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565th Engineer Detachment (FEST-A) conducts route recon

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has two districts in Afghanistan, the Afghanistan Engineer District-North, headquartered in Kabul, and the Afghanistan Engineer District-South, headquartered in Kandahar. But USACE also has other units, the Forward Engineer Support Teams, which provide direct, hands-on engineering support to Regional Commands and Provincial Reconstruction Teams. One of those teams, the 565th Engineer Detachment (Forward Engineer Support Team-Advance), deployed from Schofield Barracks, HI, works out of Kandahar Airfield.

The 565th is one of eight active-duty FEST-A teams in the Corps of Engineers inventory. There are also 20 reserve FEST-A teams, and four larger FEST-M (or Main) teams (two active-duty and two reserve). The FEST-A teams provide technical engineer support and limited design capability for overseas contingencies, natural disasters and other crises. The larger FEST-M teams can be described as a “mini-USACE district” with electrical, mechanical, civil, and environmental engineers as well as logistics, contracting and resource management personnel. Both types of team have military and civilian personnel assigned. Eight personnel make up FEST-A teams; a FEST-M team has 36 personnel assigned.

Projects the 565th has completed in Afghanistan include:

- *Multiple route recons and designs for road improvement*
- *Bridge assessments*
- *Culvert assessment and design*
- *Support to base camp expansions, including fire station and motor pool designs*
- *Support to Afghan district government centers, including assessments and designs of electrical systems, wells and district center rebuilds*

Day One

0745—Sgt. 1st Class Gary Malkin and David Nishimura from the 565th travel to Stallion Ramp on Kandahar Airfield to wait for a helicopter that will take them to Combat Outpost Little Blue in the Shah Wali Kot district of Kandahar province. There, they will link up with a platoon from Cobra Battery, 2nd Battalion, 17th Field Artillery Regiment, 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team out of Joint Base Lewis-McCord,



David Nishimura and Sgt. 1st Class Gary Malkin check their equipment before the route recon mission. (USACE photo, Mark Ray)

Wash., which will provide movement support as the team reconnoiters a possible road project.

1030—The FEST team members climb aboard a helicopter for the trip to “Little Blue.” Once at the outpost, they meet with the members of Cobra Battery and determine the day’s schedule.

1300—After lunch at the outpost’s austere dining facility, Malkin and Nishimura mount their equipment in the M-ATV (an all-terrain armored vehicle) in which they will be riding. They will be using a self-contained computer system that combines feeds from a video camera, a global positioning system sensor, and a gyroscopic movement sensor, as well as audio comments and still photos from the team members, to create a detailed electronic description of the current condition of the surveyed route. The team uses the data to develop engineering plans for projects to repair or improve the route.

1800—The platoon moves out in four M-ATVs, heading for a remote outpost that is providing training to Afghan Local Police forces.

2100—The patrol arrives at the outpost around 2100, after a 20-plus kilometer trip on smooth pavement, and rough unpaved roads. The Soldiers and the FEST team quickly bed down to sleep in their vehicles, or on cots outside, under an Afghan sky filled with brilliant stars.

Although they are a field artillery unit, the platoon from Cobra Battery has been operating as an infantry unit for most of the three months they have been in Afghanistan, according to platoon leader, 1st Lt. Jeff Cink.

“We have done a little bit of everything. We participate in key leader engagements, visiting local Afghan leaders with the Afghan National Army units stationed here. The ANA is taking the lead on operations now — they still look to us for guidance sometimes, but we encourage them to figure out the situation on their own. We do conduct mounted and dismounted patrols as well, to establish and maintain security.”



The column moves through rough terrain. (USACE photo, Sgt. 1st Class Gary Malkin)

Day Two

0430—Reveille. The team members clean up, grab a quick cup of coffee or an energy drink and something to eat, then prepare to move out, supported by Afghan Local Police and their mentors.

Looking at the sun rise over the Hug Mountains, Malkin said, “With such a beautiful sun rise, someone is looking out for us today, it is going to be a good day.”

0530—The column moves out. They are reconnoitering a more direct, roughly 12-

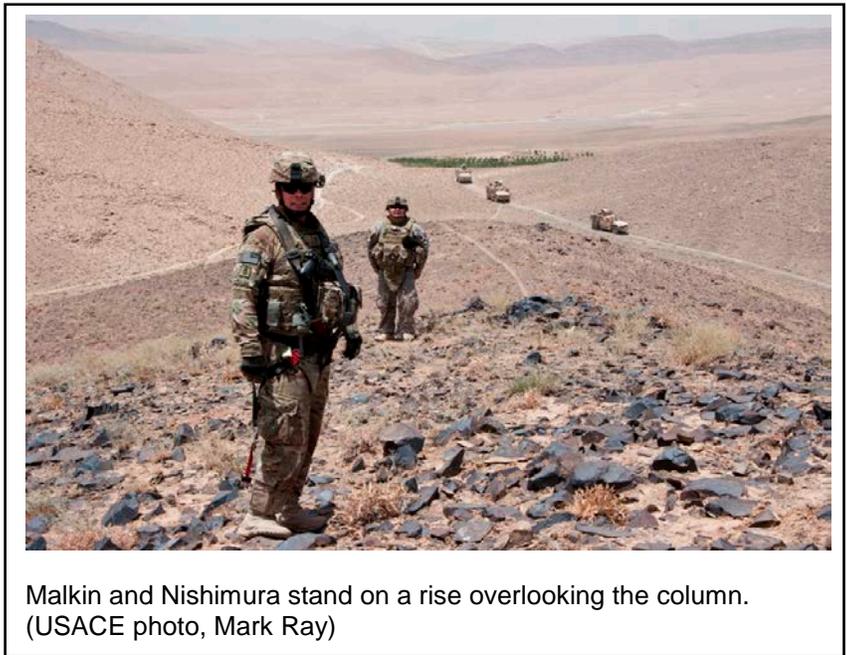
kilometer route back to their starting point, which if repaired, would significantly improve travel times and access to the regional market for local farmers and merchants.

0910—The column moves slowly, often at walking speed. Nearly four hours after setting out, they have covered perhaps four kilometers of the 12 kilometers they are to travel. Explosives detection dogs and an explosive ordnance disposal specialist have to sweep the route, meter by meter, for Improvised Explosive Devices. The route they travel is at best a narrow, rough track, and often little more than the rocky bed of a dry wadi, or dry river bed.

0930—The patience pays off, as the team discovers an IED and destroys it in place.

1100—The column successfully navigates a difficult and narrow passage between two rocks, then makes relatively rapid progress along the course of a wadi.

1230—Full stop. The mentors, scouting ahead, have discovered a large rock blocking the wadi that cannot be avoided. It is clear to Nishimura, who will prepare engineering documents for any future road along this route, that it will require much more than simple repairs to make the route passable for vehicles larger than motorcycles. Nishimura and Malkin, with platoon leader Cink, dismount and hike up a knoll beside the wadi, to meet with the mentors and look down on the terrain ahead. Further travel along the planned route risks moving into a position where the vehicles cannot move forward and cannot easily turn around. They decide to backtrack, move to the far end of the planned route, and try to recon as much as possible of the remainder of the route from there.



Malkin and Nishimura stand on a rise overlooking the column.
(USACE photo, Mark Ray)

1330—IED! On the return march, one of the M-ATVs is hit by an IED. The M-ATV is damaged and will have to be towed back to “Little Blue.” The Soldiers in the stricken vehicle are shaken, but there are no serious injuries.

1500—More difficulties. The team must cross the wadi to turn around, but the disabled M-ATV gets stuck. To add to the difficulties, the tow bar gets bent.

“This place could be seeded with IEDs,” Malkin said. “We need to get everyone into the vehicles, get this vehicle ready to move and get out of here fast.”

1600—Malkin coaches the Cobra Soldiers on how to move the damaged M-ATV with tow ropes, using a lead vehicle to tow and a trail vehicle to brake. The column moves out, heading back to the outpost where they began the day.

1800—The column arrives back at the remote outpost, fuels the vehicles, links up with a sister platoon from 2nd Squadron, 14th Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, and heads out on their return to “Little Blue.”

2100—After more than 24 hours in the field, the column pulls into “Little Blue.” The Soldiers from Cobra Battalion, 2-14th Field Artillery clean and prepare their vehicles for the next day’s mission. Nishimura and Malkin grab a quick shower before getting some much-needed sleep.

Day 3

The FEST members catch an early flight back to Kandahar Airfield, where Nishimura will analyze the data they collected, and they will plan the follow-on mission to reconnoiter the remainder of the route.

“It is never good when you hit an IED,” Malkin said, looking back on the mission. “But everyone got back in one piece, with minimal injuries. My thoughts and prayers go out to the Soldiers that are not the fortunate. Our work takes us outside the wire a lot—this time we got BIT by the enemy, Thank God it wasn’t worse.”

- 30 -

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