



Panjshir PRT proves 'peace, partnership, progress' possible

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9/27/2009 - **PANJSHIR, Afghanistan** -- Traveling through the Panjshir Province of Afghanistan, one hardly realizes there's a war being fought in the rest of the country.

Children play outside, markets are open for business and schools are in session, all with an air of fearlessness. The people here simply live their lives.

The Airmen, Soldiers and the one Sailor deployed to the Panjshir Provincial Reconstruction Team work directly with the local populace to ensure it stays that way.

The mission of PRTs is to work with local government officials to provide basic services and improve life for the people, explained the commander, Lt. Col. Eric Hommel. Of the dozen PRTs run by Americans, six are commanded by Air Force officers.

But Colonel Hommel, an Air Force Reservist, said he's the luckiest of the bunch. Because of all that's been accomplished here, Panjshir is considered the crown jewel of all the PRTs in that none of them match the effectiveness his team has in Afghanistan.



PANJSHIR, Afghanistan - A civil engineer with the provincial reconstruction team here, 1st Lt. Kate Miles takes notes on construction progress of a new government building Sept. 6, 2009. Lieutenant Miles and her team ensure contractors perform work according to code. She is a Rochester, N.Y., native and deployed from Luke Air Force Base, Ariz. (U.S. Air Force photo/Staff Sgt. J.G. Buzanowski)

SECURITY

"The first step in being effective is security - once you have security, everything else is possible," said Colonel Hommel, a Queens, N.Y., native deployed from the Pentagon. "We've got that part down, so we're able to focus on other things like governance, education and the ability to sustain what's been produced. Our motto is 'Teach, Mentor, Partner.'"

Team members travel into the local community on a daily basis. And while they bring weapons with them, they also work with the local Afghan National Police and Mujahideen guards to augment their security.

"The Mujahideen are the old school warriors of this province," Colonel Hommel said. "They fought off the Soviets for 16 years, they fought off the Taliban. Now they're working with the ANP because as a society, Panjshiris have decided they're sick of fighting. They welcome us because we aren't here to take anything away from them and they realize that."

Colonel Hommel describes Panjshir as "the largest neighborhood watch program in the world." Nothing happens here without the entire community knowing about it. And as a community, they've decided to eschew violence in favor of "peace, partnership and progress."

CONSTRUCTION

There are more than 30 schools and several other government facilities under construction in the province. A team of civil engineers regularly travels through the Hindu Kush mountain range, sometimes on roads barely wide enough for their trucks. Because of the terrain, suitable building spots are atop hills and mountains, but the PRT members hike up hundreds of feet to some locations and cross rivers to get to others. After all, anyone who will work or go to school there will have to do the same.

"We visit every location we can, usually about once a week," said 1st Lt. Kate Miles, an engineer and Rochester, N.Y., native deployed from Luke Air Force Base, Ariz. "Our job is quality control and quality

assurance. We inspect every building to make sure the contractors are doing what they've been paid to do. These buildings are important to the Afghan people, so they have to be done right."

In addition, the civil engineers also teach workers how to improve their skills. At one location, a wall had been taken down and rebuilt several times because it wouldn't hold. Tech. Sgt. Jonathan Cook, a Colorado native deployed from Nellis AFB, Nev., showed them a few tricks of the trade.

"Their cement wasn't being mixed well enough, and if it's too watery, it just won't hold," Sergeant Cook said. "I also showed them how to 'butter their bricks' so they'd hold better. I don't think anyone taught them that before, so that should improve things quite a bit."

HUMANITARIAN AID

The PRT also works with local healthcare professionals to ensure the health and welfare of the Panjshiri people. The PRT medics have taught the staff at local clinics how to use simple ingredients to make "Strong Food," a cookie dough-like paste that helps combat malnutrition in children.

"People can't do much of anything else if they're sick or starving," said Maj. Gordon Ross, a Burley, Idaho, native deployed from Goodfellow AFB, Texas. Major Ross is a nurse practitioner with the PRT and routinely visits health care facilities around the province.

"It's important the Afghans receive education when it comes to nutrition and sanitation so they can take care of themselves," the major said. "It makes me proud to know we're helping these people and that when we leave here, it'll be a better place."

Major Ross and his staff work directly with Afghan healthcare professionals to ensure the medics are getting what they need through their provincial leaders. It's important for them to use the process of working with the local government to meet their needs, Major Ross said.

"We're effectively teaching them to fish rather than just giving them handouts," he said.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

While fellow teammates are on their missions, some PRT Airmen focus on connecting with the people. Tech. Sgt. Tim Parsons, a vehicle operator and sometimes convoy commander, security guard and quick reaction force member, is also a self-appointed ambassador to Afghan youth.

"I love getting to talk with the kids here," said Sergeant Parsons, an Ohio native deployed from Scott AFB, Ill. "They don't have television so when we roll through a town, we're the show. When other folks go into hospitals or check on a construction site, I hang back and just talk with the kids or whoever else is around. It's one of my favorite parts of the job here."

Because they largely don't have to worry about violence in Panjshir, Sergeant Parsons said he's noticed a distinct difference in the local children versus those in nearby provinces.

"Here they wave and give us a thumbs up," Sergeant Parsons said. "You see little girls hugging their books as they go to school. A lot of them want to grow up to be doctors, which is just fantastic."

RUNNING THE FOB

Roughly 100 people work at the PRT, stationed on the modest Forward Operating Base Lion. It's clearly visible from the main road in the southwest corner of the mountainous province and at roughly 1,400 square miles, Panjshir covers an area smaller than Rhode Island.

A quarter of the people at the PRT are Airmen serving in joint expeditionary taskings. JET Airmen deploy alongside members of the sister services, often filling requirements not traditional to their Air Force specialties.

In addition to the missions into the local communities, JET Airmen drive convoys, provide intelligence, perform information operations, maintain communications lines with the outside world and "do whatever it takes to get the mission done," according to Senior Airman Bryan Ulloa.

Airman Ulloa, a native of Ocala, Fla., and deployed from Minot AFB, N.D., is a Services Airman back home. So at the FOB, he runs the dining facility, handles the small morale, welfare and recreation facility, and takes care of the fitness room. But he's also driven in convoys, pulled security details, operated the radio in the tactical operation center, and been part of a QRF.

"A lot of the stuff we do here is out of our job description, but you do it because it has to get done," Airman Ulloa

said. "I've learned how to do a lot of other people's jobs and taught them how to do mine. If all I did was cook, that would be one fewer person to go out on a mission. Every person here counts."

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

When traveling around the Panjshir river valley, the PRT members don't wear body armor and they rarely use armored vehicles, a testament to the difference being made here every day.

"For us in Panjshir, it's safer and actually makes us more effective at our mission," explained Colonel Hommel. "In that respect, Panjshir is light years ahead of every other PRT in the country. The people here recognize that we're only here to help them, which is something they haven't seen before.

"By earning their trust and friendship, we've been welcomed into their home and their hearts," Colonel Hommel said, "and that's how we've made a difference here."