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Deployed to Afghanistan: Rebuilding the Future of a Nation

By Dino W. Buchanan, Honolulu District Public Affairs

(FORT SHAFTER, HI - NR 25-06) When Army Capt. Thomas Piazze departed the Corps of Engineers' Honolulu District on January 6, 2006 for a six month assignment in Afghanistan to support the Global War on Terror he was eager to apply his military engineering expertise to reconstruction efforts in the war-torn country. Piazze was also curious where his knowledge would be applied and what impact it would make.

After finishing his assignment and returning to Hawaii, he said the Corps efforts are making lasting impacts.

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2-2-2 CPT PIAZZE

“In my opinion, besides the use of cars and cell phones, Afghanistan is probably very similar to where the United States was a century ago,” Piazzе said. “Whatever infrastructure they had before the Russian occupation and Taliban rule was brutally taken away from them. We are essentially helping them to rebuild a solid base after many years of neglect. The Corps and other U.S. agencies are providing much needed assistance by building those things that we take for granted back home.”

After a brief processing stint at the CONUS Replacement Center at Fort Benning, Ga., he arrived in Afghanistan on January 23.

Piazzе was assigned to the Corps’ Khost field office, approximately 25 km (15 miles) from the Afghanistan/Pakistan border and was given the role of Project Engineer for the \$85 million Khost Afghan National Army (ANA) Brigade Facility.

“My duties as Project Engineer were to monitor our general contractor, Fluor Corporation, and make sure that they met all contractual obligations to the Corps,” Piazzе said. “I monitored schedule, Quality Assurance activities, monthly payments and contract modifications.”

“We lived and worked on the construction site in K-SPAN buildings that our general contractor Fluor built for the Corps. The site was approximately 30 minutes away from Forward Operating Base (FOB) Salerno, which was the nearest military installation.

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3-3-3 CPT PIAZZE

Construction of the ANA Brigade Facility included everything from a power plant, water system and waste water treatment plant to a brigade headquarters complex and helipad.

“Our office was also assigned multiple other construction projects which included three road projects - two of which led to the Pakistan border and one that runs from Khost to Gardez – plus an Afghan National Police (ANP) station in Khost, several border control points and a future ANA Forward Operating Base,” said Piazzie. “Since our office only consisted of five Corps personnel, everyone had to help out a little with each project.”

Contrary to what is often reported in the press, Piazzie said that the Corps’ and U.S. reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan are creating economic opportunities.

“I definitely feel that the Corps is making a dramatic impact on the lives of the Afghan people,” he said. “Because of our projects, our contractors were forced to use many of the local vendors for materials and supplies. As a result, we began to see more businesses created in the area. The establishment of the ANA and ANP facilities and the upgrading of the roads throughout the country will allow for businesses to safely grow outside of the city limits and into the smaller more rural areas. Transportation will become much better and it is only a matter of time before the outside world begins to see the economic and social impact that the U.S. has throughout the country.”

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4-4-4 CPT PIAZZE

Piazzе added that despite what people hear in the media, the Afghanistan people are willing and eager to begin improving their country. He cites an example of how the Corps and construction efforts were making a good local impact.

“Our site was located between two villages that have fought for years over the land we were building on. In order to maintain peace between them, we would routinely invite the village elders to sit down and talk about the projects and ensure that we hired equal numbers of workers from each village. Fluor, our general contractor, also went so far as to get together with the U.S. Army Civil Affairs Team and coordinate the construction of additional projects that equaled \$50,000 per village. We also had friends and families (in the U.S.) send us school supplies from home that we would then hand out to children at the local schools.”

Piazzе said working with Corps civilians in the field was a pleasure.

“The professionalism and dedication of the civilians in Kabul helped us to successfully accomplish our missions and kept the projects moving forward,” he said.

“We only had one USACE civilian working with us in the field. Since he was an electrical engineer, we valued his input throughout the site concerning electrical issues. We would often have to tap into the resources at the Afghanistan Engineer District headquarters in Kabul for help in specific areas.”

Although the mission was stressful at times Piazzе said, “I would absolutely do it all over again.”

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5-5-5 CPT PIAZZE

“I am very proud of my service in Afghanistan,” Piazzе said. “I feel I was able to directly impact the Afghan people by offering the hope of a brighter future. As Americans however, we can only build the foundation that is needed for growth. It’s now up to Afghanistan to use the infrastructure we have provided and make the most of the opportunity. I am anxious to see how they will do in the future.”

Piazzе encourages Honolulu District employees to take the opportunity to help make a difference and create economic and social opportunities where there have been none before.

“My deployment was an extremely rewarding experience that I am proud to have accomplished. I encourage each and every Corps employee to think about accepting the opportunity to represent the District in either Iraq or Afghanistan.”

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