



LIFE AS A NATO ENGINEER

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By Major Matthew F. Louvet

Individual augmentee taskings are daunting enough by themselves, but getting orders as a senior captain to be a chief engineer on a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) staff was especially intimidating. Things started to look up when I finally made contact with the British captain that I was replacing, but then I discovered that as chief engineer, I was replacing not only him, but his entire platoon as well.

The duty description did little to calm initial fears: *Advises Commander, Headquarters Support Group, on all matters concerning civil engineering and building construction support. Leads a team of more than 100 Soldiers and civilians; evaluates legal construction requirements; evaluates headquarters construction and maintenance requirements, initiates inputs for funding, and supervises execution and quality control; develops specifications for NATO construction projects, acts as project officer, coordinates projects concerning purchasing, contracting, and local firm selection; oversees site/space management; leads military in case of specialized survey; supervises more than 25 local civilian employees; acts as technical expert during contract award committees; supervises fire department; supervises work force and prioritization of all daily work requests across the International Security Assistance Force Headquarters Camp.*

I knew I could handle the job of project manager, but wondered about acting as contract manager, technical expert in building things, and managing a fire department. After a meeting in Kabul with the British captain and his platoon, the “right seat ride” began. I learned that I would be responsible for all the daily maintenance of the camp, site management and all contract work on the camp up to €10,000, the fire department, and all NATO paperwork for the national assets that were on the camp.

At first, my crew consisted of just two air conditioning technicians, a metal worker, and three other workers for the entire camp. I was also managing large contracts for plumbing and generator support. Both helped to reduce the initial problems resulting from the limited number of

workers available. As time went by, noncommissioned officers from NATO armies arrived and were assigned to our shop: an aviation electrical repair specialist, an aide de camp, a personnel specialist with experience as a construction engineer, a combat engineer, and a generator mechanic. Luckily, a contract through NATO for a civilian workforce had been started. Soon our workforce increased by two civilian managers and about 20 local national skilled laborers, and we were able to manage the approximately 20 new work orders that came in daily. From something nearly chaotic, we produced a system where work orders were dropped off at the lodging office or at our shop and then assigned a priority. The priorities were relatively fixed, so it was no problem getting jobs into the right order. This allowed concentration on contract jobs occurring outside the camp’s daily maintenance.

There were usually 8 to 10 job sites—separate from routine maintenance on the camp—to be supervised daily. By the end of my six-month rotation, there were 20 or more companies available to bid on each job. To bring in a contractor, job requests had to be outside the scope of the local workforce. The NATO equivalent of a performance work statement would be drawn up and taken to the contract office. Representatives from interested companies were escorted individually to the sites and told what they would have to accomplish. Bids were reviewed and the company chosen. After the contract was written and signed (and security checks performed), work times were coordinated so that the company’s workers could get on the camp with whatever materials they needed. After that, all that was required was supervision, quality control and, finally, approval of the completed project.

Escorting contractors individually became a job in itself. Eventually a system evolved with a weekly tour, lasting from one to three hours, with all the contractors who wanted to bid on current jobs. The contractors then had a week to bid on all the jobs they wanted. (Emergency jobs were awarded based on the ability and history of the contractors.) The system made things run smoothly,



Afghani contractors replace a concrete roof at the International Security Assistance Force headquarters camp.

especially for the contracting office that handled all the paperwork.

Working in a NATO environment had its own set of challenges. For example, there were security issues of getting local nationals into secure areas to make repairs. To ensure proper supervision, the facility security force was assisted by someone from whatever shop needed the repairs. If escorts were not available on a particular day, repair jobs were time-shifted, adding another layer of negotiations to the process.

There was also a grey line dividing NATO jobs from national jobs. The NATO work force was not funded to perform work for the national assets that resided on the camp. It did perform such work, but costs were billed directly to the country involved. If the NATO engineer shop had not done repairs for the individual nations, the nations would have had to hire, escort, and pay their own contractors to get the work done. None of the national elements had the same knowledge of local contractors as the NATO engineer office, which was able to satisfy all the NATO and national assets.

The NATO chief engineer was responsible for keeping data, which was reported monthly to NATO headquarters, on the square footage occupied by each country. This number was translated into a dollar amount and billed to the individual countries. Managing the land inside the

compound became an exercise in negotiations as the individual countries sought to expand their footing on a camp with limited space. Also, there were other agencies working as part of NATO that wanted to establish themselves on the compound. Any new construction or expansion brought with it an increase on the electrical load, water consumption, and space requirements for new personnel.

The easiest part of the job was managing the fire department. It was a contract job with two shifts that worked on-site for six months each. Thankfully, there was no need to call on them to perform their duties.

The tasker offered a wealth of knowledge, although that was not obvious until it was finished. Project management was essential to successfully performing the task at hand and keeping the leaders happy. A good crew of workers, from all walks of life and backgrounds, was critical to the success of every undertaking. Without the international help and the local contractors, the little team would never have been able to deal with all the daily work orders and ongoing contracted projects. 

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