



Volume 1, Issue 7

Happy New Year Edition

January 2013

Golden Gate bridges strategic Afghan crossing



Photo courtesy of JTF Empire RC-Southwest/West Coordination Cell

Joint Task Force Empire military engineers emplace one of two 17-bay Acrow bridges during Operation Golden Gate, a Regional Command-Southwest (RC-SW) combined-joint engineering mission to construct a bridge complex spanning the Helmand River in southwest Afghanistan. The operation design was to improve mobility at the Sabit Qadam Flood Plain Crossing across the Helmand River.

Full Story on Page 5

Featured this month:

Operation Golden Gate

Page 5

260th assures freedom of movement in southwest Afghanistan

Page 11

ANA 209th engineers commence fully independent operations

Page 14



General Knowledge

From the desk of the Commanding General, JTF Empire

I want to take the opportunity to remind all the Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen in our formations that there is no end to the fighting season. While operations may drop slightly in the winter, the enemy is always trying to find new ways to harm U.S. Military personnel.

You must stay vigilant. You must also be aware that the insurgents are not the only thing we have to be weary of.

As winter continues, we must make sure that our equipment and our service members are in the best possible readiness. Proper maintenance now will save time down the road. Take the opportunity, also, to maintain your physical and mental health. The holidays are a difficult time to be away from our loved ones; don't dwell on being away from friends and family. Go with a battle buddy and hit the gym or watch a movie.

With your help, Joint Task Force EMPIRE has accomplished many great construction

(and demilitarizing) missions. We have made roads safe and passable for military and civilians alike through the hard work of our route clearance missions.

The partnership missions that you have taken part in have furthered the ANA and placed them in a position to conduct independent operations. The seeds we sow with our Afghan brothers and sisters today will allow the Afghans to reap the benefits for a lifetime.

Stay strong. Stay focused. Stay safe.

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		COMMANDING GENERAL		COMMAND SERGEANT MAJOR	
PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE		BRIG. GEN. DAVID L. WEEKS		COMMAND SGT. MAJ. ANDREW C. KROM	
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	<p>"Brigade of Choice"</p>		<p>Media Queries please contact the JTF Empire PAO at derek.m.smith@afghan.sva.army.mil</p>		

Photo by U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Brian Thompson
Task Force Warhammer



Operations at a glance:

(Left) Sappers from 2nd Platoon, 818th Engineer Company, Task Force Warhammer “blow-in-place” an improvised explosive device (IED) along an alternate supply route in southwestern Afghanistan. TF Warhammer route clearance platoons have neutralized more than 130 IEDs during the past several months, dealing a significant blow to the insurgent forces’ preferred tactic. (Below) Combat engineer Soldiers from the Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 507th Engineer Battalion, TF Warhammer, conduct training and test fires on vehicle Common Remotely Operated Weapon Systems (CROWS) prior to a mission to Forward Operating Base Shindand, in southwestern Afghanistan, recently.

Photo by U.S. Army 1st Lt. Simon Caron
Task Force Warhammer



GRUFFLY SPEAKING

Straight Talk from the Command Sergeant Major, JTF Empire

As our time here grows short, I feel the need to warn against complacency. Yes, our endstate is in sight, but our mission is not over, yet. I challenge each and every one of you to stay on target, to continue to give your all, and above all, stay true to our values and each other.

Over the last few weeks, I have traveled around Afghanistan to ensure our Soldiers, Seaman and Airmen are focused and cared for. I have no doubt that our units within Joint Task Force Empire are the cream of the crop. Our team has done outstanding work in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

I started off traveling for the Christmas Holiday in RC-South with a stop in Kandahar to visit with the, 20th Engineer Battalion, 120th En. Bn. and SFC Johnson and his crew with our coordination cell. Then, it was off to Pasab to see 584th Route Clearance Company and the 182nd Vertical Construction Company, then to Bastion to see the 507th En. Bn., and then back to Bagram to spend New Years with the brigade. After New Years, it was time to get back on the road; first heading back to the south to Kandahar, stopping in to see SFC Johnson and the crew again, then off to Frontenac to see the 1138th RCC, from there it was off to Azizullah to see the 23rd and 693rd RCCs, then to Walton to revisit the 584th. I then headed out to the West to Shindand to see the 510th RCC and A/27th Brigade Support Troops Battalion. After a long week on the road, a short break was in order with two days in Bagram, then it was time to go again. So it was off to Ghazni to see the 624th RCC and 42nd VCC before the 555th En. Bn. arrives and I will be off again with

CSM Bryan to show him around the battle space.

I would like to congratulate the following Soldiers on their promotions. Keep in mind, your new rank is not a

gift; it has been earned and the bar is set even higher for you now. The hard work that got you to this point is the hard work that will continue to push you to the next level. We expect big things from SGT Brandon Arias, SGT Jeremy Smith, and SGT Rafael Corchado.

Keep in mind that the CG and I both hold that there is no end to the fighting season. Stay vigilant and alert out there, for your own sake as well as your fellow service members.

Finally, I would like to say how very proud I am of the mission we have continued to do here. I know that even though the mission of the 411th Engineer Brigade and Joint Task Force Empire is drawing to a close, the legacy of our work here will live on. You have made an enduring impact on the operations and the people of Afghanistan. You should be proud of our accomplishments. I know I am.



Thank you all for what you do.

CSM Andrew Krom



Shoulder to Shoulder

NO SOLDIER STANDS ALONE



Golden Gate bridges strategic Afghan crossing

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

BAGRAM AIR FIELD, Afghanistan – As NATO forces work toward bridging the gap from military operations to a self-sufficient Afghanistan; Army, Navy and Marine engineers of Joint Task Force Empire took the mission literally as they conducted Operation Golden Gate (OGG) near Sangin, Helmand Province, Afghanistan through the months of November and December.

Golden Gate was a Regional Command-Southwest (RC-SW) combined-joint engineering mission to construct a bridge complex spanning the Helmand River in southwest Afghanistan. The operation design was to improve mobility at the Sabit Qadam Flood Plain Crossing across the Helmand River. This strategic crossing links the Sangin, Musa Qa'lah and Now Zad Districts close to Forward Operating Base Sabit Qadam (Jackson).

The mission carried strong strategic importance for coalition and Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), as well as the local Afghan population. It also carried historical and inherent natural challenges. The waterways are highly unpredictable, as the shoals (intermediate land masses) and surrounding areas typically flood from January through May.

“The research, concept development and engineering design surrounding the crossing of the Helmand River was enormously difficult, especially conducting this phase of the operation from a combat zone with minimal resources,” explained MAJ Michael J. Hults



Graphic courtesy of JTF Empire RC-Southwest/West Coordination Cell Plans graphics show the intended scope of Operation Golden Gate, a Regional Command-Southwest combined-joint engineering mission to construct a bridge complex spanning the Helmand River in southwest Afghanistan. The operation design was to improve mobility at the Sabit Qadam Flood Plain Crossing across the river.

P.E., RC-SW/W Coordination Cell officer-in-charge and Operation Golden Gate mission commander. “The Helmand is considered a braided river due to the network of adjacent channels, shoals, sandbars and rapids. Braided rivers are known for having erratic hydrologic activity and a dynamic topography which makes predicting either component extremely difficult. Further, any added man-made feature will ultimately have effects that cannot be readily forecasted.”

“Our specific scenario leads to a crossing point that is furthermore a floodplain during the months of March through May when the Kajaki Reservoir swells from the melting of the surrounding mountain’s snowpack,” Hults continued. “The river levels can fluctuate by as much as eight feet during these flood periods. How do you construct a year-round expeditionary crossing point for both military and civilian traffic through, over or on top of a floodplain that is highly unpredictable, all the while trying not to negatively impact the local populace? Also,

add to this scarce and subpar construction materials, a small budget and the fact that it will be constructed in a combat zone. Now, that’s a challenge!”

Hults said the solution began digitally by developing a virtual river model through software that uses empirical data and complex algorithms to predict the hydraulic events and subsequent outcomes.

“The way it was actually solved here was to have the RC-SW/W Coordination Cell design around agreed upon assumptions, available materials, time constraints and the various constructing unit’s assets and abilities,” said Hults. “Further, the cell identified and evaluated different risk factors and developed engineering solutions that could be implemented to mitigate the potential negative outcomes to a point where the risk was acceptable.”

“Another challenge to this mission was the highly kinetic project site and the diminished battle space owner personnel. The (Marines) experienced a huge drawdown of infantry personnel during the recent

surge recovery,” Hults recalled as he described the many security aspects involved in a project of this scale. “It took a combined joint effort to keep the constructing units safe and secure. Even with the numerous entities coming together, the battle space owner still felt the pinch of thinning personnel resources due to the requirements of this mission.”

Coordinating with the local contractors for material delivery was another hurdle to overcome. The project required crushed stone for soil stabilization and 60 concrete box culverts for hydraulic pressure relief along the elevated causeway. The contractors were hired, but required security and, were susceptible to delays due to route clearance requirements along the roads to the site. Additionally, military dump trucks delivered approximately 1,700 tons of riprap from Camp Leatherneck to the project site.

“Riprap is large broken concrete or boulders used to shield shorelines, abutments and levees to prevent scouring and erosion from flowing water,” Hults elaborated. “The riprap available at Leatherneck was plentiful and consisted of large chunks of concrete from an old air strip. Without the proper amount and type of riprap emplaced on the bridge complex, the structure would have surely failed during the

first flood season. “

The flood season caused major problems with past projects at the site. Two previous bridging operations were beat back by the elevated water levels of the flood plain. Originally, a 12-bay medium girder bridge (MGB) was constructed in the area for seasonal crossing in August, 2010. These bridges can cover a 31-meter gap. A constructed earthen shoal ramp decreased the original gap to 25 meters. The high river level forced the removal of the MGB the following January. A second attempt constructed another earthen shoal ramp, decreasing the gap to 28 meters and emplaced an MGB in October, 2011. The high river level again forced an emergency bridge removal in March, 2012. The repeated earthwork had caused the river to scour the shoal and increased the gap width to 50 meters.

“Each time this earthwork was introduced into the river, it drastically changed the topography. During the flood season after the 2010 MGB emplacement, the river cut through both earthen piers,” Hults explained. Riprap was added to the west side earthen pier in preparation for the following crossing season. “This caused the raging river to redirect the flow until it not only erased the east side pier, it scoured

approximately 20m of the hard pack shoal, therefore increasing the main river channel width. “

The Marine 8th Engineer Support Battalion conducted a recon of the site in June 2012 and determined an MGB could no longer span the gap. Additionally, the shoal was too severely scoured to emplace another earthen ramp. Combined recon teams revisited the site in July, August and September. A final survey in December was used to develop the “as-built” drawings. The final solution consisted of two 17-bay Acrow bridges with a 300-meter interconnecting elevated causeway system. After providing a full design package, JTF Empire was tasked with the development and overseeing the construction of the project.

Regional Combat Team 7 secured the floodplain site as the 12th Georgian Battalion and Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) conducted security on the east side of the river. Naval Mobile Construction Battalion (NMCB) 133, Task Force (TF) Anchor and the 12th Georgian Bn. secured the immediate project site. The 507th Engineer Battalion, TF Warhammer, provided route clearance patrols in the area as constant aerial over watch was maintained.

Through the efforts of the 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines, Afghan aware-



Photo courtesy of JTF Empire RC-Southwest/West Coordination Cell

Military engineers work on the shore during the emplacement of one of two 17-bay Acrow bridges during OGG. The proper amount and type of earthwork emplaced on the bridge complex was vital to the structure’s success during the upcoming flood season.



Photo courtesy of U.S. Army Col. John Elam, JTF Empire Military engineers emplace one of two 17-bay Acrow bridges during OGG. Members of JTF Empire, TF Warhammer and the 132nd Multirole Bridge Company (MRBC) installed the first Acrow bridge Nov. 22-24.

ness of the project was increased with meetings with district governors and various ANSF officials as well as informative engagements with the local populace about project status and benefits. Afghan National Army (ANA) escorts coordinated with the Marines to ensure delivery of building supplies for the project.

TF Anchor took the onsite lead on the bridge complex construction. The Seabees modified the existing pier by both increasing the elevation and width. They constructed levee systems and bridge abutments and formed the elevated causeway with crushed stone and local fill. Finally, they compacted, shaped and graded the bridge complex. Box culverts were installed within the elevated causeway. Riprap hauled by the ANA 2nd Bn., 215th Bde. engineers was emplaced along the levees, bridge abutments, causeway and around the culverts.

Engineers worked 24 hours a day for 50 days straight on rotating 12-hour shifts under increasingly harsh winter conditions, a steady diet of heater meals, long convoys to and from the site, and a daunting task ahead. The engineers of Golden Gate faced the challenge.

“The morale was the lowest in the beginning of the project when the extensiveness of the construction seemed insurmountable,” Hults recalled. “Once the Seabees started to extensively change the landscape of the floodplain through their relentless efforts, morale continually improved until culminating with mission completion.”

“Morale was very high,” agreed Sgt. 1st Class Jason Armano, 411th Engineer Bde. chief bridging non-commissioned officer. “They were eager to get the job done. They worked 12 hour shifts. The night crew had it the hardest. The temperature at night was below freez-

ing making it difficult to work in. Construction went as smoothly as any construction project goes. It had its issues and hurdles that any construction project needs to overcome, but the Army, Marines and Seabees worked through it to get the mission accomplished.”

Members of JTF Empire, TF Warhammer and the 132nd Multirole Bridge Company (MRBC) installed the first Acrow bridge Nov. 22-24, on the Sangin side of the Helmand River. The bridge was 170 feet long and 14 feet wide with the capability to span a 150 foot gap. It will support normal one-way traffic. The river can rise 10 feet before causing the need to remove the bridge. A second, similar bridge was then installed Dec. 7-13, at the Musa Qa’lah side of the river. The river level can rise 9 feet before the bridge would need to be removed.

“This was our first really big bridge build in country,” Sgt. Matthew Coleman, squad leader, 2nd Platoon, 132nd MRBC. “What really made the difference were the Soldiers out there doing the work. They were the ones who made it happen. They worked hard. They didn’t complain. They were out there ready to go. We came together as a team.”

The ANA 215th Bde. Soldiers provided project site security including vehicular checkpoints, ferry station checkpoints, local contractor site security and interpreter support. The ANA leadership provided the local populace project-related information keeping a constant communication line open, further garnering strong support. Afghan Uniformed Police assisted with ferry checkpoints, security support and traffic control.

A contingency of Seabees will



Photo courtesy of U.S. Army Col. John Elam, JTF Empire
Local Afghans come ashore using a ferry as military engineers emplace one of two 17-bay Acrow bridges during OGG. Prior to the bridge, the locals relied on a ferry system as a paid service which was often slow and unreliable.

remain on Sabit Qadam to monitor the bridge complex and provide maintenance and emergency repair support, as they transition the mission to the 215th ANA engineers. Members of JTF Empire will continue to regularly visit the site to verify bridge integrity and provide maintenance support. During the flood season (Jan.-April), data will be collected to provide RC-SW recommendations for any site upgrades.

The mission's result is greatly improved freedom of movement for coalition members, ANSF and the surrounding Afghan population which had become dependent on lengthy alternate routes or a limited and costly ferry system.

"The local population had to use a crude ferry system to get their vehicles, livestock and themselves

across the area," explained Armano. "The ferries only operated during daylight hours. Now with the levee system and the two bridges installed they can cross the area freely."

"A more accessible and quicker crossing point will save logistic, engineer and security convoys valuable time, especially when bases are few and far between and the distances required to travel grows. It will benefit the military base demilitarization process." added Hults. "The locals travel back and forth across the river to bring their livestock and goods to the different bazaars. Prior to the bridge, the locals relied on a ferry system as a paid service. The ferry process was also slow and unreliable."

The meticulously planned and cooperatively executed mission has its biggest challenge waiting at the

end of winter with the quickly approaching flood season. The engineers are steadfast in their confidence of the new crossing, as well as its lasting effect.

"The mission was incredibly successful as witnessed by the construction of an impressive bridge complex within time and budget and, the extremely positive atmospherics of the local population. From the standpoint of the local populace, ANSF, coalition forces and the engineering community, this was a huge success," stated Hults. "For the first time since we operated in the Helmand Province, It brings year-round freedom of movement while, providing a quality of life improvement for the locals. It strengthens security, commerce and prosperity for the local population." 



This Month: “Inclement Weather Driving”

JOINT TASK FORCE
EMPIRE SAFETY OFFICE

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



PURPOSE:

To identify the potential hazards of inclement weather and direct prevention measures for driving.

SITUATION:

During the winter months, we can expect snow, sleet, rain, black ice, and high winds. Inclement weather affects all driving conditions regardless of vehicle type (Tactical or Non-tactical) on improved roads or on rough terrain. In some areas the increased precipitation will cause muddy slick road conditions. Additionally water levels in lakes and rivers will increase, so extreme caution must be emphasized.

RISK MITIGATION CONTROLS:

- Pre-Combat Check
 - *Before Ops PMCS
 - *Operational Seatbelts
 - *Windshield wiper blades
 - *Windshield washer fluid
 - *Gunner Restraint System (GRS)
 - *Clean head & tail lights & mirrors
 - *Check tire pressure
- Brief Composite Risk Management Worksheet
- Conduct rollover drill rehearsal
- Reduce speed
- Increase following distances between vehicles
- Soldiers properly trained and license
- Ground guide when visibility is restricted or near water (METT-TC)
- Do not combat lock near water
- Lightning – stay in vehicle





Don't Start a Resolution - Set a Goal

by Stew Smith

Military.com

It seems to me that most New Year's resolutions are forgotten by February. Most people bite off more than they can chew on New Year's Eve and start a drastic change of life all in a short period of time.

This year, SET A GOAL! But try not to change too much in your life too quickly. Many people, in their annual search for health, make broad resolutions that require several different life style changes. Quitting smoking, starting an exercise program, and dieting all in the same week can be extremely challenging.

Tackling any ONE of the above vices is challenging enough. If you have any of the above vices or others, you may want to try one step at a time rather than trying "cold turkey -- and all at once!" Here is a plan that will get you started on the right track.

Goal Setting

This year I have several people who have set a goal of doing some form of race later in the year. Using the first 6-9 months to train for the event will get you in shape for the event AND help you lose weight. A triathlon, 5k, 10k walk or run, a 1/2 marathon, marathon, etc. My wife is determined to run the Race for the Cure this year. This is a great cause for cancer research. Many of the people who run the race either have cancer OR have beaten cancer in recent years. My wife, who is perfectly healthy, but needs some form of cardio exercise, figures if cancer sufferers and survivors can run the race, she can too.

Many men seem to like to ace one of the many physical fitness tests for the military or FBI. You can find information of all these tests at Military.com. It is a fun goal to be fit enough to be in the Armed Forces, Special Forces, of FBI at the age of 50 or above.

Here are some more tips to starting slowly and preventing failure of your goals within the first month of

the New Year.

January - April

Start exercising and drinking water NOW! You may find that you do not have to alter your diet at all as long as you are burning calories by exercise.

By drinking anywhere from two quarts to a gallon of water a day and cutting back on soft drinks. You can lose up to 25 pounds this year!

The type of exercise you need to start doing is walking, biking or swimming for 20-30 minutes 4-5 times a week.

May - September

Now you can pick up the physical fitness training a bit by lifting weights or starting a good calisthenics program. Exercises like pushups, pull-ups, crunches, and squats mixed with more walking or occasional running can boost your fitness level to new heights.

If your fitness program is not working for you at this time, you need to take a look at your diet and what you are consuming daily. If you are not losing weight by walking 4-5 times a week and drinking nearly a gallon of water a day, you need to consume fewer calories. This does not mean you have to starve yourself. It simply means eating foods with fewer calories. More nutrients like fruits, vegetables, and lean meats cooked by methods other than frying would be a good start to changing your diet.

October - December

By this time, you should feel great about your physical progress and have more energy than you have had in years. Running, biking and swimming several times a week should be habit by now and feel refreshing and stress relieving after each workout. If you have not quit smoking cigarettes by now or at least tapered off, it is time to start trying a little more aggressively. Usually, however, if you have maintained a fitness program this long, quitting has already occurred. But if you have not quit, now is the time to try either the "cold turkey" method or some type of patch method.

So in summary -- start exercising now!



260th engineers assure freedom of movement in southwest Afghanistan



Photos by U.S. Army Sgt. Kevin D. Steen
Task Force Warhammer



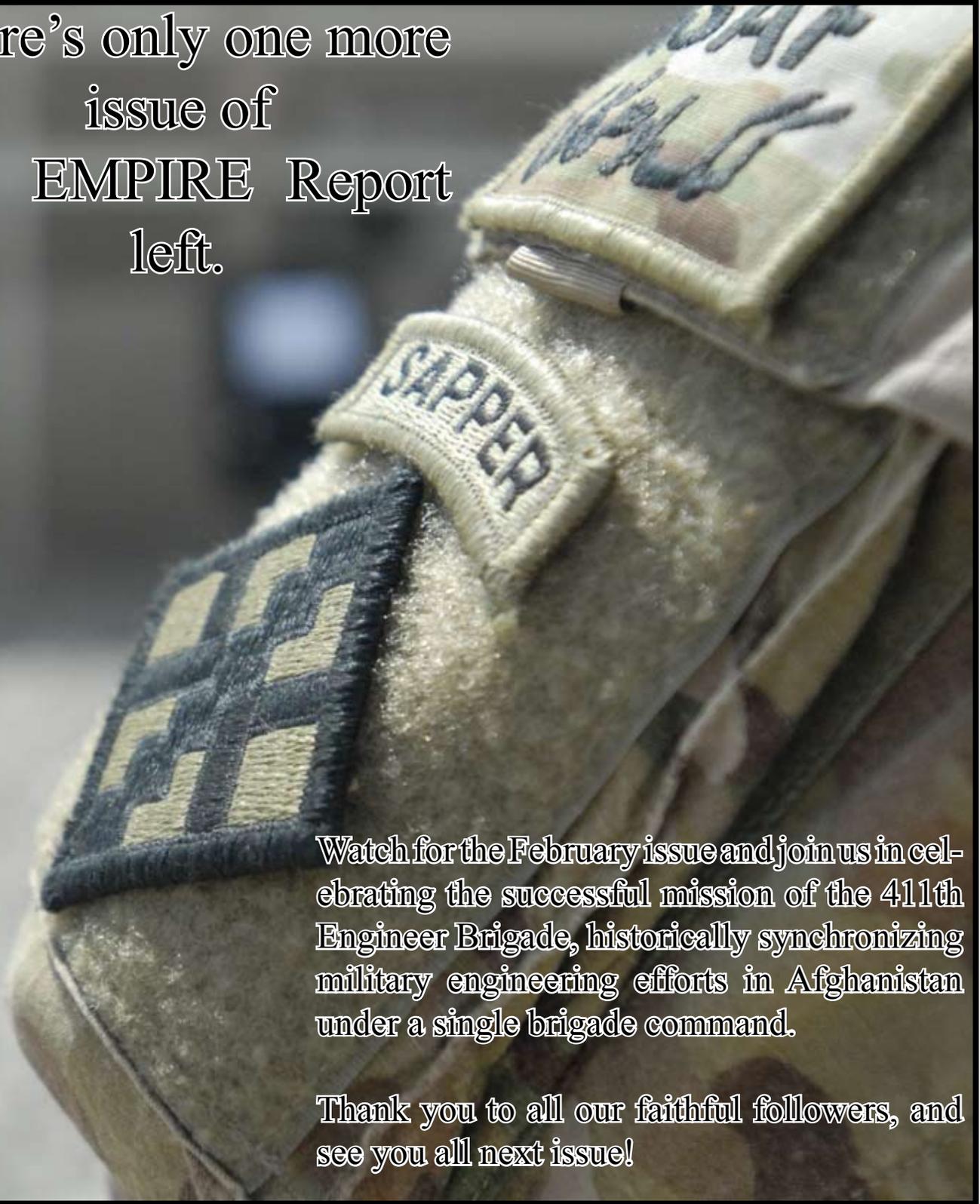
(Top) A Route Clearance Platoon (RCP) from the 260th Engineer Company, Task Force Warhammer, clears an incline in the Sangin Valley, Afghanistan. RCPs have neutralized hundreds of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in the past months greatly reducing the IED threat to coalition forces and civilians. (Left) A 260th En. Co. RCP descends into the Sangin Valley in support of the 132nd Multirole Bridge Company Operation Golden Gate bridge construction mission. During the operation, RCPs prevented dozens of IEDs from impeding bridge platoon movements to the bridge build site. (Bottom) An RCP from the Montana Army National Guard 260th En. Co. enters a populated area during route clearance operations. Neutralizing the IED threat in villages is vital to the protection and safety of the local Afghan population.



The choice is yours: some wear their heart on their sleeve...

some wear their PRIDE.

There's only one more
issue of
The EMPIRE Report
left.

A close-up photograph of military equipment, likely a sapper's gear. The image shows a tan fabric with a blue and tan checkered pattern. A prominent patch is embroidered with the word 'SAPPER' in blue capital letters. Above it, there is a smaller patch with a blue and tan design. The background is blurred, showing more of the gear.

Watch for the February issue and join us in celebrating the successful mission of the 411th Engineer Brigade, historically synchronizing military engineering efforts in Afghanistan under a single brigade command.

Thank you to all our faithful followers, and see you all next issue!

Even rough can reflect

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

Resting in a secluded patch of a training site in Grafenwoehr, Germany, a simple bench sits. Old and worn, its rough, moss-covered surface faces away from training facilities and housing in an almost prideful defiance.

When it was placed and by whom may have long been forgotten. Its purpose may be argued, as it is out of the way and appears abandoned and unused. In an area where service members spend countless hours of training for future missions in far-off lands, this simple bench seems to only speak of the past.

A lifetime ago, it seems, engineers of the 411th Engineer Brigade from New Windsor, N.Y. trained here in preparation of assuming the lead in the full military engineering mission in Afghanistan. As members of Joint Task Force Empire, they looked ahead to being the sole engineer command deployed. Now, training in Germany is a distant memory and an out-of-the-way bench may seem of no significance to the preparations of their mission.

Nearly a year removed from the training, and countless rotations of units which followed, the bench calls out. How many hear its call? The foundations of the mission were laid here. Those foundations support the operations conducted today, no matter how weary one may become with the mission, the foundation may always be rest upon . . . like a sturdy old bench.

All things past touch the present and shape the future. Even the roughest of surfaces may reflect.

The training and preparations continually evolving around this bench lay foundations for missions to come. During operations, service members reach back to les-



sons learned and develop from base concepts created prior to deployment. How many plans and concepts were developed around this simple bench? How many people sat upon its weathered surface, looking to the future, reflecting on the past, or simply took a minute to enjoy the now?

A sadness sits over the bench. How many brothers and sisters-in-arms sat here before going off overseas, but paid the ultimate sacrifice? Within the eroded and cracked wood reside countless hopes, dreams, plans, wishes and regrets of thousands who took pause in this quiet corner of the world.

Some may say that relics of the past belong there. They should be discarded to make way for the new. What is the relevance of a neglected bench from a forgotten time which appears as if it turned its back to the present?

Though, upon second look, that bench may actually not have its back turned to the now; it may actually be looking to the future - not in sadness, but actually with content. 

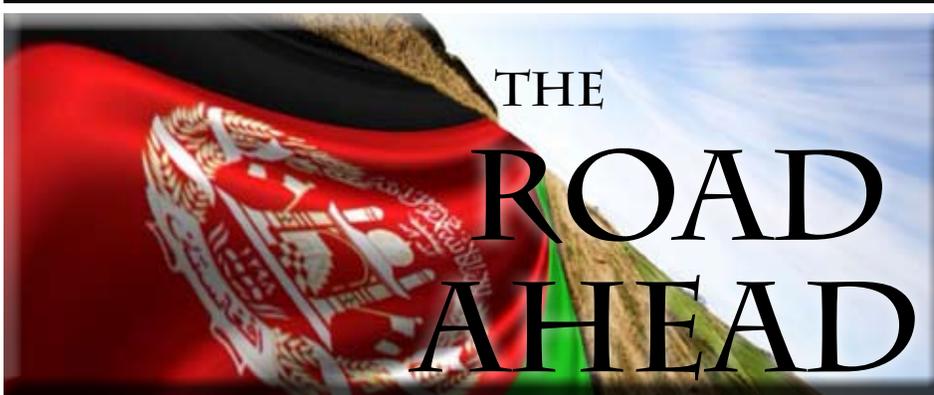


COMPREHENSIVE SOLDIER FITNESS

STRONG MINDS ★ STRONG BODIES

PHYSICAL ★ FAMILY ★ SOCIAL ★ SPIRITUAL ★ EMOTIONAL



ANA 209th Corps engineers commence fully independent operations

By U.S. Army 1st Lt. Brittany Ramos
Task Force Comet Public Affairs

KUNDUZ PROVINCE, Afghanistan – Only a few months ago the first company of combat engineers from the Afghan National Army (ANA) 209th Corps began conducting fully independent operations for the first time in Regional Command (RC)-North, Afghanistan. Now, the other two combat engineer companies have been validated by the U.S. Army engineer development teams (EDTs) they have worked with for almost a year and proven they are ready to operate independently.

As in any organization, it is the caliber of the leadership that shapes the culture of discipline and dedication necessary for building lasting excellence and the route clearance companies of the ANA 209th Corps' 2nd and 3rd Brigades have achieved such success. Insiders and outsiders alike have expressed praise for the leaders of these organizations, referring to them as “committed, trustworthy, caring,” and “the hardest of workers.” In turn, the leaders forward such praise to their Soldiers and reiterate that they are willing servants to their country.

“My message to the people is that I wear this (ANA) uniform and I will defend Afghanistan the rest of

my life. That is my promise,” stated 2nd Bde. Route Clearance Company (RCC) Commander Capt. Nawid after his company of combat engineers completed their validation mission.

Similarly, 3rd Bde. RCC Commander Capt. Abdul Qahir, remarked, “In only a year we have diffused countless IEDs (improvised explosive devices). We do this for God, County, family: in that order. This is about making a better Afghanistan and that takes leaders that are patient, controlled, and know their Soldiers.”

For the past ten months, these companies have trained daily with their respective EDTs from the 420th Route Clearance Company, a U.S. Army Reserve unit out of Indiana, Pa. that falls under the engineer units in RC-North called Task Force Comet, supporting the theater-wide engineer operations of the 411th Engineer Brigade, Joint Task Force Empire. Originally there were six teams, each assigned to one of the three construction companies and three RCCs within the 209th Corps.

Spread across RC-North, the teams had to work independently and



Photo by U.S. Army 1st Lt. Brittany Ramos

An engineer from the Afghan National Army (ANA) 209th Corps' 2nd Brigade Route Clearance Company scans the horizon for signs of an improvised explosive device (IED) during an ANA led counter-IED mission in the Charah Darah district of Regional Command-North, Afghanistan, recently.

be resourceful. Each group faced unique circumstances that shaped their experiences.

The Soldiers assigned had limited information and training to prepare them for their new mission of working with the ANA. EDT 3 member Cpl. Christopher McCall, from Pittsburgh, Pa., noted, “All we knew was that we were going to work with the ANA. We put ourselves in a position to assess them and discovered they were already very sound, operationally. They were clearing routes, mitigating improvised explosive devices; the mission was getting done.”

Throughout the months, the teams



Photo by U.S. Army 1st Lt. Brittany Ramos

Afghan National Army 209th Corps' 2nd Brigade Route Clearance Company leads a counter-improvised explosive device mission in the Charah Darah district of Regional Command-North, Afghanistan, recently.

continuously trained and assessed the companies on everything from maintenance procedures and administrative paperwork to basic Soldier skills. EDT 3, assigned to the 3rd Bde. RCC, found the company already had extensive experience and multiple successful IED finds.

They focused on the planning process, specific tactics and techniques to sharpen mission performance, and vehicle maintenance that helped enable the company to conduct missions more frequently. Capt. Abdul Kahair stated he felt his greatest accomplishment as a commander was learning how to keep the trucks running consistently and the procedures to get them fixed.

As the mission tempo picked up and the EDT was able to observe progress, they could identify specific tactical improvements.

“We saw them doing a better job of maintaining security, looking for specific “indicators,” or signs that an IED may be placed nearby, and they had their electronic coun-

ter measures working well to block certain types of detonation attempts,” EDT 3 member Spc. Levi Prisk from Curwensville, Pa. said. “The day I saw them lead a convoy of U.S. and Swedish vehicles and be the first to find an IED and dig it out of the road was a very proud day.”

The teams developed their assessments by comparing the International Security Assistance Force's list of core competencies to their direct observations during their mission planning and execution.

“We saw they knew what they were doing and that our main function would be to help them become more efficient. We focused on sharpening their knowledge of what tools they have, how to use them most effectively, and how to maintain them.”

EDT 5, assigned to 2nd Bde. RCC, had a much different experience. The company has just arrived in RC-North after completing training together. EDT 5 leader Sgt.

Jason Bell recalled, “These guys weren't even allowed to pull security on their own forward operating base when we got here. Now they are light years ahead of where they were and doing route clearance on their own. They have built a name for themselves even among the Afghan National Police and Afghan Local Police in the area.”

The team began training on basic Soldier task and drills. EDT 5 member Spc. Derek Welsh of Brookfield, Pa. recalled, “The language barrier was ridiculous. The language assistant had to translate everything into both Dari and Pashto because many of the Soldiers only spoke one or the other. We wondered how they even conducted missions together but they had developed their own system of hand and arm signals to communicate.”

To help promote more engaging classes, the team started hosting small competitions on basic tasks. The various hands-on challenges accelerated the process and built strong relationships between the trainers and the company.

It was due to observing their character in the classroom as well as on the battle field that respect and admiration for the sacrifices and commitment of the ANA Soldiers grew. Bell recalled a specific occasion their selfless service moved him.

“We had a Husky tipping over. The operator couldn't even get out of it because it was so close to rolling. Without anyone asking, the RCC immediately jumped out and got us unstuck. Without their help we would have been stuck in danger for much longer.”

Similarly, EDT 3's Cpl. McCall noted, “Our leader, Sgt. Lewis really loved this job and the company and he would share our care pack-



Photo by U.S. Army 1st Lt. Brittany Ramos

Afghan National Army 209th Corps, 2nd Brigade Commander Brig. Gen. Khair Mohammed Khawri discusses operations with Route Clearance Company (RCC) Commander Cpt. Nawid.

ages with them. Many of them send all of their money to their families in other provinces and don't have much at all. Soon we realized they weren't keeping any of the items. They would hand the toiletries and candy out to local children in need."

The two companies have made giant strides in the eyes of their leadership and the local population. ANA 209th Corps, 2nd Bde. Commander Brig. Gen. Khair Mohammed Khawri stated, "The engineers accomplish whatever mission is put in front of them. We are pleased with their take-action attitude. As a command, we know how important the RCC is. We don't do a mission without them. They are an asset to the brigade and corps. The enemy cannot fight us face to face, so their only option at this point is to place IEDs and our RCC finds them and disarms them effectively. They are famous."

It is a central doctrine of counter-

insurgency operations that it is impossible to be successful without the support of the civilian population. The RCCs have been embraced by the people and gather most of their intelligence from villagers during their missions. However, it wasn't always this way.

"They didn't know they should be talking to people while on mission," said 1st Lt. Brandon Curtis, 420th RCC platoon leader, who frequently conducted partnered missions with the ANA 209th Corps, 2nd Bde. RCC.

Sgt. Bell nodded, adding, "Now they go out, talk to the people and find at least one IED a week as a direct result."

Spc. Andrew Turnbull of Brookfield, Pa. recalled "After one of the platoons had just completed a six hour patrol, a civilian on a bike told them he knew where a bomb maker was located. The Soldiers cordoned off the area in question, handed out water to local civilians and acted

very professionally. They built rapport that still helps them accomplish their mission today."

While many of the ANA soldiers acknowledge that they joined for a better education and a better life for their families, many, like ANA Staff Sgt. Abdul Ghafoor, stated, "Since I have known my right and left hands, I have been fighting. I don't care if I am killed for serving my country. I just want my children to be able to go to school and be safe. I just want peace."

It is that very dedication combined with proven effectiveness that led Cpl. McCall, a combat engineer himself, to state, "I trust them. I trust going on a route they have cleared as much as any route that Americans have cleared." 



Photo by U.S. Army 1st Lt. Brittany Ramos
An engineer from the Afghan National Army (ANA) 209th Corps' 2nd Brigade Route Clearance Company uses a metal detector to search for improvised explosive devices (IED) during an ANA led counter-IED mission in the Charah Darah district of Regional Command-North, Afghanistan, recently.