Engineer Mobile Training Team

Standing Up the Afghan National Army Engineering School

By Captain Eric G. Nichols

An engineer mobile training team (MTT) comprised of United States Army Reserve Soldiers was deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, with a mission of building the new Engineering Corps of the Afghan National Army (ANA). The primary objective of the MTT was to train the ANA soldiers in basic combat engineer skills during a six-week advanced individual training (AIT) and to provide refresher training to the previous American-trained engineering support companies of the ANA. The secondary objective was to train the trainers by mentoring and guiding the ANA instructors with a modified program of instruction (POI) from the United States Army Engineer School (located at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri).

Coalition activities on a Romanian qualification range

This POI was custom-tailored to meet the needs of the ANA with an emphasis on mine warfare, basic demolitions, and combat construction (focused on wire obstacles and survivability positions). This MTT directly assisted in establishing the first ANA Engineering School (based on the United States Army Engineer School). At the time this article was written, ANA instructors were conducting all student instruction, which is a positive sign that soon the new school will be able to operate without U.S. support.

Mission Preparation

The MTT began the mission by conducting Soldier readiness processing for two weeks at the continental United States (CONUS) Replacement Center, Fort Benning, Georgia. Upon completion, the MTT visited the United States Army Engineer School for two weeks where the team had an opportunity to meet with former MTT members. These Soldiers did an outstanding job of preparing the team for what to expect from the ANA.

The team then returned to Fort Benning for final preparations and deployed on 8 November 2004. They arrived at Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan during the predawn hours of 10 November. While waiting for transportation, the team could hear explosions in the distance and became fully aware that they had indeed arrived in a hostile-fire area. Loading into the back of a 5-ton cargo truck, they began the trip to the training destination.

As the team left the airfield, they saw the first of many minefields along the side of the road. Scattered among the minefields were derelict T-62 tanks, remnants of past conflicts. Traveling through the outer gate of the airfield, the team entered a village that consisted of mud and stone buildings that bear the scars of decades of war. The landscape was desolate and barren and marked with hull defilade armor fighting positions and troop trenches. It was clear that warfare had been a way of life for the Afghan people for many years.

The remains of a maintenance shop in a former Taliban headquarters

The MTT spent the first month setting up quarters (general purpose [GP], medium, tents) at the camp where they were assigned. They inventoried training sets and prepared to instruct the first ANA class.

Training

The first training mission was at an ANA garrison, where the MTT conducted refresher training for two ANA engineering companies. From 11 December 2004 to 8 January 2005, the students (officers and noncommissioned officers [NCOs]) were very attentive and eager to learn. Classroom discipline was maintained by the leadership of each company, creating a positive learning environment. When outside training was conducted, the ANA students marched with great pride to their respective training areas. To bring additional honor to both units, a few were selected by the ANA leadership and the MTT to become student instructors. These students had the distinct privilege of training their fellow classmates, thus making the ANA more self-reliant.

During the two weeks prior to the next refresher training, which began on 24 January 2005, the team met its new ANA counterparts and integrated them with the engineer POIs. From the first day of class, ANA members served as assistant instructors for every class.

Due to the large volume of students, the company was divided into two groups, and a rotational class schedule was established. On the first day of the cycle, U.S. Soldiers served as primary instructors while ANA instructors took notes. On the second day, the ANA instructor became the primary instructor. At the end of each class, the U.S. instructors conducted a review to ensure that the ANA students understood the lesson that had been taught.

The refresher training program gradually evolved to where an ANA instructor taught with a U.S. instructor present, while another ANA instructor rehearsed for the next day's class with another U.S. instructor. By the midpoint of the training, additional instructors had joined the training cycle. And by the end of the refresher training, the ANA was spending more time instructing than their U.S. counterparts. The earlier policy of selecting exceptional students from the class to become student instructors continued.

While instruction to the ANA engineering support companies was being conducted, a U.S. instructor began writing the training support packages (TSPs) for the military occupational specialty 21B combat engineer course. He wrote 32 TSPs, of which 17 required a visual-guided training package for support. The entire course was completed electronically on 2 February 2005. Once the TSPs were completed, the instructor supervised the interpreters in the translation from English to the Dari language.

On 26 February 2005, the MTT began teaching the first 21B AIT course. The refresher training gave the ANA instructors an opportunity to see and use the course material; they were now ready to conduct training with minimal assistance. Because the AIT POI contained some new and previously untaught material, the U.S. instructors continued with the rotational cycle, leaving time for instructor rehearsals of the

An old Soviet T-34 tank along the training center range road

new material. During AIT, the ANA instructors always served as the primary instructors. The ANA instructor corps continued to grow, and on 30 March 2005, they single-handedly conducted the graduation ceremony.

Final Phase

After the AIT graduation, the MTT began preparations for disengagement. During the first week of April, the team conducted a Total Army Instructor Training Course (TAITC) for the ANA instructors. The purpose of the TAITC was to ensure that the ANA instructors were teaching from the TSPs that had been prepared for them in February. The class also introduced the ANA instructors to new techniques for improving future classroom instruction. At the end of the course, all the new instructors had shown remarkable improvement.

During the second week of April, the MTT and ANA instructors conducted an inventory of the classrooms, training-aid containers express (CONEXs), and the office space. By the third week of April, the MTT had completed a handover to the ANA. The ANA team leader now had full accountability for the entire ANA Engineering School.

Conclusion

The MTT was blessed and fortunate enough to stay out of harm's way. Though not making the media headlines as often as Iraq, Afghanistan still presents a great deal of danger for our Soldiers. During the team's six-month stay in Afghanistan, reports were heard of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) exploding on the road that the team traveled every day, and once they convoyed past several IEDs fashioned from old mortar rounds. Team members observed local nationals burying mines in the roadway, resulting in the marking-off and securing of the area.

While the MTT was fortunate, the camp where they were located experienced the devastating loss of four Soldiers who were conducting a range reconnaissance. These Soldiers lost their lives after their vehicle ran over an old Soviet antitank mine. The mines and unexploded ordnance (UXO) left behind by the Soviet occupation are unbelievable. Every time a major rainfall occurs, more mines are revealed. During the freeze-and-thaw cycles of winter, the frost heaves push up new dangers. Two ANA personnel lost their feet after stepping on antipersonnel mines in their "cleared" training area. To help alleviate the problem, the MTT expanded its mission into explosive ordnance disposal and disposed of 13 UXO, 100 badly decayed claymore-type mines, and about 30 pounds of old Soviet-style composition cyclotrimethylenetrinitramine-4 (C-4) and trinitrotoluene (TNT).

In final review, this engineer MTT –

- Trained ANA personnel to become engineers or to improve their engineering skills.
- Trained and mentored ANA instructors (officers and NCOs).
- Established the first "post-Taliban" ANA Engineering School.

The MTT played an active role in Operation Enduring Freedom by helping to ensure that the ANA can bring safety and security to their own country by keeping insurgents and terrorists from finding safe harbor in Afghanistan.

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