

WINNING THE HEARTS AND MINDS

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Abstract

One of the most encouraging successes of the United States Army presence in Afghanistan is the Tarin Kowt road. This road brings together the cities of Kandehar and Tarin Kowt. The extension of transportation routes into more rural areas of Afghanistan assists the election process in the fledgling democracy of this promising country.

The best weapons of the Taliban are not improvised explosive devices or rocket propelled grenades. Their strongest weapon has been their ability to isolate themselves. The building of the TK road has destroyed this weapon. Continued development of this main artery will forge on as well as the winning of the Afghan people's hearts and minds.

In April of 2005, the 18th Engineer Brigade Task Force Sword deployed to Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom VI. I had the honor of being the HHC Brigade 1SG and looked forward to the challenges I would face in the upcoming year. We had two Battalions under our control, the 864th Engineer Battalion Pacemakers and the 961st Engineer Battalion Wildcats. These two units were battle tested in Iraq and our Brigade was lucky to have them. The expertise of these two Combat Heavy Engineer Battalions was road construction. The 10th Mountain division mission directed Task Force Sword to build a road linking Tarin-kowt and Kandahar, otherwise known as the TK road.

It took 20 hours to navigate from Tarin-kowt to Kandahar prior to the building of the TK road. Because the hospitals, schools and humanitarian aid offices were in Kandahar, it was unrealistic for the villagers of Tarin-kowt to be able to receive these luxuries. This barrier also denied commerce and communication between these two provinces. Once TF Sword finished this road it only took two and half hours to drive this once tedious, dangerous journey. This was the end to geographical seclusion for hundreds of thousands of people in Afghanistan.

The building of this road was an international effort involving the support of the United Nations, United States Army troop labor, and Indian contractors. It took sixteen months, 125 kilometers, two OEF rotations and numerous National election dates to accomplish this objective. The 528th Engineer Battalion out of Louisiana actually launched this construction project. They successfully built 50 kilometers of the TK road between July of 2004 and March of 2005. Once Wildcat and Pacemaker assumed the mission, TF Sword instructed them that a mandatory spring 2006 completion date would be necessary. Because of this requirement, both Battalions would have to build roads faster and more efficiently than they had ever done before.

Building roads in war theaters today requires never-ending planning, surveying, logistical flow of materials, job site security, and continuous heavy equipment maintenance. It is definitely comparable to a decathlon, not a quick sprint to the finish line sports event. Building roads like this can be extremely mundane; progress can be very slow at times while other days extremely fast. We discovered new construction methods, which aided in the efficient use of troop labor, and materials. The use of forward operating bases cut down on the amount of driving time to and from the job sites. The cross training of soldiers from one MOS to another was also used to streamline the process. Because this type of road construction was unique to both these Battalions, the feeling of tediousness rarely set in. Every day brought new challenges that the soldiers ingeniously work through.

The extreme climate and terrain of Afghanistan presented constant challenges while constructing the Tarin-kowt road. Designs that worked well in the continental United States projects did not work here. Village elders were involved in the construction process by pre approving the layout of the road. Because of this, we could not deviate from the agreed upon plans. Civilians on the battlefield were a constant issue that required additional job site security. Every added soldier to security meant one less working on the construction of the road. The enemy was very hard to identify because anyone walking or driving a civilian vehicle on the jobsite was a potential risk.

Whenever we built a stretch of road near a village, an audience would form. It usually began with the children of the village coming out first and then the men. This was at first a tense moment but as the construction continued, we realized this was an opportune time to win the hearts and minds of the Afghanistan people. Every time the road came to a village, we bestowed

humanitarian aid upon the villagers. We commonly found that the Afghan people were tired of war and extremely happy to see the Americans that were building a road for them.

There are 3 phases to road construction. The first phase requires the use of bulldozers and entails site clearing and grubbing. Then the top layer of soil, with the use of dump trucks, scrapers and bucket loaders hauls the dirt away. This phase required hills to be leveled off, and depressions filled in. The next phase places 8 to 12 inches of rock aggregate on top of the leveled off area. The last phase wets the aggregate and runs vibratory rollers over it. Graders then begin to even out the road and place a crown, a slope off the center of the road for proper drainage.

Water is a continuous need during the compaction phase of building a road. Numerous villages assisted with this requirement by letting us use water from their wells. Throughout all phases of construction, there were times when aggregate became scarce. Once again, villagers assisted by directing us to borrow pits in the immediate area. As time went on we simply explained the specific type of rock, sand or soil we desired and the Afghan people would direct us where to go to find it. The Afghan populace wanted to assist in whatever way they could in the building of the TK road.

Task Force pacemaker started road construction at both the north and south ends of the TK road. From the beginning, it became evident that to save time driving to and from the jobsite a new start point with a forward operating base was the fix. Up to this point in the construction process, it was common to drive 2 and ½ hours a day just to get to the work site. With the completion of the forward operating base, the construction production rate nearly doubled. Because of the tremendous success of this initial FOB it became standard operating procedure to erect these temporary bases as the TK road construction progressed along.

The engineer soldiers accomplished all building requirements needed to construct these short-term base camps. At no time was any of the work contracted out to civilian companies. These temporary bases had custom-built dining facilities, wood frame buildings that housed gyms and theatres. All sleeping quarters had air conditioning and heating systems. Eating arrangements before the occupation of the FOB had the soldiers dining with Kellogg Brown and Root a well-known civilian contractor throughout the area of operations. We were afraid that the morale of the soldiers would deteriorate due to their not being able to eat from a mess hall with the menu variety KBR could provide. Much to our surprise the opposite happened because our green suit cooks rose to the occasion and provided a wide assortment of meals available at all hours of the day or night.

Prior to deploying to OEF VI it was common to hear that engineers would be picked off by the enemy as they slowly built there roads in Afghanistan. We knew job site security was going to be are Achilles heal and because of this arrived to the AO with teams already trained and identified. Every day engineer soldiers operated crew served weapon systems on both ends of the construction site. We always allowed civilian vehicle traffic to drive either through or around the ongoing construction. Because of this, it was necessary to halt vehicle traffic and search all personnel before allowing passage. We used a roving security vehicle to patrol outlying areas especially when we were working in valleys for extended periods. The Afghanistan National Police (ANP) assisted us with a male and female interpreter. These interpreters were paramount whenever searching local national females and bridging the communication gap we faced every day. All of these security measures resulted in a 100% success rate. Not a single soldier or afghan civilian suffered an attack during the construction of the TK road.

In order for peace to flourish in the nation of Afghanistan development of there infrastructure must continue. This development has definitely caused a rise in their quality of life. For the first time in decades, the people of Afghanistan are optimistic about their future. The TK road will provide developmental access to the small towns and villages for some time to come. Construction of every road regardless of the size or location it is built brings the nation of Afghanistan closer to democracy. The Taliban flourished on isolation and their ability to hide. The TK road has severely impaired the way they operate today.

