Junior Engineer Officers Get True Professional Development

By Captain L. Nicole Manteufel and Captain Jean D. Archer

The Afghanistan Engineer District (AED) of the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) has partnered with Task Force Hammer, 62d Engineer Battalion (Combat) (Heavy), to implement an officer professional development program whose purpose is to exhibit broad-scale project management and retain quality company grade engineer officers by offering perspective on future Army opportunities. From February through April 2009, two-person engineer officer teams rotated through Kabul for three to five days to learn the workings of an engineer district. The teams met military and civilian staffs and learned about their various roles, visited projects in the Kabul area, attended meetings between project managers and contractors, and shadowed the district engineer commander. The goal was for each engineer officer to gain a better appreciation for project management and an awareness of opportunities within the highly diverse Engineer Regiment. Additional benefit came from interaction with professional engineers.

AED Mission

A recent trip with AED included two days of project site visits and one day of accompanying the commander. The in-brief established that the AED mission is to conduct project management, construction, and engineering in the Central Asian republic of Afghanistan to facilitate the establishment of a secure and stable environment while promoting reconstruction and infrastructure development. The multitude of AED projects varies widely in dollar value and scope, with a large percentage being the construction and operations and management of Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) complexes to support the spread of governance.

The first day of site visits included trips to observe construction at the Ministry of Defense in Kabul and inspect electrical upgrades at an Afghan National Army complex. The technical experience and professionalism that AED offers through the oversight and management of projects ensure a safe final product for the ANSF. The second day of site visits included tours of the Afghan National Military Academy (ANMA) and Kabul International Airport. The military academy, affectionately known as "East Point," was between classes and at the end of its "Beast Year" of especially intense training. AED had recently added three new ANMA cadet graduates as staff members in order to develop young Afghan officers. The stop at the airport included visits to the Afghan National Air Corps barracks, offices, and hangars. The AED had overseen their construction and now conducts operations and management there. All of these facilities and programs expand the capability of the ANSF, which validates AED's mission.

Shadowing the district engineer commander on the third day taught a lot about the workings of AED. The day included a meeting with a construction firm that has more than $100 million in contracts, and videoteleconferences with congressional staffers and students from the Maneuver Enhancement Brigade (MEB)/Brigade Special Troops Battalion (BSTB) Precommand Course at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. The day brought to light the immense

Cadets at the Afghan National Military Academy learn to march.

This Afghan depot was built with USACE oversight.

responsibility for construction that AED carries in rebuilding Afghanistan. For 2009, AED will have more than $4 billion in construction projects throughout Afghanistan, with a staff of just a few hundred personnel. The relationships that AED has with its contractors and diplomatic and military organizations are at the heart of building up the country's infrastructure and the ANSF, which will lead to a more stable and improved country.

Valuable Lessons

The experience taught that oversight in project management is an absolute necessity. AED has found a direct correlation between the amount of time AED quality assurance inspectors spend on-site and a contractor's quality of work and the timeliness of project completion. While U.S. troop construction projects normally are under the supervision of a platoon leader and platoon sergeant, many Commander's Emergency Response Program projects do not receive the same level of quality assurance attention, due to personnel and location limitations. Since quality assurance checks are a key part of ensuring that projects are done well, efforts should be made to train Afghan engineers to undertake this responsibility.

Another piece of information gained was the huge impact that long-lead items have on projects at all levels. Long-lead items are for a specific project that cannot easily be purchased on the local economy and must be shipped from outside the country, or which must be fabricated after an order is placed. AED project managers teach their contractors backward planning in order to finish projects on time. At the platoon and company level, the need for materials must be identified, and those materials must be diligently tracked to ensure the timely completion of projects.

The trip also revealed the future plans for water management in Afghanistan. In the past, proper studies were not conducted before the construction of dams, which resulted in the massive loss of usable farmland. Having learned from the U.S. government's failures in the 1950s to irrigate land with the Helmand Valley Authority, AED is conducting detailed studies before emplacing locks, dams, and new irrigation systems. Afghanistan needs a massive amount of water work, but it should start only after the proper data is collected. Hasty planning can yield unwanted results during execution.

In just three days, the AED officer professional development program succeeds in exposing junior officers to a critical mission and to efforts and programs they would otherwise never have known. It teaches lessons about the contracting process, the importance of project management—both by the contractor and by quality assurance officers—and the impact that AED has on the people of Afghanistan. The program has been a unique experience in which lieutenants and junior captains are able to visit multiple project sites and understand the role of AED and the opportunities other than troop-leading positions available to engineer officers to contribute to the counterinsurgency fight.

As Major General Gregg F. Martin, former United States Army Engineer School Commandant, stated, one of the greatest aspects of the Engineer Regiment is that it offers more options and transferrable skills than any other Army branch. Engineers can be anything from combat warriors to nation builders. The AED officer professional development program has embraced Task Force Hammer officers to show what great engineers can do.

Captain Manteufel has served as a platoon leader for Charlie Company, 62d Engineer Battalion (Combat) (Heavy) during the company's 15-month deployment to Afghanistan. She graduated from the United States Military Academy with a bachelor's in environmental science, then attended Basic Officer Leadership Course (BOLC) II at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and BOLC III at Fort Leonard Wood. Upon her return to the states, she will attend the Engineer Captains Career Course at Fort Leonard Wood.

Captain Archer initially served as a platoon leader with Charlie Company, 62d Engineer Battalion (Combat) (Heavy) at Fort Hood, Texas. Upon the company's deployment to Afghanistan, she was reassigned as the company executive officer, where she has served since February 2008. She holds a bachelor's in civil engineering from the University of Florida, attended BOLC II at Fort Sill, and BOLC III at Fort Leonard Wood.