposed to who can do it the best or who has the most past performance. As an up-and-coming company in defense, it is a struggle. With only a few past performance citations competing against a company that has several past performance citations, even if there is a great possibility that at our level or work and commitment and dedication is higher, we may not make the cut. This makes it difficult to get into the industry.

**“In the Army, one of the biggest things I faced was adversity; whether it was enemy action adversity or being a female in a predominantly male environment. I learned to just put my nose to the grindstone and work my heart out. I think that has carried with me ever since.”- Katie Bigelow**

**CEOCFO:** *Is there any way to get around that or do you just keep doing more and more work?*

**Ms. Bigelow:** I think going above and beyond and doing more work is part of it, but the other way we get around that is we build teams so we can share past performance. We share some of the risk and the responsibility, too, but it's great because it benefits more companies in our community and we develop strong partnerships with other people. When one company tries to do it all, there is little support and a great deal of liability.

**CEOCFO:** *On your site it states, “Mettle Ops is built on grit and transparency.” Where does the transparency come in and why is that important?*

**Ms. Bigelow:** One of the things we have found in the defense industry is government contractors tend to overcharge. This ultimately hurts our soldiers and they don't necessarily get what they need. The tax payer over pays for the defense products. The way we look at transparency is when we go to a government customer, we are very clear about what our rates are, where the money is going, and how it is being spent.

We are also clear we do not want the cheapest armor to protect our soldiers; we want the best armor. However, we try to do it in the most efficient fashion. We do it in a way that we call transparency, so our customer knows we are not hiding costs anywhere and we are doing exactly what we are saying we are doing for the money they are paying us to do it.

**CEOCFO:** *Do you see the government having more interest in quality today than they might have under the last administration?*

**Ms. Bigelow:** The interest in defense fluctuates with every new budget and new administration. Wartime environments change with technology. No matter what the administration is, we must put emphasis on quality and better technology for our soldiers. Right now, we are seeing the government is asking for better quality and lower cost. They are driving efficiency and I am proud to be a part of that.

**CEOCFO:** *Are there challenges in that with government projects, they are only willing to go so far and maybe there is a better way? Do you sometimes have to adjust what you provide depending on the financing?*

**Ms. Bigelow:** Sometimes yes. They are willing to pay for it, but they have tight budgets, too. Our direct customer is not the one who is cutting the budget on the projects we are working on. Budget decisions are made at a higher level and we all must follow suit. We hear things like, “Okay, our budget this year came in at half it was last year, and we are all going to have to pare down.” In some ways that is good, because it forces contractors to create efficiencies, so I am not entirely opposed to that. As I said, there are very wasteful contractors.

However, more to your question, I think, what is a heartache with me, is the government must purchase within their requirements and requirements are a big deal. Everything must meet a requirement in order to be purchased. One thing that has happened with us is we may bring a better technology than they knew was available when they made the requirement, so now they do not have a requirement for it. They know they need it, but they cannot buy it because there is no requirement, even though what we can do is far better than what they are buying it for. It is about the acquisition system running too slowly to keep up with technology. This is an immense frustration for us.

**CEOCFO: *You have a variety of certifications. Do they help?***

**Ms. Bigelow:** They are supposed to be a big help, but so far we have never won or lost anything because of them. We are continually trying to figure out how to market them. I am a Service Disabled Veteran Owned Small Business and an Economically Disadvantaged Woman Owned Small Business and I have my 8(a), which is a small business designation for a disadvantaged business. I have not built any revenue off any of those certifications, but we have opportunities on the horizon we are actively pursuing.

**CEOCFO: *We came upon Mettle Ops as a Michigan Company to Watch. Would you tell us about that recognition?***

**Ms. Bigelow:** The nominations come from the Michigan SBDC (Small Business Development Center). They have been a truly helpful organization to us on more than one product and service. They nominated us for our rate of growth and our level of intensity and effort. I heard yesterday there were six hundred nominees for Michigan Businesses to Watch, so that was really exciting when we got selected to be among the fifty. I think it is an indication and kind of a confirmation we are definitely growing, and we are going somewhere. I am exceedingly excited about that!

**CEOCFO: *What is your plan for the next year or so?***

**Ms. Bigelow:** Earn money and employ people! Each year there is so much to learn in government contracts and they are complicated. Over the last couple of years, we have noticed a pattern and we focus on a particular type of contracting each year. We learn the ins and outs of it and add it to our core competency. Our most recent contract type is the OTA, which stands for Other Transaction Agreements. It is a type of government contracting that is not new but has become a more modern way of doing things. For this year and the coming year, we are focusing on IDIQ (Indefinite Delivery Indefinite Quantity) contracts. These require more experience and past performance and we are aggressively pursuing this type of contract. We have bid on one so far and we I think we have four coming up we are working through the bidding process. This is the big goal.

Additionally, we know that to grow we have to have more services and more products. We have taken on more teaming partners to expand our capabilities.

The other big thing is our cyber security software. The cyber security requirements for defense contractors are robust and overwhelming, especially for midsized businesses, and almost impossible for small businesses. We developed a cyber security platform that helps businesses walk through the process of ongoing cyber security compliance. There are many tools out there right now to 'take an assessment and get compliant right now', but cyber security is an ongoing, daily, weekly, monthly requirement. Our tool assists a company to maintain continual compliance. We are enthusiastic to launch this in the coming month.

**CEOCFO: *That is a big item!***

**Ms. Bigelow:** Yes! We are passionate about all of these different things we are doing!

**CEOCFO: *First, we absolutely thank you for service. Your bio indicates your work in medical evacuation. What have did you learn from the military that helps in business; maybe what to do and what not to do?***

**Ms. Bigelow:** So many things! One of them is the grit. Grit is one of those things where we can be born with a certain amount, but as we expand, and we stretch and we push, we learn more and more grit. In the Army, one of the biggest things I faced was adversity; whether it was enemy action adversity or being a female in a predominantly male environment. I learned to just put my nose to the grindstone and work my heart out. I think that has carried with me ever since.

There is a "no complaining" mentality in the military that I carry with me now. It is, "life is not fair." The solution is to just plow through whatever adversity you face. That is probably the biggest thing I learned in the military. It was flying into the fight to pick up a wounded person and there was no time to pause and think about, "How am I going to feel, how is my family going to feel if I die, this is scary..." That stuff all must be put behind you and you have to just move forward and do what you know needs to be done. That helped when me tremendously when I had a special needs son. There were

moments when he was dying and I had to put on my old aviation cap and just do what needed to be done regardless of how I was feeling. In business, things are hard or frustrating or not fair, and I have to just ignore them and keep doing what I know needs to be done. That lesson was so valuable to me!