

# Prairie Soldier

THE JOINT NEWSPAPER OF THE NEBRASKA ARMY AND AIR NATIONAL GUARD

## State building boom continues

### Officials break ground on new joint force headquarters

By Tech. Sgt. Alex Salmon  
Assistant Editor



New Nebraska National Guard Joint Force Headquarters.

State and federal officials broke ground on the Nebraska National Guard's new \$26.9 million Joint Force Headquarters building during a ceremony, March 31, at the Nebraska National Guard air base in Lincoln.

Governor Dave Heineman thanked those who had worked

to make the new facility a reality and said it will be a big step for the citizens of Nebraska.

"This is a very, very important day for the state of Nebraska," said Heineman. "This new Joint Force Headquarters will be an essential part of our emergency planning response for years to come."

See JFHQ on 7.

## New reserve center to give Columbus troops new capabilities

By Maj. Kevin Hynes  
Editor

Nebraska Army National Guard and U.S. Army Reserve Soldiers assigned to Columbus, Neb., will soon have a new, 46,000-square foot, state-of-the-art reserve center to call home.

Standing on the corner of a grassy field that will soon house an \$8 million Armed Forces Reserve Center, officials from the Nebraska National Guard, U.S. Army Reserve and local governmental leaders

broke ground on the construction project, March 15.

According to Brig. Gen. Judd Lyons, Nebraska adjutant general, the new AFRC is part of a state-wide effort to replace aging Army Guard and U.S. Army Reserve armories with energy efficient facilities that will enable units to be able to accomplish much more of their pre-mobilization tasks at home.

"This is a great step for us to replace some aging facilities with high quality, energy efficient

See COLUMBUS on 6.

## 22 Months In Afghanistan



Photo courtesy of 1st Lt. Russell Bartholow

**Making A Difference;** 1st Lt. Russell Bartholow, Nebraska Army National Guard, poses by a monument at a park he helped build during his 22-month deployment to Afghanistan. Bartholow became interested in rejoining the military after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and ended up recording the longest uninterrupted deployment to Afghanistan of any other Nebraska Army National Guard Soldier.

### Guard Soldier's journey to Afghanistan started with simple dream

By Maj. Kevin Hynes  
Editor

Russell Bartholow struggles to remember exactly when the dream first occurred.

Was it a sudden realization or did it evolve more slowly over time? He simply doesn't have the answer.

What he does know is that following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, he became consumed by an overriding desire to make difference.

It's probably safe to say that many people had similar thoughts following 9/11 and the beginnings of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom and Bartholow would've probably been forgiven if he'd simply chalked it up to a simple early middle-age crisis.

He'd already served a stint as an active duty infantryman and a follow-on tour in the U.S. Army Reserves and was now a college graduate who had developed a successful internet business.

For some reason that Bartholow still struggles to define, this dream

See MAKING AN IMPACT on 8.

First of a  
Multipart  
Series

## Soldiers, families gather information at Omaha workshop

By Spc. Koan Nissen  
Staff Writer

More than 1,100 Nebraska Army National Guard Soldiers and their families participated in a Yellow Ribbon Program pre-deployment workshop at Omaha's Qwest Center, Feb. 20-21. The gathering was the largest the Nebraska Guard has seen.

The event was sponsored for units deploying to Iraq and Af-

ghanistan later this year: the 67th Battlefield Surveillance Brigade's Headquarters Company, the 1-134th Cavalry Squadron and the 1167th Brigade Support Company.

The Yellow Ribbon Program's briefings help families and loved ones understand what resources are available to them when their Soldier deploys, said 1st Sgt. Kenneth Winn, the first sergeant for Headquarters and Headquarters Troop, 1-134th Cavalry. Winn said

the information gathered during the workshop will provide people with answers to some of the questions they may have down the road.

The workshop is a great way to share those resources, said Winn, who will deploy for the third time.

On hand for opening comments was Brig. Gen. Roma Amundson, the Nebraska National Guard assistant adjutant general.

"Less than one percent of the people of the United States wear

the uniform," said Amundson. "So that means that those people that are associated with that one percent are very scattered."

Getting involved with support systems is very important, she said. The Nebraska National Guard will be that support system for those needing it.

Amundson recalled when her husband, retired Lt. Col. Randy Amundson, mobilized in 2003. "It

See YELLOW RIBBON on 9.

## Nebraska state legislature congratulates Air Guard wing

By Maj. Kevin Hynes  
Editor

The Nebraska State Capitol's Warner Chamber has been the scene of many different events over the year.

The historic chamber took on a definitive shade of digital green and tan, April 6, when the Nebraska Legislature formally honored the men and women of the Nebraska Air National Guard's 155th Air Refueling Wing for earning the organization's 10th U.S. Air Force Outstanding Unit Award.

"Be it resolved by the members of the 101st Legislature of Nebraska, Second Session, that the Legislature hereby congratulates and extends its appreciation to the men and women of the 155th Air

See RESOLUTION on 4.

## Air Lift

Nebraska Air National Guardsmen practice recovering aircraft using just seven pounds of air pressure

By Tech. Sgt. Alex Salmon  
Assistant Editor

If there is only seven pounds of air pressure in a car tire, it's a flat tire.

The Nebraska Air National Guard's 155th Air Refueling Wing recently proved that seven pounds of air pressure is enough to lift much more weight than the average car when they took a yearly training exercise to its limits by using seven pounds of air pressure in multiple airbags to lift a KC-135R Stratotanker at the air base in Lincoln, Neb., April 15.

Called a crash, damage, disabled, aircraft recovery, or CDDAR exercise, the Airmen simulated a scenario in which an aircraft suffered a failure of one of its landing gear while taxiing, causing the aircraft to come to rest on its jet engines at the intersection of the Lincoln Municipal Airport's two major runways.

See CDDAR on 3.



Photo by Maj. Kevin Hynes

**Getting Diled In:** Tech. Sgt. Christopher Deaton, 155th Maintenance Squadron, tightens air hoses to a aircraft lifting bag control console for the 26-ton aircraft lifting pneumatic bags.

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# Lessons learned over 22 months in Afghanistan leave lasting impact

By Maj. Kevin Hynes  
Editor

The goal seemed so simple. Russell Bartholow wanted to make an impact on what was going on in Iraq or Afghanistan.

The thing was, at 38 years old, he simply didn't know exactly how.

That was until his uncle, a retired colonel in the Nebraska Air National Guard, suggested that he take a look at the Nebraska Army or Air National Guard, to check out what they could offer him, to see if they might help him achieve his goal.

## MAKING AN IMPACT continued from page 1.

of making a concrete difference slowly, but surely became an enveloping passion.

"You know, I'm really not sure when the desire to make a difference really started," Bartholow said. "I tried donating to some non-profits, but that simply didn't seem to be enough. (I wanted) to give something back to the community, to America, as somebody who enjoys our freedoms."

Late into the nights he devoured news articles about the battles in Afghanistan and Iraq. He read countless blogs and began to intensely study the two nations, their peoples, their cultures, their histories through the books he was able to find.

Before long, Bartholow developed an understanding about the various issues facing the Iraqi and Afghani people. Yet, simply studying about Iraq and Afghanistan did little to quench this overriding thirst to do something concrete; to make a difference.

### Looking To Serve

Even Bartholow's relatives noticed that he was conflicted by this growing dream.

After graduating from the University of California at Santa Barbara with a degree in Political Science, Bartholow moved to Lincoln to attend law school at the University of Nebraska. However, he dropped out after a year and accepted a job as the director of Business Services at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Bartholow also stayed in close contact with his uncle, George Boshae, a colonel in the Nebraska Air National Guard, and Boshae's wife, a retired U.S. Air Force officer.

Boshae said he sensed Bartholow needed to put his desires into concrete action.

"He was going to make his own decisions, so our job was to love, educate and support him," said Boshae.

Boshae recalled several talks when he and Bartholow discussed Afghanistan and Iraq. The more they talked, Boshae said, the more he realized that Bartholow was looking for a way to get back into the military.

Boshae suggested that Bartholow take a look at the Nebraska National Guard – both Army and Air – because of the roles the organizations were already playing in both overseas theaters. He said it didn't come as any real surprise when Bartholow decided to join the Army National Guard and pursue a commission as a second lieutenant.

Bartholow said the guidance Boshae provided him played a definitive role in his ultimate decision.

"I checked out the Army National Guard and looking at what I could do, the chances for deployment directly to Iraq or Afghanistan (after completing officer candidate school and my officer basic course) seemed appealing. And it seemed like an avenue for a direct impact – an approach that other ways that

I had sought out did not provide," he said.

At 38 years old, getting into the Army National Guard was easier said than done. In order to simplify his life, Bartholow closed his internet business "Nebraska Jerky Company," and sold his four-bedroom home in south Lincoln and most of his "worldly possessions" so that he could move into a simple one-bedroom apartment.

He also began a somewhat difficult process of gaining the needed waivers to join the Guard. Because he was older than the maximum age, Bartholow needed a waiver to enlist into the Nebraska Army Guard and then another waiver to attend Officer Candidate School.

Bartholow said there were times when he felt like the main character in the 1980s-era video game "Frogger," in which a digital frog had to hop across different lanes of on-rushing traffic in order to safely reach the other side.

"If you ever played Frogger... getting through all of the obstacles... I felt like the frog," he said.

### Officer Candidate School

Finally, after what seemed like endless delays, Bartholow enlisted into the Nebraska Army National Guard in January 2007 and then soon found himself attending OCS in Kansas and later at Camp Rapid, S.D. He quickly realized that OCS, where he was forced to try to catch up with candidates that were barely half his age, was going to be much harder than he'd ever expected.

He admits there were times when the physical, mental and emotional toll nearly caught up with him.

"I was sick, physically," he said. "I had to catch up to people who were 22, 23 and I'm pushing 40 – a 20-year difference – so physically, it hit me."

"I wasn't necessarily militarily inclined, so my military knowledge was weak. And then of course those two things combining at the same time affected me emotionally," said Bartholow. "Those three things turned the Frogger machine on me."

Bartholow said he also suspected that the OCS instructors, many of whom were also younger than he was, thought he was a weak link among the candidates; that he was a guy who hadn't completely bought into the commitment he needed to make to be a leader of Soldiers.

"They were really pushing the envelope on me to quit," he said. "They looked at me as this is the weak link, let's get him out."

The thing is, Bartholow said, they may have been right. He said that up until several weeks into OCS he really hadn't made a true commitment to the ideals that officers must live up to.

Finally, after a long day of what seemed to Bartholow to be foolish mind games, he decided that it was time to quit; to give up on the dream and go back to the life he'd led back in Lincoln.

"I walked into the (Teach, Advise

and Counsel) officer's office and said I want to quit. Give me the number to whoever I call at the state to come pick me up. I'm out," Bartholow said.

That was three years ago. Between then and now, Bartholow has lived a dream that took him to the rugged frontlines in northern Afghanistan where he not only made an impact, he left a legacy created over 22 months of deployed service, the longest continuous deployment to Afghanistan of any other Nebraska National Guardsman.

During his nearly two-year deployment, Bartholow compiled a list of accomplishments that will be hard to be replicated. He also learned valuable lessons he hopes others can use to also make an impact in war-torn Afghanistan.

and Counsel) officer's office and said I want to quit. Give me the number to whoever I call at the state to come pick me up. I'm out," Bartholow said.

He said the words that the TAC officer said still ring in his ears today.

"She said, 'No problem. This is best thing for somebody like you.' 'Somebody like you.'"

Those three words stung like nothing else ever had, Bartholow said.

"That was the turning point for me wanting to stay," he said. "I took the number and said thanks. And I did not make the call."

"I decided at that point that I had joined for a reason and that physically, mentally and emotionally, I could get through it," he said. "Especially if my goal was to deploy."

Bartholow said that suddenly, everything seemed to make sense.

"That was the turning point on both ends," he said. "That's the job of the TAC officer, to get people to quit. But none of it made any sense until that moment."

Suddenly, Bartholow said he realized that earning his commission, deploying overseas, making a difference, couldn't be just about him personally. It had to be about something much deeper.

Weeks later, Bartholow stood in formation with the rest of his class and swore to defend the U.S. Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic, as a commissioned officer in the U.S. Army and the Nebraska Army National Guard. Bartholow, who had once served as the president of the UCSB student body, who had once held an important job at UNL, who had once seemed to be living the American dream as a homeowner and businessman, said it was the most important day of his life up until that point.

"Becoming a commissioned officer in the United States military was accomplishment number one, overshadowing everything else that I had ever done in my job up to that point," he said.

### Looking To Deploy

Yet, even though it was a major milestone in his life, Bartholow said it was just the start of a journey. After attending his logistical officer's basic course, Bartholow began scouring for an opportunity to deploy. He logged onto the Army Knowledge Online Website and volunteered to deploy. He also started calling mobilization offices in Lincoln, and others from Texas to South Dakota in an attempt to find a unit that needed a logistics officer.

During one of those calls, in this case with South Dakota mobilization officials, he learned about an opportunity to serve with an Embedded Training Team that was scheduled to deploy shortly to Afghanistan. They needed a logistics officer and Bartholow felt like he was the perfect fit.

Yet there was a problem. The 18-person ETTs, Bartholow said, are typically made up of senior offi-



Photo courtesy of 1st Lt. Russell Bartholow

**Making A Difference:** 1st Lt. Russell Bartholow poses with students at the Yul Marab Girl's School at Mazar-e-Sharif during a humanitarian assistance visit in September 2009.

cers and noncommissioned officers. Because Bartholow was a newly commissioned second lieutenant and the ETT needed a senior captain, it looked like the opportunity would pass him by.

"Like everybody else in the process, they were extremely apprehensive," Bartholow said.

And then a strange twist of fate occurred. For probably the first time since he'd joined the National Guard nearly a half-year earlier, Bartholow's age served in his favor.

"Maturity," said Bartholow about the reason why the South Dakota officials decided to take a chance on him, adding that because he wasn't a traditional lieutenant, he was accepted onto the team.

Still, in order to take a lieutenant with them, South Dakota had to receive permission from the theater commander in Afghanistan.

According to Boshae, Bartholow finally confided in him about his desire to deploy as soon as possible shortly after he received his commission. Again, Boshae said, he and his wife supported their nephew's wishes.

"He started talking about his desire (to deploy)," said Boshae. "I guess he kind of felt this sense of responsibility, this obligation, this desire to contribute. I think that he thought that it was a good time in his life to do it and if he waited too long, he might not be able to."

After a long talk about what Bartholow had decided to do, Boshae said he and his wife had just a simple comment: "We support you."

"Our part was just to support him, like any family member... to make sure that he knows we love him and support his decisions," he added.

Finally, in November 2007, Bartholow travelled to Sioux Falls, S.D., to undergo pre-deployment processing with the rest of the team. He then mobilized for additional training in January 2008, meeting up with the rest of the ETT at Fort Riley, Kan.

A few short weeks of training later, Bartholow was in Afghanistan, serving at Camp Spann at Mazar-e-Sharif in the Balkh Province of Northern Afghanistan.

### Duty In Afghanistan

Within days, Bartholow said, he quickly realized that his new job at Camp Spann, named after the first American casualty in Afghanistan who had been killed about a block from the forward operations base,

wasn't going to be exactly the role he had envisioned for himself back months before as he stayed up late in his Lincoln, Neb., home dreaming of ways to making a difference in Afghanistan or Iraq.

Assigned as the executive officer of Camp Spann, Bartholow was in charge of vector control – essentially the elimination of rodents and other pest animals – as well as vehicle maintenance and mission movements. Bartholow said they were all important jobs that needed to be done, so, even though it wasn't exactly the job he'd hoped to do, he kept quiet and focused on the job at hand.

"I rolled with the punches," he said. "For the first few months it was FOB-based, though I did several logistics combat missions while I was the XO."

Still, that doesn't mean Bartholow wasn't ready if an opportunity presented itself.

Finally, after several months as the XO, Bartholow said he learned that the base Effects Cell – a team charged with conducting such civil military operations as road construction projects, digging wells, building new schools and clinics in the northern region of Afghanistan – had an opening because one of the team members was rotating back to the United States. Bartholow said he approached the FOB commander and made a simple proposal.

"I told the colonel... if I can get on that team, I would extend," Bartholow said. "I was far from my first period of time being over, but I said, 'If you put me there now, when it's time to extend, I will extend nine months.'"

Bartholow said the colonel seemed surprised at the offer at first, but then made a counter proposition: "He said if you will extend nine months, I will not only put you on the team, I will give you the team."

"And he did."

It was an agreement that would finally place Bartholow in the position he had so desired to be in. It was also an agreement that would cause Bartholow to serve in Afghanistan for a longer period of continuous service than any other Nebraska Army National Guard officer.

Bartholow was finally given the chance to make a difference.

Now, what would he do with this opportunity?

**Coming in June:**  
**TRIALS & TRIUMPHS**

## On The Job Training

# Nebraska Guard officer learns cultural skills needed to help rebuild Afghanistan

By Maj. Kevin Hynes

Editor

**R**ussell Bartholow couldn't believe his luck.

After months of often soul-searching training and work, the 38-year-old Nebraska Army National Guard second lieutenant from Lincoln, Neb., was finally in the position he had dreamed about for years.

Stationed at Forward Operations Base Spann in northern Afghanistan, Bartholow was about to embark on an assignment as chief of a five-person Effects Cell responsible for a variety of humanitarian aid projects spread over the nine northern provinces of the war-torn nation.

As such, Bartholow was about to place himself squarely in the middle of making a difference in the lives of ordinary Afghan men, women and children.

It was precisely what Bartholow had dreamed of in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York City, Pennsylvania and the Pentagon near Washington, D.C.

The question now was, what would he do with it?

**22 Months In  
Afghanistan  
Second of a  
Multipart Series**

### Effects Cell

By mid-2008 2nd Lt. Russell Bartholow had already been in Afghanistan for several months when he made a deal with the base commander: by volunteering to extend an additional nine months past his original return date, Bartholow was given command of the local Effects Cell.

According to Bartholow, the Effects Cell was responsible for conducting a number of different types of civil-military operations such as road construction, digging wells, building new schools and clinics, ensuring that local civilians had access to food, water and shelter, and running weapons buy-back programs in the local provinces surrounding Camp Spann, located near Mazar-e-Sharif along the Afghanistan-Uzbekistan border.

Bartholow said he quickly realized his tiny team had an enormous job ahead of it, adding that one of his first priorities was to redevelop the region's educational resources.

"Priority number one was education of males and females," said Bartholow, adding that getting schools built in the region was typically a lengthy and often bureaucratic process that quickly tested his ability to work effectively between U.S. military and international agencies and local Afghan community leaders.

"We had a clear, hold, build strategy for this area," he said. "Different provinces were identified as priorities by the commander in charge of the north, based upon where the priorities existed."

Once provinces were identified, planners then looked at the needs of individual districts before settling in on which community within that district most needed a school. Once this was established it was Bartholow's job to go in with his team to work through issues with local leaders and Mullahs, essentially the religious leaders of a particular village or area.

Bartholow said the local Mullahs were extremely supportive of his efforts to get schools built in their communities.

"We empowered the local leaders," said Bartholow, adding that when a school was built in a particular community, the local villagers typically gave the credit to their local leader.

"(The leaders) knew when we showed up we were in some way, shape or form the means to their empowerment. Of course that's how they've existed for thousands of years... go with whoever gives them the most so that they can stay in power," Bartholow said.

Bartholow credits much of his initial success to the early days following 9/11 when he used to stay up late at night pouring over books, articles and blogs about Afghanistan, its people and the culture by which it is governed. He said that without those months of intense study he would have never been able to effectively work in Afghanistan as quickly as he ultimately did.

"The read-up did a lot to prepare me mentally. In other words, I knew facts," he said, before adding that his research still only took

him so far. "Visually, emotionally, spiritually, it did zero."

"Once I was there on ground, I had a factual understanding of how many people are poor, sick and what the history was," Bartholow said. "My cultural understanding I had to develop from ground zero."

### Building Relationships

Bartholow said he quickly realized the key to success was going to be the relationships he developed with the individual Afghan leaders he was working with.

"Afghanistan is a male-dominated society," he said, adding that centuries have created a culture in Afghanistan where the males of society literally make every decision that affects the local populace. "Afghans do not track time on a clock. When they want to develop something in a business, when they develop something that they want to do, everything is based upon relationship development."

Bartholow said those relationships often take a long time to develop.

"If we can handshake and hug each other, our relationship is to one point," he said. "If we can handshake, hug each other and kiss each other's cheek, it's to another. If we can handshake, drink chai and talk about each other's families, males and females, then you've almost made it."

"If you meet the family," Bartholow said, smiling as he slapped his hands together in a way familiar to those who've deployed to Afghanistan, "that's it. You've developed a kinship that is like having another brother."

Bartholow said this was one of many real-Afghanistan lessons that he had to learn on the ground. "There's no way you can read and understand it. You read it again, it's a fact that you can talk in front of a class about," he said. "But to experience it over two years, you're part of that culture now."

### School Building

During his 22 months in Afghanistan, Bartholow's team managed approximately 12 successful school building projects. Of those, Bartholow was the direct leader on five. He said that even though the numbers weren't as high as he would've liked, their construction did symbolize multiple successes.

"Any kind of construction in a combat zone where there are enemy present and the local population's form of business is bribery and backroom dealing, then building a school becomes a little less than impossible," Bartholow said.

"However, developing those relationships, understanding how to operate with the leaders – the decision-makers as we call them – and continuously being fair and open and honest as a U.S. Soldier, you in the end can cut through a lot of those obstacles and get to the point where you break ground," he said. "That's the key: getting to the point where you break ground. Then you're managing just like you're managing a construction site."

Simply breaking ground didn't always mean that the school would be constructed, however. In fact, Bartholow said he quickly learned how difficult and heart-breaking working to develop Afghanistan's educational infrastructure could be.

"Anything can happen," he said. "The locals are threatened by the Taliban or anti-government forces. Those who are working for four bucks a day to build the school get threatened, so construction can stop."

"You have land disputes. You have materials and supplies or labor disputes. Construction can stop," he said. "You have shoddy workmanship or craftsmanship. Work can stop. Priorities of the commander change or that district goes from pro- to anti-government – in other words we no longer hold that territory, its back in control of the Taliban – construction can stop."

Bartholow said Taliban resistance to some particular projects was especially heated.

"The resistance was to the point that we would get into gun battles and they would destroy our projects," he said, adding that the resistance was usually from small Taliban resistance groups, although at times the resistance was much larger.

Bartholow said one particular unsuccessful project still breaks his heart today.



Photo courtesy of 1st Lt. Russell Bartholow

**High Level Discussions:** 1st Lt. Russell Bartholow (far right) discusses how to distribute humanitarian aid with the Jawzjan provincial governor following the floods of 2009. In what would become the largest military humanitarian aid mission in northern Afghanistan, Bartholow helped coordinate the delivery of over 15 tons of food, water, building supplies and farming tools, and 220 family-size tents to people who had lost their homes. The mission would involve 11 Afghan villages.

"They destroyed a school in Faryab (Province)," he said. "They went in and burned the school down maybe a week before we finished it."

"It tore me apart, not as a Soldier, not as an officer, but as someone with empathy for the locals," Bartholow said. "I went into this with the expectation that these are the battles I'm going to be fighting every minute, every hour of every day of my deployment. It's an uphill battle. I knew that face value going into it."

"But once you see something and work through the leaders and see the kids and feel the excitement in knowing that you're going to change a civilization to such a significant degree," he added, "to see somebody with the mentality of the Taliban or Al Qaeda come in and destroy that, that affect on them is the disheartening part. You just kind of see them shrink back into the shadows (and say) 'This is our lot in life. In Shala.'"

### Helping Change A Society

Still, despite the difficulties, despite the setbacks, Bartholow said the Effects Cell did record a number of success stories. For example, along with helping build a dozen schools, the team also helped oversee the construction of over 300 kilometers of new roads, built six new medical clinics and helped dig 20 new wells.

All told, Bartholow's team was responsible for approximately \$12 million in civil-military projects during the 22 months he was in Afghanistan.

He said it's hard to describe the feeling of joy his team felt as each project was successfully completed.

"It's too much to absorb all at once because you're dealing with happiness... not just within myself because I finished a project (and) I did the military proud... but because the people – the inhabitants around me – are so happy and excited," Bartholow said.

"You know that you've had a direct affect... on educating decades of girls and boys who, until that point, didn't have a concept of even going to school," he said. "And if they did, it was on a rock."

"But now you've created a situation where not only are they going to go to school in a new building made of concrete with color and blackboards and books, but they're going to get educated and gain a better understanding of where they exist in the world civilization and improve their educational standards and their expectations of their elected leaders," he added.

"You know, it's too much to take in at once," Bartholow said. "Sometimes you have to take a step back... and understand."

### Extending To Serve

As days turned into weeks and months, Bartholow said that it soon became apparent

that he needed to stay even longer than the nine month extension agreement he'd made initially with the base commander. He said he didn't mind.

"I was having too much fun... way too much fun," he said. "The benefit of what we were doing... of what we were accomplishing in that area of Afghanistan... far outweighed anything that I could be accomplishing back here in Lincoln, Neb."

Another factor, he said, was that after months of learning the job on the ground, he now felt that he had the needed cultural and situational knowledge to get the planned projects completed.

"Understanding the culture, understanding how to get projects up and running and operating smoothly, understanding how to do the analysis on the 5 Ws on who gets school, a road, a well... understanding the whole scenario 360 degrees and then making it happen... that was my motivation to stay," he said.

He added that he knew his friends and family back home probably really didn't understand, though.

"Everybody thought I was crazy," he said. "And not just family... people I worked with... because at this point two, three, four brigade combat teams are rotating through. They thought that maybe PTSD was already kicking in."

Retired Col. George Boshae, a former member of the Nebraska Air National Guard who had helped his nephew Bartholow join the Guard, was one of the many who was worried about Bartholow's state of mind.

"We were always worried about the fact that he was going over because the risks you take and the hazards that are over there," said Boshae. "And so we were always looking forward to the day that he would return. We were always praying and looking forward to the day... you know, counting down the days."

Boshae said he quickly sensed that Bartholow's dedication to his mission was leading him to extend longer than the typical deployment.

"He decided he was going to extend. He felt he was really contributing over there. He really felt like he was making a difference. I think he just felt an obligation to extend," said Boshae. "So again, we played our role. We supported him and just told him to be careful... to use his head in terms of making good decisions over there and that type of thing."

What neither Boshae nor Bartholow realized was that the Nebraska Army National Guard lieutenant would soon be faced with a situation that would ultimately test his understanding of Afghanistan and ability to get the job done under some of the most difficult and terrifying conditions imaginable.

**Coming in August  
Clarity Of Thought Under Fire**



# Coolness under fire

## Army Guard officer uses Afghan negotiating skills to help rescue unit trapped by Taliban

By Maj. Kevin Hynes  
Editor

Russell Bartholow could tell that something was up. Riding in one of four armored Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles as it bounced along a pot-holed, dusty road in the northern Afghan province of Kondoz in April 2009, Bartholow listened as the first reports came over the radio.

Off among the rocks and boulders that lined the road and hillsides, small groups of men could be seen, moving rapidly and obviously tactically.

More worrisome to the American Soldiers traveling in the MRAPs were the weapons that the rapidly increasing teams of men were carrying: RPGs!

Suddenly, as the American Soldiers began taking machine gun fire and were struck with volleys of rocket-propelled grenades, which exploded amongst the rocks and sent up clouds of dust and dangerous shrapnel that pinged against the sides of the armored vehicles, Lieutenant Bartholow had a frightening thought: We're driving into an ambush.

Rolling into the tiny village of Chara Dhara, where only moments before Bartholow's effects team had hoped to have a meeting with community elders about the prospects of building a humanitarian aid project, the convoy commander now ordered the vehicles to move quickly toward a separate exit so that they could leave the ambush safely behind.

However, as the MRAPs attempted to cross a stream that bisected the town, one of the heavy armored vehicles suddenly became stuck in the slippery rocks alongside the creek.

The convoy quickly ground to a halt.

Fortunately, the Soldiers had trained endlessly for just such a possibility. So, as the commander ordered his Soldiers to dismount from their MRAPs, each of the Soldiers quickly took up their position, forming a protective perimeter around the stricken vehicle, ready to hold off the Taliban teams that were rapidly approaching the village.

Assigned to guard the '6 o'clock' position of the perimeter, Bartholow felt the stifling Afghan heat burning down on his shoulders as he sprinted to his position carrying his M-4 rifle, fragmentary grenades and protective armored gear.

Along the way, a strange thought suddenly entered his mind.

"What am I doing here?"

### Road To Afghanistan

Months after the ambush, Bartholow would laugh when describing the various twists and turns his life had taken during the years and months immediately preceding the ambush.

Years earlier Bartholow had been a successful internet business owner living in a four bedroom house in a picturesque south Lincoln, Neb., neighborhood. By all accounts, he seemed to be living the All American dream.

What few people outside of his family knew, though, was that Bartholow was also a conflicted young man. After serving for several years as an active duty and U.S. Army Reserve infantryman, Bartholow finished college and then moved to Nebraska to develop his civilian career.

However, following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Bartholow became consumed with the idea of going to Afghanistan and trying to use his skills to help make a difference there.

After several unsuccessful attempts to make a difference, he

finally decided to join the Nebraska Army National Guard at the urging of his uncle, George Boshae, a Nebraska Air National Guard colonel.

Despite being in his mid-30s, Bartholow earned his commission and then volunteered to deploy to Afghanistan with an embedded training team from the South Dakota Army National Guard.

Once in Afghanistan, he made a deal with the local base commander to take over the local effects team in exchange for agreeing to extend an additional nine months past his initial return date.

As the leader of the Forward Operations Base Spann Effects Cell, Bartholow was now in the position that he'd dreamed about earlier. His team was responsible for conducting numerous civil-military operations such as road construction, digging wells, buying back weapons, ensuring that local civilians had access to food, water and shelter, and helping construct clinics and schools.

Because the team was responsible for projects in nine separate Afghan provinces that lined the border between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, Bartholow's five-person team frequently travelled long distances over the always-dangerous roads to visit the farflung villages targeted for a civil-military operations project.

That was exactly the situation that had brought Bartholow to the dust-strewn village that year.

### Surrounded

Despite being well-trained and well-armed, the Soldiers knew that they were in a precarious situation. Although they had already deployed snipers to several roof-tops and were in radio contact with their higher headquarters, which was diverting aircraft to their location to provide additional fire support, the tiny squad was facing long odds.

Bartholow said the Soldiers estimated that dozens of Taliban insurgents were moving in to surround the village and many more were likely on the way.

This was definitely not the situation that Bartholow's team had planned upon being in several hours earlier.

According to Bartholow, he'd decided to hitch a ride with an American team from Kondoz — which was one of the last Taliban hold-outs in northern Afghanistan prior to their defeat by the Northern Alliance and the American-led coalition forces in the early days Operation Enduring Freedom — to participate in the village meeting.

The plan for the day, said Bartholow, was to meet with local leaders and assess their village's needs for a civil-military affairs project.

"As crazy as that sounds, that's why we're there," said Bartholow.

Thoughts of potential schools, clinics, wells or even a potential new road quickly disappeared as the convoy entered the village under fire.

According to Bartholow, priorities shifted as the Americans began to receive more and more incoming fire, which had already wounded several Soldiers.

"We're taking fire, we've got wounded Soldiers, we're returning fire simultaneously, trying to protect the populace in that village... for a Soldier, that's a lot of balls in the air," said Bartholow.

### Battlefield Negotiations

When Bartholow joined the Guard in 2007, he said a lot of people wondered what a person in his mid-30s was doing enlisting in the military. However, as the training went on, he soon found out that his age could, at times, also be an aid to him.

That morning in the village was one of those times, he said.

"This is probably the second time



Photo courtesy of 1st Lt. Russell Bartholow

**Village Meeting:** 1st Lt. Russell Bartholow (center) moves to his vehicle while other American Soldiers talk with local Afghan leaders during a visit to an Afghan village in April 2009. Several hours later the American Soldiers would become involved in a battle at Chara Dhara, Afghanistan.



**Chara Dhara:** The site of the day-long battle in Chara Dhara, Afghanistan, took place roughly 15 kilometers away from 1st Lt. Russell Bartholow's base near Kondoz.

my age played a positive accomplice," said Bartholow later, smiling. "I think out of the box."

"So there I am, scorching hot sun, full battle rattle, frags, M-4, sporadic fire (striking) the village. I've got a language assistant in tow because (he) couldn't stay in the vehicle so it is my responsibility to protect him. And I'm covering down on the 6 o'clock of the convoy, which is basically the entrance to the village," he said.

At this point, Bartholow had been in country about 15 months, which had enabled him to combine his pre-deployment study of Afghan culture and society with the hands-on negotiating skills he'd learned since arriving in Afghanistan.

Those two factors, said Bartholow, gave him the skills he believed he needed to help get the convoy out of the tough position it was now in.

"I knew enough Dari to communicate with the locals," he said, "... to communicate to them that we're not there to harm them in any way, shape or form. You know, the best way to resolve this without hurting their village, their buildings, their commerce, their people was to work with us to get out of the village."

Bartholow recalls seeing a villager watching the unfolding fight from a nearby building.

Noting the way that he was dressed and how he was sending the other villagers back to their homes, Bartholow quickly surmised that he was obviously a man of local importance, most likely the village mullah or religious leader.

Bartholow said he also quickly realized this man was the key to the situation.

Running over to where the man stood, Bartholow quickly started speaking to him in his broken Dari and through his trailing interpreter.

"My first approach was to make sure that he understood that I respected him," said Bartholow. "I shook his hand. I asked him if he knew what was going on. And I communicated to him as the leader of that village."

One of the first goals, said Bartholow, was to make sure that the Afghan understood that he wasn't simply talking to him as someone trying to save his own life, but rather as a partner in an extremely dangerous situation.

"I communicated to him in a way that I understood and respected his needs, not mine," Bartholow said. "I didn't look to him to save my ass. I looked to him as 'Now that we are in this situation together, what can I do to benefit his village?' because this is not why we are here."

Slapping his hands together triumphantly, Bartholow added: "That broke the ice."

One of the local mullah's first requests was that he didn't want his village to suffer casualties, Bartholow said. He also offered to communicate with the Taliban.

Bartholow said he hired him on the spot.

"I said 'I would like to, with your permission, hire you as a negotiator right now,'" he said. "I will pay you 40 dollars and understand that I do not want to disrespect you, I have

40 dollars in my pocket. I will pay you 20 dollars right now and I will pay you 20 dollars when we leave here successfully."

"He shook my hand and agreed," Bartholow said, adding he knew the agreement he and the mullah had made was rock solid.

"Once he promises, he is giving you his life. That's it. That's just their rules," Bartholow said.

### Bartering For The Americans

Bartholow said that once he hired the mullah, things quickly began picking up.

"I know that he hired out other sub-people in the village to run out and get on point and look," Bartholow said. "They would feed him information (and then) he would come back and feed me information."

After each report Bartholow said he would run approximately 500 meters to where the convoy commander had established his command post, his heavy equipment banging against his body as he sprinted.

There, Bartholow passed on his initial intelligence: approximately 20 Taliban insurgents were already massing near the entrance to the village.

Bartholow then sprinted back to his original position so that he could lend valuable firepower should the insurgents decide to press their position.

A few moments later the mullah passed on additional information to Bartholow: the insurgents now numbered approximately 40 and they were beginning to move quickly toward the village.

The information, Bartholow said, was troubling to say the least.

"40 Taliban will easily wipe (us) out," he recalled thinking. Death, he said, seemed to be a probability.

"At that point the game-changer had been played," he said months later. "At that point, even though I didn't realize it... death was just around the corner."

"Of course, I realize that in retrospect," Bartholow said. "At the time I was just focused on being a team player."

After receiving the information from the mullah, Bartholow, soaking in sweat, once again made the 500-meter sprint to relay the intelligence to the convoy commander. Both officers agreed that the situation seemed dire.

What they didn't know, though, was that Bartholow's paid negotiator had already opened up a conversation with the Taliban, urging them to let the Americans leave the village so that his citizens and their property wouldn't be damaged any further.

"He communicated to them not to fight," said Bartholow, adding

See BARTHLOW on 15.



# Learning to breathe key component to overall well-being

**M**ental health is a key part of overall well-being.

As most know, the key parts of well-being are physical health and mental health. In order to maintain physical health, a person must eat right, get plenty of sleep and exercise.

What most don't know is that these activities also improve your mental health and overall well-being. Mental health is closely related to physical health in that most people who exercise regularly, eat well and get plenty of sleep also get periodic health screenings and better manage their stress. These people tend to be more proactive in their approach to health.

There are two approaches to both physical health and mental health or well-being. You can wait till you get sick or need help and then go see your doctor, or you can be proactive and do a few simple things each day to maintain your overall well-being.

People who are proactive increase the chances that they will catch early signs and symptoms. So, should you come down with a physical illness or encounter undue stressors, you will be better equipped to deal with things as they happen and better able to bounce back.

This bounce-back is often referred to as resiliency, the ability to overcome or adjust to times of adversity.

There are four basic areas that make up and determine one's mental health or well-being. Thoughts, Feelings, Behaviors and Body Reactions. Each works to change the other three.

There is much debate within the field of psychology about which is most important to affect the other three, but most important is to know that if you change any of the four, the other three will change as well.

**Thoughts:** Ideas, urges, mental images. These are the things that run through your mind, whether you are aware of them or not.

**Feelings:** These are the emotions that one experiences in any given event throughout the day.

**Behaviors:** Our actions. What we do in response to thoughts, feelings and body reactions.

**Body Reactions:** Changes in heart rate, breathing, brain chemical, hormones.

In each of these four there are things we can control or manage and things that we cannot. The best goal to support and increase mental health and well-being is to focus each day on building skills to manage the things you can so that in times of increased misfortune, change and stress you are prepared to bounce back or adjust as quickly as possible.

Though we have little control over what pops into our minds, we do have ways to change our thinking at any given time of the day. We also have the ability to increase our awareness of our thought processes and to decide how these thoughts and images affect our feelings, behaviors and some of

## Healthy Coping

By Viola Raschke

Director of Psychological Health  
Nebraska National Guard

*Though we have little control over what pops into our minds, we do have ways to change our thinking at any given time of the day. We also the ability to increase our awareness of our thought processes and to decide how these thoughts and images affect our feelings, behaviors and some of our body reactions.*

our body reactions.

Negative thinking can be a difficult cycle to break. Thoughts like 'Life Sucks!' 'I'm stupid and deserve this.' 'I will never get through this.' 'Nothing good ever happens to me.' are examples of negative thinking.

These statements are not only thoughts, but Self Talk.

Negative Self Talk can lead to feelings of hopelessness or make us want to give up. It may also lead us to find ways to numb our feelings (like drinking alcohol, yelling at loved ones, or isolating ourselves.) It has also been known to lead to an increase in heart rate and can trigger stress hormones to be released.

With awareness, a person can learn to change one's Self Talk and thus change one's feelings, behaviors and body reactions.

How can someone do this?

It's as simple as taking a few minutes a day to review and challenge thinking patterns. Depending on how deeply set one's negative self talk is, some can go it alone. For others, if going it alone is not working, seeking help from a professional can further help a person develop resiliency in the face of life's changes.

For more information on breathing techniques and mindfulness exercises to increase awareness, check out and order these free tools from Military One Source: Go to [www.militaryonesource.com](http://www.militaryonesource.com). Click on the tab "Find" Information. Click on "Emotional Well-Being." Click on "Managing Stress." And then find the CD titled *Breathe*. Order for free. Also in the list check out the CD titled *Handling Stress with Humor*. These are two great starter tools.

For a comprehensive self assessment and more self guided learning tools for service members and their families, check out [www.army.mil/csf](http://www.army.mil/csf)

As always, if you have any questions or want more information, feel free to contact me at (402) 309-7438 or (402) 314-4092.

## Steps to developing positive Self Talk

**T**he process is a daily personal commitment. It starts when a person wakes up and comes to a close when he or she goes to bed.

### Step 1: Start the day with a body-length stretch

As you wake up in the morning, before you get out of bed, stretch. Stretch from your toes to your fingertips. Breathe deeply in and out from your stomach as you stretch.

For some it helps to even put a hand on your stomach to ensure that you are breathing from your diaphragm.

As you stretch imagine the air you breath reviving your body and focus on the feeling of your blood flowing to your muscles as you stretch. Don't get up yet.

### Step 2: Make positive plans

Lie in bed for a few minutes and think about what it is that you hope to accomplish today. (Not a laundry list of to do's.) Set goals that you hope to accomplish throughout the today that will make this day a better day than yesterday.

For example your list might include such things as, 'I want to stay relaxed when I encounter stress.' 'I will let those around me, my spouse, significant other, kids know how important they are to me.' 'I will find at least three things today that refreshed or brought happiness to me.' By finding these positive things to focus on and to continue to focus on them throughout the day you will be less likely to feel stressed or will feel stressed for shorter periods.

Okay you can get out of bed now.

### Step 3: Take regular breaks

Throughout the day take short breaks, at least 5-10 minutes every hour or every other hour.

Our smoker friends are great at doing this. Smokers get up and take breaks away from their desk and breathe deeply several times a day. The only unhealthy part is the smoking.

So, learn to take breaks. Make yourself get up and away from your desk for 5-10 minutes every hour or every other hour. Walk outside, go to your car, or any other quiet place you can find. While on your break, sit, stand or walk and quietly focus on your breathing.

As we get stressed we breathe less from our diaphragm. Our shoulders creep up and we take more shallow breaths. This leads to an increased heart rate, increased breathing rate, and the trigger of stress hormones.

To counter this stress reaction, or to stop it before it starts, use your break to refocus and refresh.

As you take your break think about

dropping your shoulders. Take deep breaths so your stomach moves in and out. As you take those deep breaths try to clear your mind. As your mind clears, go back to your goals that you set this morning.

How are you doing? Don't allow negative thoughts to creep in. If you do notice negative thoughts, imagine them floating out of your mind like clouds through the sky and think about what you have done well so far today and how you will continue to make the day better.

This can be hard at first, but as you practice, it will become easier as time goes by. With much practice you may even catch your shoulders creeping up and your breathing shallow as you get stressed.

When you get to this point of awareness you will be able to in the moment drop your shoulders, take a few deep breaths, refocus and decrease stress. This will keep the stress hormones from being released and improve your ability to react to stressful events in the most effective and healthy way possible. You will think more clearly and respond accordingly.

Remember, practice, practice, practice. This can be done at your desk, in the car, virtually anywhere. But don't cheat yourself out of your breaks. Though you may be able to take mini breaks anywhere it is still important to move away from your work area or the task you are working on and take longer breaks to refocus throughout the day.

It is even important that you take some mini-breaks when you are at home. If you feel yourself getting stressed, whether it be a task your working on, a disagreement with a loved one, or as simple as trying to coordinate kids activities with making dinner, take a break, walk away, practice breathing and come back.

### Step 4: Reflect on the day

You have made it through the day and are getting into bed for the night. Hopefully along with all the breathing you also ate as healthfully as possible, did some form of exercise and are now getting ready for a good night of sleep. Even if you didn't eat so well or exercise, the breathing is still a step.

Now as you lay in bed think about how you did today. At first this will be difficult because it is normal for us to be self-critical and focus on what we didn't get done, what we must do tomorrow, or what the failures of the day have been. If those thoughts come up take a few deep breaths, refocus and again think about what went well today.

Continue to take those deep breaths and think about what you appreciated about the day and the things you or those around you did well. Drift off to sleep.

In the morning, start back with step one.

## BARTHLOW continued from page 14.

that the mullah obviously was determined to settle the situation as peacefully as he possibly could. Bartholow added that the mullah also had a financial reason for working so hard in his negotiations.

"He still had 20 bucks on the line and if I died, he wasn't going to get any 20 bucks."

"These are very intelligent people when it comes to negotiating," said Bartholow. "He said, 'I do not want my village destroyed. Please wait until they leave my village.'"

Returning to his position after talking with the convoy commander, Bartholow said the mullah approached him again to relay what he'd told the Taliban leaders. Bartholow said he instantly realized the negotiations were designed to aid both the villagers and the Americans.

"We had common goals while looking out for each others' well-being, while also keeping our own interests in mind," he said. "And that's how Afghans have operated for 1,000 years."

### Exiting Into Hell

Bartholow said the American Soldiers soon noticed a definite slackening of fire. That respite gave the troops the time they needed to pull the MRAP out of the river, get

the vehicles back into a tactical formation and then the Soldiers and accompanying civilians loaded up.

As the vehicles prepared to leave the village, Bartholow said they continued to take fire, causing "a little bit of damage."

Just as the order was given for the Soldiers to exit the village, Bartholow said he caught the eyes of the mullah, who was standing in a nearby, darkened doorway. The lieutenant said that throughout his conversations with the village leader, he had never indicated how many times the mullah would be needed, so the mullah kept a constant vigil nearby, not knowing when he would finally receive his promised \$20.

"He didn't know how many times he would have to report to me," said Bartholow. "But I knew that he, by not knowing how many times he would have to report to me, he would do his damndest to speed up the process - to end that mission - because that's going to be 40 bucks."

"For your average farmer, 20 bucks is about a month's wage... and he's going to get 40," he said. "So he's going to get a couple months pay."

Bartholow said that as the other vehicles began passing his

MRAP on their way out of the village, he reached out from his window and grasped the mullah's hand in a tight handshake and expressed his gratitude in a way that he knew the village leader would understand.

"I shook his hand and told him he's a noble, God-fearing, clean man," Bartholow said. "(And) I gave him his 20 bucks and left."

Within minutes after leaving the village, Bartholow said a fiery battle exploded around the convoy.

"That's when all Hell broke loose," he said. "Hell was dropping a little bit of steel rain on us."

"At that point," he added, "things really got serious."

According Bartholow, the lead MRAP was soon struck by an RPG that disabled it on the road, forcing the rest of the convoy to stop. Bartholow said the convoy commander now had an important decision to make.

"We can't go forward... certainly can't go back to the village... so we dismounted and fought in place," he said.

Fortunately, the quick reaction force that had been dispatched from nearby Kondoos soon after the start of the battle, was now arriving on site, giving the American Soldiers a badly-needed infusion of support-

ing firepower.

Still, said Bartholow, the fight was far from over.

Bartholow said that one of the issues was that the Soldiers needed permission to destroy the disabled MRAP, which was filled with a number of sensitive items.

"Until that (permission) came, we fought in place," Bartholow said, adding that the Americans also had to care for casualties as the battle raged around them.

After about two hours, permission to destroy the MRAP and its equipment was granted.

In order to give the Americans some additional support, a U.S. Air Force B-2 bomber, which was orbiting nearby, was also dispatched to drop a 500-pound bomb about 500 meters from the Americans' position as a show of force.

"Shocking," said Bartholow about the force of the blast that rocked the ground below them and sent geysers of dust, sand and gravel flying upward. "It reinforces reality... of power."

### Aftermath

Bartholow said that following the battle he felt drained and overwhelmed at the same time. He added that after leaving the village, he never saw the mullah again.

"Nor do I want to," Bartholow said. "That would mean that I have to go back there and I don't want to."

Despite still feeling the lingering emotional toll that the battle brought to him, he said that he recognizes that he was fortunate that it occurred when it did... nearly 15 months into his deployment... rather than early on when he was still learning the valuable lessons of living and working with the Afghans.

"It just would've been a different scenario that would've played out," he said. "You can point to all these things - all your failures - but it's not always easy to figure out the reasons why you were successful. You know, thank God it happened like that."

"But again, people were hurt, people were shot," said Bartholow. "But I think in this scenario - and this is not bragging... it's not. I would be dead if not but for everybody doing their part on this team. I would be a dead person - there was initiative shown. Not that I'm a better Soldier, not that I'm a smarter person, but because I understood their culture... (I had) a better access to tools to operate in that culture."

**Coming in October:  
Building The Dream**



■ Park project becomes capstone accomplishment for Nebraska Army Guard officer serving in Afghanistan

# Building the Dream

By Maj. Kevin Hynes  
Editor

Most called it the graveyard, a final resting place for dozens of abandoned vehicles and aircraft, their giant armored hulks slowly rusting away like the Soviet dreams that had brought them here decades earlier.

However, where most of his fellow Soldiers and local Afghans simply saw a forlorn place of shattered dreams and an equally tragic reality, 1st Lt. Russell Bartholow saw the faint glimmers of hope.

Granted, he admits now, one almost had to suspend reality to see it, but it was there. Hope. A simple word, but one that the Nebraska Army National Guard officer became convinced that he could somehow transform this dangerous, nightmarish 16-acre graveyard into.

The idea, he said, didn't simply dawn on him one day, but instead evolved over time based upon the situation he saw daily while serving as the head of a five-person Effects Cell at Forward Operations Base Spann near the northern Afghan city of Mazar-e-Sharif.

"On the edge of the city and the edge of our base was the gate that we would come in," said Bartholow. "Right there, there were 16 acres, empty acres, of blown up BMPs, MiGs that had crashed and buses that had blown up. It was just a wasteland."

"Signs were up that it hadn't been de-mined. A couple acres was cemetery," he said. "It was literally a dead zone of battle... graveyards of empire."

Travelling by the graveyard almost daily, Bartholow not only noticed the rusting hulks, he also watched as hundreds of kids played along the side of the road, barely inches away from where hundreds of Afghan and coalition vehicles passed by.

And then he began to wonder why all these kids had to play so close to such a dangerous road.

"Kids there don't have parks," said Bartholow. "They play in cemeteries, they play on the streets... they play on the top of roofs."

"And they die," he added, his voice barely about a raspy whisper.

"They get hit by vehicles, they get run over and kicked by donkeys."

According to the former Lincoln, Neb., internet businessman who had sold his business and four-bedroom home so that he could join the Nebraska Army National Guard in 2007, this was exactly the type of situation he had thought of after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, when he used to spend countless nights researching Afghanistan and the problems and dangers the Afghans faced.

It was also the type of situation that Bartholow had been looking for in his search to somehow make a concrete difference in the lives of ordinary Afghans.

"Being (at the base) for so long, and seeing the increase in vehicles and people going out the gates, I knew a kid – a child – was going to be maimed or killed at some point," he said.

But how to get these kids off the road? That was a significant question.

And then suddenly Bartholow said he realized that what the kids in the area needed was a safe place where they could go and play. They needed a place where they could simply be kids.

What they needed was a park.

## Capstone To A Journey

Bartholow's journey to this moment had taken many twists and turns along the way. Barely two years earlier Bartholow was an owner of a growing internet business in Lincoln, where, by all accounts, he seemed to be living the American dream. What most didn't know, though, was that Bartholow had become increasingly conflicted.

A former active duty and U.S. Army Reserve infantryman, Bartholow figured that his military career was long behind him when he first moved from California to Lincoln, Neb., where he briefly attended law school before starting his business career.

The terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, changed all that, though.

In the months that followed, Bartholow became consumed by the war in Afghanistan, spending countless nights reading books, blogs and articles about the troubled, war-torn Central Asian nation and

22 Months In  
Afghanistan  
Fourth of a  
Multipart Series



Photos courtesy of 1st Lt. Russell Bartholow

**First Ride:** 1st Lt. Russell Bartholow smiles as he tries out one of the newly-installed playground equipment pieces at the Deh Dadi park. Such playground equipment had to be tested prior to the opening of the park, said Bartholow, adding that the contractor intentionally put up the spring toy first in order to see Bartholow ride it.



**Hands In Concrete:** 1st Lt. Russell Bartholow and a few of the more than 150 Afghan children who attended the grand opening place their hands in the wet concrete of a newly-placed sidewalk at the Deh Dadi Park. Bartholow said the goal was to give the local children "ownership" of the new park.

all of the difficulties that the people there faced.

He also became consumed by an idea whose genesis began during those late-night study sessions: If given the chance and put into the right position, Bartholow knew... absolutely knew... that he could make a difference.

That dream eventually put him back into uniform when he followed the advice of his uncle, Col. George Boshae, and joined the Nebraska Army National Guard. Despite his age, Bartholow soon graduated from Officer Candidate School and his Basic Officers Course and then volunteered to deploy with an Afghan National Army Embedded Training Team from South Dakota to Afghanistan.

Opportunity soon followed. Within a few months of his arrival in northern Afghanistan in early 2008, the 38-year-old made a deal to extend his deployment in Afghanistan in exchange for the opportunity to lead FOB Spann's five-person Effect Cell, which was responsible for developing and conducting civil-military projects in the nine northern provinces along the Afghanistan-Uzbekistan border.

By the time Bartholow returned home, the Nebraska Army Guard officer recorded 22 uninterrupted months in Afghanistan, the longest of any other Nebraska Army Guard Soldier. He also left in his wake a list of accomplishments that included 12 successful school-building projects, the construction of 300 kilometers of road, 12 newly

dug wells and several weapons buy-back projects and humanitarian aid missions.

Bartholow also helped his team successfully survive a Taliban ambush (see *August Prairie Soldier*.)

Yet, despite all these accomplishments, Bartholow said he quickly realized that if he was able to turn the rusting graveyard into a hope-filled park for the local Afghans, it would be the capstone achievement of his time in Afghanistan.

## Funding The Park

Serving and working in Afghanistan for 22 months, Bartholow learned many different skills and developed many relationships with the local Afghan power brokers, which helped him navigate through the often complicated Afghan social and business systems. He admitted later that he needed all of these skills to create the park.

After learning that he couldn't use Commander's Emergency Response Plan (CERP) funds, which are congressionally appropriated funds designated for such reconstruction projects as building schools and digging wells, Bartholow said he realized he needed to think creatively and use the relationships he had developed over the past months to get the process started.

"The first thing I did was go to the general who I found out owned the land and I had developed a relationship with because over the past two years I had delivered

over 30 tons of humanitarian assistance and probably built five schools on just his suggestion," said Bartholow. "I went to him and said, 'Here's my idea.'"

The Afghan general, a local corps commander, was receptive to the idea, but he had one requirement: If Bartholow could raise the money for the park, the general would donate the land and the engineering assets to de-mine the land, remove the tanks and MiG jets, and resurface the entire 16 acres.

But how to raise the approximately \$120,000 it would take to build the park without using American taxpayers money? The answer, Bartholow quickly realized, lie in the other relationships he'd developed in Afghanistan.

"The relationship I had built with 12 businessmen in all of northern Afghanistan was significant," he said, adding that he'd also spent much time trying to communicate the idea that part of being a good citizen – especially for those in community leadership positions – is the willingness to give back to one's community to make life better for all.

"The concept of giving back to your community – not your family network, but giving back to your community as a whole – that's not a huge concept in Afghanistan," said Bartholow. "But I approached them and said, 'Here is my idea, here is what you can do... you can give back to your community and empower not only yourself and your community, but also Afghanistan.'"

He then laid out his idea of building an "oasis of hope" for the local kids. "Every day that these kids play here, their expectations and standard of living will increase," Bartholow told the assembled business leaders. "Their happiness and joy – something that they do not have now – will increase... they will have hope because they will see colors and they will have emotions that they might not have even had before besides fear, fright and oppression."

"All these things you will create for generations to come," he added.

Bartholow figured the project would be a hard sell. He admits now that he underestimated the relationship he'd developed with the Afghan leaders.

"In a matter of a week I had roughly \$100-120,000," he said. "And let me tell you, this was something not like the way we donate

See PARK on 9.



**Popular Spot:** Local Afghan children try out the first equipment installed at the Deh Dadi Park. Bartholow said the merry-go-round, the only one within 25 kilometers of the park, was visited daily by a core group of 30-50 Afghan kids who were allowed to play on the equipment throughout the construction of the park. As such, the merry-go-round had to be replaced two times before the actual opening of the park.



Photos courtesy of Maj. Brenda Ruhrer

**Lifesaving Skills:** Capt. Mark Bales, Nebraska Army National Guard Medical Detachment, teaches a CPR class to a group of Afghan National Army soldiers.



**New Working Clothes:** Afghan nursing students display their new scrubs donated by Grand Island's St. Francis Medical Center with help from Capt. Mark Bales.



**Gentle Touch:** 1st Lt. Yolanda Canter, 155th Medical Group, poses for a photograph with some of the local children who live near where Canter and other Nebraska National Guard nurses are conducting a training program for Afghan nurses.

**NURSES** continued from page 1.

hospital where they lack even pain medication for patients," said Bales, a member of the Nebraska Army Guard's Medical Detachment. "Professionally, I am using a lot of basic skills that I may have become complacent with over the years. I also have to find ways to get basic tasks completed by being resourceful due to lack of equipment."

Making the Afghan medical training system better is the primary goal of the program, said Maj. Sheryl Wohleb, a member of the Nebraska Air Guard's 155th Medical Group who also works as a staff nurse at the Offutt Air Force Base's Family Medicine Residency Clinic.

"(The) goal is to train the trainer so in two years the program will be run entirely by the Afghans," said Wohleb via e-mail. Wohleb said the curriculum is based around the Army's 68WM6 program, which essentially teaches people to perform at the licensed practical nurse level.

"We are training and mentoring the Afghan faculty," said Wohleb, adding that the students come from both the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police, which makes up the greater Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). "ANSF Nursing Program will serve as a pipeline for providing an adequate number of nurses who are capable of caring for soldiers, police and their beneficiaries."

It's a need that is constantly growing, Wohleb said.

"ANSF is increasing in size and needs nurses to keep up with the demands," she said. "The country already has a shortage of nurses and increasing (the size of) ANSF only adds to the shortage of nurses."



**Building Friendships:** Maj. Sheryl Wohleb and Maj. Brenda Ruhrer (center and left) pose with Col. Mahboob, director of Nursing for the Afghan National Army, after Mahboob presented the two Nebraska Guard officers with head scarves.

Ruhrer said they're essentially providing basic nursing instruction in a number of different areas including clinical rotations in obstetrics and mother/child care in addition to adult care.

Bales said the Afghans are eager students. "The best part of this mission, hands down, is the interaction with the students," he said. "They ask great questions. They study hard. They love the opportunity to train with Americans."

"One of my most memorable moments here happened when we had trained our students in CPR. The next week while in clinical setting, our students got to perform CPR on a patient who had 'coded.' They successfully revived the patient," Bales said. "They were definitely as strong clinically as the nurses who had been working in ICU setting for

many years."

Wohleb said she and 1st Lt. Yolanda Canter, another 155th Med. Group nurse from Lincoln, Neb., who is also instructing in Afghanistan, have also been impressed with the Afghan students.

"I enjoy working with the Afghans," Wohleb said. "The students are very eager to learn (especially from the Americans). Once you develop the relationship with the Afghans, you are mentoring. They seem to be very attentive to learning. They really try to get the goals/problems solved (or at least try to anyway) and value your guidance and mentorship."

This is the second class to graduate from the program, however it is the first year that Nebraska nurses have participated in the mission. That means that the Nebraskans have had to play a key role in developing the current curriculum.

All four Nebraskans say that trying to establish a nursing program in a place like Afghanistan is not without its frustrations.

For example, simple things like paper aren't always available. Teaching materials needed to be translated before starting the course. Classroom space had to be found. Faculty members had to be interviewed, hired and trained. Cultural differences had to be learned.

Another on-going issue, said the Nebraskans, is helping the Afghan nursing students become self-sufficient instead of leaning on the Americans to make the correct decisions.

"Sometimes they just want you to solve the problem, however you wouldn't be doing them a favor if you do this," said Wohleb. "They need to learn to solve problems and develop their own system."

It's an on-going process, say the Guardsmen. Still, measurable success has been made, they add.

"The experience is much better than I anticipated," said Bales. "I had heard of the lack of equipment and resources, but no one told me how ambitious the students were to learn."

"Some of these students see this course as a great opportunity to help their country. Also, many of the students are utilizing this course to escape the poverty from which they were raised in," he added.

The instructors also say that they, too, are learning much from their experience in Afghanistan.

"Professionally (this) has challenged me to be more patient and not get frustrated at the way things are done or how long it takes to get something accomplished," Wohleb said. "Afghanistan culture is very different and one really needs to develop the relationship with the Afghan you are mentoring before they even begin to trust you and this takes time."

"I would have to say that I have polished up my lecturing, Power Point and clinical skills," said Ruhrer. "It has been interesting working with the interpreters and trying to instruct. It adds a lot more time to the lesson."

Ultimately, the Nebraskans say, it's a labor of love as they work to help the Afghans, who've they've grown to respect and like, develop a critical skill that will hopefully have major positive impacts in the future.

"It is rewarding to be part of a mission that is so vital in Afghanistan and hopefully developing this program to develop nursing care in Afghanistan is only the beginning," said Wohleb.

**PARK** continued from page 8.

money where we go to a dining-in or to the March of Dimes."

Bartholow said the donations came during a meeting in the office of the Afghan general. The leaders, who were accompanied by their assistants, sat in the general's office and listened as Bartholow presented his idea. He said he had no idea how to take the initial impression he had while speaking.

"These are very serious people when it comes to money," he said, adding that asking each of the men to donate \$5,000 – a huge sum in Afghan society – was extremely serious. "They're barely surviving, so \$5,000... to give that is a sacrifice."

Following his presentation, Bartholow said the ceremony that unfolded in the general's office is something that will stay with him forever.

"When we went around the room, they stood up and held their money over their head, thanked God and said, 'I am a clean man.

This is money from my family...' and they came forward and presented this money."

"This is what it meant to them," Bartholow added. "Then it was counted and they would turn around. This is just the most awesome amount of pride I've ever witnessed from 12 men."

When the money was counted, more than \$100,000 was collected.

The park – and Bartholow's dream – was a go.

**Construction**

Work on the park began within a few weeks. Vehicles were towed away. Minefields were cleared. Trash was cleaned up.

Over the weeks and months that followed, the park began to take shape until finally on Thanksgiving 2009, Bartholow and other U.S. military leaders gathered with their Afghan military and business counterparts to officially open the park, which had an es-

timated value of approximately \$300,000.

Hundreds of local Afghans, including around 150 local children, attended the grand opening.

Bartholow's voice beams with pride when he describes the finished project, which included an international-sized soccer field, a volleyball court, an NBA-sized basketball court designed by a local "NBA fanatic" on FOB Spann, playground systems in a cul-de-sac complete with slides, swings and fake palm trees, a little cantina equipped to sell candy and sodas to the kids and a \$52,000 security fence that surrounded the 16-acre park.

The center piece of the development was a large 25-foot metal tree with green leaves and an eagle on top of an engraving encouraging people to trust in God, be clean men and live righteous lives. Additionally, a well had been dug in the park to water the grass, an unheard of

luxury in Afghanistan.

"When we had the grand opening, it was a grand, grand day," said Bartholow, who was invited to place his hands in wet concrete during the grand opening in recognition of the role he played in getting the park completed.

**A Dream Realized**

A few weeks after the grand opening of the park, Bartholow was scheduled to return home to Nebraska. He said that his last view of the park, which he visited a few days before he left Afghanistan, left a lasting memory.

"(It was) packed," he said. "800, 900 kids in line to play volleyball. Three or four teams filled the soccer field. The cantina itself had a line of 10 people buying gum and soda and pistachios."

Other people, Bartholow said, were wandering along the parks winding paths, deeply engrossed in conversation. "(Afghans) love

to walk paths. There were dozens walking, holding hands together, walking, talking, contemplating their future," said Bartholow.

The kids left an even deeper impression.

"There were kids on the spring toys. They'd already blown through two merry-go-rounds that I had to replace because it was the first piece of equipment and nothing else showed up until late in the game," he said. "So all that was there was this merry-go-round that the vendor built twice – \$500 a piece – because so many kids were on that merry-go-round."

"And they were playing tag and they'd created a 10-foot-square area where they were shooting marbles," Bartholow said, his voice rising. "You know, man, it was a safe haven... of enjoyment. And it was a glimpse, I think, of the future of Afghanistan."

**Coming in December: Home Again**



■After 22 months of challenges, accomplishments and changes, well-traveled Nebraska Soldier comes...

## Home Again!

By Maj. Kevin Hynes  
Editor

Imagine putting a life on hold for 22 months. Think of all the changes that could and will take place over that time, both internally and externally. It's not a matter of if the changes occur... but rather when they occur because nothing ever stays constant in life.

**22 Months In  
Afghanistan**  
Fifth and Final Part of  
a Multipart Series

Russell Bartholow knows this about as well as anybody.

By December of 2009, Bartholow was a Nebraska Army National Guard first lieutenant in the last days of a monumental journey that had taken him from a normal life in Lincoln, Neb., to northern Afghanistan where he had worked diligently for 22 months trying to make a concrete impact in the lives of the Afghan people.

In charge of a five-person Effects Cell, Bartholow had indeed made an impact through the various projects he had worked on, not the least of which was a glittering new park he had helped build from what had once been a rusting junkyard and minefield left over from when the Soviets had fought here.

Needless to say, Bartholow could look back on all he'd accomplished with an intense feeling of pride. Still, as he counted down his final days in Afghanistan, Bartholow felt conflicted.

"I was excited, of course, to go home, but now being in Afghanistan for 22 months, I had really become, from my perspective as much as an American Soldier could become part of that culture... I had separation anxiety," he said.

"I loved sleeping on the cots. I had learned to work through languages and culture. I knew how to exist and survive," he said. "It was almost frightening to come home to something that was even more frightening than what I was leaving."

The chief reason behind this reason, Bartholow admits now, was the fact that he and much around him – both in Afghanistan and back home in Lincoln – had changed since early 2008.

He was stepping back into a pair of roles he had never known before.

### Growing Love

Prior to Bartholow's mobilization in January 2008, he had dated Julie Rogers. That relationship had grown out of long-lasting friendship that was now becoming much deeper for both people.

Still, with the Afghanistan mobilization fast approaching, both agreed to take a wait-and-see approach.

Rogers said part of the reason was she understood how important the mission was to Bartholow, so she'd decided to put their relationship "on hold" while he was away during what she expected at the time to be a year-long deployment.

"I could see that (joining the National Guard and deploying) was something that he would regret for the rest of his life if he didn't do that," she said. Still, it was hard to see him leave for Afghanistan in early 2008. "We were dating at the time, but we didn't make any commitments because we wanted to (wait) until after we knew when he was coming back from Afghanistan."

During the coming months, the two talked frequently on the phone or via the computer. Their love for each other began deepening in ways neither had expected.

"For me, specifically, the relationship became more intense because

being married and having a relationship with someone you care about became much more important to me and her the longer we were apart," Bartholow said. "It was almost as if absence made the heart grow fonder. It sounds silly, but if you read an (Ernest) Hemingway novel... life, war, pestilence... it seems to up the ante on these emotions and your relationships seem to move faster when you're faced with these extreme situations."

Bartholow's first two-week leave came in November 2008 when he met Rogers in Hawaii for a dream vacation. The recent separation had them both thinking about the direction their relationship was heading.

"I wanted to marry her then because I was afraid of dying and leaving her with nothing because we knew we loved each other," Bartholow said.

Rogers, however, wasn't sure that it was the right time, yet.

Bartholow had already discussed with her his desire to stay in Afghanistan longer than he'd originally planned. He spoke about the options. He spoke about his desire to extend so that he could take on the Effects Cell assignment and make an even greater impact than he was currently making. They were all good reasons, Rogers said.

"It showed me that he had grown," she added.

Still, Rogers wasn't sure about marriage quite yet. "I wanted to make sure that we had an end in site of him coming home," she said.

Rogers added she also began noticing differences in Bartholow during their trip to Hawaii. "He was more emotional," she said. "He was more thoughtful and contemplative."

"I think war has effects on someone, no matter who you are," she said. "But he also had a view of another culture that made him appreciate things in the United States more."

By the time their vacation was over, both admit they were devastated emotionally by having to say farewell once again. It would be July 2009 before they physically saw each other again.

This time, both admitted that they were ready to get married. So sure was Bartholow that he was already showing photos of Rogers to his co-workers – including many of the Afghan leaders he was working with – and describing her as the woman he was about to marry.

One day one particular mullah had a present waiting for Bartholow when he arrived for their meeting. "(He had) bought her a dress... a wedding dress," Bartholow said, adding that he was also given a traditional Afghan outfit with the understanding that they would wear the clothes when they were married.

Bartholow said it was just another sign of how his relationship with the local Afghans had grown during his time overseas.

"Families are by far number one in their lives," he said. "Just by speaking about a wife with an Afghan man is significant because they don't talk about women amongst each other and certainly not with a foreigner."

### Married... And A Surprise

During Bartholow's second leave to Nebraska in July 2009, the couple decided to get married a few days later, on a bright Sunday morning, Rogers' father – a retired Madison, Neb., district county judge – married them in front of their family.

True to Bartholow's promise, the couple each wore the traditional Afghan clothes during the ceremony.



**Chilly Weather, Warm Welcome:** 1st Lt. Russell Bartholow poses by a sign made by his family welcoming him home from a 22-month deployment to Afghanistan in December 2009. Bartholow arrived back in Lincoln, Neb., during the middle of last year's Christmas Eve blizzard.

Rogers called the clothes a meaningful tribute to the people her husband was working with in Afghanistan.

"It was meaningful because the people he was working with... these are very, very poor people and they presented this wedding gift to somebody they had gotten to know from another country that is very different from their's," she said. "Family is very important. So, making this marriage commitment as family, it meant a lot that they would send along this gift."

All too soon, leave was over again. And once again the newlyweds had to deal with the emotions that the separation brought. Bartholow said the emotions he felt this time were different than the ones he'd experience in Hawaii the previous year.

"The fact that the emotional impact was so negatively deep had the biggest impact on me," he said. "I didn't realize that I could care about so much... that it would hurt that much to leave."

He added that he suddenly remembered the times he'd snickered at the married Soldiers in his unit as they went through similar emotional separations. Now, he realized how little he had understood back when he used to tell others: "C'mon, what's the big deal. You're going to be back in nine months... man up."

"I had to eat those words and realize people who are single have a lot different scenario than men and women who are married with a wife or husband and kids," he said.

Still, Bartholow figured he'd figure out some way to complete the final months of deployment. What he didn't know was that fate was about to send him another unexpected twist.

About six weeks after returning to Afghanistan, Rogers broke the news to Bartholow.

She was pregnant.

Bartholow said finding out that he was about to become a father was like being a child and learning that he was going to Disneyland. He added that he started whooping, hollering and screaming.

"(It was) excitement you cannot contain, but you have to," he said. "That was the exciting part."

It also got him thinking about his new responsibilities. "The other side of that fulcrum was not wanting to die... not only as a husband, but now as a father," he said. "It's a crazy transition I went through as a husband and then a father in Afghanistan."

Bartholow said the news also



**Wedding Day:** 1st Lt. Russell Bartholow and Julie Rogers pose for a wedding day photo on the deck of their Lincoln, Neb., house, July 12, 2009. The couple wore a set of traditional Afghan wedding clothes, given to them by an Afghan mullah as a wedding gift, during their marriage ceremony.

affected the way he conducted his work in Afghanistan.

"I had to work harder to operate status quo on the mission because now I didn't think of things as this 'Let's go rock and roll' single guy. Now... unfortunately, I was much more cautious and I had to calculate that into my mission planning and my (operations) orders," he said.

"It was a very awkward feeling," he added. "I found myself now really caring for the Soldiers on my team in a manner that didn't approach the care that I had for them before. I saw each of them as my son or daughter... it was really crazy crap."

### Home Again

That goes a long way in explaining the mix of feelings Bartholow felt as he completed his mission in Afghanistan.

Finally, after a long flight home, Bartholow arrived in Kansas during the midst of last Christmas' blizzard. After hitching a ride home with a fellow Soldier, he arrived in Lincoln on Christmas Eve.

Rogers said it was a Christmas she'll never forget.

"I assumed that since it was really snowy we would just stay in Lincoln, but he was delayed so many times (because of the weather) he said, 'My goal is Norfolk, Neb.," Rogers recalled, saying that Bartholow was convinced that he wanted to make the three hour trip to spend the holidays with Rogers' family.

"So we drove through the weather... it was horrible, but we made it

for Christmas."

"It was a really great Christmas," she added, saying she had an extra special present for her husband. She handed him a sonogram of their baby. They were having a son.

Beckett John (Rogers) Bartholow was born on April 8 this year.

Both say that becoming new parents while also learning how to transition into their new life together has been a challenge at times. They also say that they've learned much about themselves during their time apart.

"There's lots of people (who) might not be supportive hourly, but there's tons of people around who are supportive generally and in their own subtle ways," said Rogers about what types of advice she would give to other military spouses in similar circumstances.

"I would say that we're all stronger than we realize and with the support of family and friends, I really think it makes it easier."

Bartholow said he, too, learned much during his 22-month journey.

"The first thing that I learned is that Americans, when looked at globally, are truly unique because of our ideals and perspective of freedom. That was my first lesson, not only as an individual Soldier who wanted to go rock and roll and experience something, but also as a dad and a husband," he said. "All these moms and dads, they leave their home to go possibly die. That was the first lesson."

"The second is, we're the world police and other countries, as much as they don't like us in their press, count on us," Bartholow said. "And the third biggest lesson, I came back as an extremely humbled person... extremely humbled... in realizing how well we have it here in the United States when compared to people who essentially live like Jesus did."

"And I'm humbled by the sacrifices that I watched people make," he said. "Before, I was a different person. I was probably a little more arrogant. Going over as a second lieutenant and coming back, I definitely listen more and I want to have a positive impact."

Finally, when asked to answer the question as to whether he accomplished the mission he had set out to do years ago in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, Bartholow pauses for a second... wipes a tiny tear from his eyes... and then says: "110 percent yes. That's what makes me a very fortunate man... yeah, I'm a fortunate man."