During a recent trip to Kabul, Afghanistan, the 52nd Chief of Engineers, Robert L. Van Antwerp, discusses the Corps of Engineers mission, and how the Corps role in Iraq and Afghanistan is evolving.

A candid interview with the Chief of Engineers

By Bruce J. Huffman

Q-Can you give us an overview of the Corps of Engineers and what you do?

Van Antwerp-The Corps of Engineers has a couple of big pieces, so let me break them down into thirds. One of those pieces is our Civil Works mission, and when a lot of people think about that they think of our water resources mission. The Corps of Engineers is in 33 other countries, not just Afghanistan and Iraq. We have 241 locks that we operate along the waterways of the United States. We have 12,000 miles of navigation channels. We have 926 harbors and ports that we are responsible for dredging. We have 610 dams and 383 of those have reservoirs behind them. We provide a great deal of risk reduction for people, because we are able to capture rains that come out of the mountains, and then dole them out at a rate that doesn't flood people out. Flood control is a big aspect of what we do. Another part is water storage and water quality, and of course we have recreation. Last year we had more than 380 million visitor days to our project sites. So that's the Civil Works part.

We have a military programs part, which actually dollar wise is bigger than the Civil Works piece. We're on Air Force and Army installations. We're doing Base Realignment and Closure, we're building facilities for Re-grow and Re-station the Army; a huge program this year, which is four times larger than it is most years.

And then we have a third arm to the Corps, which is a little smaller dollar wise, but it's equally important, which is our research and development.

We have an organization called the Engineer Research and Development Labs and Community. Right here in Afghanistan we are doing a lot of research on improvised explosive devises. That organization will do about $750 million this year.

So that's the Corps of Engineers in a nutshell. The part that we do over here in Afghanistan and Iraq fits into the military program piece.

Q- Could you describe what types of projects you are doing in both Iraq and Afghanistan?

Van Antwerp-There are a lot of parallels, yet

some differences between the two theaters. Both Iraq and Afghanistan are working on what we call the Security Forces. Here it's the Afghan National Security Forces, which is the Police and the Afghan Army. One of the very unique things in Afghanistan is that we've contributed to what is very much like a West Point, which is their military academy. I was really thrilled and proud to hear that they graduated their first class in which there were a number of Engineers. One of the things we want to do while we're here is build capacity, and that capacity will come by them having their own engineers that can ultimately do the things that our engineers can do, and then have the ability to develop the infrastructure of this country.

Now there's another big piece, and it's equally important, and that's Military Construction. This is the work that helps secure our forces. We have to make sure they have places to live and that those facilities are to standard.

There's one other area that I would like to mention that we are just getting into. In fact, one of the reasons we are here now is to attend a water council. This is probably the first time they've had a council on this scale where the Afghan Minister of Energy and Water was the presiding official. They are really looking at water resources here in Afghanistan. I think there are probably two things that will really aid this country in getting on its feet, and enable it to get exports and imports; and one is water. Wherever they can irrigate, they can grow crops. So you have a real possibility for agriculture here if we can get the water piece right. The other part has to do with the transportation system, and it really has to do with how you can get the minerals out of these mountains. It's thought that they have considerable reserves, a mining industry if you will. So both of these mean you have to get things to market, and that's why another one of the things the Corps of Engineers is doing here is the road work. This will help the Afghans get their goods to market.

Q-Okay, so your building up security, and also building infrastructure like roads and water that will help create a lasting success in Afghanistan.

Currently AED has 1,225 Kilometers of roads under construction in Afghanistan.

Van Antwerp-Right, if you go back to U.S. history in the 1920's, we started to harness the waters of our nation. That's why you now have the Inland Waterway System, because we realized how important that infrastructure was. We also built a lot of our dams that provided those water supply systems, and gave us the ability to use water to our advantage. The other part was our National Highway System, and another factor was our rail system. I think there's been some talk about a rail system here, but it's a very expensive proposition through terrain like this. I think for the near-term it's going to be the road network that really does the trick.

Q-How do you see the Corps mission evolving in Iraq and Afghanistan?

Van Antwerp- Clearly here in Afghanistan the mission is growing. If we look at the end of our physical year, which is the end of September, between what's under contract and what's under construction, this theater will have almost $4 billion in work. If we look toward next year FY10, there will probably be another billion dollars added onto that. The workload is growing at a very high

Afghan workers prepare rebar at a Reception, Staging, Onward Movement and Integration facility under construction at Kandahar Air Field.

Lt. Gen. Van Antwerp discusses future growth of the AED South District that will be established in Kandahar, Afghanistan in Aug. 2009.

rate of speed. So we have to expand to be able to do that, because our function is to be there on-site to make sure when the project is brought across the finish line that it's quality, that it will stand the test of time, and that there's good operations and maintenance programs in place. So this means we have to have boots on the ground here for the Corps of Engineers. So what we are going to do is stand up a second Corps District here in Afghanistan. When we get done with the second Engineer District and bring in what's called a Joint Forces Engineer Command, we will have a structure that looks a lot like what was in Iraq when we had a division and three districts. So for this coming year you're going to see what is essentially a Division Headquarters evolve here, but it's going to be a Joint Forces Engineer Command that will control all theater engineer forces, to include NCR from the Navy, Red Horse, the Seabees, construction battalions from the Army and the two districts from the Corps of Engineers. In addition, we've stood up a Joint Program Integration Office. We have a great American, an SES, Witt Anderson from the Northwest Division over here, and he will stand up that Joint Program Integration Office. It will be one of the staff sections under this Joint Forces Engineer Command. So the theater is growing. We're trying to meet the workload here, and one of the important things that's going to come out in probably the next 40 to 60 days is the assessment that General McCrystal is doing. This will set the tone for the future, and will set our priorities. We know for one thing, that we will continue to work very hard on this security force mission.

Relocatable conex barracks are being constructed at Kandahar Air Field for AED South personnel.

Q-How does the Corps of Engineers fit into the big picture in Afghanistan, and is the JFEC a new tool to better integrate the Corps with the other units in the Afghan theater?

Van Antwerp- When you think about what is happening here in theater, they are going to institute under Lt. Gen. Rodriguez a three-star headquarters, whose mission will be determined when this new assessment comes out. And you will also have a four-star headquarters. What these headquarters need is someone who is responsible for all the engineer assets in theater, much like I am the Chief of Engineers for the Chief of Staff and the Secretary of the Army. So essentially for all things engineer, you have one button. So that's part of it. To have an engineer command that can provide that one button touch for all things engineer for the whole Afghan theater. The other thing that we're looking at, and this is very long term is to refine what our organizational structure will be if we go into a new theater. So it's not experimenting for experimentation sake, but it is to stand up and begin to develop the doctrine for what things should look like in a new theater. Everything is growing so much that in some ways it has the same aspects of a new theater. This new structure is going to use some of

SES Witt Anderson discusses AED South construction with Brig. Gen. John McMahon.

our theater engineer command assets, the 412th and 416th Engineers. It will start to bring together the Corps of Engineers and other construction assets. We've got some AFCE work with the Air Force being done, and those troop units like the NCR, Red Horse, the Seabees, and the construction effects battalions from the Army. What we're doing is bringing this all together and as I say, tie it all up in a nice 'engineer bow' and ultimately you are taking the command priorities from those three and four star commands and meeting their needs as their engineer.

Q- Is there anything else you would like to say?

Van Antwerp- First of all, I'd like to say that I am so proud of what our district has done here. And because they've done such great work, that kind of work begets more work. We've learned a lot about how to operate in this theater. One of the things that we want to accomplish in the days ahead, and this is one of the command priorities, is to build capacity. So we are looking at how we can engage more Afghans in the business of engineering. How can we develop Afghans that can be Resident Office Managers, or Area Office Managers in our type of structure who can then manage their own projects? I think ultimately the success of the country depends on that kind of capacity building. So between the academy that can produce engineers, and the training and experience that they can get by working side-by-side with us, we are building the Afghan capacity. We help train them, we have mentors for them, and then when we're out on a project site we're side-by-side. The other part we're calling 'Afghan First', and what that means is that we want to employ as many Afghan contractors as we can, because what they go through responding to requests for proposals, and putting bids together, and obtaining materials etc., is also building that capacity. Ultimately a lot of these contractors would like to work on a world scale. They would like to have work in other countries too. But first they've got to understand how to do it, and how to build to international standards. So we've got some teaching to do. We've got some coaching, mentoring and partnering to do, all with the intention of building capacity among the Afghans.

Q-How do you feel about the Corps role in bringing about freedom?

Van Antwerp- I think the Corps has a big role in providing freedom, in providing that security. These facilities that we're building, that these new Soldiers and Police forces will go in, if you think about it, if you have a good place to operate from, then you feel like a professional. That's what these new places will be. They're not gold plated, but when they go into those facilities they're going to feel like they are professionals. They earn good pay, and I think this buildup of the Afghan National Security Forces is going to provide security. The other thing about freedom is, that if they have the right security provided by their police forces and the Army, it will allow freedom of movement of the people. It allows them to go out and go to market and bring their goods in, and all of these things are so important to bringing about security. When you see people celebrating in the streets and going about their daily business without worry, that's a real boost to the country, and from there, that's where you get entrepreneurs. When you don't have that security, people are on edge. So that's what we want to get; we want to get off the edge and get on with normal living where people are secure and happy. If you are a farmer, you want to be able to bring your crops to market and not have to worry

about security. The other part from the construction industry is that we have a lot of attacks on Afghan and other contractors. This is a tough place to work. That security that's provided by the Afghan Army and Police force will also help the construction piece, because it will enable us to have the freedom of maneuver, to go and build throughout this country without worry of attack or kidnapping or loss of time on the job site.