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Afghan Local Nationals, the road to quality

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An Afghan Local National Quality Assurance Representative surveys a Corps of Engineers project [USACE Photo]

Helmand Province, Afghanistan--In Afghanistan, the real journey begins where the road ends. With the lowest density of roads in Central Asia, Afghanistan's mountainous terrain, harsh winters and the presence of enemy forces makes it extremely difficult for Corps of Engineers personnel to inspect construction projects and provide quality assurance. With hundreds of projects underway in some of the most austere and dangerous locations in the country, the Corps of Engineers must rely on transportation and security from Coalition maneuver units, aerial photographs, or trained Local National Quality Assurance Representatives (QAR's) to monitor progress and ensure quality construction on the projects.



Giant Mastiff's equipped with 40mm grenade launchers cross the Helmand River. The grey wall on the left behind the tree line is the Afghan National Police compound being constructed by the Corps of Engineers [USACE Photo]

In late April, weeks before U.S. Marine and British forces launched an attack on the Taliban in the Village of Garmsir in the Helmand Province, two Corps of Engineers personnel, Lieutenant Colonel William Jones, and Sergeant First Class Barry Wilson climbed aboard a Chinook helicopter and flew there to inspect an Afghan National Police compound that was under construction. After arriving at Forward Operating Base Delhi, the two linked up with British forces for a convoy to the project. You might remember that this was the same area where England's Prince Harry served in Afghanistan, before news of his presence was leaked to the national media. "Garmsir is surrounded by poppy fields and is a stronghold for the Taliban," said Jones. "No one from the Corps of Engineers had ever laid eyes on this project before, so we wanted to check it out". The two rode with British forces to the jobsite in "Mastiff's", which are huge, extremely heavy, armored vehicles sold to the British by the Americans. During the inspection, they found numerous deficiencies on the project. "There's an old adage, 'what's not inspected, is neglected', and that was the case here," said Jones. "I'm glad we were able to inspect the project when we did," said Wilson. "Some of the deficiencies were pretty significant," he said. After the inspection, they were stranded at the FOB for five days before a helicopter could pick them up. "This is not a popular place for helicopter pilots to come," said Jones. "Travel to and from some jobsites can be very difficult and dangerous," he said.

Corps of Engineers personnel also take aerial photographs of remote projects, but one of the best ways to ensure quality on the jobs is to hire Afghan Local Nationals to inspect the work and report back. "The Afghan QAR's can go into many areas that we cannot," said Colonel Miroslav P. Kurka, Afghanistan Engineer District Commander. "However, they still need to be careful, because the Taliban will not hesitate to harm them if they know they are helping the Americans," he said. "In fact, in some areas the QAR's cannot even carry cameras or documents affiliated with the Corps of Engineers, because they will be harmed," said Kurka. According to Ms. Connie Parks, an Engineering Technician with the Afghanistan Engineer District Contract Administration Branch, each QAR is hand-picked and must meet strict criteria to work for the Corps of Engineers. "They must have a University or College technical degree, or equivalent work experience directly related to engi-

neering technology,” said Parks. “They must also be able to speak and read English, Dari and/or Pashtu, and be able to interpret engineering designs and plans”. In addition, each QAR must also pass a Corps of Engineers approved Contract Quality Management course, have a computer, cell phone, digital camera, and a vehicle. These items are provided to them by an Afghan contracting agency used to recruit Afghan workers for the Corps of Engineers in Afghanistan.

After the QAR is hired, their role is to inspect Corps of Engineers projects and provide photographs and detailed progress reports at least every three days, and they must also meet with the Corps of Engineers project engineers a minimum of every two weeks, exclaimed Parks. Since June of last year, the QAR program has grown from 37 Afghan QAR’s to 168, and the Afghanistan Engineer District plans to have a total of 218 QAR’s by the end of the year. In addition to QAR’s, the Afghanistan Engineer District is also seeking qualified Afghan Deputy Resident Engineers, Project Engineers, Mechanical, Electrical and Civil Engineers, Architects, Cost Estimators, Schedulers, and Safety Officers. “As we progress toward a stable and secure environment in Afghanistan, our goal is for the face of the Afghanistan Engineer District to become more and more Afghan,” said Kurka.



Sergeant First Class Barry Wilson and Lieutenant Colonel William Jones atop Hamburger Hill, the southern most British outpost in Helmand. Notice the poppy fields in the background. [USACE Photo]

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