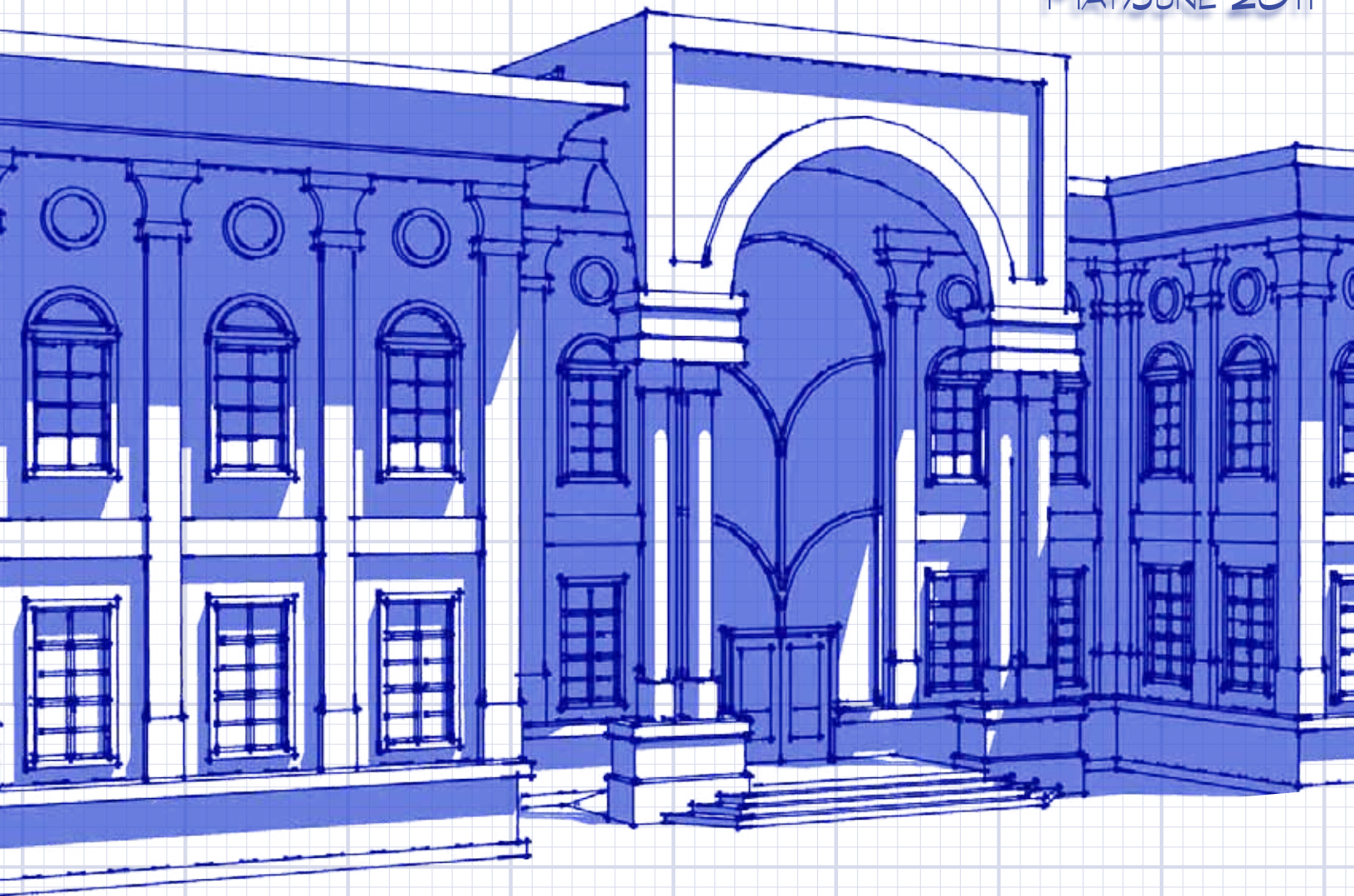




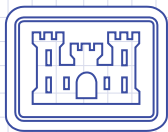
FREEDOM BUILDER

MAY/JUNE 2011



ARCHITECT DESIGNS A CLASSIC

- NEW ENGLANDERS WELCOME SEN. KERRY TO KABUL
- AFGHAN NEWS REPORTERS FOCUS ON STREETLIGHTS PROJECT
- U.S. PERSONNEL STRENGTHEN TIES WITH FOREIGN LANGUAGES
- CORPS OF ENGINEERS HELPS REBUILD AFGHAN CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY



US Army Corps
of Engineers®

District Commander
Col. Thomas Magness

District Command Sergeant Major
Chief Master Sgt. Forest Lisner

Chief of Public Affairs
J. D. Hardesty

Layout and Design
Joseph A. Marek

Staff Writer
Paul Giblin

Staff Writer
LaDonna Davis

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All photographs appearing herein are by the Afghanistan Engineer District Public Affairs Office unless otherwise accredited.

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AED.PublicAffairs@usace.army.mil

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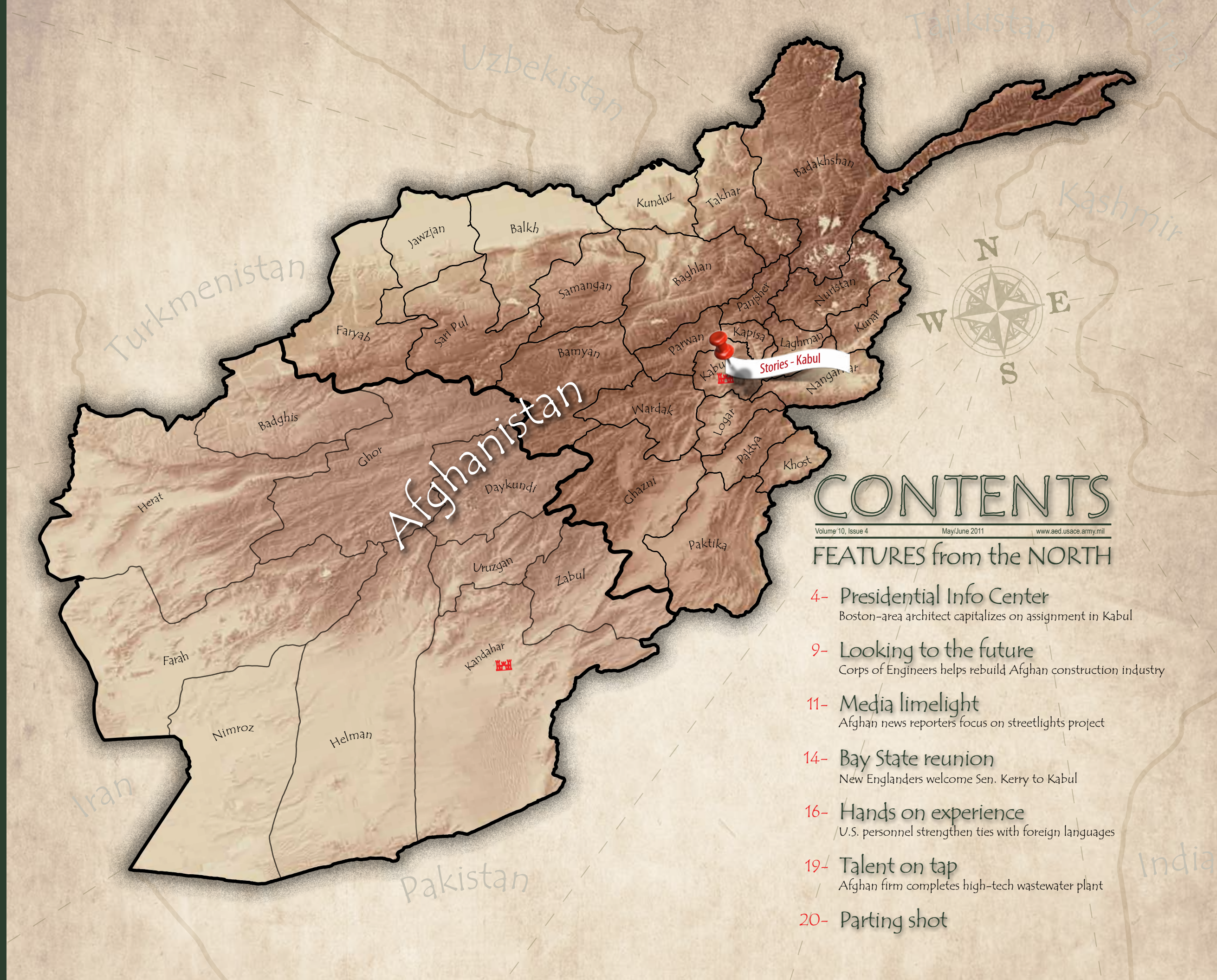
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Cover Image:



**Polish-born architect
Bogdan Figiel gives an
Old World look to a new
building in Kabul. (Full
story on pg. 4)**

Illustration by | *Bogdan Figiel*



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The Info Center

Boston area architect capitolizes on assignment in Kabul

Story by | Paul Giblyn

Photos by | Joe Marek

Bogdan Figiel won a design competition for a new addition to the presidential palace compound.

KABUL — Massachusetts architect Bogdan Figiel, a civilian employee of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers who has worked in Afghanistan since January 2010, is leaving a permanent mark on the country.

He designed a \$7.3 million government building that's being constructed on the presidential palace grounds in Kabul, across a courtyard from Afghan president

Hamid Karzai's office. The new Presidential Information and Coordination Center will house intelligence functions, bolstering the Afghan government's ability to monitor and oppose insurgent forces that operate in the country.

It's expected to be completed in the spring of 2013.

The building marked the first of its type

that Figiel has designed. It's also the highlight of his career to date. In the United States, he generally designs office buildings and laboratories. In Afghanistan, he typically designs offices and living quarters for Afghan and U.S. personnel at military bases across Afghanistan.

Figiel won a design competition among Corps of Engineers architects working in Kabul in the fall of 2010. With little guidance

from Karzai and other Afghan officials concerning the appearance of the building, Figiel took a risk and designed a building that had strong classical features inspired by historic European buildings.

In contrast, the other architects in the competition presented strong modern designs. Figiel was impressed by their designs, which were completely different than his, but equally as daring, he said. "It was stiff competition, I have to tell you," said Figiel, who lives in Canton, Mass., and started a two-year tour in Kabul in January 2010.

Karzai made the final selection.

Figiel opted for a classical look after visiting the presidential palace complex, which is under tight security and has remained relatively untouched by decades of war and conflict. "This is one of very few compounds that still has buildings that survived many ups and downs in Afghanistan," he said.

Many of the buildings, including the buildings closest to the Presidential Information and Coordination Center site, were built in the late 1800s.

Architecturally, the surrounding buildings blend muted classical features with Islamic flourishes. Few are in their original states. Most have been expanded, adapted and reworked over the decades to accommodate the needs of succeeding generations.

A relatively tight budget and limited space for the new building presented important design considerations. "It was my initial impression — and my challenge — that I was supposed to design something that would complement the presidential palace, and at the same time, fit nicely in the surroundings," Figiel said.

The compound is walled and compact. Buildings line a narrow street that encircles a courtyard. Existing structures are two or three stories tall, and Karzai has a view of the site from his presidential office. "The presidential palace is only two stories, so I knew that if Karzai was going to have an interest in this new building, he wouldn't want it dominating his own quarters," Figiel said.

The architect, who was born and raised in Poland, tried to envision a building with interesting features that would serve as a point of pride for the emerging democratic government. He took cues from the classical features of near-by buildings, but he opted for a more traditional Old World design compared to the other structures on the compound.

Figiel, 55, always has had an eye for classical architecture. He earned a bachelor's degree in structural engineering from Cracow University of Technology in Cracow, Poland, in 1983. He immigrated to the United States in 1989, gained citizenship in 1992, and earned a master's degree in architecture from the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence in 2001.

He didn't use any particular existing building as a reference when he designed the Presidential Information and Coordination Center, but he incorporated centuries-old classical ideas and themes.

He designed the building with three sections – a center segment featuring a pronounced entrance, and two symmetrical wings. Since there's no space for a plaza in front of the building, he knew that creating

space at the front entrance was essential.

"I decided to break the plane, push the center back, and at the same time pull out a gate as the main opening," he said.

By recessing the center of the building further away from the street, he created space for a portico, a grand porch, framed by columns.

Stairs ascend in the front, while ramps lead to the same landing from the sides, hidden from view behind two sets of double columns. The ramps are important because there's no space for loading ramps or service doors in the rear of the building, so deliveries will be made through the front doors, Figiel said.

The columns support a roof that both provides shade, and accents a 2½-story atrium window that was intended to produce a sense of grandeur. He drew two versions of the portico roof – one with a strictly classical round arch and one with an Islamic-inspired crescent arch.

He explored Afghan history and art in search of a symbol that he could incorporate into the support framework for the window wall, but he couldn't find anything that suited the purpose. Next, he scoured photos of the country for inspiration, and he came up with the idea of using grass.

Grass, Figiel said, seemed to symbolize strength, because it's the first plant to break up Afghanistan's harsh deserts and the first plant to re-grow in areas scarred by warfare. He designed a graceful, swaying support structure representational of a single strand of grass.

He also extended the height of the second story of the building beyond usual proportions. The second story is 1½ stories tall, which gives the building classic proportions, he said. Figiel emphasized the height further with a series of narrow windows positioned between columns around the entire exterior.

He presented two options for decorative elements called pediments above the second-floor windows. He designed both classical round arches and Islamic-inspired crescent arches.

He selected masonry construction materials, specifically concrete with stucco and stone finishes, in keeping with other buildings in the area. Finally, he incorporated classical details, including a continuous stone veneer foundation called a plinth, and a pronounced stone overhang at the top called a cornice.

For the interior, Figiel envisioned a grand lobby behind the atrium window on the first floor and a large room that could be used for meetings and press

conferences on the second floor. Both would be lit by natural sunlight through the massive window. He clustered sensitive information-gathering and communications equipment in a secure underground level, and placed offices and workspaces in the wings.

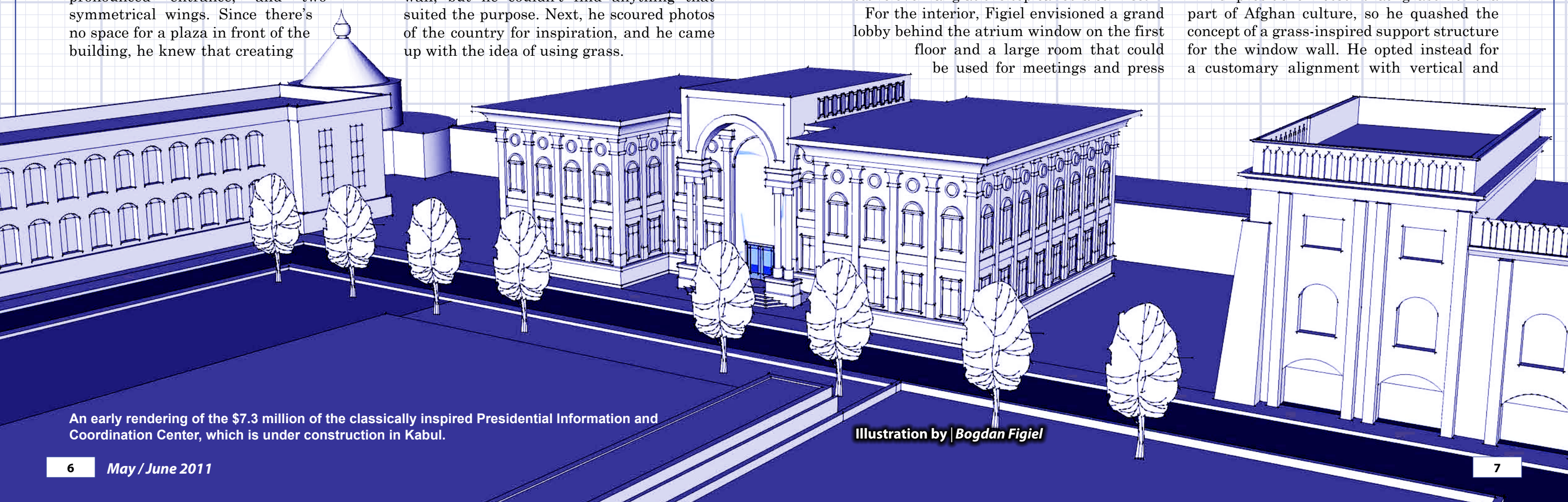
Then he submitted his plans for the competition. "I knew that I was taking a huge risk at that point, because it wasn't modern in the sense of the use of steel and glass," he said.

Karzai selected the classical plan, then surprised Figiel with his attention to architectural details. All clients provide some design suggestions, but the Afghan leader took a particularly strong interest in the nuances, the architect said.

"I went to present the project and the ideas," he said. "He was already very much familiar with it. He wanted to talk about the details."

Karzai selected the crescent arches, and ordered changes to the atrium window, the lobby and the first-floor and second-floor windows.

The president noted that grass isn't a part of Afghan culture, so he quashed the concept of a grass-inspired support structure for the window wall. He opted instead for a customary alignment with vertical and



An early rendering of the \$7.3 million of the classically inspired Presidential Information and Coordination Center, which is under construction in Kabul.

Illustration by | Bogdan Figiel

horizontal supports.

The president also asked Figiel to widen all the windows around the building to allow in more natural sunlight. Wide windows, Karzai pointed out, are typical of Afghan architecture. The president acknowledged that wide windows allow more heat, as well as more light, but he explained that heat isn't the foremost consideration for his countrymen.

"He was adamant," Figiel said. The architect obliged and expanded the windows from 1 meter wide to 1.3 meters wide.

Finally, Karzai scuttled the idea of a large conference room on the second story of the central section of the building. Instead, he wanted the entire atrium space opened to create an even statelier lobby.

Figiel responded with a concept of matching curved staircases at the back of the lobby, ascending to interior galleries that provide views to the first floor. Figiel found space elsewhere in the building to accommodate a conference room.

In the weeks that followed, teams of architects, and structural, mechanical and electrical engineers at the Corps of Engineers' Middle East District office in Winchester, Va., and at Afghanistan Engineer District-North in Kabul, joined the effort to develop the initial plans into complete sets of construction documents, said Brandon Tobias, the architecture lead in Kabul.

The groups worked together to ensure the customer's expectations were met and that the facility was functional and could be used in Afghanistan, he said. Work continues in an effort to ensure fast construction.

"We took a look at the set through the eyes of a contractor to figure out what questions they would ask, what kinds of requests for information they would make during the construction process," said Tobias, a resident of Kansas City, Mo., who's on a temporary deployment from the Kansas City District office. "We're in the process right now of trying to answer as many of those questions as possible ahead of time."

U.S. Army Col. Thomas Magness, the commander of the Corps of Engineers in



Photos by | Afghan Presidential Office

Architect Bogdan Figiel, left, reviewed plans for the new building with Afghan President Hamid Karzai at the Presidential Palace in Kabul on Sept. 20, 2010.

northern Afghanistan, said Figiel's work underscores the value of the organization's mission to build military bases, police stations, roads, airstrips and other infrastructure projects in Afghanistan.

"We often state boldly that we are the world's premier public engineering organization," Magness said. "We are able to deploy halfway around the world and design something of strategic importance with one of our own, an architect from Boston."

Figiel is scheduled to return to the Corps of Engineer' New England District office in Concord, Mass., in February 2012 – about a year before the Presidential Information and Coordination Center is expected to be complete.

But he's considering returning to Afghanistan for another tour before the building is finished. "I would like be here for the grand opening, yes," he said. 🇦🇫



Looking to the future

Afghanistan Builders Association sets sights on 2014 transition, beyond

Story by | U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Stacey Haga
ISAF Public Affairs

Photo by | Joe Marek

Col. Thomas Magness addresses construction business executives during an Afghanistan Builders Association conference at the Serena Hotel on June 10.

KABUL – In addition to the daunting task of building hundreds of police stations, military installations, road and other infrastructure projects in Afghanistan, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has taken on the additional task of helping to rebuild the country's construction industry.

"We need a viable, strong construction industry in this country," Col. Tom Magness, commander of the Corps of Engineers' district in northern Afghanistan, said during a business conference in the capital city on June 10.

Corps of Engineers personnel are

guiding Afghan construction executives in developing a trade association to regulate the booming construction sector. The non-profit, non-government Afghanistan Builders Association was chartered in 2004 to serve as an advocacy organization for its members.

The association is establishing construction standards and providing professional information and education. Its executives also aim to enhance the integrity and visibility of the industry within the country.

"The ABA is still at a premature stage," said Mowdood Popal, the association's vice president. But it is maturing. Its executives

and members laid out a three- to five-year plan during the conference at the Serena Hotel.

The association was launched with 20 members, and now has about 500. The intent is to increase membership by 20 percent a year for the next several years, Popal said. Its membership already represents a broad spectrum of Afghanistan's building sector – both Afghan and foreign companies, small and large firms, and companies that specialize in standard construction, heavy machinery operations, and supplies and materials, among other interests.

With assistance from the Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the Afghan National Standards Authority, the association is paving the way for an emerging private sector within Afghanistan's construction industry.

Prior to U.S. and coalition forces entering Afghanistan in 2001, all construction contracts, regardless of their size, were controlled by the government, Popal said.

Although the majority of construction contracts

being offered around the country are issued by the Corps of Engineers, it is important for the Afghanistan Builders Association to regulate the private sector to ensure that professional contracting, accounting, building and safety practices are adhered to, he said. Standards and consistency will go a long way toward bolstering the emerging industry, Popal said.

Under the association's and the Corps of Engineers' guidance, many new construction firms are being given opportunities to prove themselves as reputable builders that construct projects that meet professional standards, Magness said.

Approximately 50 percent of the contracts the Corps of Engineers awards in Afghanistan are awarded to Afghan companies. The

combined value of those contracts reaches the multi-billion-dollar range annually, he said.

However, the Corps of Engineers is projected to transition out of Afghanistan in late 2014. During that time, Corps of Engineers personnel are helping to guide the Afghanistan Builders Association into a primary role overseeing the industry.

While the association's members face many challenges, such as a new government, an unpredictable economy and limited resources, as they work toward the transition they remain optimistic about the association's future.

The association already has many attributes that will help it progress, said Assad Mattin, the association's senior advisor. Those attributes include a strong leadership team, size, a meaningful educational component and a widespread and quick communication system.

Magness said, "They have come a long way, but they have a long way to go."

The association's leaders are looking ahead to identify the construction industry's role after

the 2014 transition – perhaps it involves Afghanistan's trillions of dollars worth of mineral deposits – and to position the industry to be ready for the future, Magness said.

"I am very proud," said Naeem Yassin, the association's president. The organization will draw upon the strong relationships it has built with the Corps of Engineers, the Agency for International Development and the Afghan government, he said.

Those relationships, accompanied by the association's strengths, and its leaders' and members' passion and forward-thinking attitude, form a solid foundation to position the organization and the construction industry for the transition in 2014 and beyond, Magness said. ■

Media limelight

Corps of Engineers shows solar-powered streetlights to Afghan media

Story by | Paul Giblin

Photos by | J.D. Hardesty

U.S. Army Col. Thomas Magness, center, and Kabul Mayor Muhammad Yunus Nawandish, right, describe the solar-powered streetlights project to Afghan reporters on May 19, 2011

KABUL – Solar-powered streetlights have boosted commerce in a busy business district in downtown Kabul where the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers installed solar-powered streetlights late last year, Kabul Mayor Muhammad Yunus Nawandish told Afghan news reporters on Thursday, May 19.

Before the streetlights were in place, merchants in the area by a major hospital typically kept their shops open about eight hours a day, he said during a press conference under one of the lights.

"If we can light the city, they can work four or five hours more. And when they are working more, the income of the household is going up. It directly affects the level of the lives of the people and families," Nawandish said while standing alongside U.S. Army

Col. Thomas Magness, the commander of the Corps of Engineers in northern Afghanistan, who oversaw the project.

Streetlights also make the city of 5 million people seem more vibrant and secure, the mayor said. He thanked the Corps of Engineers for installing the first phase of lights and encouraged the organization to keep up the development.

Magness promised that would happen. The Corps of Engineers plans to illuminate about 10 kilometers of roadways in the capitol city during the next few years. That's important because the war-ravaged city has an inadequate electric grid and most streets go dark after sunset. The stand-alone street lights generate their own power without drawing from Kabul's limited power network.

The mayor used the press conference to explain the basics of solar-powered energy to eight local TV and newspaper reporters and to their audiences. “As you can see, during the day, it feeds on sunlight and at night, the light comes on. As daylight comes, it shuts off,” he said in Dari. “I feel that Afghanistan is a country that feeds on sunlight.”

In fact, Kabul receives more than 300 days of sunlight a year, which makes it an ideal city for solar power.

The streetlights on the first phase are about 27 feet tall and are equipped with solar panels and Lithium ion batteries with expected life spans of 20 years. The batteries are secured in locked containers atop of the light fixtures to prevent tampering and they store enough energy to run three consecutive nights without a sunny day to recharge. They power light-emitting diode lamps that are energy efficient, low maintenance and environmentally friendly.

The streetlights project also includes training for Kabul public works employees to maintain the lights.

In addition to improving commerce and security, the streetlights are improving Kabul residents’ perception of their city, Nawandish said. For example, since the lights were installed more families walk along the street and shop at night, giving the area a busy, bustling atmosphere, he said.

“It affected very nice the psychology of the people. The people are very happy. They are coming here. They are spending. They are taking photographs. They are very happy,” the mayor said in English.

The results survey conducted for the Corps of Engineers after the first phase went operational mirrored the mayor’s impression, Magness said. “One of the first comments we got was: ‘It feels like a city. When you have a city that is lit up at night, it feels like a city.’ That’s the psychology piece, where people feel more comfortable,” he said.

The first phase of the project featured 28 poles and 56 lights along Jumhoriat Road, from Jumhoriat national specialized Hospital to Sherpoor traffic circle, a 0.88

kilometer stretch of road crowded with delivery trucks, cars, motorcycles, donkey carts and pedestrians.

The streetlights along Foreign Affairs Road is part of Nawandish’s “Open Kabul’s Streets to the Night” program, which is intended to boost commerce along several important commercial corridors. The Corps of Engineers and the mayor’s office have announced four phases total. They are:

Phase 1 – Jumhoriat Road, from Jumhoriat National Specialized Hospital to Sherpoor traffic circle, 0.88 kilometers, 28 poles and 56 lights. It was valued at \$181,000 and completed in December 2010.

Phase 2 – Foreign Affairs Road, from Jumhoriat National Specialized Hospital through Malak Azghar Square to Zanzaq Square near the Turkish Embassy, 2.05 kilometers, 140 poles and 140 lights. It is valued at \$900,000. Work began in January and is projected to be finished in November 2011.

Most streets are dark after nightfall in Kabul because the electrical grid is in tatters after three decades of war. Photo by J.D. Hardesty, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Phase 3 – Wazir Akbar Khan Road, from Zanzaq Square to Indira Gandhi Children’s Hospital, Wazir Akbar Khan Hospital and Bastar Military Hospital, 2.2 kilometers, 295 poles and 295 lights. The cost and exact timeline have not been finalized.

Phases 4 – From Great Masoud Circle to Shaheed Abdul Haq Circle to the Old Microrryan residential area, 5.5 kilometers, 848 poles and 956 lights. The cost and timelines have not been finalized.

The lights are attracting plenty of attention, the mayor said. “A lot of proposals from the people, we got. They asked us to light their streets,” he said in English. He hopes that the success of the program will encourage additional investment to light more streets in the desert city.

Nawandish emphasized that the sense of safety created by the streetlights is unprecedented. “It’s the first time, because in this area, the security was not so good, but

now you can walk at 1 o’clock or 2 o’clock in the morning,” he said.

The mayor walked the entire length of the road under the streetlights after midnight to judge for himself. “I wanted to see. And I saw the reaction of the people,” he said. It was all positive.

Corps of Engineers officials are confident they’ve identified a way to improve the city in a manner that’s tangible and significant to average residents, Magness said. “We’re on our way. We’ve got more work to do.”

An added benefit is that the solar-powered streetlights project appears to have fostered the renewable energy industry in Kabul, he

said. When the Corps of Engineers solicited bids to install the first phase of the project, only one Afghan company submitted a qualified bid. By the time the Corps of Engineers solicited bids for the second phase, more than 10 Afghan companies submitted qualified bids.

“We’re now working on Phase 3 and we’re finding so many people have the capacity and the ability to build what we’re looking for, so we’ve created an industry in Kabul that wasn’t here before,” Magness said. “I think that we’re going to have many bidders on future phases.”



Most streets are dark after nightfall in Kabul because the electrical grid is in tatters after three decades of war.



Bay State reunion

Bay State Corps of Engineers personnel meet Sen. Kerry in Kabul

Story and photos by | Paul Giblin

Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts, center, meets U.S. Army Corps of Engineers employees Bogdan and Vee Figiel, Michelle Arter, Alicia Hill, Stephen Born, Dave Miles and Tim Shea, from left to right, at the U.S. Embassy.

KABUL — Several U.S. Army Corps of Engineers employees from Massachusetts met U.S. Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts at the U.S. Embassy on May 15. The senator spoke thanked them for the work in Afghanistan and spoke briefly about ending the war.

Kerry, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations, stopped at the embassy for series of meetings while en route to Pakistan for discussions with Pakistani leaders in the

aftermath of the U.S. special forces strike that killed al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden in a compound north of Islamabad on May 2.

“He’s on his way to Pakistan to try to smooth things over there. He’s got a tough job ahead.”

Eight Corps of Engineers employees, along with about 125 embassy employees and other guests, greeted Kerry in the shade of several trees just outside the main embassy building on a sunny morning. Kerry ambled through the crowd, speaking one-on-one and standing for snapshots with civilians and military personnel alike.

He mostly inquired about the workers’ hometowns and their duties in Afghanistan. When asked, he offered his opinions and insights about the war and reconstruction effort.

Concerning public support for the war in the United States, he told the Corps of Engineers employees, “For you guys, it’s there. But for the war, there are a lot of questions right now. You know it’s been going on for a long time. People are wondering: How do we get it wrapped up? Nobody wants to just pull it, but get it wrapped up.”

He said reaction to the attack that killed bin Laden was positive, but that it hasn’t had a direct effect in bringing the war to a close. He repeatedly urged the Corps of Engineers civilians to take care of themselves and to remain safe.

The Corps of Engineers employees in attendance included Massachusetts

residents architect Stephen Born of Stoneham, architect Bogdan Figiel and contract administration office engineer Vee Figiel of Canton, architect Dave Miles of Winthrop, police project manager Tim Shea of Holden, and police program manager Bud Taylor of West Minster.

A couple of non-Bay Staters — travel specialist Michelle Arter of Victorville, Calif., and police project manager Alicia Hill of Anchorage, Alaska — also made the short trip in an armored vehicle from the Qalaa House compound, where the Corps of Engineers is based a few blocks away within the Green Zone in downtown Kabul.

The half-hour session was informal. Kerry, who is one of the most recognizable members of the Senate, was dressed in a sports jacket, striped shirt and tan pants.

Taylor, who knows Kerry personally and set up the visit, later told his colleagues, “It was obvious when the senator was speaking with all of you, he enjoyed it, especially the Boston accents.”

The Corps of Engineers personnel said they appreciated a chance to get up close and personal with the man who ran for president in 2004, though they wished the event had been more intimate allowing deeper discussions.

Miles said, “We didn’t get to talk much, but it was a great photo op.”

Born, who has heard Kerry speak at events in the United States, said he appreciated speaking directly with him in Afghanistan. He acknowledged that Kerry’s schedule was tight, but he would have liked to have spoken with him at greater length about his mission in the region.

“I understand that he’s on his way to Pakistan to try to smooth things over there. He’s got a tough job ahead,” Born said. “Maybe it’s things he really can’t talk about right now, but it’s on a lot of people’s minds.”

Hill, the wayward Alaskan, posed alongside her colleagues for photos with Kerry, but quipped, “I thought Sarah Palin was going to be here. That’s why I came.”



Kerry, left, shares a few words with Born.

Hands-on experience

Corps of Engineers is bridging the language gap to create better Afghan relations



Story and photos by | LaDonna Davis

Army Maj. Thomas Fenoseff, center, speaks with Afghan construction and police officials in Dari during a ribbon-cutting ceremony for Afghan National Police station in Lal Por, Afghanistan.

KABUL — Navy Lt. Cmdr. Joel VanEssen studied architecture in college with hope of using his skills in the engineering field. But, in an unexpected twist, his aspirations took a sharp turn to a field he had never even imagined.

“As someone who went to school to study fields in math and science, learning a foreign language was something I never expected I’d do,” he said.

After college, the Navy recommended VanEssen for a program that teaches military service members and civilians the local language of the area where they will be deployed.

As a result, VanEssen became one of the first graduates of the Afghanistan Pakistan Hands program. The goal of the program, which is commonly called AfPak Hands, is to teach English speakers the local languages of Pakistan and Afghanistan, so that they

can communicate with locals and help build relationships with foreign nationals.

The Department of Defense initiative is a new program that was started during the Obama Administration.

“When an Afghan realizes that you know how to speak Dari, they just get the biggest smile on their face,” VanEssen said. “They want to test you and push you. They want to know how much you know. And they appreciate the fact that an American is reaching out to them in their own country, speaking their language.”

Even though the AfPak Hands program is still in its infant stages, the history of such a program dates back the 1940s when a group of service members, diplomats and journalists with expert knowledge of China came to be known as China Hands.

Now the term AfPak Hands refers to a cadre of service members and civilians with

language and cultural training focusing on Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Luckily for VanEssen, his training still led him to a career of his choosing. He works for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers as the officer in charge of the Kabul South Resident Office. He uses his language skills to speak with high-level Afghan officials, project and site managers, and even local construction workers.

In order to get through the AfPak program, service members and civilians are put through an intense four-month training course that is taught at the Defense Language Institute in Rosselin, Va.

There, students are taught at what is called Level 1+ language skills in Pashtu, Dari or Urdu. Each student is expected to know how to carry on a basic conversation, know different greetings and how to speak local phrases.

Each AfPak Hands class member stays in the program for approximately four years. After combat and language school, they deploy for a year, they then return to the

United States for a year to continue work in their field of study, all the while continuing language courses. Then they deploy again for another year to master their skills.

“The idea is to get the basics down and then come to theater, get immersed in the culture and learn more as you go along,” VanEssen said.

The Corps of Engineers’ district in northern Afghanistan has six AfPak Hands service members located at different field operating bases throughout its region. There are roughly 200 AfPak Hands members working across Afghanistan for various organizations and military units.

Air Force Maj. Jeremiah Hammill, the officer in charge of the Kabul Central Resident Office, started training for the AfPak Hands program in July 2010. After seven months of combat training along with

six months of language training, he landed in Kabul in April.

He has been busy using his language skills ever since.

“I work with a staff of about 41 local nationals and engineers and the language skills that I have learned have really helped me, not just to communicate with them, but also foster relationships with them,” he said. “It helps bridge the gap and gets us all on the same page when we can all speak the same language.”

Hammill learned Dari, which is one of Afghanistan’s two official languages.

“The training we receive is very intense and very high speed,” he said. “We had to learn about 35 vocabulary words every night and then use them the next day.”

In spite of the challenging workload, the training has helped him become a better Airman and build strong relationships with a populace that does not always view the United States favorably, Hammill said.

“We have a contracted security company that provides security for us when we go out on site visits – and they are Afghans,” Hammill said.

“When we’re in the car, we talk and teach each other different words in our respective languages. One day, I asked one of my security detail guys what the Afghan people think about Americans. He said the majority of Afghans are very happy with Americans here because we are helping to provide them with opportunities, bettering their quality of life and providing them with jobs. But it’s a fine line as it only takes one person to change that perspective,” he said.

VanEssen and Hammill agree that while the program teaches service members language skills, it’s really what individual service members do with those skills that make the difference.

“Everyone’s tour is different,” VanEssen said. “Some people take the opportunity to

“We want to show them that we mean goodwill towards them – and not harm.”

learn a different language and culture and really get involved with the people to make a difference. And there are some that don't."

Hammill has a similar point of view.

"Unlike some units who are here to enforce, we are here to help and build relationships with the Afghan people. We want to show them that we mean goodwill towards them – and not harm," he said.

"When I go out on project sites, I interact with the children and shake the adults' hands, because I want them to know that we are here to help and look at project sites, not disturb them," he said.

The AfPak Hands program not only helps build relationships between U.S. service members and Afghans, but it also gives the program members a chance to teach other district employees about the Afghan cultural.

Hammill said some personal interactions that are perfectly acceptable in the United States just aren't acceptable in Afghanistan. Among them are pointing or telling an Afghan he is doing something wrong in front of his peers.

He said that by teaching cultural norms to others, Corps of Engineers employees will develop better relationships with the local nationals who work for them.

Army Maj. Thomas Fenoseff is preparing to complete his first tour in Afghanistan

with the AfPak Hands program.

After a year in theater working as the officer in charge of the Jalalabad Area Office, he will return to the United States to work at the Corps of Engineers headquarters in Washington, D.C. There he will continue taking language courses, along with his other duties.

Fenoseff expects to return to Afghanistan within a year to continue with the AfPak Hands program, realizing one of the greatest benefits of the program.

"The great thing about joining this program is that I get to build relationships with these people. In a year, I can come back to a project that is complete and talk to one of the Afghans I worked with," he said. "They will remember me. They will know that we did not just come to build and leave – and that means something."

Fenoseff said other factors that helped him build relationships with Afghans is reading and understanding the Quran, a sacred Muslim book that is the central religious text of the Islamic religion.

"Islam is so big in this culture. In order to really understand these people, you have to understand their culture. And that's what this program has

helped me accomplish," Fenoseff said.

"If you can bridge that communication gap, you are more efficient. If you can talk to an Afghan and ask them what their problems are, what their issues are, then it is easier to reach a solution. And that's what the Corps of Engineers is here to do." ■



The coin for the AfPak Hands program.



Talent on tap

Afghan firm completes high-tech wastewater plant

Story and photos by | J.D. Hardesty

U.S. Army Col. Thomas Magness, center, and Omran Holding Co. project manager Sayed Ali Akbar Faiq, center right, pause while touring a new wastewater treatment plant on June 28.

KABUL – The recent opening of a technologically advanced wastewater treatment plant illustrated that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' success in developing Afghanistan's workforce is just as important as its success in building facilities, said Col. Thomas Magness.

Magness, the commander of the Corps of Engineers' district in northern Afghanistan, teamed with representatives of Afghan construction firm Omran Holding Co. to mark the completion of a \$5 million sewer system at the Kabul Police Academy on June 28.

The bulk of the design work was handled by two Omran engineers who represent a growing technologically proficient labor pool

of workers in Afghanistan, he said.

The plant features green technology that will treat the academy's wastewater, as well as provide irrigation water and other grey water resources for the facility in two years.

"With Omran serving as the prime contractor, the wastewater treatment plant was built by an Afghan company, with Afghans workers for Afghanistan," Magness said. "Omran demonstrated that Afghan companies can build high-tech projects."

Omran serves as a great example that the Afghan people are positioned to take over the reconstruction effort and continue to build their future as U.S. and coalition forces begin their drawdown this year, Magness said. ■



Parting shot

Army Maj. Terri Wise reflects on the sacrifices made by U.S. service members during the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' candlelight vigil at Qalaa House commemorating Memorial Day on May 29. An Associated Press article about the ceremony ran in more than 400 newspapers worldwide.

The article can be accessed at: http://www.usatoday.com/news/military/2011-05-30-memorial-day-troops_n.htm?csp=34news.

Photo by | J.D. Hardesty