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Mountain Blade:

partnership slices through historic Afghan pass



Photo by U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Derek M. Smith
Joint Task Force Empire Public Affairs

A convoy stages outside the Salang Tunnel during Operation Mountain Blade, an emergency road repair effort to the Salang Pass section of Highway One in the Parwan Province, Afghanistan, recently. The operation, conducted by engineering elements of Joint Task Force Empire, improved the road surface of the pass in preparation for winter.

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General Knowledge

From the desk of the Commanding General, JTF Empire

As we celebrate this Thanksgiving Day, it is important we remember the little things we should be thankful for. Many things we take for granted – hot food, hot showers, warm and dry living quarters and the camaraderie of our Soldiers, Airmen and Seabees.

We have much to be thankful for as a Nation. We live in freedom. Our people are free from terror and do not suffer the burdens of armed conflict on our homeland. We are free to exercise the rights our forefathers fought for, many who paid the ultimate paid the ultimate sacrifice.

On this day, I ask that you take a moment to reflect on the blessings we enjoy. Take a few moments also to phone home or email family and friends – those with whom we celebrate life. Share with them what we are thankful for.

All of us at the headquarters wish each and every one of you a safe and happy

Thanksgiving Day. I trust that in the months and years to come, you will look back on your service here with pride and satisfaction; knowing that you served with distinction in the establishment of this country.

Thank you for what you do every day in the defense of freedom. The people of Afghanistan will not forget your service, nor will the men and women of our great Nation.

Happy Thanksgiving!



Essays!

DAVID L. WEEKS

Brigadier General, USA

Commander

Joint Task Force EMPIRE and
411TH Engineer Brigade

Bagram Air Field, Afghanistan

THE EMPIRE REPORT

JOINT TASK FORCE EMPIRE - 411TH ENGINEER BRIGADE
PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE

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133rd Naval Mobile Construction Battalion - Task Force Anchor
49th Mine Dog Detachment

“Winter is coming.”

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Engineers use civilian experience to rebuild dining facility in time for Thanksgiving

By 1st Lt. and Jered Stokes
Task Force Lumberjack Public Affairs

KANDAHAR PROVINCE, Afghanistan – Earlier this summer, a group of Afghan insurgents made their way into the secure confines of Forward Operating Base Frontenac, a small U.S. outpost in southern Afghanistan. The effects of the ensuing attack were significant to both the facilities and the Soldiers stationed at the FOB.

Nine coalition troops were wounded before all but one of the attackers were killed. The resulting combat action also destroyed the outpost's dining facility. For the last few months, Soldiers have either dined in the tight confines of an austere temporary facility or opted for take-out containers that permitted consumption at some other location, most likely their work or living areas.

Two weeks ago, Soldiers from the 181st Engineer Company, Massachusetts Army National Guard, arrived to change this. Having received their marching orders from the 20th Engineer Battalion, who recently assumed responsibility for most of the construction effort in Regional Command-South, a platoon of skilled carpenters, electricians, plumbers, and welders were immediately dispatched.

"This is an important effort and the very best craftsmen in our formation are on site," said Lt. Col. Jason Kelly, commander of the 20th Engineer Battalion. "Many of the leaders and Soldiers in the 181st Engineer Company make their living doing exactly what we've asked them to do. Every time I visit one of their jobsites, I'm amazed at what



Photo courtesy of Task Force Lumberjack Public Affairs

Sgt. 1st Class Laurie Bence of Cranston, RI., 181st Engineer Company, shows progress on the Frontenac Dining Facility to Lt. Col. Jason Kelly and Maj. Brian Hallberg of the 20th En. Battalion, recently.

they've done. The unit is well led and consistently exceeds my every expectation. I was able to visit Frontenac a few days ago and they're at it again."

"The 181st Soldiers have exercised a wide array of construction skills on the Frontenac Dining Facility," stated Capt. Adam Peterson, commander of the 181st Engineer Company. "As always, the platoon relied on civilian construction expertise and produced a high quality product."

Sgt. 1st Class Laurie Bence of Cranston, R.I. is leading the way. When Bence is not spearheading

jobs in Afghanistan, she's a master plumber in Cranston.

Capt. Peterson spoke highly of Bence as he commented, "Sgt. 1st Class Bence matched her expertise in the trade with leadership and management skills that brought the full capability of the platoon to bear." Morale is unbelievably high and improvisation is in full effect. The Soldiers are committed to having the facility up and running before Thanksgiving.

"We're going to have our Thanksgiving meal in this building," proclaimed Bence. "We will finish the job."



GRUFFLY SPEAKING

Straight Talk from the Command Sergeant Major, JTF Empire

Once again, It was another busy month traveling over 2,900 miles conducting battlefield circulation, visiting the Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen of JTF Empire.

We started out this month with a trip to KAF, to say thank you, and a job well done, to the Soldiers of the 980th Engineer Battalion. We wish Lt. Col. Lowery and Command Sgt. Maj. Fowler and their Soldiers safe travels home. At the same time, JTF Empire welcomed Lt. Col. Kelly and Command Sgt. Maj. Zokaitis and the Soldiers from TF Lumberjack. They brought a great team and a fresh set of eyes to the fight. There is no question they will do great things while they are here.

Back on the move, I headed out to FOB Lagman to take a ride down Highway One with the boys from the 151st and 870th Route Clearance Companies. We investigated some wires on the roadside, stopped for a code yellow, helped a local national right his truck, made it out to the BSO line, turned around and headed back to do it all over again. It is always a good day when everyone makes it back safe.

From there I headed west to Leatherneck to see Lt. Col. Meyer and Command Sgt. Wagner and the Soldiers of TF Warhammer. While there, we stopped in to see Cmdr. Yamodis, Command Master Chief Garcia and TF Anchor. Then it was off to COP Dwyer and a visit with 818th. They had just gotten in off mission. So we headed out to see what the Seabees were up to and, as usual; nothing but good things.

While back at for a few days, Lt. Gen. Terry stopped by and had a good visit with the CG and staff.

We again hit the road to FOB Sharana to see Lt. Col. Dobson, Command Sgt. Maj. Medlin and the Soldiers of TF Prowler and the great work they are doing.

From there, it was off to the north to see Lt. Col. Schaper, Command Sgt. Maj. Duros and the Soldiers from the RC-N TAC, then over to Spann to visit with the school house and enjoy some time on the range with our German brothers along with about 25 Soldiers from JTF Empire. The Soldiers from JTF Empire were able to take part in a once-in-a-lifetime event for a Reserve Soldier; qualifying for the German Schützenschnur. All the Soldiers seemed to have a great time, firing the weapons and learning from the German Soldiers that ran the range.

We made a quick stop Back at BAF before heading out the door the next day to FOB Goode to see the Soldiers of the 444th, to honor and remember three of our Heroes from New York- Spc. Jayne, Sgt. Gorniewicz, and Staff Sgt. Venne.

We made a run out to FOB Tillman to see some of the final deconstruction that was going on out there, and the great support we are getting from the 1st ID.

I would like to congratulate the following Soldiers on their well-deserved promotions: Spc. Sheaffer. Sgt. Daniel, Sgt. Alvarez, Sgt. Maj. Betty and 1st Lt. Rowland.

It has been another great month visiting with the Soldiers and seeing all that is going on around the country. Take care of each other and stay focused... and, as always, keep up the great work!

Thank you all for what you do.

CSM Andrew Krom



Mountain Blade:

partnership slices through historic Afghan pass

By U.S. Army
Staff Sgt. Derek M. Smith
Joint Task Force Empire
Public Affairs

BAGRAM AIR FIELD, Afghanistan – With a surface denoting the embodiment of Afghanistan’s tumultuous history, the Salang Pass is more than a roadway; it’s an economic and cultural symbol to Afghans. The battered roadway through the Parwan Province is the primary transit route between northern and southern Afghanistan crossing the treacherous Hindu Kush mountain range, and typically the only pass in the area to remain in use the entire year.

This highway is the main route between north and south Afghanistan, by which nearly all commerce for the capital city of Kabul and all other cities in the east, such as Bagram and Jalalabad, travels. An estimated 5,000 vehicles travel daily through the winding mountain pass.

With little maintenance since the Salang Tunnel first opened in 1964, the iconic passage has slowly slipped into a rutted path of decay. Continuous risk of closure threatened the economic and social lifeline to southern Afghanistan. After decades of conflict and neglect, Afghan and NATO leadership concluded something had to be done.

During a visit to the tunnel with Afghan Ministry of Public Works (MoPW) representatives in spring, 2012, Gen. John R. Allen, International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) commander, committed to assist Afghanistan with repairs prior to winter. ISAF Joint Command (IJC) tasked the engineers of the 411th Engineer Brigade, Joint Task Force Empire (JTF Empire), with the mission. Operation Mountain



Photo courtesy of Operation Mountain Blade Personnel
Vehicles pass within inches of each other through the darkened Salang Tunnel in Parwan Province, Afghanistan, recently. Inside the tunnel can become pitch black, and the air is filled with deadly carbon monoxide. While there are other routes through the Hindu Kush, the tunnel is the quickest, most efficient road.

Blade (OMB) was born.

The road oft travelled ...

The Salang Tunnel remains the primary connection from northern to southern Afghanistan. The path reduces travel time from 72 to 10 hours and cuts approximately 190 miles (300 km) from the trip. It is 1.6 miles (2.6 km) long at an altitude of approximately 11,200 feet (3,400 meters) above sea level, making it one of the highest road tunnels in the world.

The Soviet Union and Afghanistan developed the Salang Road jointly, starting in 1955. It was a crucial military link through the country during the Soviet-Afghan war. The natural danger inherent in the pass,

such as avalanches and extreme weather, has been compounded over the years by military actions and accidents. A tunnel fire in 1982 killed more than 170 Soviets and Afghans. Due to combat between the Northern Alliance and the Taliban through 1997 and 98, the ventilation system and entrances to the tunnel were destroyed, resulting in the closure of the tunnel to all but foot traffic. It was not reopened until January, 2002, after a joint effort by Afghanistan, Russia, the U.S. and other countries cleared the pass of mines and debris.

The area of the route can be treacherous and the tunnel itself has been the site of many disasters. Inside the tunnel may become pitch black, and

the air is filled with deadly carbon monoxide. Travellers can feel the air settling into their lungs, chokingly and nauseatingly so. While there are other routes through the Hindu Kush, the tunnel is the quickest, most efficient road and deemed most protected from insurgent attacks.

“The Salang Tunnel is a strategic piece of key terrain,” explained Lt. Col. Jon Brierton, JTF Empire chief of operations and Afghan National Army (ANA) development officer. “It’s the focal point of the northern distribution network. It’s of substantial interest to (NATO and Afghan forces).”



Photo by U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Derek M. Smith

(Above) A Soldier from 1st Battalion, 142nd Infantry Regiment, Task Force Hydra, stands watch outside a patrol base by the Salang Tunnel during Operation Mountain Blade. TF Hydra assumed the security role of the operation, ensuring force protection to construction and support assets throughout the area. (Right) Lt. Col. Greg Wooten, 605th Survey and Design Engineer Detachment commander, discusses operation plans with Afghan partners.

Travelling through the darkened walls of the Salang tunnel, travellers can see runoff from the mountain water seeping through holes in the tunnel’s half-century old walls. Pavement of the road had been worn into a bumpy rutted path of mud in many parts. Cars and trucks tightly squeeze through, depending on the traffic volume, too often with only inches to spare between vehicles and the walls.

The long climb ...

The operation was initiated to enable the Afghan MoPW to conduct emergency repairs of Highway One through the Salang Pass by providing equipment, materials and technical advice to repair portions of the road. IJC provided a specific scope; to assist in the repair of 400 meters of road inside each end of the tunnel and 200 meters outside each end of the tunnel - a total of 1,200 meters. The repairs were to be conducted as soon as possible to finish before the winter snows arrived.

“The intended scope was to im-

prove the road surface,” explained Brierton. “The road surface was in a serious state of disrepair prior to Empire’s involvement. There were massive ruts and potholes running throughout the inside of the tunnel which was a result of poor drainage. Over the years, it’s been repaired through various means, whether it was putting down concrete or overlaying it with asphalt. One of the biggest challenges was getting down to a solid sub-base from which Joint Task Force Empire could rebuild up the road.”

“OMB is phase one of a two phase (Commander's Emergency Response Program) project to complete emergency repairs of the Salang Tunnel,” stated Lt. Col. Greg Wooten, 605th Survey and Design Engineer Detachment commander. “Two million dollars of the total 20 million dollar project was allocated to phase one. Phase two is contracted to a civilian company and they indicate they will be on-site to begin work on living quarters in December 2012 and construction in



Photo courtesy of Operation Mountain Blade Personnel

spring 2013.”

“The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) here in Kabul have contracted for the enduring repair of the road surface which is phase two of this project to essentially resurface the roadway throughout the entire Salang Tunnel roadway,” Brierton elaborated. “This includes the snow galleries that lead up into it. There are approximately 16 galleries that essentially exist as an avalanche precautionary measure.”

Movement to the site began in August. Construction started on schedule Sept. 1. The 605th Engineer Detachment Construction Management Team took the lead on the operation which included elements of the 7th Engineer Battalion, Task Force Red Devils; 1st Bn., 142nd Infantry Regiment, Task Force Hydra, assuming the security role, ensuring force protection to construction and support assets throughout the area; and the 10th Sustainment Bde., Task Force Muleskinner, supplying logistical support.

The operation was planned as a collaborative effort between JTF Empire and Afghan engineers. Early miscommunications led to a slow start to the project. Details of the partnership were not firmly established prior to the start of OMB which led to confusion. Partnership became a continuous negotiation.

“The overall intent of the partnership between Joint Task Force Empire and the Ministry of Public Works was for our subject matter experts, being the equipment operators and the horizontal engineers, to train the MPoW to maintain the road,” stated Brierton. They were trained on how to maintain the road and fix parts of the road that still need to be repaired. We purchased gravel and heavy engineer equip-



Photo courtesy of Operation Mountain Blade Personnel Soldiers partner with engineers of the Afghan Ministry of Public Works during Operation Mountain Blade, improving the road surface inside the Salang Tunnel in Parwan Province, Afghanistan

ment, all of which was turned over to the Afghan Ministry of Public Works.”

“We struggled daily with the concept, implementation and execution.” Wooten recalled. “Our interpretation of what this should be was very different from the on-site supervisor’s, (Afghan National Army) Col. Ataulah, which was very different from his boss’, who was very different from his boss’. Our saving grace lay in our ability to communicate frequently each day with Col. Ataulah. He was very supportive and knew what needed to be done.”

Initial key leader engagements were conducted to establish guidelines on cooperation and equipment availability. In addition to the typical language barrier and limited number of linguists; pay, liability and equipment issues also hampered progress.

“Initial on-site visits prior to OMB led us to believe there was adequate equipment (to conduct the operation),” Wooten said. Once OMB

began, it became obvious more construction assets would be needed. “We negotiated daily in regard to equipment use and frequently gained access to critical pieces and we continued with the augmentation of equipment through purchase and the use of military equipment.”

“We purchased seventeen pieces of construction equipment for use during the project and to enable the MoPW to conduct road maintenance through the winter in order to sustain traffic ability, facilitating civilian traffic and critical movements of commerce, goods and services,” Wooten continued. “A maintenance contract was acquired to support and enhance the capabilities of the construction equipment. This proved invaluable as the construction effort was absolutely brutal on the equipment. The removal of multiple layers of pot-holed asphalt inside the tunnel resulted in worn and damaged equipment each day.”

Negotiations between the U.S. and Afghan engineers on construction efforts took place almost daily re-

sulting in a range of participation results. Ultimately, later engagements between the MoPW and Brig. Gen. David L. Weeks, JTF Empire commanding general, resulted in a stronger support of the partnership by all parties. Over time, a broader understanding developed and a stronger partnership developed.

In such a remote location, communications, which are sometimes taken for granted, became even more critical. Even while lacking electrical power during the initial week, the Soldiers ensured they maintained contact.

“Basically, communications are something we take for granted wherever we are. We always assume we can pick up a cell phone or a computer and have access to information,” said Capt. Mark R. Bailey, JTF Empire communications chief. Bailey established communications for the operation with a staff of two, then remained on site for the duration of the project to maintain these systems. “The reality is that those types of capabilities are quite com-



Photo courtesy of Operation Mountain Blade Personnel
Soldiers work on improving the road surface of the Salang Pass during Operation Mountain Blade in Parwan Province, Afghanistan, recently. The engineers worked primarily at night due to the large amount of vehicles using the roadway every day.

plex and are only made easy to use through modern communications systems. In a country such as this, very few of those systems exist, so we have to carry them with us in order to communicate on the battlefield.”

“Communications was a critical

part of the planning process,” Bailey explained. “We were given this mission, and we accepted it knowing that it was at an austere environment away from any existing base. Initially, communications were to be limited to Blue Force Tracker, which is a satellite-based messaging system, as well as radio. It was determined that additional capabilities were required in order to meet the commander’s intent. This included digital data services, so we added a satellite data communications system which provided both secure and nonsecure data services as well as telephone capabilities and secure video teleconference capabilities.”

These communication requirements included, updates on project status, security related information for force protection, and even morale and welfare for recreational use for the benefit of Soldiers the doing the difficult job, so they could maintain communications with their families.



Photo courtesy of Operation Mountain Blade Personnel
Soldiers work on improving the road surface inside the Salang Tunnel during Operation Mountain Blade in Parwan Province, Afghanistan, recently.



Photo courtesy of Operation Mountain Blade Personnel. Soldiers work on improving the road surface inside the Salang Tunnel during Operation Mountain Blade in Parwan Province, Afghanistan, recently. The operation, conducted by engineering elements of Joint Task Force Empire, improved the road surface of the pass in preparation for winter.

Plunging into the darkness ...

Due to the large volume of traffic through the pass, the decision was made to conduct all construction efforts during the night. This increased risk and stressed workers' abilities to comply with reasonable mitigation measures regarding safety.

"Visibility is limited during night operations regardless of efforts to provide artificial lighting, especially inside a tunnel," explained Wooten. "We experienced minor vehicle accidents with the construction equipment, even with ground guides. No guard rails are present on this treacherous high mountain pass. Conditions elevated the nightly risk of a vehicle plunging over the edge."

"By far (the equipment issue) was our most critical and difficult obstacle to overcome," said Wooten. "Both military and purchased equipment would become non-mission

capable each night. We struggled each day, working maintenance issues to get them back up. As luck would have it, we were able to shift efforts relative to the mission capable equipment which kept us on track and moving forward."

Other issues included: blown transmission and alternators, dead batteries, fuel pump failures, thrown tracks, broken windshields, broken cutting blades on graders, flat tires, civilian vehicle accidents, and cut fiber lines.

"Though we never got behind schedule, our progress was challenged daily by mechanical failures and equipment damage," emphasized Wooten. "OMB Soldiers worked nonstop from the time arrival through the final night (of the operation)."

"Site visits indicated a critical need for quality materials to complete the repairs and enable the MoPW to continue repair efforts through the winter," said Wooten. "(Existing)

repair efforts included local materials extracted from nearby mountains. This material was not suitable for adequate durability on a high trafficked road. It was mostly dirt and large rocks."

"JTF Empire worked with the local regional contracting command to contract delivery of high quality well-graded aggregate to establish adequate subgrade and a maintainable road surface," Wooten continued. "More than 800 truckloads of base-course and road surface aggregate were delivered, totalling 15,000 cubic meters. Portions were used during OMB as we assisted in the immediate repairs prior to winter. The remainder was stockpiled for use in the continued maintenance and follow-on completion of phase two (in the spring of 2013)."

Unusable road surface was removed from the work areas, averaging 10-20 inches in depth. An aggregate road surface was then laid down. An asphalt transition ramp was constructed to merge the concrete road surface with the existing road surface of the tunnel and severe potholes were repaired with asphalt. The engineers worked throughout the night in and around the tunnel, pausing regularly to allow traffic through.

"This Highway is the main route between North and South Afghanistan," Wooten explained. "It is impossible to completely close a road with this much traffic and the single most viable route spanning the Hindu Kush. We experienced continual authorized traffic such as emergency vehicles, wedding and funeral processions, government officials and vehicles supporting other contracted efforts supporting the tunnel and Highway One. Unauthorized vehicles also plagued our efforts, as

no strict requirements were established by the ministry traffic control personnel and we could not allow the vehicles to accumulate at our construction sites. Operations had to be managed in such a manner to allow traffic to pass routinely.”

Traffic and darkness were not the only adversaries to the engineers. The elements and environment exacted their toll on the Soldiers as well. An elevation change of over 10,000 feet for many Soldiers resulted in cases of altitude sickness and exposure.

Sitting on top of the world ...

Soldiers of TF Red Devils established a temporary patrol base on the north side of the tunnel. Utilizing existing buildings on site, the Soldiers were able to provide a suitable area for command and control of the operation, staging equipment, and billeting. Initially, the staging and living site was austere with no latrine facilities requiring burn out latrines and burn pit. Within two weeks, though, the engineers established latrines, shower and laundry facilities along with a water and trash contract. Additionally, the MoPW assisted with facilities for barracks, maintenance, supply storage and vehicle staging areas.

A route clearance patrol initial security until the TF Hydra team members assumed the security mission of the project. While TF Muleskinner maintained supplies to the operation, conducting convoy and airdrop operations to the troops on site. The remote location made routine ground supply difficult. The majority of resupply was conducted from the air with directional parachute drops.

Supply and security were not the only concerns for the engineers at



Photo courtesy of Operation Mountain Blade Personnel

Capt. Mark R. Bailey, Joint Task Force Empire communications chief, surveys the area outside the north entrance to the Salang Tunnel in Parwan Province, Afghanistan during Operation Mountain Blade, recently.

the Salang Tunnel. The high altitude, remote location created many challenges from personnel sickness to wildlife.

“The very first day, there was literally a miniature stampede of sheep that ran right through the patrol base,” Bailey recalled. “I had never been through a stampede of any sort, let alone a stampede of sheep.”

“At night we would here very strange sounds coming from the mountainside,” Bailey continued, though he remained unable to determine what was actually making the sounds. He recounted there were also several cats who lived on the base. Though the felines were friendly, Soldiers exercised caution around them.

Wooten explained that these issues did not, however, dampen Soldiers’ spirits, even though temperatures dropped below freezing most nights

and they had to endure two snow storms during September.

“Morale ran high throughout the mission due to the unique circumstances, continual contact with local nationals, and a high sense of accomplishment in regard to assisting the country of Afghanistan,” said Wooten. “The food was the most difficult issue with regard to morale. (Meals, Ready-to-Eat and shipped hot meals) for a month is enough to discourage anyone. This was mitigated by the MoPW. OMB Soldiers had access to freshly baked bread and occasionally, freshly cooked rice, beans or lamb. Soldiers (were able to) consume the local food as a welcomed supplement to the military rations.”

“The interaction with local nationals really stood out,” Bailey recalled. “Local Afghans worked there and lived there long before



Support personnel depart the Salang Pass landing zone via Chinook during a site assessment of Operation Mountain Blade in the Parwan Province, Afghanistan, recently. The majority of resupply was conducted from the air by helicopter and directional parachute drops.

Photo courtesy of Operation Mountain Blade Personnel

we got there. We established a good neighborly rapport with the local Afghans.”

Light at the end of the tunnel ...

OMB completed and exceeded the original mission scope by repairing more than 500 meters of road inside each end of the tunnel and 400 meters approaching each end of the tunnel in addition to 300 meters in gallery 15, further down the route, for a total of more than 2,200 meters of road repair. The entire project was completed 26 days ahead of schedule

“It met the intended goal,” Brierton affirmed after conducting a site

Approximately 16 galleries lead up to the Salang Tunnel in Parwan Province, Afghanistan. These galleries, while affording protection from the elements and the risk of avalanche, also allow for more exposure to the well-worn surface of the Salang Pass. In future operations, contracts in collaboration with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will address these areas.

Photo courtesy of Operation Mountain Blade Personnel

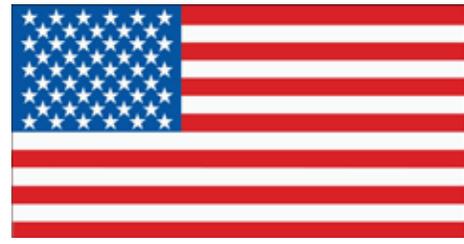
survey a month after completion. “The road surface that Empire put down is wearing exceptionally well. It has enabled a safer throughput of traffic. It has set conditions for the start of stage two of USACE’s contract. From this point, USACE can come in now, where we left off, do very minor maintenance on the base we have established and start putting down asphalt.”

“That was an impressive thing the engineers were doing,” said Bailey. “It was not easy work. It’s common knowledge - the absolute critical nature of that mountain pass. From an economic and security standpoint, it is just imperative that it stay

open, and personally, I was glad to participate in the mission for those reasons.”

“This effort was extremely effective,” Wooten agreed. “Ultimately, we provided the MoPW with equipment and materials sufficient to continue necessary road maintenance through the winter months and beyond. MoPW employees participated in the repairs and learned much needed techniques for repairing the road and conducting routine maintenance. In the end, OMB was successful at training equipment operators and increasing their knowledge of best practices for repairing and maintaining Highway One.” ❖





Respect to the flag; it's more than a regulation

By Joint Task Force Empire Public Affairs

BAGRAM AIR FIELD, Afghanistan – Service members may never seem lacking in their ability or creativity in exhibiting their patriotism and pride in their country. Display of the U.S. Flag is a common example of this expression. However, military members' intentions may not always coincide with the traditions and protocols established with the display of the U.S. Flag. Individuals displaying "Old Glory" should inform themselves on proper in the effort of paying proper respect to the nation's colors.

The U.S. Flag Code was officially adopted on Flag Day, June 14, 1923, during the National Flag Conference. This conference was attended by representatives of the Army and Navy which each had their own practices and procedures, and 66 national groups. It established uniform guidance on display of the flag. Adjustments were made in later years until Congress passed a joint resolution and it became public law as U.S. Code 36, December 22, 1942. This code included exact rules for use, display, conduct during the National Anthem, and the Pledge of Allegiance.

The code remains a guide, but imposes no penalties on the U.S. Flag's misuse, which is handled by the individual states, federal agencies and the federal government for the District of Columbia. It also gives no federal agency authority to make policy on the flag other than the President of the United States. Various provisions of the code continue to cause debate. Some of these have been contested at the level of the U.S. Supreme Court.

Army Regulation 840-10 governs Soldiers in proper display and honors to the U.S. Flag. It mirrors the U.S. Flag Code and regulates Army flag customs.

Service members should take care in the proper dis-

posal of a worn-out flag. It should not be thrown away, dropped in an amnesty box or disposed of in a burn pit. Proper disposal includes separation of the blue field, dignified burning and burial.

The appropriate methods of display include flat display and hanging free. When flying free, the blue field, or union, is always at the top nearest the mount. For flat display, AR 840-10 states, "When the flag of the United States is displayed either horizontally or vertically against the wall, the union will be uppermost and to the flag's own right, that is to the observer's left facing the display."

The U.S. Flag will always be given the honor position. It will be displayed on the marching right; the viewer's left, when presented with other flags. No other flag will be flown at a greater height than the U.S. Flag. Additionally, if the flag is flown during hours of darkness, it should be illuminated with its own source of light.

The U.S. Flag Code and military regulations state that no disrespect should be shown to the flag of the United States of America. It should never be dipped to any person or thing or touch anything beneath it, particularly the ground. Nor should it ever be displayed with the union down, unless it is a signal of dire distress.

The flag should never be used as a covering for ceilings, worn as apparel, used as bedding, or hung as a drapery. Fastening, display, use or storage of the flag in a manner which permits it to be easily torn, soiled or damaged is prohibited and it should never be used carry items.

Army regulation and the flag code both state clearly that no lettering or object will be placed on the flag. The flag should never have placed upon any part of it, or attached to it, any mark, insignia, letter, word, figure, design, picture or drawing of any nature.

Service members are encouraged to educate themselves on flag protocol and pay proper respect to the nation's colors in their expression of pride and patriotism. The flag is the symbol of the nation. Paying proper respect is not only military regulation, it is a time-honored tradition. 

Young couple proud to serve together in Afghanistan

By 2nd Lt. Nicole Palazzo
Task Force Lumberjack

KANDAHAR PROVINCE, Afghanistan – A married couple from the Forward Support Company, 20th Engineer Battalion is serving together in Kandahar, Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Specialists Karina Vazquez, 20, and Luis Vazquez, 21, joined the Lumberjack battalion in July of 2012. They were born and raised in Las Vegas, Nevada, both to Mexican immigrants. In high school, they were best friends. Luis graduated in June of 2009 and worked odd jobs for a year, just trying to make ends meet and struggling to find a job he was passionate about.

In November of 2009, Karina went to the recruiter and expressed interest in joining the Army. Six months later, Luis did the same. After Karina graduated, they started dating, and a couple months later Luis went off to basic training in Fort Jackson. Karina followed not too long after, and during winter exodus leave the two went to the court house to get married.

When asked about his parents' reaction, Luis responded, "There was nothing they could do. We were young and in love." That was almost two years ago. Now, after a year in Korea, the young couple is deployed with the FSC of the 20th En. Bn. within the 36th Engineer Brigade.

Although the Vazquez couple is split into different platoons, they see much more of each other during the day than they did in Korea. In Korea, they were in different companies in the same battalion. It didn't seem to have any adverse effect on their relationship, however. They have different missions, Karina being a heavy vehicle driver and Luis being a heavy vehicle mechanic, and therefore have things to talk about when they get back to base.

Now that they are deployed for the first time, the couple is optimistic about the new experience. Since they have never been overseas before, they rely on the experiences of their battle buddies in the company for guidance. During pre-deployment block leave they spent time with loved ones, answering questions and enjoying

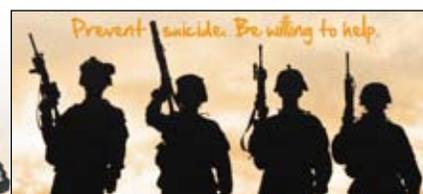


Courtesy Photo

Spc. Karina Vazquez and her husband Spc. Luis Vazquez, Forward Supply Company, 20th Engineer Battalion, capture some time together in front of their company tactical operations center in Kandahar, Afghanistan.

time with their families. Luis expressed that his parents are worried but proud. His mom prays for them daily and has requested a service be dedicated in their honor at their church. Karina's father was an Infantryman in the Mexican marines for four years and can relate to the day-to-day struggles and concerns surrounding the military lifestyle. She said that it's more difficult for her mom to understand what she goes through.

The Vazquez's are not sure what the future holds. They are focused on getting through the deployment before they make any decisions about re-enlistment. They plan on studying for the promotion boards together and taking college classes toward a bachelor's degree. In Korea, Karina went to the Soldier of the Quarter board and won at the battalion level. That victory sparked a competition between the Vazquez's; their competitive nature is motivation for improvement and career progression. They are proud of their service and are proud to be serving their country in Afghanistan together. 



SAFETY STOP

JOINT TASK FORCE
EMPIRE SAFETY OFFICE



This Month: “Load Binder Accidents”

By Mr. Marcus M. Heard
Joint Task Force Empire Safety Officer



2 Aug 12 - Soldier (SPC) (Thursday) 1230hrs Soldier was offloading construction equipment. SM released the pressure of the load binder (standing on release side). SM was struck in the face with the cheater bar he was using to release the tension. The accident resulted in 1 loss tooth, 1 tooth broken and a laceration on his bottom lip.

3 Aug 12 - Soldier (SGT) (Friday) 2300hrs Soldier was checking tension of chains during a convoy halt. SM began to tighten load with the flashlight in his mouth. SM was standing on the release side of the load binder. The load binder shifted and hit the flashlight that was in his mouth. The accident resulted in the loss of 2 teeth and 1 broken tooth.

17 Oct 12 - Soldier (SPC) (Wednesday) 1630hrs using cheater bar to tighten a load binder on an 870 trailer, bar slipped and hit his upper jaw.

13 Sep 12 - Soldier (SPC) (Thursday) 1040hrs was removing a chain securing the arm of a load binder (unbinding D-7 Dozer). The chains released built up tension in the arm and the arm hit the Soldiers hand. The accident resulted broken bones in the Soldier’s hand.

These are few of the recordable accidents, but we have incurred several other load binder related acci-

dents. Soldiers are currently using the “Lever” load binders and attaching an extended bar to the lever for leverage to tighten the chains.

- Use the “Ratchet” load binder. If your hand slips the ratchet will not propel and strike your face.
- Routinely check load binders for wear, bending and cracks.
- Do not operate load binder while you or someone else is standing on the load.
- Position the load binder so it can be operated from the ground, ensure your footing is secure.
- Move handle with caution using an open hand (handle may whip) keep your body clear.
- Never use a cheater bar pipe or handle extender to tighten or release a load.
- After tightening the load check the load binder handle position. Ensure load binder is in the locked position.



Diverse Task Force Anchor unit provides project materials

By Utilitiesman Third Class Drew Verbis
Task Force Anchor Public Affairs

CAMP KRUTKE, Afghanistan – Task Force Anchor, comprised of Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 133 personnel, meets the demand for Seabee capabilities to support ongoing military operations in Afghanistan by establishing solid supply lines. The center of the effort resides in the material liaison office aboard Camp Krutke, where pushing supply lines of mission essential materials is assigned to a small unit of experts from a diverse spectrum of training.

Builder Second Class Travis Johnson, the MLO yard boss, said each of the nine Seabees has multiple responsibilities each day to complete their tasking requirements.

“It would all but be impossible to complete missions as fast or with such ease as we do, if we didn't come from such culturally diverse backgrounds, and such a mixture of ratings,” said Chief Utilitiesman Laroy Brisco, the MLO leading chief petty officer.

“Here at MLO, we work with a unique dynamic of military, civil-



Photo by Utilitiesman 3rd Class Drew Verbis
Constructionman Electrician Elizabeth Leow, the assistant yard boss at the Task Force Anchor material liaison office, ground guides a forklift operator lowering a massive bundle of concertina wire.

ians and foreign national personnel, which only add to our figurative tool box.”

MLO uses a variety of methods to acquire a staggering quantity of tools and materials required to support the needs of coalition forces and at the same time maintain a working stock able to support emergent missions. This includes using local vendors, adjacent supporting units like the Marine Corps builder maintenance yard, and overseas shipments. There are language barriers, deadlines, budgets, contracts and physical acquisition of materials which are normally picked up

by the equipment operators on staff. At any one time, the department might be responsible for supplying multiple projects with thousands of pieces of materials worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.

“In a region like Afghanistan, there's always a challenge to provide materials to our projects on camp and located at forward operating bases,” said Johnson. “It's not an easy task.”

MLO has already processed nearly \$1.2 million in construction materials for five different construction projects and outfitted those same projects with the necessary tools to complete the mission, inventoried most of a 5.8 acre yard housing more than \$8 million in materials, and many additional chores since the battalion's arrival in Afghanistan.

“You see us working around the yard through the day, non-stop until after sunset,” said Lt. j.g. Mike Manzano, the MLO division officer. “The next morning we come in early with smiles on our faces. Every day is a new day and this crew truly embodies the spirit and the legacy of the Seabees like no other.” 



Photo by Utilitiesman 3rd Class Drew Verbis
U.S. Army personnel from the 132nd Engineer Company support loading operations for the Task Force Anchor material liaison office aboard Camp Krutke.

“One” becomes “Me”

Commentary by Staff Sgt. Derek M. Smith
Joint Task Force Empire Public Affairs

One may see a changing culture within our military. From which well this torrent sprung may never be known, but its lack of clear origin makes it no less apparent. It is a spectre; an essence hanging over the military community, but not quite tangible enough to grasp. It is the culture of the “Army of Me.”

Whereas Icelandic singer/songwriter Bjork hauntingly praises her “Army of Me” in her song of the same title, today’s Army has adopted its own version of the term. The lyrics of the song speak of empowerment, of standing up for oneself and focusing one’s life. The military version of the term tends to be less empowering and more divisive. Today’s “Army of Me” centers on individual entitlement; what the Army “owes me.”

It appears there is an ever-increasing trend of service members who express the opinion or exhibit the mindset that the military serves their agenda. The self-important contend that they are owed more and neglect the concept of earning. Additionally, there are increasing complaints that leaders utilize personnel and resources to further their own career. Leaders fail to foster the team success and perpetuate the individualist atmosphere through divisive practices.

Today’s Army recruits are arguably the most knowledgeable and talented group the military has ever received. Soldiers are better educated and possibly the most versatile troops in history. Knowledge and talent, however, often carry the baggage of ego. Many hold a belief that it is the Army’s privilege to have their service rather than their service is a sworn and sacred duty accepted under oath. Do Army units suffer from Soldiers’ inability to find the appropriate balance between self and corps?

The seven Army Values speak of individual merits, not of individual achievement. These values emphasize principles of foundation for one’s Army conduct. One would have a difficult argument in equating them to the individual mindset. They speak nothing of gain or achievement. They speak of character.

Perhaps the “Army of One” campaign was misinterpreted. When the motto was officially adopted in 2001, critics were already questioning the emphasis on the individual. At the time, the campaign seemed to resonate with the target demographic of 17-21 year-old males. Was the motto an influence in the collective mindset, or was it a result of an underlying mentality already firmly seeded in American society? The debate continued for years. Of note, however, is that “Army of One” was officially dropped in 2006 with the launch of the “Army Strong” campaign.

It has been argued the “Army of One” slogan was contradictory to the teamwork concept of the Army. The campaign was developed after marketing research showed that potential recruits saw military life as dehumanizing. The new slogan was to appeal Generation Y, the Army’s target audience. “Army of One” was intended to emphasize that Soldiers are the Army’s most important resource. It carried a dual message that was designed to communicate the strength of the individual as well as the strength or a united organization.

Critics of the campaign argued “Army of One” was taken too literally and over-emphasized the individual. The slogan may not have initiated the “Army of Me” concept, but it can certainly be

reasoned that it possibly contributed, if not fostered the attitude.

The military is a direct reflection of the society it serves. If one subscribes to this theory, then one would need to examine the role of “me” in the American culture.

In her book, “The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement,” author Jean M. Twenge examines the subject. “Narcissism is absolutely toxic to society,” Twenge said. “When faced with common resources, narcissists take more for themselves and leave less for others. They tend to be greedy and take too many risks. They feel entitled, don’t think about consequences and think that everything will turn out great.”

The author cites examples of the entitlement mindset which seems to plague society, claiming Americans in their teens, 20s and 30s tend to display very healthy levels of self-esteem even if they haven’t accomplished much to earn it. Common workplace and school comments supporting this opinion included: “That’s not my job,” claims that pop quizzes were unfair, demands for higher pay when lacking the skill requirements for such an increase, and even one college student’s expectation for a rescheduled exam to celebrate the student’s birthday.

How many similar occurrences do military members witness? It appears “shoot, move, communicate,” may have mutated to “why are we shooting; why do I have to move; and that’s not my responsibility, so tell someone else to do it.” Upon individual deliberation, is the person looking back from the mirror someone each service member can count on?

How might this mentality affect good order and discipline in a military unit? If everyone focuses on individual goals, where does that leave the mission? Do Soldiers know Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity and Personal Courage as words or do they hold them as values?

Military leaders need to remain introspective and ensure their actions remain in line with their respective creeds. There is a profound difference between a leader who made a decision because they should as opposed to one who did so because they could. A leader maintains the understanding that their choices affect not only themselves, but those entrusted to their mentorship.

In no way is this discounting individual accomplishment. Personal achievement is a cornerstone to our society. The fault lies where the individual success is at the expense of others. Soldiers are entrusted and expected to support the mission, mentor and support their peers and subordinates, and live up to the Army Values.

Have leaders made their own evaluations more important than their Soldiers’ development? Have Soldiers made their own agendas more important than the mission? These are questions only the individual can answer.

Today’s Soldier needs to find the balance between self and service. No individual is greater than the mission. Every single member of today’s military voluntarily enlisted. Each took the oath and signed the check payable to the American People in the possible amount of one’s life in the service Of the United States. There are no words within this oath which speak of individual entitlement. This oath is taken to affirm a calling to something larger than oneself.

Soldiers at every level should regularly examine their actions. What choices were made and for what purpose. In life, there are people who collect their check, and there are people who earn their check. This writer asks, “Which are you?” The mirror can be the clearest window to the truth. 

Operations at a glance:

Images from around JTF Empire



Photo by Capt. Zane J. Curtiss
Task Force Warhammer



Photo by Staff Sgt. Corey Ebach
Task Force Warhammer



Photo by Staff Sgt. Derek M. Smith
Joint Task Force Empire Public Affairs

(Top) Members of the 507th Engineer Battalion, Task Force Warhammer, demonstrate the capabilities of the DOK-Ing mine clearing vehicle at Camp Leatherneck, recently. (Above) Soldiers of TF Warhammer use an M984A4 Wrecker to assist an RG-31 Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicle through a sandy area of a route in southwest Afghanistan, recently. (Left) Sgt. Stephen Poandl, a technical engineer sergeant for the 411th Engineer Brigade, Joint Task Force Empire, fires the SIG 9mm pistol during a German Weapons qualification range at Camp Spann, recently. For more on this story, check out the December issue of the Empire Report.

Legal Matters

JTF EMPIRE COMMAND JUDGE ADVOCATE

Social Media and OPSEC

In a previous article, we mentioned how social media platforms can instantaneously connect users to a global network, allowing for the instantaneous and open sharing of information. Although these media platforms enhance the ability of service members to share personal information and activities with family and friends, this ability is also one of the more prevalent concerns when assessing operations security (OPSEC). While the OPSEC landscape has changed, best practices have not. The Loose Lips Sink Ships campaign of World War II has transitioned to Loose Tweets Sink Fleets with the advent of social media.

Ensure that any information posted online has no value to the enemy. Avoid posts that inadvertently tip off the enemy regarding tactics, techniques and procedures, standard operating procedures, and force protection measures. Do not discuss specific operations, particularly mission objectives, nicknames, and code words. Even after a mission is concluded, do not discuss its effectiveness or any enemy activity related to the mission. Never post photos or videos of actual military operations.

Do not write posts about future troop movements. Do not include dates, times, or geographic locations (including schedules, itineraries, and drop off/pick up points). The best practice is to hold posts about any event until well after it happens, even if the information has technically already been released publicly.

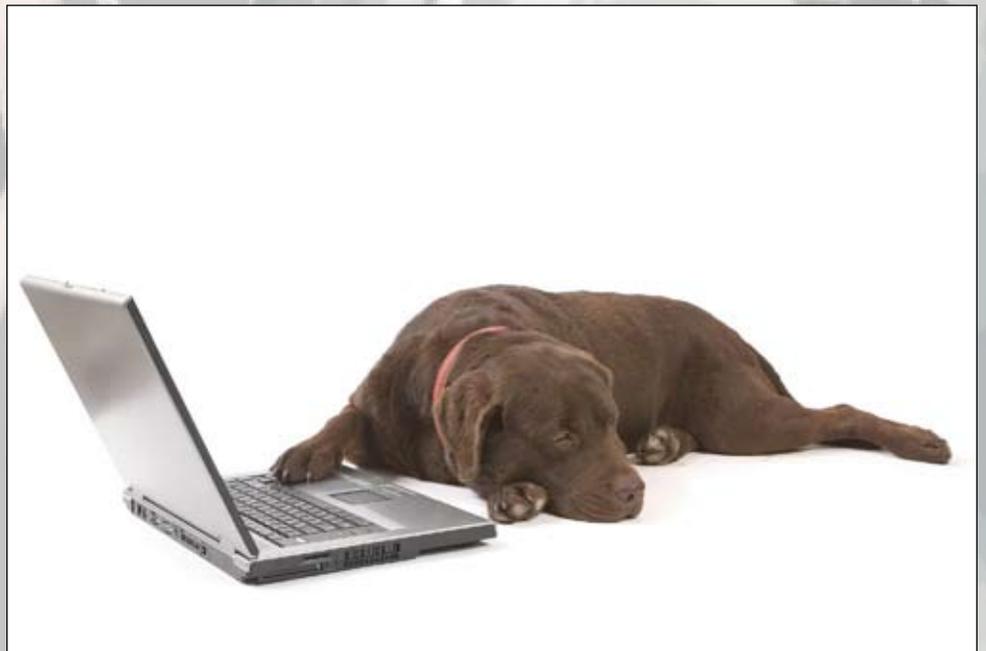
Location-based social network-

ing broadcasts geographic location, often to the detriment of deployed troops. Disable GPS-enabled features (including geotags). Make sure your photos and videos are not tagged with specific locations. Disable “places” features which allow you or your friends to check in. While online, do not describe bases, outposts, or areas frequented by service members.

Adjust your privacy settings, and set your activity to “friends only” (and not “friends of friends”). Verify a “friend” request before allowing access. Keep in mind that information which compromises OPSEC should not be posted, regardless of these settings.

Social networking requires awareness, good judgment, and discretion. Generally, you may post unit APO addresses, information already properly released in the public domain, and general information about your unit and mission. Personal use of social media is specifically addressed in Joint Task Force Empire Policy Memorandum 12-13; official use is addressed by the U.S. Army Social Media Handbook.

Remember that OPSEC violations can not only result in disciplinary and/or adverse administrative action but, more importantly, seriously jeopardize the safety of your fellow Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines. Remain vigilant!



In Remembrance . . .

*"But the freedom that they fought for, and the country
grand they wrought for, Is their monument to-day and
for aye."*

~ Thomas Dunn English



Sgt. Brett Gornewicz

Alden, New York

Served with the 444th Engineer Company out of Oswego, New York, deployed to Gardez, Paktya Province, Afghanistan, in March of 2012, where he served as a Combat Engineer in a Route Clearance Platoon in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Killed In Action November 3, 2012.



Spc. Ryan Jayne

Campbell, New York

Served with the 444th Engineer Company out of Oswego, New York, deployed to Gardez, Paktya Province, Afghanistan, in March of 2012, where he served as a Combat Engineer in a Route Clearance Platoon in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Killed In Action November 3, 2012.

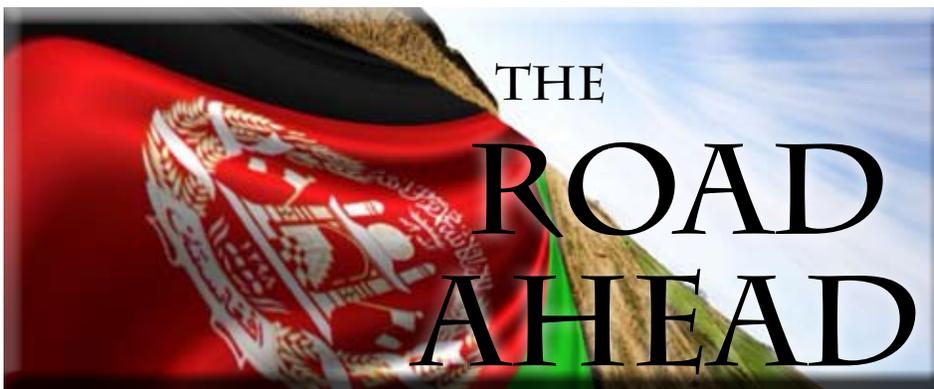


Staff Sgt. Dain Venne

Port Henry, NY

Served with the 444th Engineer Company out of Oswego, New York, deployed to Gardez, Paktya Province, Afghanistan, in March of 2012, where he served as a Combat Engineer Squad Leader in a Route Clearance Platoon in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Killed In Action November 3, 2012.



Task Force Anchor revives commerce with bridge repair

By Builder 3rd Class Sarah Sharples
Task Force Anchor

CAMP KRUTKE, Afghanistan - Seabees from Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 133, Task Force Anchor, completed repair of a heavy timber bridge across the Helmand River in Afghanistan's Helmand Province during October.

The 27 Seabees detailed to the project, working in three teams 24 hours a day, repaired the 370-foot long bridge which was originally constructed in 1957. In four days, the TF Anchor personnel replaced the uneven and treacherous decking with fresh wood that prepared it for increased traffic from a nearby village and local bazaar.

"The main purpose of the repairs was to open up freedom of movement for the Afghan National Army

and local commerce freight," said Chief Utilitiesman Joseph Mathers, the detail's senior enlisted leader. "Eventually the hope is to revive the once bustling bazaar and help the town economically."

With the arrival of the Seabees, the local population became curious, and while the bridge was closed for much of each day, they expressed appreciation for the repairs being done.

"There were people watching us at all times," said Builder Third Class Skylar Brown. "It was cool to interact with people from another culture."

Builder 3rd Class Autumn Searcy agreed. "It was a good feeling knowing that you're helping the local (population)," she said.

The detail's officer-in-charge, Lt.

Builder 3rd Class Paul Theile and Builder 2nd Class Nicholas Turner of Task Force Anchor carry timbers along the bridge during their bridge repair mission in northern Helmand Province.

Photo by U.S. Navy
Lt. Kenneth Garcia

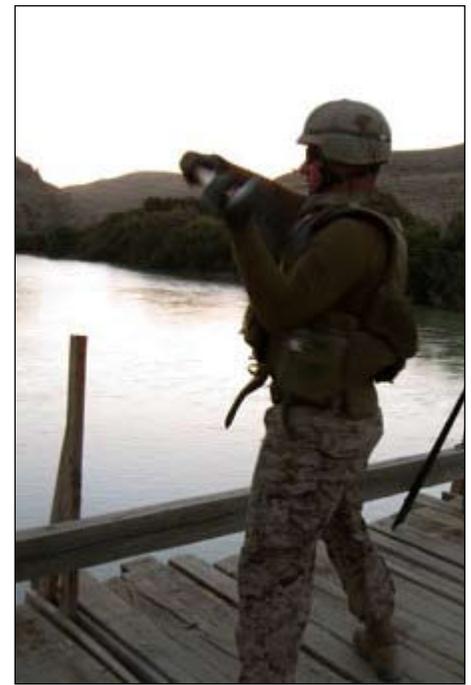


Photo by U.S. Navy Lt. Kenneth Garcia
Construction Electrician Constructionman Zachary Zehner of Task Force Anchor removes existing bridge curbing during a bridge repair mission in northern Helmand Province.

Kenneth Garcia said he was impressed with the crew's initiative and hard work.

"We could not have finished it without the crew we had. I would pick the same crew for any other project," he said. "Hopefully we have given the Afghan (people) a bridge that will last for years to come."

With the swift completion of the assigned task and additional time before they were scheduled to return, the crew took the opportunity to assist with force protection upgrades and quality of life enhancements to a nearby forward operating base and ANA post to further enhance their ability to patrol the region.

NMCCB 133 is deployed to Afghanistan to provide engineering support to coalition forces, the Afghan military and the local population. 