



FREEDOM **BUILDER**

March/April 2012

Getting down to business

Corps of Engineers works to finish Camp Shaheen in northern Afghanistan

Bomb survivors

Engineers remain on the job after an IED attack

Keys to transition

Employees train Afghans in property management skills

Somebody's listening

New senior enlistee lends his ears to anyone and everyone

A teaching moment

Engineers show Afghan children tricks of the trade



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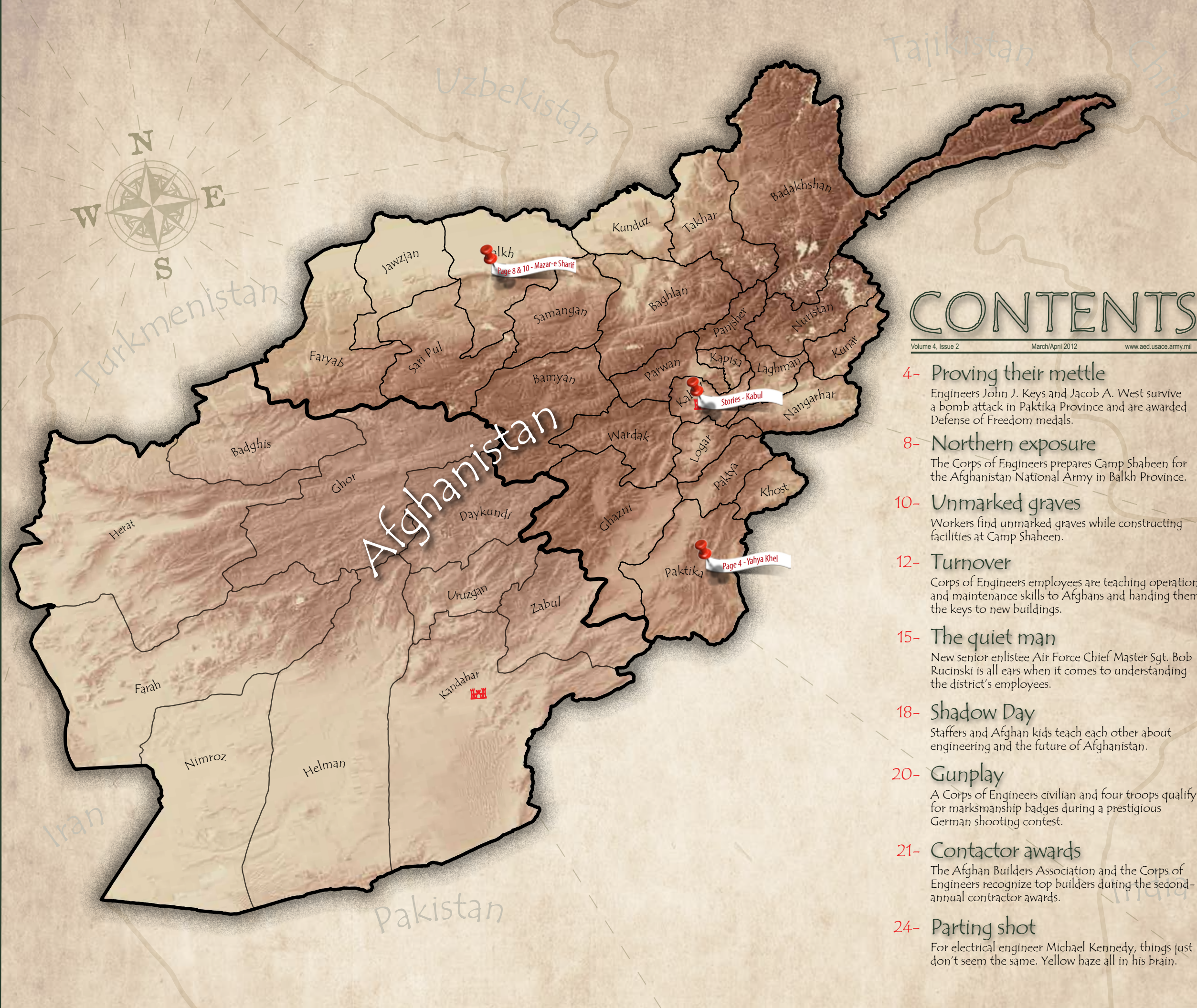
Cover image:



District commander Col. Christopher W. Martin (right) and deputy of programs and project management Todd Smith tour the Engineer Branch School project at Camp Shaheen in Dehdadi, Afghanistan, on May 1.

(Full story on Page 8)

Photo by | **Paul Giblin**



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Employees prove their mettle



Civilian engineers survive deadly bomb blast

Story by | Paul Giblin

Photo by | John J. Keys

Military personnel secure the site after an IED killed two men and injured three on in Yahya Khel on Oct. 19, 2011.

KABUL – In hindsight, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers civilian employees John J. Keys and Jacob A. West said they should have noticed that something wasn't right. So much so, their lives were in imminent danger.

There was something off-putting about a comment a young boy made.

At the time, the engineers had been inspecting a two-lane gravel road in the village of Yahya Khel in eastern Afghanistan. Several well-armed military personnel, an interpreter and a couple of Afghan police officers accompanied them. During the inspection, the engineers came across a group of children sitting in a doorway.

One of the kids spoke to the men in Dari. Typically, kids asked for pens, candy or bottled water, but the boy's words caused the interpreter to grimace. "What does he want?" Keys asked. The interpreter replied that the boy said he wanted the Americans' testicles.

"I thought, 'Now, this is weird little kid,'" Keys said. The group moved on.

A few minutes later, a buried improvised explosive device detonated, wounding Keys, West and the interpreter, and instantly killing two military escorts.

“The job that we do – working directly with the military, supporting these operations – is very important to security”

Keys and West were treated for concussions and shrapnel wounds and still suffer from headaches and ringing in their ears from the incident on Oct. 19. Both,

however, remained on the job after the attack, and later were promoted to supervisory positions at the Corps of Engineers' district headquarters for northern Afghanistan.

On March 31, U.S. Army Maj. Gen. Kendall P. Cox presented Keys, 52, of Fairbanks, Alaska, and West, 30, of Fayetteville, N.C., with Defense of Freedom medals, which recognize civilians killed or injured during conflict.

The medal is the civilian equivalent of the Purple Heart.

"People don't want these awards," Cox said, presenting the medals at the Qalaa House compound before 300 civilian employees and military members.

"You shouldn't go out there seeking something that identifies you as either being shot or blown up," the general said. "It's not a nice thing to have, but it's important to recognize these two gentlemen for their service."

Keys and West both said they accepted

the medals in honor of the two men who died that day – Navy Chief Petty Officer Raymond J. Border, 31, of West Lafayette, Ohio, and Army Staff Sgt. Jorge M. Oliveira, 33, of Newark, N.J. The four had worked together at the same base for months.

The Corps of Engineers is the leading agency rebuilding critical infrastructure in Afghanistan after three decades of war. Much of the agency's work is focused on constructing police stations and military facilities for Afghanistan forces.

Keys and West, though, are involved with the Provincial Reconstruction Team program that assigns individual engineers and construction representatives to coalition military compounds in the rural regions of the country.

Provincial Reconstruction Team members develop smaller projects, such as roads, bridges and schools, built at the request of local Afghan officials. Such projects are intended to bolster economic and humanitarian conditions for Afghan citizens.

On Oct. 19, Keys, West and the others were assessing a roughly two-mile section of road in Paktika Province near the Pakistan border, from the village of Gheybi Khel to Yahya Khel, about 60 miles south of the capital, Kabul. Village leaders asked coalition forces to resurface the road with cobblestone to reduce dust and mud.

The group had traveled from Forward Operating Base Sharana in a convoy of heavy military rigs called Mine Resistant Armor Protected carriers, known as MRAPs. The tan-colored vehicles have V-shaped hulls designed to deflect blasts from bombs hidden in roads.

At the first village, Keys, West and Border, who served as a construction representative, and an Afghan interpreter, exited the rigs and walked the rest of the way along the center of the road. They documented road conditions, taking notes, photographs and videotape.

Oliveira and other well-armed military personnel on a security detail escorted the group. They positioned themselves

mostly to the edges, walking ahead, behind and at the sides of the unarmed civilians, constantly checking alleys, doorways, rooftops and other spaces where insurgents could hide.

The convoy of slow-moving 14-ton MRAPs and a couple of Afghan police pick-up trucks kept pace.



Everyone in the group wore combat gear – helmets, flak jackets, fire-retardant uniforms and gloves, boots, ballistic glasses, personal first-aid kits and communication equipment. The military personnel were prepared for action; they carried assault rifles, grenade launchers and pistols.

The engineers were focused on their assignment. "We were looking at all the drainage features and what it would require to make it a proper cobblestone road," Keys said.

The group passed about a dozen three-foot-

deep craters left by previously detonated improvised explosive devices, but the group followed a mine-detecting vehicle that had not identified any unexploded IEDs.

The road was lined by an open trench along one edge, and was bordered on both sides by tall mud and brick walls that commonly border family compounds in Afghanistan.

At noon on the sunny day, as the temperature neared 90 degrees, the group reached the end of the inspection, about two hours after the road tour started. A few of the trucks turned around within the narrow space.

Five of the men – Keys, West, Border, Oliveira and the interpreter – paused to assess a culvert that channeled a murky creek under the road. Keys snapped a few photos of the downstream side of the creek to the south. A trickle of water ran along the bottom of a 15-foot-deep gully. An orange cat crept under a drippy pipe protruding from the side of the gorge.

Then, Keys snapped a photo of two craters in the road near where they stood.

Keys, West and the interpreter broke off, walking to the edge of road to better assess the upstream end of the brick-lined culvert to the north. The interpreter initially stayed ahead of Keys.

Keys stopped at the road's edge, about 15 feet from where the five men had stood seconds earlier. He snapped a photo of the gorge, lined on both sides by dirt alleys and walled compounds. About 450 yards away stood another walled compound, mostly parallel to the road.

Unknown and unseen at the time, two men were hiding there, watching the group.

The interpreter doubled back a few steps behind Keys, returning to West, who slowly walked as he shot video, dictating his observations as he went along.

Keys looked to West and the interpreter.

"I remember turning and then – it's hard to describe – it was just pain," Keys said. "I remember turning and this bad pain."

West, still shooting video, panned back south at the same instant. He never saw the



Photo by | Mark Rankin

Maj. Gen. Kendall P. Cox presents Jacob A. West, of Fayetteville, N.C., the Defense of Freedom medal on March 31, 2012.

flash.

The road erupted like a “volcanic explosion,” according to a statement filed two days later by Navy Chief Bobby A. Long, who was 60 feet away. “I saw a massive blast of dirt and dust.”

Keys was blown off his feet and about seven yards into the gully. West and the interpreter were knocked about the same distance, to the edge of the road.

Keys awoke face down in the dirt, dazed. He couldn’t figure out how he had gotten into the gorge. The air was thick with dust, debris still falling, U.S. currency lying on the ground around him.

“It was weird,” he said. “Surreal.”

Still confused, he reached out to grab the closest dollar bill. “Then it popped into my head that this bill might be booby-trapped,” he said. He pulled his hand back and waited until his head cleared a bit.

Keys didn’t realize it at the time, but both

his ears were bleeding, his right eardrum was blown out and a kidney was lacerated from the shock wave.

When he could, he called out for West by his nickname.

“I yelled for Jake and I yelled for Chief,” he said. “I yelled for Jake, and he didn’t answer right away, so I yelled for him again. Finally, he answered.”

West’s memory is a blur. “I remember the smell — that’s the only thing I do remember — the burning dirt, chemical, plastic,” he said. “Still today, if I smell that again, I know what that is.”

West vaguely recalls his friend’s voice somehow wafting through the murk in his own head. West was face down, dirt and bits of clothing and equipment falling around him.

“Are you OK?” Keys called out.

“I’m OK,” West responded.

“Where’s Chief?” Keys asked.

“I don’t know, man. He’s gone,” West said.

Long, who’s a medic, and the security leader appeared through the dirt cloud on the road above Keys.

Long spotted Keys, asked if he was alright, and then moved on to other victims. Keys heard the security leader radio for immediate military assistance. Keys heard him ask someone for ground coordinates, and he heard West, who had a global positioning device on his wrist, call out their precise location.

Later, West would remember none of it.

Keys scrambled up the gully and found West standing, barely conscious, bleeding from his ears, face and hands. The interpreter was on the ground. Keys led West to the closest MRAP as more military personnel secured the area from further attack, and attended to the interpreter.

With West safely inside the armored vehicle, Keys joined the search for Border and Oliveira. The group found Oliveira’s body in the gully, and Border’s body within the walled compounds, both about 100 yards away, but in different directions.

West’s first somewhat clear memory was sitting in the back of the MRAP, peering through a small window, watching Keys outside.

“He immediately went back to the site — unarmed — and helped the security forces team search for and recover our fallen soldiers,” West said. “He did all that without being asked. He did all that on his own without any regard for his own personal safety. He was a part of that team. I think that was significant. People should know that.”

Special Forces personnel responding to the scene discovered a wire buried in the dirt from the blast site to a triggering device about 450 yards away. The insurgents likely used binoculars to spy on the men and a motorcycle to flee after triggering the bomb.

The explosives were 12 feet deep. The size of bomb indicated that it was designed to destroy an MRAP.

The depth of the explosives probably

required a couple of men three or four days to dig, which means virtually everyone in the village was aware that the bomb was in place. Many villagers watched the group during its inspection; none said anything about the bomb.

The IED’s depth likely accounts for the survival of Keys, West and the interpreter. The deep explosion created a relatively vertical blast zone.

Special Forces personnel located and detained the suspected bomb-maker shortly after the attack. They identified and detained one of two suspected triggermen several weeks later. The other suspected triggerman remains at large.

Keys and West both had headaches and ringing in their ears for months after the blast, characteristic of IED blasts. The symptoms have subsided for both. They will receive further medical evaluation, standard military protocol for such events.

Keys is serving a 14-month tour and is scheduled to return in June to Alaska, where he works as a civil engineer at Fort Wainwright. He’s the father of two sons, both of Fairbanks.

He previously served on active duty for the Air National Guard for 16 years. He grew up in Port Clinton, Ohio, and earned a civil engineering degree from the University of Toledo.

West, who began his employment with the Corps of Engineers in Afghanistan, is serving a two-year assignment. He’s scheduled to return to North Carolina in October.

He grew up in Kansas City, Kan., and earned a civil engineering degree from the University of Kansas in Lawrence.

Keys and West both chose to remain in Afghanistan after the bombing and went on similar missions within a week. They have since been promoted to run the entire Provincial Reconstruction Team program, overseeing engineers and construction representatives across northern Afghanistan.

Keys serves as the program director; West as the deputy director.

Significantly, the promotions were not

tied to the explosion, said Col. Christopher W. Martin, who serves as commander of the Corps of Engineers in northern Afghanistan.

“Their selection to run the program is based on their familiarity with the Provincial Reconstruction Team, their familiarity with the program, their overall outstanding exhibition of leadership,” Martin said. “They are two separate, distinct incidents.”

Each medal, which is formally known as the Secretary of Defense Medal for the Defense of Freedom, was presented after a thorough review process lasting months.

Overall, more than 350 of the medals have been presented since they were created following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, according to Department of Defense spokeswoman Navy Lt. Cmdr. Kate Meadows. The number awarded for service in Afghanistan was not immediately available, she said.

“It’s outstanding that we had the

opportunity to recognize civilians who were injured on the battlefield, just like Soldiers,” Martin said. “It’s not something you’re awarded; it’s something you’ve earned. No one can approve or disapprove it. If you’ve actually been wounded, you get this medal.”

Both Keys and West said they were honored to receive the medals, but were conflicted by the loss of two friends that day. They remain committed to the reconstruction mission in Afghanistan.

The Provincial Reconstruction Team program in particular is vital to the cause, West said. “The job that we do — working directly with the military, supporting these operations — is very important to security. There was no way in my mind that I was going to leave these guys,” he said.

Accepting risk while working in a combat environment is a necessary part of the job, Keys said. “It’s a war zone. I didn’t take the IED personally.”



Photo by | Mark Rankin

Cox presents John J. Keys, of Fairbanks, Alaska, the Defense of Freedom medal at the Qalaa House compound on March 31, 2012.

Northern exposure

Engineers preps base for Afghans



Story and photos by | *Paul Giblin*

District commander Col. Christopher W. Martin (left), resident engineer Chuck Comeau (center) and officer in charge of the Mazar-e Sharif Area Office Lt. Col. Jason Evers take in the view from atop of the dining facility of the Engineer Branch School, which is under construction at Camp Shaheen on May 1.

DEHDADI, Afghanistan – U.S. Army Corps of Engineers personnel are directing construction of several compounds encompassing dozens of buildings at Camp Shaheen, an Afghan military base that covers a square mile in the northern region of the country.

There's a tangible sense of urgency to the work.

About 8,000 Afghanistan National Army troops are stationed at the base, but plans call for the manpower to nearly double to 15,000 as soon as the facilities are available.

When it's finished, the camp will serve as one of the nation's largest military training bases, with specialties in engineering, military police and communications. It also will be a permanent installation for Afghan troops assigned to fight insurgent forces in the area.

"I consider Camp Shaheen to be like the Fort Leonard Wood of the north," said Lt. Col. Jason Evers, the officer in charge of the Corps of Engineers' Mazar-e Sharif Area Office. Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri is a training base for U.S. military police, engineers, chemical technicians, explosives handlers and others.

"We have a lot of facilities that are going to be used for national purposes. That piece of it is pretty important as far as what we're bringing to the fight for the Afghan army," Evers said.

The scope of work at Camp Shaheen includes five big-ticket

projects totaling 203 buildings with a combined value of \$127.8 million. Three of the five new compounds are within the existing camp:

- The Engineer Branch School, which features 48 buildings and related infrastructure work valued at \$28 million. The prime contractor is a joint venture of the construction firms Assist Consultants Inc., and Kakhkashan Construction Co., which are both based in Kabul.

- The Regional Military Training Center, which encompasses 55 structures budgeted at \$36.7 million. Assist is the lead contracting firm.

- The Camp Shaheen Infantry Kandak compound, which includes 10 buildings and related infrastructure valued at \$7.2 million. A kandak is an Afghan military unit about the size of a battalion or about 650 soldiers. The firm Technologists Inc., which based in Rosslyn, Va., is the prime contractor.

Two of the five projects are being built within a newly expanded area of the camp:

- An expansion of the Afghan army's 209th Garrison compound, which is slated for 46 buildings and is budgeted for \$28.1 million. The construction firm ECC International, which is based in Burlingame, Calif., is the lead contractor.

- A military police school and a communications school, which together feature 44 buildings and related infrastructure projects

budgeted for \$27.8 million as a single project. The side-by-side schools are adjacent to the 209th Garrison expansion. ECC International is the lead contractor.

Hundreds of Afghan laborers work at the site every day, but significant obstacles have caused delays, said Chuck Comeau, a resident engineer stationed at Camp Mike Spann, a U.S. compound within Camp Shaheen.

Heavy snowfall during the winter slowed work and delivery of materials. Local residents called it the worst winter in two or three decades. "Everybody was hit by the weather," Comeau said.

With the spring thaw, work has resumed at a better pace, he said.

Additionally, the limited pool of skilled laborers in the region has slowed construction schedules. Contractors have been recruiting workers from across the country's northern provinces and from as far as Kabul, more than 200 miles south.

Plus, there are the security considerations that affect all construction projects in Afghanistan.

Col. Christopher W. Martin, the Corps of Engineers' commander in northern Afghanistan, and other district executives, toured the developments on May 1. "You

have a lot of challenges here and you're doing very well," he told engineers and construction representatives.

The base is strategically located in Balkh Province near the Uzbekistan border, 18 miles from Mazar-e Sharif, the fourth largest city in Afghanistan.

It's a short distance from Highway 1, a two-lane strip of pavement that loops the country. Camp Shaheen's proximity to Highway 1, which is also known as the Ring Road, allows quick troop movements throughout the region.

The base is being enlarged again to accommodate new developments. Facilities for Afghan and coalition troops have expanded beyond the original perimeter walls a couple of times since the Corps of Engineers arrived in 2004. Guard towers that stood at the edge of the compound in 2008 now are well within its interior. New towers stand at the expanded edges.

The Engineer Branch School

The complex will serve as the primary engineering school for the Afghan army.

The compound, which is on the south side of the base, will accommodate 1,300 students and staff members. The complex features classrooms, administrative offices, a dining facility, living quarters, storage facilities and

more.

Unlike most projects at Camp Shaheen, coalition countries, rather than the United States, are funding the project. Construction started in April 2011 and is scheduled to be complete in June 2013. It was 50 percent complete when Martin's group toured the camp on May 1.

The general contractor is using two shifts of workers. There are about 700 workers during the day shift and an additional 150 during the night shift. Abdul Wasi, the firm's regional manager, said he would put more workers on the day shift, but there isn't enough room on the site.

Finding skilled workers is a challenge, he said.

"For the work that people are not familiar with, we call trainers from other countries, mostly Turkey and Dubai (United Arab Emirates). Sometimes they come from Pakistan," Wasi said in English. "They train a couple of our foremen. Then the foremen will go on site and train the technicians."

The Regional Military Training Center

The facility will be the largest military training base in the country when it's complete.

The campus on the northeast corner of the base is designed to accommodate 3,000



Engineer Rich Newton (center left) briefs Martin (center right) and others on the Regional Military Training Center.

trainees and staff members. Construction is underway on all the buildings.

Like the engineering school, it will have complete facilities for the Afghan soldiers to live and train, including classrooms, administrative offices, living quarters and a power plant.

The need to move a helicopter pad and the discovery of collapsible soil in some areas of the site also slowed construction, Comeau said. The project initially fell behind schedule, but Corps of Engineers personnel have been working with Assist executives to get back on schedule.

“It was big learning curve. This is their first project with us,” Comeau said.

Construction started in July 2010 and is projected to be complete in October 2012. It was 45 percent complete during the tour. The contracting company has 700 to 800 workers on site during the day, and about 100 at night.

The Infantry Kandak quarters

The complex is near the northeast corner of the camp, mostly within the Regional Military Training Center. It will accommodate 635 Afghan troops, who currently are housed in temporary quarters. The unit is fully trained and fielded and ready to move in.

Construction started in August 2011 and is scheduled to be finished in August 2012. It was 89 percent complete on May 1 and project managers on the site told Martin they expected to be finished in July.

While Martin and construction managers toured the complex, workers installed interior doors, applied interior finishes, installed roof sheathing and built roadways and parking lots.

The most pressing factor at the site is installation of interior electrical systems, Comeau said. “They don’t have a lot of skill sets in that area, so it does take time,” he said.

The 209th Garrison expansion

The compound on the newly expanded west side of the base is being built to house 1,800 troops.

Work started in July 2011 and is scheduled to be complete in August 2012. It was 35 percent done on May 1.

The complex is distinctive at Camp Shaheen because it features barrel vault style buildings, which also are known as K span buildings. The structures are used as barracks, office buildings, maintenance shops, storage facilities and more. The structures are made of arched sheet metal panels that are secured to concrete foundations. They’re well suited to withstand Afghanistan’s snow, heat and blowing sand, Comeau said.

The sheets are between 1.1 mm and 1.55 mm thick and nine to 15 inches wide. The panels are shaped at the construction site with devices called coil-bending machines or curved-roof forming machines. Workers seam five together at a time, then erect them and link them together. The width of a building can be altered by adjusting the arch, and the length

can be modified by the number of panels that are seamed together.

The majority of the steel on the site has been shaped and is ready to be erected. Several buildings already are standing.

Military Police and Signal School

The complex is adjacent to the 209th Garrison expansion on the southwest corner of Camp Shaheen. It is designed to accommodate 890 students and staff members.

The compound will be used to develop military police officers and communications technicians. In addition, the compound features a network of roads that will be used to teach officers how to drive.

Like the 209th Garrison expansion, it features barrel vault style buildings. Work began in May 2011 and is scheduled to be complete in May 2013. It was 38 percent complete on May 1.

Overall, the Corps of Engineers’ mission at Camp Shaheen is driven by the need to bolster security in the region, Evers said. “The decisions that we’re making right now are tied to where and when the Afghan army needs soldiers on the ground,” he said.



A crew of Afghan workers go about the dusty business of mixing concrete at the Regional Military Training Center.

Workers find unmarked graves



Story by | Paul Giblin

Photo by | U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Construction continues at the military police school at Camp Shaheen in Dehdadi, Afghanistan.

DEHDADI, Afghanistan – A crew of Afghan workers made a grisly discovery while digging a trench for utility lines at Camp Shaheen.

DEHDADI, Afghanistan – A crew of Afghan workers made a grisly discovery while digging a trench for utility lines at Camp Shaheen early this year.

They found human bones in one location and several bodies in a nearby location on Jan. 1. Preliminary evidence suggests that the bodies were dumped during the time when Taliban insurgents controlled the region.

The laborers suspended work immediately.

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers officials, who are overseeing development at the camp, notified Afghan authorities, so that they can investigate the matter and properly intern the bodies.

The particular spots where the bodies were found are in an area that’s being developed to house the Afghan army’s 209th Corps Garrison and an adjoining area that’s being developed as a military police training school.

The discovery of the bodies underscores the need to expand the military base to bolster the Afghan army, said Lt. Col. Jason Evers, who serves as the officer in charge of the Corps of Engineers’ Mazar-e Sharif Area Office, which is overseeing the construction.

“People’s missions are tied to being able to move into these facilities and getting functions for the Afghan army set up,” he said.

There was no indication that the land had been used for anything other than agricultural purposes before U.S. and coalition forces began building the military installations in Balkh Province in 2004, said Chuck Comeau, a resident engineer.

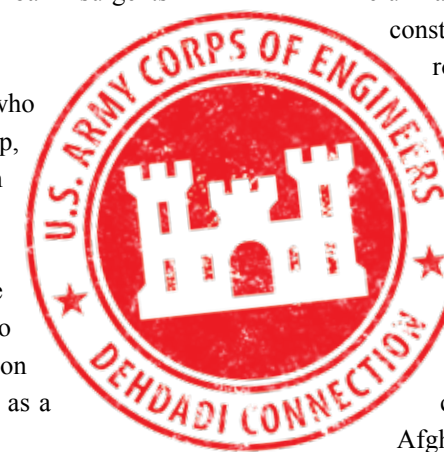
The workers were using hand tools to dig the trenches when they made the discoveries. The trenches are three to six feet deep. Signs of disturbed soil suggest the possibility of two mass graves. The number of bodies at the site is unknown.

The unmarked graves halted work on the utility lines, but construction has continued on surrounding buildings, roads and other developments.

Afghan authorities have yet to conduct a full investigation into the deaths or remove the bodies. “To date, there’s still been no remedy as to how it’s going to be resolved,” project engineer Rich Newton said during a tour of Camp Shaheen on May 1. “It’s in the hands of the Afghans.”

Col. Christopher W. Martin, who serves as commander of the Corps of Engineers in northern Afghanistan, directed project managers to instruct workers to fence off the areas while Afghan authorities conduct their activities.

Martin also directed project managers to identify alternate routes for the trenches, which will be used for the main electric lines linking power generators to the 209th Corps complex and the military police and communications schools. It’s important, he said, to keep development of the Afghan army base progressing.



Turnover

Corps of Engineers transfers maintenance to Afghans

Story by | **Paul Giblin**

Photos by | **Joe Marek**

KABUL – The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers marked two significant milestones during March in the difficult task of transferring ownership of newly constructed buildings to the Afghan government.

The events:

► Kabul's Vocational Technical Training School graduated its second class of Afghan trainees in construction and property management on March 18. Corps of Engineers officials worked closely with the school's faculty members to design and run the six-month course, which produced 58 new graduates.

► Corps of Engineers officials handed over nearly all operations and maintenance duties to Afghan forces at Darulaman Garrison, an Afghan army training base on the south side of Kabul, on March 1. The turnover marked the largest transition of its type to date.

"Actually, I would say it's the culmination of several really good months," said Cheryl Hess, who serves as chief of the Operations and Maintenance Division for the Corps of Engineers in northern Afghanistan.

The primary difficulty in transferring operations and maintenance duties of newly constructed buildings to Afghans is that after three decades of war and economic stagnation, the country simply does not have enough qualified property management professionals to do the job.

Meanwhile, there's an acute – and

growing – need for skilled operations and maintenance workers.

The Corps of Engineers is producing hundreds of police stations, military bases and other infrastructure projects for Afghan forces across the country. The inventory includes barracks, dining facilities, office buildings, gyms, storage facilities and more. Someone has to maintain those buildings after the Americans hand over the keys.

As a result, the Corps of Engineers has taken on the responsibility of teaching operations and maintenance skills to hundreds of workers. The agency's military personnel and civilian employees teach those skills themselves, and they've partnered with Afghan colleges and vocational schools and outside contractors to train even more workers.

U.S. Air Force Maj. Mike Brannon worked closely with the Vocational Technical Training School's administrators to write the curriculum and to run it properly. The program was designed specifically so that graduates would be qualified to maintain the inventory of buildings that the Corps of Engineers is building.

Brannon, who serves as the Corps of Engineers' Operations and Maintenance

deputy chief of training and transition, based the curriculum on the Air Force's operations and maintenance program, which he previously taught in the United States. The program features six trades: plumber, electrician, carpenter, painter, mason, and heating, ventilation and air conditioning technicians.

"There are several hundred tasks per trade, and they're adapted for Afghanistan," said Brannon, a native of Fort Worth, Texas, who's on a yearlong assignment in Afghanistan, and whose home station is Wright-Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, Ohio.

The list of tasks range from simple jobs to complex jobs. For example, the coursework for plumbers ranges from cleaning out a drain to installing a toilet. "It gets specific, because you want them to truly show proficiency at each task," Brannon said.

Special considerations had to be made for the trainees, who were recruited by the Afghan ministries of defense and the interior. An essential first step was providing basic instruction in literacy and numerology. Just 28.1 percent of Afghan adults can read and write, according to figures compiled by the Central Intelligence Agency.

"We got the students in and started to teach them. I had carpenters who had never seen numbers – period. They had never used a tape measure, never seen words. I mean, they're from the hills of Afghanistan," Brannon said.

Before the instruction, many trainees had compensated for their lack of formal education by using pieces of string to gage comparative measurements. They used that method to determine the length of lumber, bricks and other building materials.

"They made their own bricks. They piled their bricks the way their father and grandfather piled bricks before them. Now we're trying to teach them the ability

to maintain the structures that we've built, which are a little bit more complicated than that," Brannon said.

The U.S.-funded structures are outfitted with features such as concrete floors, door knobs, indoor plumbing and electric power, which are completely new and unfamiliar amenities for many Afghans. Before teaching trainees how to fix leaky water faucets, instructors had to teach them how faucets function.

Likewise, many of the recruits had no prior experience with electric power tools, Brannon said. "Obviously, there's a lot of safety training that goes with that. Having a saw that spins by itself and that can cut your fingers off? That was an issue," he said.

The instruction went mostly well. A few of the trainees accidentally severed the cords of their own tools, but not their fingers.

Overall, 58 members of the 60-member second class graduated, which marked a significant increase in the success rate compared to the first class, Brannon said. The Afghan government's recruiting techniques for the first class of 60 was somewhat suspect.

"They waited until the last minute," said Brannon, who speaks Dari, which is Afghanistan's primary language.

"They pulled the troops literally off the street. We had two guys who said they were standing at a bus station and people in uniform came up and said, 'Hey, would you like a job?' They put them on a bus and brought them to Kabul. They were recruited at a bus station," Brannon said.

Others had similarly lacking qualifications.

In contrast, the second class of recruits was more targeted. That group was comprised largely of men who already had low-level civilian jobs at Afghan military bases. Generally, they worked as janitors or errand runners. Others were tradesmen from rural areas.

◀ **Air Force Maj. Mike Brannon helped write the curriculum for training in operations and maintenance so that Afghan forces can manage newly constructed buildings.**

personnel to date have been Afghan civilians, though there is discussion within the Afghan government about retraining some Afghan soldiers to take on those duties, Brannon said. That decision rests entirely with Afghan government officials.

Brannon also played a key role in developing the Corps of Engineers' on-the-job training program for Afghan employees. The program is similar to the vocational school's program and features four levels of achievement for each trade: laborer, apprentice, journeyman and craftsman. The full program takes about four or five years to complete.

To date, 230 Afghans have been certified as craftsmen, while 501 others are enrolled in the program at 15 facilities across the northern portion of the country, he said. Furthermore, Brannon has shared the program with other U.S. and coalition agencies in Afghanistan to ensure a uniform approach.

"The ultimate goal is transition," Brannon said. "We want the Afghans to be able to maintain and sustain all the things that we've built."

The focus on operations and maintenance also could help steady the Afghan workforce as U.S. and coalition forces prepare to withdraw from the Afghanistan during the next few years.

The United States and other NATO

countries have created thousands of construction jobs for Afghans during a nearly 10-year construction blitz, but that building boom is all but certain to end, or at least shrink dramatically, when U.S. and coalition forces pull out. A portion of those construction workers, however, could transfer to operations and maintenance jobs, Brannon said.

In the meantime, the Corps of Engineers has been successful in turning over buildings to Afghan forces.

Previously, nearly all of the operations and maintenance functions had been contracted to a U.S. company that was required to hire, train and eventually transition the work to Afghans. Corps of Engineers officials have been pushing the pace of transition.

Rather than adding new buildings to the list for the U.S. contractor to maintain, the Corps of Engineers has started to sign over buildings directly to the Afghan government, with the expectation that the newly trained property managers can assume responsibility for their upkeep immediately, Brannon said.

The process is working well, he said.

"It turns out that the guys were paying attention. They understand how to operate and maintain these bases. They just hadn't had to do it," Brannon said.

"What we're finding is that as we're removing buildings from the contract,

giving them to the Afghans, they like being able to control their own destiny," he said.


The changeover at Darulaman Garrison was an important step in the overall transition process. Afghan forces have taken responsibility for nearly every building on the complex. To ensure that the mission didn't suffer, coalition forces retained oversight of the power plant, the water plant and the waste water plant to allow for more training on those complex systems.

"The lines that go to the buildings, the lines that go in the buildings, that's all in the Afghans' hands. Our contractors don't go inside the buildings anymore," Brannon said.

There are 167 buildings at Darulaman. The U.S. maintains just 10.

Based on that success, the Corps of Engineers has been increasing the pace of turning over other projects to the Afghans across the country, said Hess, who's also on a temporary assignment in Afghanistan, and otherwise serves as the chief of Installation Logistics for the Army at the Pentagon.

Overall, Afghan forces have taken the operations and maintenance at 1,061 buildings since November 2011.

"It's been breathtaking to see how fast and how well the Afghans have been able to take over O&M responsibilities at a lot of places," she said. 



Afghan forces assumed most operations and maintenance at Darulaman Garrison (foreground) in Kabul on March 1.



Story by | Paul Giblin

Photos by | Joe Marek

Air Force Chief Master Sgt. Bob Rucinski says his job is knowing the mood and disposition of the district's employees.

Senior enlistee listens first, speaks second

KABUL – The quiet art of listening is an essential – though a lightly regarded – component of leadership, according to Air Force Chief Master Sgt. Bob Rucinski, the newly installed senior enlisted military member for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in northern Afghanistan.

Listening also happens to be the foundation to his personal leadership style.

He began a six-month tour, his second in Afghanistan, in April. As the district commander's primary advisor for personnel matters, Rucinski said it's important for him to pay attention to and know the mood and disposition of the district's hundreds of military and civilian employees.

"In my career, I've noticed that for some reason, people think leadership equals talking, that it involves speech. Sometimes leadership involves just listening, being

there for people, and people knowing they can come to you," he said.

Those skills are particularly important for

"Sometimes you can't do anything about the problems or the issues, but it's just to be a sounding board."

someone in his role as the principal member of the staff responsible for ensuring morale and discipline, he said.

The best approach is mixing with employees both at the district headquarters at the Qalaa House compound in Kabul, and at the area offices all across the district. His job is talking to people, listening to people, and hearing their grievances, Rucinski said. "We're in Afghanistan. It's not America. This isn't the Holiday Inn Express. There are sacrifices that we all make. You may have frustrations. Sometimes you just need to talk to someone; you just need to voice some frustrations," he said. "That's the little bit I can do – just listen."

Often, he said, he isn't able to directly address the issues he hears about. The living conditions are cramped and will stay cramped. The amenities are limited and will remain limited. The work hours are long and will stay long.

"Sometimes you can't do anything about

the problems or the issues, but it's just to be a sounding board, letting them voice their frustrations and they feel better. We're still in the same predicament. We're still in Afghanistan," Rucinski said.

His approaches to dealing with military service members and civilians are virtually identical, he said. Everyone wants to be treated fairly and with respect. Everyone is making sacrifices by being away from family for long periods of time, said Rucinski, a chief master sergeant since June 2010.

"There's no difference. People are people. Well, there is a little bit of difference, but the bottom line is that people are people. One of the benefits that I have is that in the Air Force, we have a civil engineer squadron and it's a mix of civilian and military, so I've worked around civilians my whole life. I've seen people try to separate them, but I always approach it as we're all people," he said.

The biggest difference between military members and civilians in Afghanistan turns out to be their ages, Rucinski said. The military members tend to be younger, while the civilians tend to be older. And those issues transcend military status.

District commander Army Col. Christopher W. Martin said he depends on Rucinski to serve as his eyes and ears for the entire workforce throughout the unit.

"You want him to get the pulse of what's going on. At the same time, you want him to ensure that the commander's intent is being carried out by everyone, that people understand it. He helps ensure that attitudes and the way things are being expressed around the camp are OK," Martin said.

The key to Rucinski's approach is experience, Martin said. Rucinski, who's 41, has served in the armed forces for 21 years, including 11 years overseas. He doesn't jump to quick decisions. Instead, he relies on his military knowledge to



identify important issues and seek appropriate input before taking action, he said.

"When the chief master sergeant speaks, he's speaking on my behalf. That's obviously because I trust him a lot. I trust his experience and his grade. I know that he'll make the right decisions," Martin said.

Rucinski said he is able to listen to people's issues – and when he can, address them – without personally carrying the weight of those issues. He makes it a point to separate his professional life from his private life, even when his private life is crimped when he's deployed.

"I don't take it on as a burden. I don't feel like that," he said. "I know I have limitations. There's only so much I can do. Sometimes things are out of my realm and I understand that."

A bigger concern for a guy who has built his reputation on being accessible is that most people think his natural facial expression is serious, bordering on stern. He's well aware of that. "Sometimes I wonder if I make the best first impressions, but once people get to know me, we tend to be OK," Rucinski said.

Certainly, he's been around. He has served in Italy, Germany, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and on the island of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, in addition to his previous tour in Afghanistan.

He did a six-month stint in 2008 and 2009 at Bagram Air Field, where he worked as the superintendent for the facility engineer team. He oversaw the day-to-day operations and maintenance at the busy international base.

The job kept him largely confined to the compound, so his view of Afghanistan was limited. The most he ever saw of the country was during 10K runs around the back side of the base. He remembers glancing up during one run on a cold winter day and seeing sunlight illuminate snow-covered mountains in the distance.

"It was such a beautiful site. It just reminded me that it's just such a shame that people can't find peace here, because if they did, I think they would enjoy the beauty of this place," he said.

His current job gives him the opportunity to see far more of the country, traveling frequently with Martin to Corps of Engineers project sites throughout the northern portion of the county, which is the size of Texas.

Rucinski grew up in Dolton, Ill., just outside of Chicago, the second of four children, and the first in a large extended family to join the military. Rucinski and his wife Ingrid live with their daughter Jessica, 18, at Kadena Air Force Base in southern Japan.

Outside of work, he enjoys hiking, camping, fishing and canoeing, which

are pursuits that the big city guy truly discovered during a seven-year assignment at Malmstrom Air Force Base in Montana. The natural splendor of the Big Sky Country was unexpected, he said.

"We would go camping and hiking and see all that beautiful wildlife. I mean, I had never bought a canoe. I had gone fishing before, but you go fishing or hiking there and you'll come across a moose or a grizzly bear. It was a different world up there," he said.


Another passion is Chicago sports, particularly the Bears, Bulls and Cubs. Rucinski, who's 6-foot-1, plays basketball, softball and baseball, and he coached his daughter's softball teams when she was younger.

He's an Air Force-trained electrician who broke into the trade working with high-

voltage power lines. He earned a bachelor's degree in management from Park University in Parkville, Mo., in 2007.

He's the third consecutive Airman to fill the post of top enlistee for Afghanistan Engineer District-North, following Chief Master Sgt. Chad Brandau of Tucson, Ariz., and Chief Master Sgt. Forest Lisner, of Minot, N.D.

Rackinski sought the assignment because he felt he was due for another warzone deployment.

"It wasn't the assignment per say, as much as credibility. Credibility is huge," he said. "Even though you've deployed in the past, you're only as good as what you've done lately. It was just my turn. Everyone else had gone and it was time for me to step up and do it too, and just build credibility and serve our country. That's what we do." 



Rucinski (left) gets to know Afghanistan National Police program deputy manager Alana Sattin (center), and police program project manager Deryck Solomon at the Qalaa House building on April 26, 2012.



Story and Photos by | Mark Rankin

Army Spc. Adam McCrady, of Southfields, N.Y., assists Sadar Mohammad (left) and Parwiz Ghulam-Mohuddin (right) assemble a kite on Shadow Day at the Qalaa House compound on March 4.

Employees, Afghan kids build models for success

KABUL – U.S. Army Corps of Engineers employees introduced 36 Afghan children to the engineering industry during a Shadow Day program at the Qalaa House compound on March 4.

The program also provided insight into the working environment at large by giving the children the chance to shadow a parent, relative or a mentor who works on the compound, said Raelene Hampton, the event coordinator.

“We are proud to host these young boys and girls and help them get a fresh start on life,” she said.

“Most Afghanistan children don't know much about their parents' or relatives' workdays beyond the hugs and kisses

on the way out the door. This is a great opportunity for the Corps to show them

“ We are proud to host these young boys and girls and help them get a fresh start on life.”

we appreciate their commitment to make Afghanistan better,” said Hampton, who serves as the equal employment officer for

the Corps of Engineers' district in northern Afghanistan.

District employees introduced the kids to basic concepts of engineering by focusing on bridges and kites.

Bob Killey, a resident engineer, showed them bridges from around the world on a jumbo television, then collaborated with teams of children as they built their own model bridges. The project was presented as a competition among teams of two or three children each.

The students used paper, wooden Popsicle sticks, glue and tape. They carefully assembled all the materials to make their bridges sturdy enough to withstand pressure from bottles of water

and pennies.

The group whose bridge sustained the most weight was declared the winner.

For 14-year-old Bezhan Baryalai, son of Qalaa House dining facility worker Ahmad Baryaliai, the best part of the day was working on the bridge and assembling a kite.

“I used a close-stick design that allows my bridge to be strong and have more weight,” he said. “I thought that might work, so I tried it.”

In fact, Bezhan's design worked well. His team placed third among 12 teams.

While designing bridges may have been the goal for the students, the goal was much bigger for the employees who volunteered to help.

“We wanted the students to see there

are many aspects of engineering,” Killey said. “There is more to engineering than designing and constructing buildings.”

Shadow Day proved to be both academically motivating and fun. The children not only had a chance to see how math and science can be applied to everyday life, but they also had an opportunity to meet new friends.

The event turned out to be equally educational for the American instructors, said Jennifer Ford, a cartographer.

“It was a fun day and one of the best days I've had interacting with children since I deployed,” Ford said. “Knowing that the kids are family of our Qalaa House employees makes it that much more personal and rewarding.”

Over the course of the day, the students

learned about geographic information systems, toured the world on the computer using Google Earth, and listened to presentations about workplace safety and unique architecture designs.

In addition, they were treated to a juggling demonstration by district deputy commander Air Force Lt. Col. Aaron Benson, who appeared in a full clown costume.

Perhaps the most important lesson for the children was learning how engineering and construction are helping to restore bridges and roads throughout Afghanistan.

“It was very exciting and I would like to become an engineer,” Bezhan said. “I want to be an architect or engineer and help my country build better homes, roads and bridges.”



Resident engineer Bob Killey, of Walla Walla, Wash., works with Tamana Farhat to fashion a kite from tissue paper.

Shooters test aim with Germans

Story by | **U.S. Army Corps of Engineers**

Photo by | **Mark Rankin**

KABUL – A U.S. Army Corps of Engineers civilian and four military personnel snared prestigious German Schützenschnur marksmanship awards during a competition with German and coalition forces on April 12.

Public affairs specialist Mark Rankin, a retired Navy chief petty officer from Nashville, Tenn., qualified for the top award, a gold badge.

Army Sgt. Diego Castro of New York, Air Force Sgt. Matt Sammataro of Westerly, R.I., and Army Spc. Eric Schult of Orlando, Fla., got silvers, while Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Danny Finona of Kapolei, Hawaii, made bronze. The four are members of the force protection detachment.

The half-day competition took place at Camp Alamo. All five qualified on German P8 9 mm pistols, and G36 5.56 mm assault rifles. Overall, about 60 shooters from the United States, Germany, France, Hungary and Italy participated.

The key to the competition was adapting quickly to the German hardware, Rankin said. Each participant was allowed just five practice shots on each weapon at each distance – 50 meters and 75 meters for the pistol, and 200 meters for the rifle.

The shooters took aim on multiple targets with strict time and ammo limits.

On the P8, it was 10 shots in 10 seconds, then five shots in five seconds, and five shots in five seconds again. On the G36, it was

eight shots in eight seconds, then six shots in six seconds, and four shots in four seconds.


The competition offered troops a break from their daily routines, said Peter Klawitter, a German military advisor and the event coordinator.

“We started the event to bring the coalition forces together, out of our normal scope of work and bring camaraderie among them,” he said. “They get the chance to get away from base, away from the normal training and they get to do something different and fun in a more relaxed environment.”

The contest provided the opportunity for the Corps of Engineers personnel to become more familiar with coalition soldiers and their weapons, Finona said.

“If we have to be deployed, this is a great way to learn something new about our friends, meet other NATO counterparts and shoot weapons,” he said.

A delegation from the German army presented the Schützenschnur awards to the Corps of Engineers personnel at the Qalaa House compound on April 29.

The marksmanship badge is one of just a few pre-approved foreign awards that U.S. service members are authorized to wear on their uniforms, though it can only be worn by enlisted members on their class-A uniforms. Officers may accept the award, but not wear it. 



Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Danny Finona fires a German P8 9 mm pistol during the Schützenschnur competition.

Contactor awards



Corps of Engineers honors top builders

Story and photos by | **Mark Rankin**

U.S. Army Col. Christopher Martin speaks to Afghanistan television reporters during a break at the second-annual Contractors Recognition Awards ceremony at the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul on Feb. 26, 2012.

KABUL – The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers honored the top construction companies in northern Afghanistan during the second-annual Contractors Recognition Awards ceremony at the Intercontinental Hotel on Feb 26.

The event was presented by the Afghanistan Builders Association and was attended by nearly 250 engineering and building professionals doing business in the northern portion of the country.

The Oscars-style event provided a rare opportunity for business leaders of the country’s emerging construction sector to come together to network and build professional relationships.

“I appreciate this opportunity to recognize excellence in construction,” said U.S. Army Col. Christopher Martin, the commander of the Corps of Engineers’ district in northern Afghanistan. “Our goal is to ensure that

Afghanistan remains a strong and proud country, and a strong construction industry is important for the future of Afghanistan,” he said.

Martin and Afghanistan Builders Association president Naeem Yassin presented awards to 15 companies in 13 categories. Several companies were honored in multiple categories.

The categories reflected the Corps of Engineers’ two primary missions in Afghanistan: Building high-quality infrastructure projects to house and support Afghanistan National Army, Afghanistan National Police and coalition forces; and teaching construction, engineering and business management skills to Afghan workers.

Corps of Engineers officials identified one to seven companies as finalists in each category. The top awards – Afghan

Contractor of the Year and International Contractor of the Year – were presented to Jamal Aziz Construction and Engineering Co., which is based in Kabul, and to Ishan Qudrat and Prime Projects International Ltd. JV, which is a joint venture based in Kabul and Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

The companies best exemplified both quality construction and capacity development during 2012, Martin said.

This year marked the second year in a row that Ishan Qudrat and Prime Projects was selected as the top international contractor. Company vice president Imran Azim Butt credited the firm’s success to putting a tremendous amount of effort into the firm’s job-training program and into increasing its presence at various agencies throughout Afghanistan.

“We worked hard and it has showed,” Butt said. “We increased our Afghan workers’

skill levels through training and it made a difference in the quality of our work.”

He thanked the company’s workers for maintaining a fast pace of construction during often difficult conditions. “The weather, security and safety are very potentially massive problems here, so we are grateful,” Butt said.

Focusing on worksite safety is a major consideration. Most of the country’s laborers are inexperienced, so continuous oversight is required to ensure workers learn safety procedures as they learn construction skills, he said.

Ishan Qudrat and Prime Projects picked up four awards overall. In addition to the top international award, the company won the International Capacity Development and International Design/Build awards, and was a finalist for the International Safety Performance award.

This year marked Jamal Aziz’s first as the top Afghan contractor. The firm finished as a finalist in the category at last year’s ceremony. This year, Jamal Aziz took three honors overall. It also won the Afghan Capacity Development award and was a finalist for the Afghan Excellence in Construction award.

Virtually all of the companies that were

recognized have steadily expanded their portfolios of work during the past several years as Afghan and coalition military forces have reduced the economically crippling influence of insurgents throughout the country.

The firm Z-Plus Construction Co., of Kabul, made its debut in the event by winning the Best New Contractor award. Company vice president Zakia Wardak said the three most important aspects to working with the Corps of Engineers are adhering to the construction schedule, employing highly qualified workers and providing additional training for workers.

“We are always thinking of improving our training and projects,” Wardak said.

Four other firms won multiple honors:

► Afghan Builders Consortium, which is based in Kabul, won the Afghan Excellence in Construction award and finished as a finalist for the Afghan Contractor of the Year, Afghan Design/Build and Afghan Safety Performance awards.

► Omran Holding Group, of Bagram, Afghanistan, won the Afghan Design/Build award and was a finalist for the Afghan Contractor of the Year and Afghan Excellence in Construction categories.


► Asian Atlas Construction and Engineering Network, of Kabul, won the Afghan Safety Performance title and was a finalist for the Afghan Contractor of the Year award.

► Yuksel Insaat AS, which is based in, Ankara, Turkey won the International Excellence in Construction and International Military Construction awards, and was a finalist in the International Contractor of the Year and the International Safety Performance categories.

The second-annual awards program capitalized the momentum established by the inaugural program, Yassin said. The event promotes pride and competition within Afghanistan’s construction industry.

“It was a good evening for everyone,” Yassin said.

The program is based on the Afghanistan Builders Association’s and the Corps of Engineers’ shared goal of making Afghanistan a better country, he said. “We are glad to be partners,” he said.

“Because of our close relationship, we are able to provide construction companies with knowledge and training to provide quality work that benefits the future of Afghanistan,” Yassin said. 



U.S. Army Corps of Engineers contracting chief Ginger Booher (right) discusses contracting opportunities with Afghan construction executives during a break in the Contractors Recognition Awards event on Feb. 26, 2012.

US Army Corps of Engineers Afghanistan Engineer District-North 2011 Contractors Recognition Awards Ceremony

The winners:

Afghan Contractor of the Year

Jamal Aziz Construction and Engineering Co. - Kabul

International Contractor of the Year

Ishan Qudrat and Prime Projects International Ltd. JV - Kabul and Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Best New Contractor of the Year

Z-Plus Construction Co. - Kabul

Women Owned Business of the Year

Eagle AA Construction - Kandahar, Afghanistan

Afghan Design/Build Company of the Year

Omran Holding Group - Bagram, Afghanistan

International Design/Build Company of the Year

Ihsan Qudrat & Prime Projects International Ltd. JV - Kabul and Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Afghan Excellence in Construction Award

Afghan Builders Consortium - Kabul

International Excellence in Construction Award

Yuksel Insaat AS - Ankara, Turkey

Afghan Safety Performance Award

Asian Atlas Construction and Engineering Network - Kabul

International Safety Performance Award

Lakeshore TolTest JV LLC - Detroit

Afghan Capacity Development Award

Jamal Aziz Construction and Engineering Co. - Kabul

International Capacity Development Award

Ihsan Qudrat and Prime Projects International Ltd. JV - Kabul and Dubai, United Arab Emirates

International Military Construction Contractor of the Year

Yuksel Insaat AS - Ankara, Turkey

Parting shot

Photo by | *Joe Marek*

KABUL – Michael Kennedy, of Fayetteville, N.C., who's a member of the Fire Brigade at the Qalaa House compound, emerges from the yellow haze of a simulated fire during an emergency drill on April 26, 2012. Despite the yellow haze all in his eyes, he knew if it was day or night. When he's not blowing his extinguisher, Kennedy serves as an electrical engineer in the Operations and Maintenance Division.

