



# FREEDOM BUILDER

September/October 2011

## Somber moments

District personnel remember slain colleague James W. "Will" Coker and 9/11 attacks.

## Meeting expectations

District contracting agents brief Afghan business leaders at conferences across region.

## Securing Afghan roads

Corps of Engineers professionals provide construction expertise at outlying bases.

## Love at first bite

Chef Tracy Hunter's reputation rises along with the aroma of her cinnamon rolls.

# Air Forcing their way in

Airmen comprise more than a quarter of military members within Army Corps of Engineers unit.



US Army Corps  
of Engineers®



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The Freedom Builder Magazine is available online at [www.aed.usace.army.mil](http://www.aed.usace.army.mil)

### Cover image:



Some of the Airmen within the district's ranks:  
1) Master Sgt. Travis Chadick; 2) Master Sgt. Guadalupe RodriguezValdez; 3) Tech. Sgt. Dwain Hornesby; 4) Staff Sgt. Erika Jackson; 5) Tech. Sgt. Sunshine Scarbrough; 6) Chief Master Sgt. Chad Brandau; 7) Capt. Trent Arnold; 8) Staff Sgt. Tilmon Alvin; 9) Lt. Col. Aaron Benson; and, 10) Capt. Mark Jones.

(Full story on pg. 4)

Photo by | Joe Marek



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# Winging it

Airmen fill key roles in Army unit

Story by | Paul Giblin

Photos by | Mark Rankin

**K**ABUL – The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in northern Afghanistan increasingly is taking on the blue hue of the Air Force.

Air Force service members fill more than a quarter of the military positions within the unit, including several of the top leadership positions. Consider this: The district's deputy commander, the top non-commissioned officer and the chief of the force protection team are all Air Force members.

The Airmen's contributions are critical to Afghanistan Engineer District-North, said Army Col. Christopher W. Martin, commander of district.

"I don't think we could accomplish the mission without all the Air Force personnel that we have," he said. "Just the number of engineers and military engineers that it takes to execute here, we just have it in the Army, so it takes a blend of all the services."

District human resources chief Maj. Keithen Washington stands guard as he waits for a helicopter before leaving the Afghanistan National Police Wardak provincial headquarters complex in Maydan Sahar, Afghanistan.

The district's line-up of employees already has something of a pick-up team feel to it. The group of 1,400 is comprised of U.S. military service members, U.S. Army employees, private-sector U.S. contractors and Afghan employees plucked from locations around the globe.

The mix-and-match composition is further evident even among the military members.

The specific numbers change on almost daily, but the composition of military service members on Aug. 27 illustrates the joint nature of the district's military team. On that day, 66.7 percent were Soldiers, 26.4 percent were Airmen, 5.4 percent were Seamen and 1.5 percent were Marines.

All armed service members arrive in Afghanistan knowing that the task is tough and aligned with peril, but they're united in the mission to defend freedom and eradicate terrorism, said Air Force Maj. Keithen Washington, who heads the human resources operation for the district.

"This is definitely a team and close-contact sport," he said. "Our success is dependent on the ability to operate in this joint environment, bringing the full capability of our strengths to the forefront. I've visited all the forward operating bases and the camaraderie and esprit de corps has been nothing short of phenomenal."

Because the Army is largely tasked with the fighting operations of the war in Afghanistan, the other services have been called upon to fill vital roles within the Corps of Engineers, said Air Force Lt. Col. Aaron Benson, who serves as deputy commander of the district.

"The Air Force, the Navy and other services have come on line to accept these taskers," Benson said. "There's just so many Army resources out there, and there just aren't enough to go around, so the other services have stepped up."

The joint nature of the Corps of Engineers is especially beneficial to Airmen, Benson said, because it provides opportunities for Airmen to contribute directly to the war effort in

Afghanistan. Without the open-door policy at the Corps of Engineers, he and others might have missed the chance altogether.

"In the back of my mind, I always wanted to get here to Afghanistan, definitely," Benson said. "I got to go to Iraq for 90 days, so I thought it would be really neat to say later in life that I was able to serve in both of these theaters while I was in the military."

In fact, the Air Force has been extending the tours of its members, so that they can serve in leadership positions and make greater contributions to the effort. Benson began his year-long tour in May.

The general consensus among Airmen within the district is that the biggest impediment to serving in the unit is simply learning the Army's unique and sometimes puzzling lingo. In contrast, the greatest benefit is exposure to the Army's protocols and methodologies.

Two key components to developing a sense of teamwork across the branches is for non-Army service members learn the Army's acronym-laden language and for all service members to pick up each of the other branches' rank structures, said Air Force Chief Master Sgt. Chad Brandau, who serves as the top enlisted member in the district.

"We're very fortunate," he said. "We have Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, and of course, we have our Airmen. They work together. I haven't seen a hiccup."

Brandau noted that almost immediately after Col. Martin assumed command of the district on July 10, he ordered posters highlighting the Army's values be displayed prominently at Corps of Engineers facilities across the district. The posters, which focus on loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity and personal courage, by design feature photos of the district's service members from every branch.

"What the boss is saying is 'Check your sticks on these values.' He's not telling the Sailors or the Airmen or the Marines that

"I don't think we could accomplish the mission without all the Air Force personnel."





Air Force logistics personnel Master Sgt. Guadalupe RodriguezValdez (left) and Capt. Dennis Widner load equipment onto a hardened truck in Kabul.

they have to get of the values from their services. All he's saying is 'Check your sticks on these values.' It's a good thing," Brandau said.

It helps, of course, that the services' ethos have commonality.

Despite the joint nature of the district, it's hard to overlook the sheer number of Air Force service members within the district's ranks. One of Brandau's favorite gags is to casually mention to Soldiers that the district's population of Airmen just hit the 51 percent mark, always produces a gulp. (At least it did until publication of this article, anyway.)

While there are similarities among the Army and Air Force, there are differences, as well.

The Air Force's institutional culture toward processes generally is businesslike and technical in nature, said Air Force Capt. Trent Arnold, who heads the district's logistics operations. In comparison, he said, he's found the Army's culture to be based in strength, accountability and can-do attitude.

During his yearlong tour, which began in September 2010, Arnold has tried to blend the organizations' respective tactics, techniques and procedures. He plans to incorporate some the new blended mythologies into his

regular duties when he returns to his Air Force unit in England at the conclusion of his tour in Afghanistan.

"We bring in more of the transport specialization, like the cargo prep and pallet build-up of moving and manifesting cargo, which here is probably 90 percent of our effort in supporting the forward operating bases," he said.

Arnold is particularly proud of a new procedure he guided to develop a small pallet that fits inside Russian-made Mi-8 transport helicopters, which are under contract to the Corps of Engineers in Afghanistan.

Furthermore, he directed an effort to develop a standard packing list of materials and to make the entire operation accessible through Internet systems, which he based on the Air Force's model of in-transit visibility.

"We used those same principles and applied them to the Army concept of operations," he said.

The result is that forward operating bases now receive supplies in organized shipments on a regular schedule, which marks an improvement on the previous method of delivering supplies piecemeal on a haphazard schedule, he said.

The improved system should benefit the Corps of Engineers long Arnold rotates out. Conversely, he'll take with him the Army's concept of standardized of property accountability, he said.

Working alongside Army personnel has been particularly beneficial, as might be expected, concerning security measures.

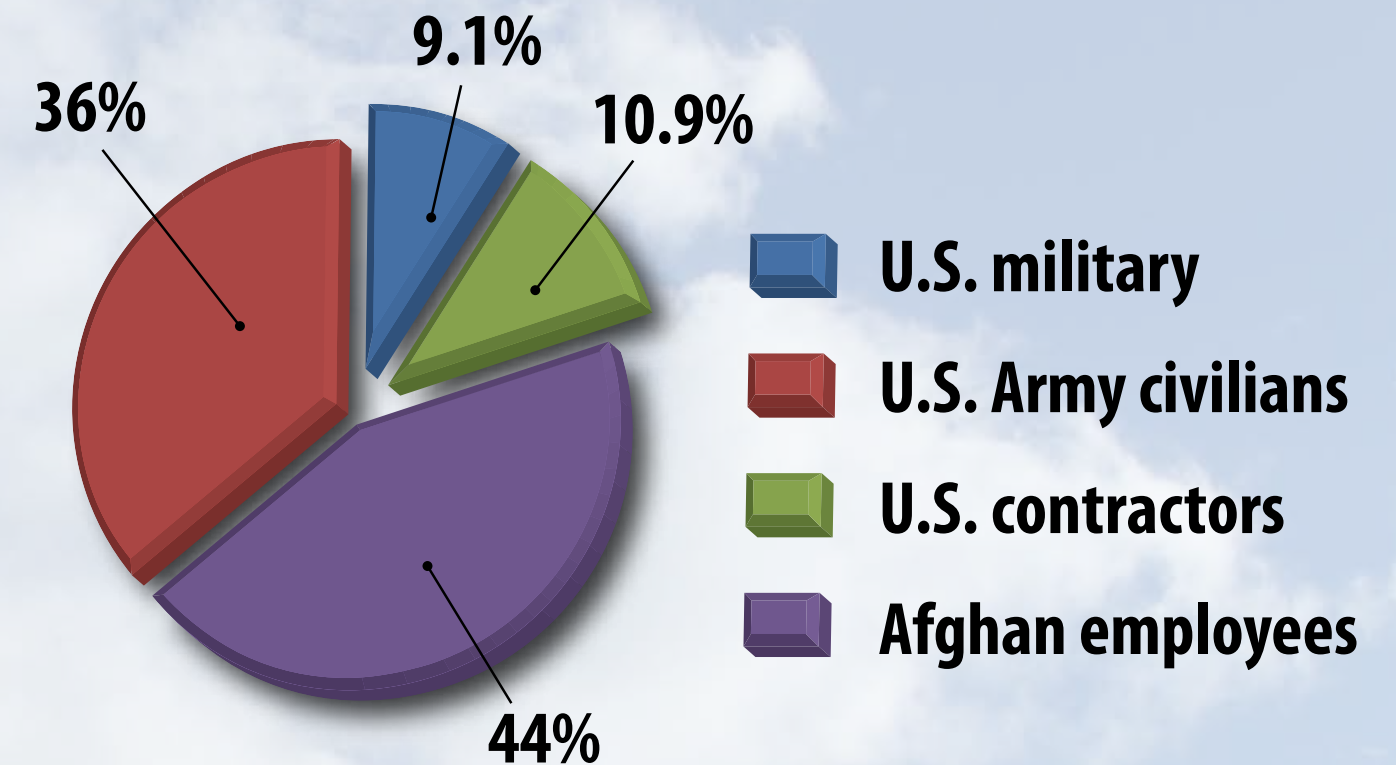
"They're security forces by trade. They know that business. It's inherent in their jobs," Benson said in regard to Army personnel.

The Army is renowned for security training, which greatly streamlines planning and reduces risk while working in a war environment, he said. "I've learned a lot," he said.

Martin said he appreciates the diverse perspectives that Air Force personnel have brought to the organization. "It's a good way of mixing things up to fill critical spots. A fresh set of eyes is good thing to have," he said.

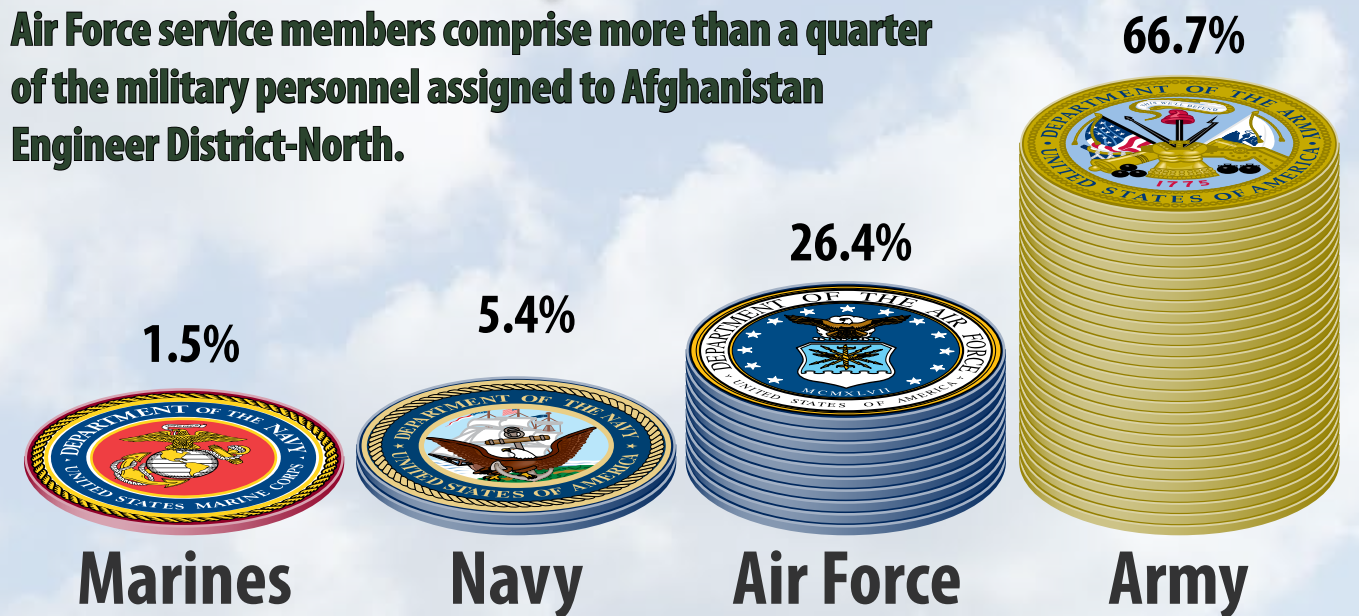
## Blended workforce

**Afghanistan Engineer District-North blends civilian and military personnel, government-sector and private-sector employees, and Americans and Afghans.**



## Blended military

**Air Force service members comprise more than a quarter of the military personnel assigned to Afghanistan Engineer District-North.**



Note: Count taken on Aug. 27, 2011.  
Source: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Graphics by | Joe Marek





# Final tribute to Coker

Story and photo by | J.D. Hardesty

District commander Col. Christopher W. Martin (right) salutes a photo of James W. “Will” Coker during a memorial service at the Qalaa House compound on Sept. 9.

**K**ABUL — Hundreds of Corps of Engineers employees gathered from across Afghanistan on Sept. 9 at the Qalaa House compound to pay tribute to co-worker James W. “Will” Coker, who was killed by insurgents four days earlier while supervising reconstruction efforts near the capital city.

Coker, 59, served as a site manager for the district’s Operations and Maintenance Division at Camp Blackhorse, just outside of Kabul.

The circumstances of his murder are under investigation and details have not been released.

“This has been a turbulent and emotional week with the sudden loss of Will. I know many of you are still looking and waiting for answers, and they will come in time,”

said Afghanistan Engineer District-North commander Col. Christopher W. Martin. “For now, let us just focus on the memory of Will and the lives he touched when he was here.”

Coker, of Mount Pleasant, N.C., had served in Afghanistan for about three months. At home, he worked as an engineering technician assigned to Naval Facilities Engineering Command. He is survived by his wife, three adult children, one stepdaughter and five grandchildren.

“Will was a good man, a man who we really had the opportunity to know for a short time. Even more importantly, Will was one of our family. And we all miss him,” Martin said.

Martin said Coker chose to live his life as a family man, an educator, a working professional and as a brother in Christ. He

served as role model to his family, friends and co-workers. “He was a man of God, a true servant whose actions in daily life labeled him as a true man of faith,” he said.

Co-workers remembered Coker as a soft-spoken, hard-working, kind-hearted and deeply religious man.

Operations and Maintenance chief Cheryle Hess noted that Coker had served the United States for 20 years, beginning as a civilian employee with the Air Force, then with the Navy and Army. He served overseas twice, in Djibouti and in Afghanistan.

“In all his job assignments, Will tried to make the world a better place in very tangible ways,” Hess said.

Coker was regarded for being technically competent, quality conscious and thorough, she said. In Afghanistan, he oversaw operations and maintenance at 12 Afghanistan National Army site in the Kabul region.

“Most recently, Will was working diligently to solve a problem with waste water treatment facility aerators that are causing unclean waste water to be released into a nearby wadi. This was the professionalism and dedication to the mission that everyone in O&M had come to expect from him,” she said.

Operations and maintenance program manager Charlie Bechtold said Coker inspired others around him. “He’d stay after work to achieve his personal goals. He’d always be working on-line for his classes. He

was 59 years old and he was still working, still learning,” Bechtold said.

He noted that at Camp Integrity where Coker was assigned, Coker met a group of co-workers for prayers each day before work at 7:15 a.m. “He taught us to man enough to hold hands in prayer,” he said.

Coker also took a leadership role in Sunday evening Bible study session. He often spoke

about his religious mission trips to Africa and his plans for future mission trips.

During the memorial service, military and civilian personnel formally lowered and folded a red and white Corps of Engineers flag to present to Coker’s family. They replaced the flag at the headquarters building and lowered it to half staff in tribute. “Amazing Grace” and other songs played as Coker’s co-workers filed

past a photo of him to offer final salutes, prayers and letters to his family.

The memorial service was streamed live through the internet to Coker’s family in North Carolina, to colleagues at district offices across northern Afghanistan, and to personnel at Transatlantic Division headquarters in Winchester, Va.

While scores of co-workers lined up to pay their respects to their fallen comrade, the colonel’s closing remarks remained heavy on the minds of those in attendance. “May each of you find the courage and strength that Will had to remember that each day we have here is a gift; and to live as he did, like each day was his last.”



James W. “Will” Coker



# Remembering 9/11

District pauses to mark anniversary



Story by | *LaDonna Davis*

Photos by | *J.D. Hardesty*

**K**ABUL—U.S. Army Corps of Engineers personnel took time to reflect on their mission in Afghanistan on the 10th anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States.

Military and civilian employees formally raised more than 100 U.S. flags throughout the morning of Sept. 11 at the Qalaa House compound, which serves as the headquarters of Afghanistan Engineer District-North.

At 4:30 p.m. Kabul time – 8 a.m. Eastern time in the United States to coincide with the time of the first attacks – more than 300 district personnel gathered for a candlelight vigil.

They recalled the attacks through pictures, videos and an hour-by-hour recount of the four flights that crashed in the World Trade Center towers, the Pentagon and a Pennsylvania field in 2001.

Capacity building team deputy Jeff Collins lights a candle and news footage of the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, plays behind him during the vigil at the Qalaa House compound.



“If you’ve been watching CNN over the past several days, you know it’s not over just because Bin Laden’s gone,” district commander Col. Christopher Martin said during the ceremony.

“There is still a significant threat out there from Al Qaeda. We have a totally different type of enemy that we’re fighting here today. We just have to be aware of that,” he said.

Corps of Engineers personnel have served key roles in Afghanistan for the past decade.

After Sept. 11, 2001, a Corps of Engineers forward engineering support team deployed with the Army XVII Airborne Corps and worked with that unit’s engineers during combat operations.

The Corps of Engineers team provided the XVII Corps with engineering, construction, planning, contracting and real estate management expertise during and immediately after the conflict.

In 2002, the Corps of Engineers established the Afghanistan Area Office in Kabul to help manage construction and renovation of facilities for the new Afghanistan National Army.

The newly formed Afghanistan government established an army to secure internal peace and security after decades of war and conflict. But, in order for the Afghan army to succeed, its soldiers needed new facilities that would provide places to train and work.

Most of the existing military facilities in and around Kabul at the time were either damaged or destroyed, making repairs difficult or impossible. Despite the conditions, Corps of Engineers personnel and contractors began rebuilding some structures.

In 2004, the Corps of Engineers established

the Afghanistan Engineer District to bolster the rebuilding effort. The district’s mission was to provide quality, responsive engineering and constructing services benefit Afghan men, women and children, so that the country could thrive again.

In 2009, the district split into two – Afghanistan Engineer District-North, which is headquartered in Kabul; and Afghanistan Engineer District-South, which is headquartered in Kandahar.

Both districts continue the mission of delivering quality infrastructure projects, providing operation and maintenance services for completed projects, and developing the engineering and construction capacity of Afghanistan’s workforce.

The North district’s operations are carried out through five primary programs: The Afghanistan National Army program, the Afghanistan National Police program, the Military Construction

branch, the Operations and Maintenance branch, and Infrastructure and Planning branch

Additionally, the district’s Capacity Building program helps bolster Afghan workers’ skills to design, engineer, build and maintain facilities as U.S. and coalition personnel transition out of the theater of operations.

In 2011, the district awarded more than \$3.5 billion in contracts for approximately 500 projects. The district employs more than 500 civilian and military service members and has six area offices.

Some of Afghanistan Engineer District-North’s more noteworthy projects include:

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**“We have a totally different type of enemy that we’re fighting here today.”**

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► Kabul streetlights – Solar-powered streetlights are being erected along some of downtown Kabul’s busiest streets to improve safety in a city that does not have a reliable electric grid.


► University textbooks – More than 17,500 new textbooks have been provided to five universities at a cost of nearly \$2 million funded through the Commander’s Emergency Response Program. Kabul University and the four other schools had been using outdated books and materials for years because of hardships caused by decades of war and Taliban rule.

► The Detention Facility in Parwan – The \$43 million high-tech prison at Bagram Airfield features three detention housing units for low-risk and high-risk detainees. The facility was built in less than a year, in

spite of construction challenges associated with a large and intricate project.

The Corps of Engineers’ reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan – the country where the Sept. 11 attacks were plotted – pay tribute to the people who were killed that day, Martin said during the candle light vigil.

“We lost 2,800 people, and countless numbers of military and civilians since then. So, let’s just make sure that what we’re doing everyday reminds us of why we’re here and what we hope to get out of this,” the colonel told district personnel.

“Let’s make sure we’re doing the right things, so that one day we can look back at this period in our lives with pride and say, ‘I was there and I helped make a difference,’” he said. 



Force Protection unit members Army Spc. Maurice Jones (left) Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Joseph Saia (center), and accountant Erin Connolly fold one of more than 100 flags that were flown at Qalaa House throughout the morning on the 10th anniversary of the terrorist attacks.





Story and photos by | U.S. Air Force 1st Lt. Ryan DeCamp

U.S. Navy Chief Petty Officer Raymond Border (left) guards civil engineer John Keys as he inspects construction of the Sharan-to-Zurmat Road on Sept. 12. Border died in a bomb attack on the road Oct. 20.

## Securing Afghan roads

**M**ATA KHAN, Afghanistan – Two U.S. Army Corps of Engineers employees are playing key roles in the construction of a nearly 22-mile road that's intended to improve transportation, bolster the economy and strengthen security in parts of two provinces in the southeastern region of the country.

The \$6.7 million road will link the villages of Sharan in Paktika Province and Zurmat in Paktia Province. Construction began in June 2009 and is scheduled to be complete early next year. The finished road will resemble a paved city street similar to one in the United States.

The risk involved in the project cannot be overstated. Two U.S. service members, Navy

Chief Petty Officer Raymond J. Border, 31, of West Lafayette, Ohio, and Army Staff Sgt. Jorge M. Oliveria, 33, of Newark, N.J., were killed by a bomb placed along the project on Oct. 19. They were part of the security detail that guards Corps of Engineers civilian personnel.

The project is being supervised by military personnel assigned to the Paktika Provisional Reconstruction Team, which is located at Forward Operating Base Sharana, one of several such bases scattered across Afghanistan. Corps of Engineers civil engineer John Keys of Fort Wainwright, Alaska, and construction representative Chuck Graham of Lexington, Ky., are stationed at the base

and provide engineering and construction expertise.

The road project, like the majority of construction projects run by the military's provisional reconstruction teams, are funded through the Commander's Emergency Response Program, which gives U.S. military commanders wide latitude in directing humanitarian assistance projects in their regions of responsibility.

The construction work is contracted to Afghan companies that hire workers from the areas where the work is being performed. Corps of Engineers personnel offer technical assistance, often teaching construction skills to Afghan laborers on a one-on-one basis.

About six miles of the Sharan-to-Zurmat road have been completed so far. The unfinished thoroughfare has improved safety for residents of cities and villages in the area, said Aziz Ullah, sub-governor of Mata Khan District, which is a political region within Paktika Province.

"It used to be really hard for the people to drive from here to Sharan, because they were scared of IEDs and things like that," Ullah said, referring to bombs called improvised explosive devices. "Right now the road is paved and they're not faced with those kinds of problems anymore."

The IED that killed Border and Oliveria was hidden in a culvert. Keys had worked closely with both men. Border and Keys spoke frequently about Ohio, because both grew up in the Buckeye State.

"He was personable, dedicated and always wanted to learn more. He was taking online college classes to help become a senior chief," Keys said. "We discussed our families, and how Chief's oldest stepson had enlisted in the Navy and will report in January. Chief Border

must've had a positive influence on him."

Keys had gone on more than 40 missions with Oliveira, whom he called a professional and courageous Soldier and an excellent leader.

"Quite often, he was the lead man running ahead of us clearing culverts, and always on his game. He continuously had a big smile on his face, and was well respected by his men. His confidence and leadership were outstanding," he said.

In 2009 when the road was still dirt, U.S. forces found at least 19 IEDs on the road between Sharan and the village of Mata Khan, a stretch of about seven miles. The following year, the total increased to at least 22.

Some of the IEDs included 30 pounds or more of homemade explosives. That much explosive material can tear a four-door sedan to pieces,

Graham said. Motorcycles and sedans are two of most common vehicles used by Afghans in Paktika.

Graham previously spent more than 18 years as an Army combat engineer, a tenure that involved detecting and clearing IEDs in Paktia and Khost provinces in Afghanistan in 2008 and '09.

"Gravel and dirt roads were prime locations for placing IEDs," he said. "IEDs in hard-surfaced roads are harder to hide. It takes more time to dig the hole for the bomb, and wires running from the holes are easier to see, because they're not going through dirt. Often they're running on top of the road."

However, no amount of pavement will make the road completely safe from insurgents and terrorists. The new surface provides additional benefits.

Before the road was paved, a driver heading from Sharan to Mata Khan would have needed two hours to travel the seven-mile stretch.

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**“ The U.S. military has deemed the PRTs’ role in reconstruction, mentoring and local governance to be an essential component of its mission in Afghanistan. ”**

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Now the drive takes just 30 minutes, Keys said.

“The road was heavily rutted and it frequently washed out or was impassable during periods of high rain or spring runoff,” he said. “Breakdowns such as broken axles, flat tires or loads falling off trucks were common.”

Though the concern about IEDs may never go away altogether, the paved road will have a large impact economically and socially, according to Paktika Provisional Reconstruction Team civil affairs and U.S. State Department representatives.

It’s difficult to gather accurate population or economic data for the villages Sharan and Zurma, because of the high number of people continually moving around the provinces. However, June statistics compiled by the World Bank’s Economic Policy and Poverty Sector show Paktika Province hosts a population of about 400,000, while Paktia Province has about 500,000 people. Together, that’s approximately 3.7 percent of Afghanistan’s total population of 24.5 million.

The two provinces, along with Khost Province, commonly are referred to as “Loya Paktia” or “Greater Paktia” by local Afghans. Paktika and Paktia became separate provinces in 1964, and Khost became its own province in 1995. Many residents of the three areas still have strong social ties.

Paktika Provisional Reconstruction Team members visited Sharan’s bazaar in the provisional capital Aug. 25. They reported

seeing more than 1,000 people buying and selling food, textiles and services. The road would have been the shortest distance to travel for people and goods coming from the north.


The Sharan-to-Zurmat road provides residents of neighboring provinces a safer way to connect to each other, whether that involves bringing goods to a market or uniting families, Ullah said.

“It used to be that no one was willing to cooperate or come to the district center,” he said. “This is starting to change in part because of the road. People are willing to come and share their issues with us and we are doing what we can to help them out. People are more willing to cooperate with the Afghan government and the trust is increasing between the two.”

Overall, 35 Corps of Engineers professionals are assigned to 15 provisional reconstruction teams, or PRTs, across northern Afghanistan, said Matt Toton, the director of the PRT program for the Corps of Engineers in that region of the country.

“The U.S. military has deemed the PRTs’ role in reconstruction, mentoring and local governance to be an essential component of its mission in Afghanistan. And the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, recognizing its strength, has, since 2003, committed personnel to supporting the engineering and construction side of that mission,” said Toton, a Seattle resident who’s based in Kabul.

The Sharan-to-Zurmat road’s true measure of success is its roles in improving Afghans’ quality of life and boosting their faith in their government, according to members of the provisional reconstruction team. That’s already happening, Ullah said.

“The development of local roads has made the people happy. They feel more connected to outside areas like Paktia’s capital of Gardez, Khost and Ghazni provinces, and even Kabul,” Ullah said. 



Story and photo by | Mark Rankin

Air Force Chief Master Sgt. Chad Brandau acknowledges Army Sgt. Barry W. Castro for being awarded the Purple Heart Forward Operating Base Shank on Oct. 13.

## Nashville Soldier gets Purple Heart


**P**UL-E ALAM, Afghanistan – Army Sgt. Barry W. Castro of Nashville, Tenn., was awarded the Purple Heart medal, which is one of the Army’s oldest and most respected honors, on Oct. 13 for a combat injury he received on Sept. 4.

Castro, who is assigned to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers at Forward Operating Base Shank, was involved in a ground convoy in the northeastern region of the country on the day he was injured.

At one point, the convoy of Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles stopped and Castro stepped out of his rig. Insurgents attacked with rocket-propelled grenades and Castro

suffered a concussion as a result of the blasts. “It’s a pretty significant event that happened out there,” said Col. Christopher W. Martin, commander of Afghanistan Engineer District-North.

“It’s not an award that I ever want to have to present to anybody, but it’s an award that I when I do have the opportunity, I’m very proud and honored and humbled to present,” Martin said during the ceremony attended by military personnel and civilians alike at Shank.

“I feel privileged,” Castro said after the ceremony. He has remained at the base and he said he hopes to resume his full scope of duties soon. 



Keys photographs concrete forms used on a bridge along the road.

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# Work continues across the north

Story and photos by | J.D. Hardesty

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had 330 projects with a combined value of \$2.8 billion under construction across the northern portion of the country in October.

Here are some highlights:

## Bagram terminal

**BAGRAM, Afghanistan** – A new passenger terminal, which will serve as a gateway to Afghanistan for the estimated 500,000 passengers who travel through Bagram Air Field annually, opened Aug. 31.

The terminal opened ahead of schedule and dwarfs the old 7,500-square-foot terminal it replaces. The new facility gives the approximately 1,400 daily passengers plenty of room to stretch out in air conditioned facilities. The terminal has space for 1,250 passengers, five times the capacity of the old terminal.

“This will enable even greater passenger movement more effectively throughout Afghanistan,” said Brig. Gen. Darryl Roberson, commander of the 455th Air Expeditionary Wing. The terminal supports both fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft.

Yuksel Construction Co. built the new terminal.



“Finishing ahead of schedule is the culmination of good partnership between everybody involved,” said Bagram Area Office officer-in-charge Lt. Col. Douglas Vanderhoof. “We’ve established a very good working relationship with the Air Force. It’s because of this relationship that we’re able to get these projects done on time.”

Vanderhoof lauded the contractor for their hard work, but, also stressed the relationship between the army and Air Force as paramount to a successful project.

The Corps is scheduled to complete a new cargo terminal before year’s end. “That project is currently ahead of schedule as well,” he said. Other construction projects he said should be completed by the end of the year include a waste water treatment plant and a waste management facility.

## Police headquarters

**PAGHMAN, Afghanistan** – Lt. Col. Steve Danner, the officer in charge of the district’s Kabul Area Office, hosted Afghanistan Engineer District-North commander Col. Christopher W. Martin on a tour of several construction sites in Kabul Province on Aug. 18.

The tour included the



Col. Christopher W. Martin tour several construction projects in Kabul Province Aug 18 with Kabul Area Office officer-in-charge Lt. Col. Steve Danner (behind) and civil engineer Anthony Ruth, including the Afghanistan National Police Paghman District Headquarters being constructed by Kabuljan Construction Co.



Civil engineer Anthony Ruth (right) briefs Martin on the progress of the 25 ammunition bunkers construction project near Chimatallah.

Afghanistan National Police Paghman District Headquarters which is being constructed by Kabuljan Construction Co.

The nearly \$1.5 million project that includes the headquarters building, guard towers, a security wall around the perimeter of the site and a water well house.

The project is scheduled to be completed in the spring of 2012.

## Ammo bunkers

**CHIMATALLAH, Afghanistan** – The Corps of Engineers is partnering with the Afghanistan National Army to build 25 ammunition bunkers in Kabul Province.

Construction of the \$5.3 million project, which also is managed by the Kabul Area Office, started about a year ago, and is on schedule to be completed in March 2012.

The Afghan Builders Consortium will construct the roads and a drainage system. The consortium is a group of contractors that was assembled in response to the Afghanistan First program, which gives incentives to Afghan companies and contractors to use local Afghan laborers to fulfill work

contracts. The program is designed to bring jobs to the local economy.

## Camp Shaheen

**MAZAR-E SHARIF, Afghanistan** – Martin hosted Brig. Gen. Kendall P. Cox on a tour of construction projects managed by Corps of Engineers across nine northern provincial districts on Aug. 17.

The work included several projects at Camp Shaheen, a Afghan army complex. Among the projects is the 209th Infantry Kandak, which is being built by Technologists Inc. The facility is designed to house and support more than 600 Afghan soldiers when complete.

The Corps of Engineers hires Afghanistan quality assurance professionals who supply day-to-day hands-on support for construction projects, allowing Corps of Engineers program managers, resident engineers and construction representatives to concentrate on completing multiple projects simultaneously.

Also on the base, the Afghanistan National Hospital project is nearing completion. It is being built by Turkish-based Biltek. The 46-bed facility includes a dining facility, pharmacy and conference room, among other features.

In addition, a Battalion Support Complex is being built by the firm Herai Alpha. The project includes a battalion headquarters,



Maj. Gen. Kendal P. Cox (wearing a white hard hat) listens to representatives of Technologists Inc. discuss construction of Afghan army complex at Camp Shaheen Aug. 17 at Mazar-e Sharif.





Story and photo by | Mark Rankin

District chief of quality assurance Rex Mols (right) fields questions from Afghan building industry executives on Oct. 5.

# Small firms, big business

District officials forge one-on-one relationships with Afghan construction execs.

**K**ABUL – U.S. Army Corps of Engineers officials are reaching out to Afghan construction company owners and contractors in an effort to encourage more of them to bid on construction projects offered by the agency.

Corps of Engineers officials underscored that message during a business conference at the Serena Hotel in downtown Kabul on Oct. 5. The half-day conference, which was co-hosted by the Afghanistan Builders Association, was designed specifically for Afghan business leaders who own, manage or serve in upper-level management positions at engineering and construction-

related businesses.

The event also attracted representatives of various Afghan government ministries, and Afghan vocational schools and universities.

Afghanistan Engineer District-North commander Col. Christopher Martin and a team of representatives from the district's contracting, quality assurance, and engineering and construction branches discussed job opportunities. They gave an overview of the Corps of Engineers' overall building program, and of its quality assurance and contracting practices.

"This is an excellent opportunity for the Corps to fine tune the contracting

and construction process and answer any question you might have," Martin told those in attendance.

Mohammed Sohail Alami, operations manager and business developer for the construction firm Omran Holding Group, came with questions about contracting. "This was a good opportunity to speak directly with Corps of Engineers contracting executives and learn how other Afghan business owners are doing business," he said.

Rex Mols, the district's chief of quality assurance branch, and Lt. Col. Rusty Dooley, chief of contracting, agreed that the conference presented an ideal setting to make professional connections.

"This type of environment provides a period to answer one-on-one questions, network and the opportunity to give key information," Mols said. "With so much construction going on in Afghanistan, it's an opportunity for them to see what other businesses are doing."

Another attendee, Nilofar Savedi, who serves as president of Gulf Prince Construction and Logistics Services Co., which is based in Kabul, said she was thankful the Corps of Engineers conducted the conference because business prospects for women in Afghanistan are extremely limited.

"Today, I am very pleased because we have this opportunity to be here and educate ourselves further," she said during the program. She said she made several new contacts during the conference and that she plans to bid on road construction work.

The principles of good business are universal, Martin said, "The things that make Afghan companies successful are no

different than what makes an American company successful; it is the ability to know your contract, execute your contract and deliver a quality product at the end," he said.

Many of the country's buildings were destroyed during the last several decades of civil unrest and need repaired, so a thriving construction industry needed rebuild army facilities, police stations, schools, roads, government buildings and more, Martin said.

The Afghanistan Builders Association is doing its part to help Afghan construction companies grow and provide quality construction, the association's vice present Mowdood Popal told the audience.

The association is a non-profit, non-governmental trade organization that was established with the support of the U.S. Agency for International Development and Afghan construction companies in May 2004. Its task is to establish construction guidelines and standards, and to educate Afghan construction executives and laborers. It also

strives to enhance the integrity and visibility of the construction industry in Afghanistan, he said.

It's important for the association to regulate the private sector and to ensure that contracts, accounting practices, building standards and safety protocols are adhered to as the Afghan construction industry expands, Popal said.

The relationships, partnerships, collaborative efforts and enthusiasm that were developed were developed at the conference and others like it will benefit the country's construction sector long after the Corps of Engineers' scheduled departure in 2014, he said. 🇺🇸

**“The things that make Afghan companies successful are no different than what makes an American company successful.”**





Photos by | Mark Rankin

Story by | Paul Giblin

Program coordinator Sarah Shea serves arroz con dulce, a Puerto Rican bread pudding dish, while procurement analyst Carlos Brava tries guava paste, another treat, at the district's event.

## ¡Se! Hispanics spice up district

**K**ABUL — Hispanics' influence in the United States is mirrored by Hispanics' contributions in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, said Edwin Cuebas, the keynote speaker at a Hispanic Heritage event at the Qalaa House compound on Oct. 12.

"As we sit here today, we represent our nation's best. We are not only leaders, but contributing members of the society that has been shaped by our cultures," said Cuebas, who serves as the assistant chief of construction for Afghanistan Engineer District-North.

Americans who whose ancestors came from Spain, Mexico, the Caribbean and Central and South America have made important contributions across American

culture, spicing up sports, food, arts, politics, government, science, business, education and more, he said.

He highlighted several Hispanics luminaries, including baseball icon Roberto Clement, guitar great Carlos Santana and Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, among others.

"This has been accomplished by the hard work, dedication and struggles that many Hispanics have endured in realizing their American dream," Cuebas told nearly 100 people who attended the event.

"Over the years, we have continued to strive for the same goals, dreams and realities as those born in the U.S. As Hispanics, we are a vast and varied group of people, each with our customs, unique ideas and determination

to achieve a dream," he said.

Hispanics have a proud tradition of serving in the military, Cuebas said. Since the 1960s, they have served in disproportionately high numbers on the front lines and 43 Hispanic Americans have earned The Medal of Honor, the military's highest honor.

They also hold several important roles within Corps of Engineers' district in northern Afghanistan. Cuebas noted that he moved to Florida from Puerto Rico with a wife and a 1-year-old daughter to pursue his personal dream.

"I found myself without friends and speaking really broken English," he said. "And if you think I have an accent now, imagine 32 years ago. But here I am serving our country with all of you, standing as a proud Hispanic American."

Among others: Force Protection unit member Army Sgt. Alejandro Sanchez and contract specialist Daniel Portillo, who both emigrated from Mexico; contract specialist Dienor Bolanos, who emigrated from Costa Rica; program analyst Michelle Newman-Gallardo, who grew up in Puerto Rico; and contract specialist Yvette Walker, who's a first-generation American born of Puerto Rican parents.

Overall, Hispanics represent about 11 percent of the district's workforce, according to a review of personnel records.

Cuebas said, "Recently, President Obama was quoted: 'The story of Hispanics in America is the story of America itself.' I couldn't have summarized it better. We are all one people, living out our dreams for freedom and independence."

vDistrict deputy commander Air Force Lt. Col. Aaron Benson opened the event by encouraging employees to embrace the diversity of the workforce in Afghanistan.

He recalled the words of Spanish philosopher Baltasar Garcian: "True friendship multiplies the good in life and

divides its evils. Strive to have friends, for life without friends is like life on a desert island. ... To find one real friend in a lifetime is good fortune; to keep him is a blessing."

The event also featured Hispanic-style dance and food.

Administrative support specialist Diane Davis and Camp Egger's Army Sgt. Fernando Ramirez spun and swayed as they demonstrated salsa dancing, a dance style that originated in the Caribbean and has become popular in Mexico and throughout Central and South America.

They encouraged those in the audience to join salsa-dancing classes that are held regularly at both Qalaa House and Camp Eggers.

The selection of food featured desserts, snacks and drinks representative of several countries throughout the Caribbean and Central and South America.

Portillo gave the invocation, supervisory contract specialist Ana Camacho read President Barack Obama's proclamation declaring Hispanic Heritage Month, and local national workforce manager Deb Santiago recited a closing prayer. 🇺🇸



Assistant chief of construction Edwin Cuebas (left) and deputy commander Lt. Col. Aaron Benson speak at the event.



# DESSERT

## in Afghanistan



Food service specialist Tracy Hunter took the long road back to Afghanistan for a second tour.

**FREEDOM  
BUILDER**

**K**ABUL – Tracy Hunter didn’t grow up cooking, but her intuition and desire to please others led her down an unexpected path to the dining facility at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ headquarters in northern Afghanistan, where she’s renowned for her cookies, pies, soups and fresh baked bread.

Hunter grew up in an Air Force family eating canned food and military meals. She studied civil engineering in college and worked as a waitress at a popular restaurant in Washington state in the 1980s.

Since then, her career path has taken her to the Qalaa House compound in northern Afghanistan, where she’s usually enveloped in the aromas of fresh baked bread, homemade soups or gooey cinnamon rolls.

She acknowledged that the standard menu options in a war zone dining facility are limited, but with a little tender loving care and creative thinking, it’s not hard to turn everyday military dining into something special.

“Sometimes you have to make do with what you have,” Hunter said. “So I don’t have pumpkin to make pumpkin bread. OK. Well, I have sweet potatoes, so why not make sweet potato bread?”

It’s that ingenuity that gave Hunter her start in the food industry and generated a successful 20-plus year business.

In the ’80s as Hunter was working her way through college as a waitress Patsy Clark’s Restaurant, an upscale establishment in Spokane, Wash., she realized that a niche market wasn’t being met.

“A lot of drunken driving laws went in to affect,” she said. “That really impacted how the food industry could sell alcohol. That, in turn, affected their business sales, since alcohol yielded the highest revenue.”

Hunter realized the restaurant industry could make up for the declining alcohol revenue by tapping in to a market that wasn’t being fully explored.

“The next highest revenue maker in the business was desserts, but back then, restaurants didn’t hire bakers and the menu options for desserts were like a frozen cheesecake, very limited,” she said.

Hunter decided to use the money that she had saved for college – about \$20,000 – to buy some used equipment to open a food wholesale and catering business with her sister.

They opened Just American Desserts in 1986 as an anchor store in a strip mall in Spokane. Hunter and her sister catered

Story by | **LaDonna Davis**

**FREEDOM  
BUILDER**

Photos and graphics by | **Joe Marek**



parties, sold baked goods to restaurants, and provided basic food management and prep skills to local food businesses.

Hunter said she never imagined going into the food industry. She said she not a professional chef, and all of her recipes stem from trial and error. But she always knew she would own her own business.

“Now in retrospect, looking at it, my favorite toy was the Easy Bake Oven. I wore that thing out,” Hunter said. “I knew I would own my own business; that’s what I always wanted to do, but I just never knew what it would be.”

Hunter’s business became so successful that she and her sister opened three locations throughout eastern Washington, but in 2006, her passion for food and management pointed her in a new direction.

Hunter’s husband Mark Springer worked for the Corps of Engineers as an engineer for the Seattle District. In 2003, two years after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, Springer volunteered to deploy to Afghanistan to help rebuild the country as part of a forward engineering support team.

After a few years of deployment, Springer enlisted his wife to come be with him to run the dining facility. After some convincing, Hunter sold her part of the business to her sister and agreed to deploy. Hunter and her husband stayed in Afghanistan together for three years.

In 2009, Springer redeployed to Washington, while Hunter remained in Afghanistan. “I really loved it. I love working with the Afghans, teaching them how to cook and teaching them a skill they will be able to take with them after we leave,” she said.

Hunter served as the district’s dining

facility manager from 2006 to 2010 until tragedy struck.

After a previous battle with cancer, Springer fell ill again in 2010. She left Afghanistan to be with her husband, who died from cancer later that year.

“We really lived our lives to the fullest,” Hunter said with tears in her eyes. The pain of losing her soul mate was still fresh in her mind, but it was that great loss that prompted Hunter to return to Afghanistan for a second tour beginning in July as a food service specialist.

Hunter explained that her decision to return to the district so shortly after her husband’s death wasn’t a difficult decision. “I’d rather be here than sitting at home crying all day thinking about my loss. This is like home for me,” she said.

“One of our priorities is to increase morale and quality of life on Qalaa,” said Air Force



**Executive assistant Lorrie Lloyd serves Hunter’s cinnamon rolls to a long line of district employees.**

Capt. Trent Arnold, the former director of the district’s logistics operations. “Tracy fills that task with her expert baking skills and welcoming demeanor.”

The best part about working for the military, Hunter said, is being able to bring a taste of home cooking to each person who is deployed.

“I love what I do. I think it shows. That’s hard to hide,” she said. “To make something out of nothing, to put a smile on people’s faces, that’s the greatest feeling in the world.”

Though cooking for more than 300 deployed military members and civilian employees each day and managing a staff of more than 20 Afghan workers can be grueling and labor intensive, Hunter said she knows how important mealtime is. She wants to make sure everyone’s dining experience is memorable, especially during the holidays.

For each Thanksgiving and Christmas that Hunter has been deployed, she has led efforts to prepare special holiday spreads featuring carved turkey and ham, fresh-baked rolls, all the traditional fixings and selections of special desserts.

“During the holidays, Tracy would always go way out of her way to make sure everyone felt at home,” said Joe Marek, who arrived at Afghanistan Engineer District-North as a public affairs specialist in 2009.

“Even though they were 7,000 miles away, everybody felt that it was holiday dinner with their family. And the food was really good, too. Oh my goodness, the food was delicious,” he said.

The holidays in Afghanistan can be hard for those who are deployed, Hunter said, which is why she believes it’s so necessary to

make holidays special.

“Every holiday you have while deployed, you are going to remember it,” she said. “It is very important to me that I make sure everyone here gets a taste of home and a little reprieve from their jobs during their meals.”

Hunter has instituted other traditions at Qalaa House. Anyone who dines on the compound regularly knows about “Pay-day Cinnamon Roll Fridays.” Every other Friday, Hunter bakes hot fresh cinnamon rolls that draw service members and civilians from all over the Green Zone.

While she’s nearly legendary for her cinnamon rolls and desserts, her cooking skills extend beyond dough, sugar and flower. Her repertoire includes freshly made chicken salad, hot soups, Asian cuisine, and even hearty sandwiches.

“I’m not just a one recipe gal,” she said.

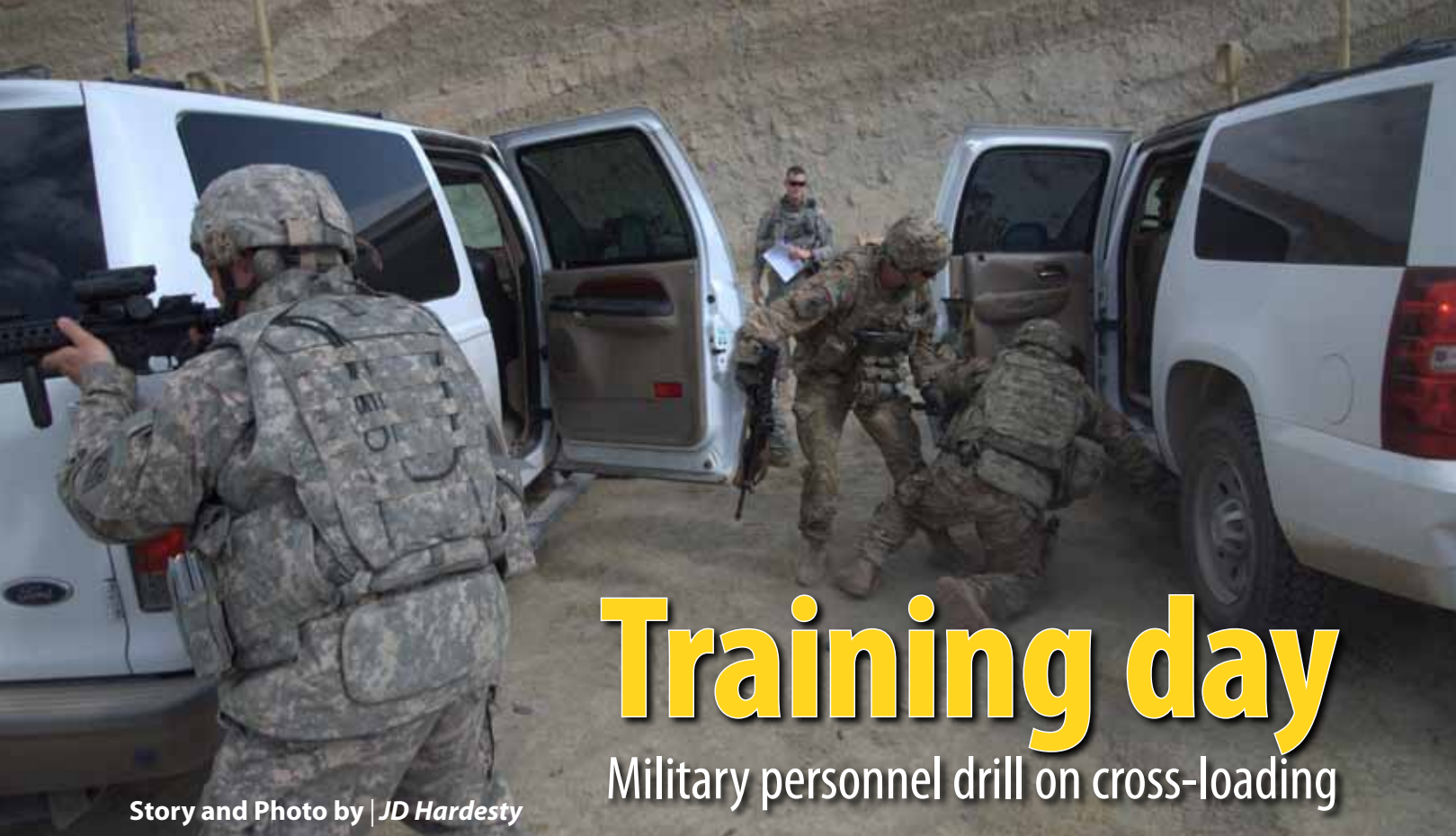
Additionally, Hunter noted that she was not hired to be a baker, or even a chef; she was hired to be a supervisor. It’s really her passion for teaching others that fulfills her, she said.

“I love sharing my knowledge. This isn’t the Tracy show; I want everyone to own what they’re doing. Everyone brings something different to the plate,” she said.

Learning from each other and working long hours together helps develop a sense of camaraderie and teamwork among the dining facilities staff members, regardless of their individual skill sets and countries of origin.

“Everyone wants to be part of something great; everyone wants to be treated with respect. That’s not an American thing or an Afghan thing, it’s a human thing.” Hunter said. “We all have a common goal.”





# Training day

## Military personnel drill on cross-loading

Story and Photo by | JD Hardesty

**Army Staff Sgt. Christopher Houck (left) provides fire suppression for convoy passengers transferring from a disabled vehicle during a cross-loading drill exercise at Camp Commando on Aug. 12. Army Lt. Edward Howard (center) helps passengers while Army Staff Sgt. Jonathon Cotton (rear) evaluates the exercise.**

**K**ABUL – Members of Afghanistan Engineer District-North’s Force Protection team sharpened their cross-loading battle skills under live fire in at the Afghanistan National Army’s Camp Commando weapons range on Aug. 12.

The maneuver is used when a ground convoy comes under attack and a vehicle becomes incapable continuing toward a safe destination. Force Pro members and passengers in the unmovable vehicle cross load, or transfer, into another convoy vehicle.

The drill is just one that Force Pro members have developed to keep their battle skills sharp. Knowing the procedure is critical, said district commander Col. Christopher Martin.

The Force Pro team demonstrated the technique to the district’s workforce at the Qalaa House compound on Aug. 18, six days after the training at Camp Commando.

“When we take a ground convoy, one of the

actions we take if a vehicle breaks down and we’re under fire, is cross load,” Martin said before the demonstration. “We’re going to show you what we learned, in the event that some time you’re out there in a convoy, a patrol, and this happens to you. It’s not as easy as it sounds.”

To increase the learning curve and make the training more realistic, civilians participated in the battle drills, both at Camp Commando and at Qalaa House. Tim Yarger, a resident of Toms River, N.J., who is currently deployed from the New York District and serves as chief of the district’s Engineering and Construction Division, played a role during both scenarios.

“I thought Col. Martin was nuts in suggesting I participate in the training, but I could not have been more wrong,” Yarger said.

“The training raised my awareness of what I can expect in an emergency and I am more comfortable that I will make fewer mistakes

should the real thing come along. I learned even tasks that seem simple can become difficult when performed in a hurry. There is no substitute for hands-on experience,” Yarger said.

Two Force Pro team members served as range safety officers for the live-fire exercise at Camp Commando and helped develop the cross-loading battle drill in response to Martin’s request to conduct live-fire battle drills.

Army Staff Sgt. Jonathon Cotton, a native of Valparaiso, Ind., is a military police officer who was stationed in Heidelberg, Germany, with his family prior to deploying to support the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Kabul. He teamed with fellow military police officer Air Force Staff Sgt. Nathan Clark, a native of Oklahoma City who is stationed with his family in San Antonio, Texas, to plan the drills.

While neither Cotton nor Clark has had to cross load passengers from one vehicle to another during actual convoy operations, they have trained on it numerous times.

Cotton and Clark explained that all of the Force Pro staff sergeants came together to focus on the cross-loading battle drill to make it better. “As noncommissioned officers, we are charged with training the force,” Cotton said.

“When in a joint environment, there are many aspects of training that maybe one service does and others do not, so together, as a joint service Force Protection team, we came up with the safest way to cross load from one vehicle to another,” Cotton said.

The Force Protection professionals explained that battle drills are essential to every military member’s mission. “If something were to happen in a real world situation, a military member must know how to react without hesitation in order to save his life and the lives of others traveling with him,” Cotton said.

Marine Staff Sgt. John Kraft, a Connecticut native stationed at Camp Lejeune, N.C., said his greatest fear while conducting convoy ground operations is being attacked and having to leave someone behind. “This is a combat zone and we will always be prepared for the worst,” he said.

Cotton and Clark, with assistance from Army Staff Sgt. Christopher Houck, planned and prepared the live-fire training exercise in three days during their off hours.

“Overcoming issues and obstacles while implementing phased training on the fly is challenging for a Force Protection team working a never-ending operations tempo,” Cotton said. “This usually takes months to conduct stateside.”

The inclusion of unarmed civilians wearing bulky battle armor provided a sense of realism to the exercises. “I really wanted U.S. Army Corps of Engineers civilians participating in the training, because it enhanced the lessons learned for all the participants,” Cotton said.

During the demonstration at Qalaa House, the squad conducted the drill in 27 seconds flat.


Rehearsing maneuvers like cross loading is vital, Martin said, because in a real world situations, every second counts. 



Photo by | Joe Marek

**Army Col. Christopher Martin (center) discusses the cross-loading technique before members of the Force Protection team (foreground) demonstrate it to civilian Corps of Engineers employees at the Qalaa House compound on Aug. 18.**



# COUSINS ★ IN ★ ARMS ★



## Cousins share brotherhood of combat

Photo by | Corps of Engineers

Story by | J.D. Hardesty

Chris Houck (right) was part of the detail that picked up his cousin Jeremy Houck at Kabul International Airport.

**FREEDOM  
BUILDER**

**K**ABUL – Selfless service. Duty. Honor. Respect.

Those Army values form the marrow from which Pennsylvania cousins share the brotherhood of combat.

Pennsylvania National Guard Staff Sgts. Chris Houck, 37, and Jeremy Houck, 33, of Lebanon City, have grown close serving together in Afghanistan.

Both staff sergeants provide force protection and security services for the Afghanistan Engineer District-North.

The cousins perform similar tasks – protecting the district’s workforce, responding to area emergencies, and serving as drivers and gunners.

Chris serves at the district’s Qalaa House compound headquarters in Kabul; Jeremy at the district’s Shank Area Office south of Kabul.

That wasn’t always the case.

With their families having problems during their youth, the Houcks saw little of each other from middle school through their early 20s. The cousins reunited one night over billiards and beer.

Jeremy explained that he went with a different cousin to shoot pool after work one night a decade ago in their hometown. That cousin said his buddy Chris might join them. After playing pool with Chris for an hour, Jeremy asked, “What’s Chris’ last name? He looks really familiar.”

They confirmed that their last names matched, then a quick discussion followed as to where each fit in the Houck family tree.

“Oh, your dad’s name is Randy,” Chris said.

“Yep,” Jeremy retorted.

“Oh, cool. My dad and your dad are

brothers. We are first cousins. Where’ve you been?” Chris responded.

Since that pool game, whether living in Pennsylvania or serving in Iraq or Afghanistan, they have been nearly inseparable. The more time they spent together in discourse, the more commonality bridged them to become best friends.

“Jeremy is the closest thing I have ever had to a brother,” Chris said.

Chris is a former Marine who took a hardship discharge in 1994 to help his mother Rose care for his father Tracy, who was diagnosed with brain cancer. “The loss of my father sent me on a difficult road,”

Chris said.

His renewed relationship with Jeremy helped him move on.

“Jeremy had already served six years in the Pennsylvania National Guard and our discussions revived many feelings regarding

service to my country and made me question if I still had something to offer the military,” Chris said. “Jeremy provided valuable guidance and mentorship on my path to rejoining the military service I had missed for so long, so I enlisted in the Guard in May 2007.”

After a 13-year break in service, newly enlisted Guardsman Chris Houck, 37, was training to deploy to Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom in September of 2008.

“It was a difficult time for me when I returned home from Iraq,” the older of the two said. “Not many people can understand unless they have been there, but I joined the Guard knowing full well I would be deploying

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**“It is one thing to be called to duty. It’s another to volunteer for duty in a combat zone.”**

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Photo by | J.D. Hardesty

**Col. Christopher W. Martin awards the Bronze Star to Chris Houck at the Qalaa House compound in Kabul on Sept. 11.**

to Iraq.”

Jeremy finished a deployment with the U.S. Border Patrol in Yuma, Ariz., then headed overseas as the Pennsylvania National Guard sent two brigades from the 28th Division to Iraq. A Houck deployed with each brigade.

Jeremy joined the 2nd Combat Aviation Brigade, a heavy aviation unit with AH-64D Apaches, UH-60 Blackhawks and CH-47 Chinooks headquartered in Indiantown Gap, Pa. The unit deployed to Camp Adder, near Baghdad International Airport, to provide aviation support to Multi-National Division-South.

Chris conducted operations in the northern Baghdad from January to September 2009 with the 56th Stryker Brigade team based at Camp Taji, the only Stryker Brigade in the military reserve.

They were stationed on the other side of the world from their home in Pennsylvania,

just 60 miles apart. They spoke once in a while, but were never able to arrange a meeting, Chris said.

When they returned from Iraq, their esprit de corps never stopped kneading their call to duty. Both staff sergeants still wanted to serve side by side to share the unique honor of military brotherhood, he said.

Jeremy said, “After being home from my Iraq deployment for about six months, I still felt obligated to deploy. There was still a war going on and I knew I could help more overseas than in my cushy job at the aviation schoolhouse working supply.”

For both Houcks, service is something revered, something honored, something born in combat. “It is the actions we take in the face of adversity that ultimately defines who we are and what we are made of,” Chris said.

He said family understanding is important. He said his wife was supportive, but he sensed hesitation in her voice when they discussed another tour.

“It is one thing to be called to duty. It’s another to volunteer for duty in a combat zone,” he said.

“Many may ask, ‘Who would leave their family and their loved ones?’” said Chris, a father of five, as if he was pondering the question himself. “It’s a calling, a calling to serve.”

Like many Soldiers who wrestle with returning home while their brothers in arms are serving in harm’s way, Chris was no exception. He said he repeated asked himself, “Why do I deserve to sit on my sofa

while so many others continue to fight?”

Jeremy didn’t struggle with a family quandary, since he is single and has no children. “Chris has enough for both of us,” he said. “I am still waiting for that perfect girl that everyone keeps telling me about.”

Yet Jeremy shares his cousin’s sentiment about service.

“I still felt obligated to deploy,” he said. “There was still a war going on and I knew I could help more overseas than at my cushy aviation supply job with the Eastern Army National Guard Aviation Training Site (located in Annville, Pa.).”

Sitting at the kitchen table one evening, they decided to deploy overseas again. Chris found a position as part of a team that operates military vehicles called Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles, or MRAPs for short.

Jeremy followed Chris’ lead and submitted his paperwork a week later for a similar position.

Chris was called to duty in Afghanistan in October 2010 for a one-year assignment. Jeremy was selected at the end of February.

“Even though I deployed first, I knew Jeremy would arrive soon,” Chris said. “There would be no wavering or second thoughts between us.”

Once in Afghanistan, Chris was moved from the MRAP team to the Qalaa House Force Protection team. One of his missions was to pick up his cousin at the Kabul International Airport.

“Having the opportunity to serve side by side with my cousin only enhances the experience

and further solidifies our family bond,” Chris said.

Serving side by side also has fueled a unique brand of military brotherhood.

Jeremy said, “We joke around to each other that the Army would never put us at the same location at the same time, because we would end the war too quickly.”

When asked who the best staff sergeant is, Chris replied, “Anyone with the last name Houck.”

Chris headed home at the end of September. He was awarded a Bronze Star Medal for his force protection work. He’s considering another tour in Afghanistan.

“I volunteered to deploy because it is a great honor to be part of the 1 percent who serves in America’s armed forces. I serve and continue to volunteer in honor of all those who have served before me in our nation’s conflicts and especially for those who have made the ultimate sacrifice,” Chris said. 🇺🇸



Photo by | Bob King

**Jeremy Houck stands guard as civilian engineers inspect an Afghanistan National Police site in Pol-e Alam on May 22.**





# Parting shot

Photo by | *U.S. Air Force Senior Airman Sandra Welch*

**MISTEGAY, Afghanistan** — Al VanGuilder, of Duluth, Minn., an engineer attached to Provincial Reconstruction Team Khost, explains to Afghan laborers how to properly place mortar to build a boundary wall for a school on Sept. 22.

Work on the 8-classroom building began in July 2011 and is scheduled to be complete in July 2012. More than 800 students are expected to use the school, which is in the village of Mistegay, in Khost Province, in the eastern portion of the country.