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U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

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Air Forcing their way in

KABUL – The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in northern Afghanistan is increasingly taking on the blue hue of the Air Force.

Air Force service members fill more than a quarter of the military positions within the unit, including several of the top leadership positions. Consider this: The district's deputy commander, the top non-commissioned officer and the chief of the force protection team are all Air Force members.

The Airmen's contributions are critical to Afghanistan Engineer District-North, said Army Col. Christopher W. Martin, commander of the district.

"I don't think we could accomplish the mission without all the Air Force personnel that we have," he said. "Just the number of engineers and military engineers that it takes to execute here, we just don't have it in the Army, so it takes a blend of all the services."

The district's line-up of employees already has something of a pick-up team feel to it. The group of 1,421 is comprised of U.S. military service members, U.S. Army employees, private-sector U.S. contractors and Afghan employees hired from locations around the globe.

The mix-and-match composition is further evident even among the military members.

The specific numbers change almost daily, but the exact accounting of military service members on Aug. 27 illustrates the joint nature of the district's military team. Of the 129 total military service members on that date, 86 were Soldiers, 34 were Airmen, seven were Seamen and two were Marines.

Because the Army is largely tasked with the fighting operations of the war in Afghanistan, the other services have been called upon to fill vital roles within the Corps of Engineers, said Air Force Lt. Col. Aaron Benson, who serves as deputy commander of the district.

"The Air Force, the Navy and other services have come on line to accept these taskers," Benson said. "There are only so many Army resources out there, and there just aren't enough to go around, so the other services have stepped up."

The joint nature of the Corps of Engineers is especially beneficial to Airmen, Benson said, because it provides additional opportunities for service members, like him, to contribute directly to the war effort in Afghanistan. Without the Corps of Engineers' open-door policy, he and others might have missed the chance altogether.

"In the back of my mind, I always wanted to get here to Afghanistan, definitely," Benson said. "I got to go to Iraq for 90 days, so I am proud to be able to serve in both of these theaters while I am in the military."

In fact, the Air Force has been extending the tours of its members, so that they can serve in leadership positions and make greater contributions to the effort. Benson began his year-long tour in May.

The general consensus among Airmen within the district is that the biggest impediment to serving in the unit is simply learning the Army's unique and sometimes puzzling lingo. In contrast, the greatest benefit is exposure to the Army's protocols and methodologies.

Two key components to developing a sense of teamwork across the branches is for non-Army service members to learn the Army's acronym-laden language and for all service members to understand each of the other branches' rank structures, said Air Force Chief Master Sgt. Chad Brandau, who serves as the top enlisted member in the district.

"We're very fortunate," he said. "We have Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, and of course, we have our Airmen. They work together. I haven't seen a hiccup."

Brandau noted that almost immediately after Col. Martin assumed command of the district on July 10, he ordered posters highlighting the Army values to be displayed prominently at Corps of Engineers facilities across the district. The posters, which focus on loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity and personal courage, by design feature photos of the district's service members from every branch.

"What the boss is saying is "Check your six" on these values' which means to take inventory of yourself and ensure you are living in accord with the Army values. He's not telling the Sailors or the Airmen or the Marines that they have to get rid of the values from their services. All he's saying is "Check your six" on these values.' It's a good thing," Brandau said.

It helps, of course, that the ethos of each service has commonality.

Despite the joint nature of the district, it's hard to overlook the sheer number of Air Force service members within the district's ranks. One of Brandau's favorite gags is to jokingly mention to Soldiers that the district's

population of Airmen just hit the 51 percent mark, which always produces a gulp, he said. (At least it did until publication of this article, anyway.)

While there are similarities among the Army and Air Force, there are differences, as well. The Air Force's institutional culture toward processes generally is businesslike and technical in nature, said Air Force Capt. Trent Arnold, who heads the district's logistics operations. In comparison, he said, he's found the Army's culture to be based in strength, accountability and can-do attitude.

During his year-long tour which began in September 2010, Arnold has tried to blend the organizations' respective tactics, techniques and procedures. He plans to incorporate some of the new blended methodologies into his regular duties when he returns to his Air Force unit in England at the conclusion of his tour in Afghanistan.

"We bring in more of the transport specialization, like the cargo prep and pallet build-up of moving and manifesting cargo, which here is probably 90 percent of our effort in supporting the forward operating bases," he said.

Arnold is particularly proud of a new procedure he guided to develop a small pallet that fits inside Russian-made Mi-8 transport helicopters, which are under contract to the Corps of Engineers in Afghanistan.

Furthermore, he directed an effort to develop a standard packing list of materials and to make the entire operation accessible through Internet systems, which he based on the Air Force's model of in-transit visibility. "We used those same principles and applied them to the Army concept of operations," he said.

The result is that forward operating bases now receive supplies in organized shipments on a regular schedule, which marks an improvement on the previous method of delivering supplies piecemeal on a haphazard schedule, he said.

The improved system should benefit the Corps of Engineers long after Arnold rotates out. Conversely, he'll take with him the Army's concept of standardized property accountability, he said.

Working alongside Army personnel has been particularly beneficial, as might be expected, concerning security measures, Benson said.

"They're security forces by trade. They know that business. It's inherent in their jobs," Benson said in regard to Army personnel. "Especially with Col. Martin here, I've learned so much about movements, force protection within our compound, interactions with battle space owners."

The Army is renowned for security training, which greatly streamlines planning and reduces risk while working in a war environment, he said. “I’ve learned a lot,” he said.

Martin said he appreciates the diverse perspectives that Air Force personnel have brought to the organization. “It’s a good way of mixing things up to fill critical spots. A fresh set of eyes is a good thing to have,” he said.

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Afghanistan Engineer District-North Air Force personnel (photo by Joe Marek)