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Now they're cooking with gas

By SSG David Waddell, Camp Zafar O&M Site Manager

Herat, Afghanistan- For the past four years, cooks at Camp Zafar, an Afghanistan National Army Base in the western region near Iran, have been preparing their Chai Tea the old fashioned way on wood burning stoves. However, with four of the ten stoves in the Afghan Tea Room there out of commission, preparing the Chai was becoming increasingly more difficult and very time consuming. That is until the US Army Corps of Engineers stepped in and retrofitted the facility with new high capacity propane fired stoves, making the process cleaner, safer and more efficient.



Before ...

To fully comprehend the significance of this upgrade, you must first understand how important Chai is to the Afghan people. To them, it is more popular than coffee and is taken with every meal. It is also a tradition to serve it during social gatherings and meetings usually with nuts, Afghan raisins and sometimes hard candy. To Afghans, Chai is far more than a warm drink, it's a cultural experience.

Chai is prepared by boiling loose tea leaves in a pot with milk and water, and served piping hot. Since the wood stoves there were in such bad condition, the cooks at Camp Zafar had to start their fires several hours before the first meal and painstakingly stoke the flames throughout the day to make enough hot Chai for



After!

the 2000 Afghan Soldiers there. The mission of the Corps of Engineers Operations and Maintenance Program is to help the Afghan National Army properly maintain their facilities. This program helps sustain the forces that maintain stability and rule of law throughout the country. Army Staff Sergeant David Waddell, a US Army Corps of Engineers O & M Site Manager in Herat, and his Afghan counterpart Masoud Fayeque, met with the cooks at Camp Zafar to plan the Tea Room retrofit. They listened intently as the cooks explained in great detail their problem, then Waddell and Fyeq came up with the solution that would keep the Chai flowing.

The new design would call for the removal of the inadequate wood burning stoves and the teetering stacks of firewood in the cluttered 9 X 6 meter room. Then the contractor would install nine high-capacity, clean burning propane burners capable of brewing enormous 300 liter kettles of Chai or boiling large pots of vegetables. With the stacks of firewood gone, and the propane fuel storage tanks outside, surprisingly there was enough space in the Tea Room for additional food preparation stations in support of the main mess hall. The contractor, CII, completed the retrofit project in 30 days and trained the Afghan cooks to safely use and maintain the equipment.

The Operations and Maintenance program has been in effect at Camp Zafar since the Afghan base was commissioned in 2006, and this retrofit is just one of many projects that will take place there. According to Waddell, the cooks at Camp Zafar are delighted they can brew more Chai faster, cleaner and safer, and still have the time and space for additional meal prep. "It doesn't hurt that they don't have to cut and haul the wood any more either," said Waddell. Thanks to Waddell and other O & M Site Managers like him, Afghan National Security Forces around the country are learning how to integrate today's technology with the Afghan way of life and culture, and properly maintain their facilities. Soon Afghan cooks everywhere will be "cooking with gas". (The O & M program will be extended to include Afghan National Police compounds in July 08.)