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Lt. Gen. Van Antwerp visits Afghanistan, shares vision

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Lt. Gen. Van Antwerp addresses the Afghanistan Engineer District personnel during a Town Hall meeting in Kabul, Afghanistan. AED Commander, Col. Thomas E. O'Donovan can be seen in the background.

Kabul, Afghanistan—Chief of Engineers and Commanding General of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Lt. Gen. Robert L. Van Antwerp, visited the Afghanistan Engineer District (AED) in late July to see key construction projects and share his vision with the military and civilian personnel there. He was accompanied by Command Sgt. Maj. Micheal L. Buxbaum, who recently assumed his duties in April, and Maj. Gen. Bo Temple, the Deputy Commanding General for Military and International Operations. The party and their aides were greeted at Bagram Air Field by Col. Thomas E. O'Donovan, who recently took command of AED on 7 July, and a small group of senior leaders from the District. "The Chief is extremely busy, and the fact that he took time to visit Afghanistan while there are record storms and floods across six states is a good indication that the emphasis on Afghanistan



is increasing,” said Lt. Col. Bryan Pratt, AED Chief of Construction.

Lt. Gen. Van Antwerp visited several AED construction sites at Bagram Air Field where the Corps of Engineers is currently managing about \$200 Million in construction projects. According to Lt. Col. Jim Utley, Area Engineer and Officer in Charge of Corps personnel at Bagram, the base is growing at a fast pace, and a lot has changed even since the Chief’s last visit in December 07. Corps of Engineers projects such as utility upgrades, bulk fuel storage facilities,

barracks, and flight line improvements will enable Coalition Forces at Bagram to project military power throughout the region. “The Soldiers and Airman are moving in, and filling up the barracks as fast as we can build them,” said Utley. Lt. Gen. Van Antwerp also met with the Commander of the 101st Airborne Division, Maj. Gen. Jeffery Schloesser while at Bagram.

The next morning, the Chief flew in a helicopter over the Kabul to Bagram road project which is currently under construction and being managed by AED. This 20 kilometer road is a vital link that will connect the nation’s capitol in Kabul with the largest Coalition base in Afghanistan. During the same flight, the Chief also saw the Afghan National Civil Order Police (ANCOP) compound in Ghazni, which is located in the volatile Helmand Province in southern Afghanistan. The sprawling ANCOP compound was recently turned over to the Afghan government, and is one of almost 300 Afghan National Police facilities that AED is building this year to help establish a secure and stable environment in Afghanistan.

After settling in at Qalaa House, the AED Headquarters in Kabul, the party toured the facility and saw some of the construction taking place on the compound. “The District has nearly doubled in personnel in the last year,” said Capt. Jason Hipps, AED S-1. “Not only are we building all over Afghanistan, we are building new barracks and office space here as well, to accommodate the growth at the District, which is necessary to accomplish our mission,” said Hipps. AED currently has seven Area Offices, 22 Resident Offices, and six Project Offices strategically located throughout Afghanistan, and will manage more than \$2 Billion in construction projects this year, which is twice as much as Fiscal Year 07.



Lt. Gen. Van Antwerp on a mountain range at Bala Hissar overlooking the city of Kabul. [USACE Photo]

After touring the Qalaa House compound, the Chief had office calls with Gen. David D. McKiernan, NATO’s International Security Assistance Force Commander, and then Maj.

Gen. Robert W. Cone, Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan Commander. When he returned, the Chief mingled with AED personnel who were gathering in front of the headquarters building for a Town Hall meeting that was to take place before dinner.



Administrative Assistant Kathy Farrell asked Lt. Gen. Van Antwerp a question during the Town Hall meeting held 19 July. [USACE Photo]

Lt. Gen. Van Antwerp sat down with a group of AED personnel and began discussing family, posing for pictures, and thanking them for their service in Afghanistan.

At 6pm sharp, Col. Thomas E. O'Donovan, AED Commander, introduced the 52nd Chief of Engineers, and the Town Hall began. Lt. Gen. Van Antwerp explained his philosophy on taking the Corps of Engineers from "Good to Great", and his desire to establish an organization that's "Built to Last". "AED is going to grow, and that's why we're trying to get out in front of it with a work force that can take on growth," said Van Antwerp. AED currently has 72 military and 229 civilian volunteers. In addition, there are 324 Afghans working for the District. According to Hipps, the number of military and civilian volunteers is projected to reach nearly 400 by the end of the year. "It's really important that you get the right people, on the right bus, and in the right seat," said Van Antwerp. The Chief also explained how vital power generation and adequate quantities of drinking water and water for irrigation are to the Afghan people. "We have set the standard for our profession," said Van Antwerp. "Who else would you call on, to develop hydro, wind, and solar power?" According to Van Antwerp, once you establish these things, you can start developing the right exports and imports and can build an economy that's able to operate on a world scale. After a brief question and answer session, Lt. Gen. Van Antwerp then presented a Meritorious Unit Commendation to the Afghanistan Engineer District for meritorious service from 1 March 2004 to 28 February 2006. According to AED Command Sgt. Maj. Gary Win-

kleblack, military members assigned to AED during that period are authorized to permanently wear the ribbon on their uniforms, and military members currently assigned to AED that were not attached to AED during those times can only wear the ribbon while they are attached to the unit.

The following morning, Lt. Gen. Van Antwerp met with a small group of AED personnel for a prayer breakfast, and was entertained by the Camp Eggers Gospel Choir. The Chief's party then took a helicopter to Sharana meeting with Corps personnel there and a group from the 420th Engineers. Poor weather and visibility kept them from visiting the scheduled project sites, so the Chief returned to Kabul. Command Sgt. Maj. Buxbaum later met with all the enlisted Soldiers at Qalaa House. During the meeting, Buxbaum talked about sending AED Soldiers to professional development training, Soldier and NCO of the Year boards etc. After a brief question and answer session, he encouraged them to make sure "Right was done Right", and to take care of the civilians in the command. The Chief then visited Kabul area project sites at the Afghan National Army Commando School, Bala Hissar, and the Afghan National Military Academy.

"This is a very important mission, and our part of it is to build facilities and capacity," said Van Antwerp. "Anyone who has been deployed here or Iraq will tell you that this has changed their life". "What happens is, you get outside yourself and get focused on working with a team that feels like a family, which is an incredible experience," said Van Antwerp. "We are at a place in time where we are writing the book". "We are using tried and true practices, but at the same time we're adapting those practices to a totally new environment that doesn't have time to wait," he said. "We need to do it now!" "So how can we be more efficient and at the same time be as effective as we can?" "How can we deliver, and deliver on time?" "What you have to do is talk to an AED employee and ask them, 'why did you come, and why did you stay?' and you'll find out that it's something special," said Van Antwerp. "So come join us and be a part of it".