



TORRID HORIZON

Graduates set the
cornerstones for the future
of the Afghan Air Corps

**BY LT. COL. STEVEN
ORIE, CLASS OF 1990**

Building an independent security force for Afghanistan has always been a top priority for the Department of Defense. A key element to this objective is the Afghanistan National Army Air Corps (ANAAC) which provides a strategic role in supporting allied forces and keeping peace in the region. The US Air Force 438th Air Expeditionary Wing (AEW) is charged with establishing the conditions for a professional, fully independent Afghan Air Force. The 438th's mission is clear: train an Afghan Air Force that is capable of meeting the security requirements of their nation today and into the future.

Lt. Col. Rod Melzer, '94, walks with local Afghan Airmen.

The 438th Air Expeditionary Wing accomplishes these objectives by embedding advisors into each of the Afghan groups and squadrons to provide guidance to the key leaders. Throughout the course of this mission, both graduates and staff members of the U.S. Air Force Academy have played an essential role in mentoring the fledgling Afghan pilots, officers and commanders.

Brig. Gen. Mike Boera is commander of the 438th Air Expeditionary Wing. In a previous assignment, he was the Cadet Group 2 Air Officer Commanding at USAFA. He set the vision for the way ahead with the ANAAC by stating the goal for the 438 AEW: "We set the conditions to bring the Afghan Air Force to the next level of capability en-route to a professional, fully independent, Air Force, which meets the security needs for Afghanistan today ... and tomorrow." As the advisor to the corps commander, he spearheads the mission in bringing the Afghan leadership into the fold on all military decisions. Boera consistently emphasizes the importance of self reliance among the senior officers he trains. His primary lesson teaches Afghans to take responsibility and to make decisions that are right for the Afghan Air Corps.

Lt. Col. Bernie "Jeep" Willi, '90, is the 438th's Rotary Wing Program Manager and Mi-17 helicopter pilot. Jeep divides his time between teaching the Afghan helicopter aircrew to perform MEDIVAC, CSAR and air assault missions in both day and night conditions. As the program manager for the Mi-17s Hips and the Mi-35s Hinds, he works through the myriad of challenges associated with acquiring and sustaining a Russian OEM helicopter fleet, all as a program office of one.

Lt. Col. Rod Melzer, '94, is the Director of Operations for the 438th Air Expeditionary Advisory Squadron (AEAS). His deployment began in Kabul, and he flew rotations through Her'At in the western portion of Afghanistan, running operational missions supporting Afghan kandaks and coalition units. Today, he flies missions with the Afghan pilots into the southern

provinces out of Kandahar. Melzer also conducts training missions twice a week.

On the fixed-wing side of flying, the AN-32 is a Ukrainian-made twin turbo-prop workhorse designed for short and medium range transport. Academy grads Maj. Jake Lukens, '00, and Lt. Col. Mark Hersant, '92, head up the program, with Hersant acting as Director of Operations for the 538th AEAS. After getting qualified in Ukraine on the Russian AN-32, the US pilots arrived at Kabul to begin their advisory role. They have been enormously successful with the squadron, supporting 2,300 combat sorties, 68,197 troop movements, 492 medical evacuations and the movement of, 396 human remains and 195 tons of cargo. Their success is admirable, considering they only have five aircraft. Yet the planes themselves are hardly the greatest challenge facing these grads. Both Lukens and Hersant would agree that overcoming significant language and cultural barriers while facing non-existent passenger control measures greatly outweighs the difficulty of flying a foreign aircraft. Throw in the violent conflicts between Afghan crews and soldiers, and flying the aging AN-32 is easy by comparison.

Always forging ahead, Hersant laid the ground work for the reception and stand-up of yet another twin turbo-prop medium transport, the Italian-made C-27 Spartan. With the introduction of a western aircraft, he had to implement 11 formal courses to prepare the aircrew for the first all-weather, day/night tactical aircraft flown by the ANAAC.

Lt. Col. Steve Orie, '90, (now stationed at USAFA) commanded the 440th Air Expeditionary Advisory Squadron during his latest deployment. The 440th plays a pivotal role in the support of the entire fleet of ANAAC aircraft. His team was embedded in all facets of daily maintenance production. Since his arrival in February 2009, Orie was instrumental in helping the Afghans double their Mi-17 Hip fleet, re-energize their Mi-35 Hind gunship program and bed-down the

newly-arrived Spartans. Under his mentorship, the Afghanistan National Army Air Corps flew over 5,000 sorties delivering 33,000 passengers and 739 tons of cargo throughout Afghanistan over the past year. The Corps also played a role in Afghanistan's Presidential Election, delivering twenty-seven tons of ballot materials to remote provinces. Throughout 2009, the 440th rescued over five-thousand villagers displaced by floodwaters, stood-up three forward operating bases and hosted several high-ranking officials, including Secretary of Defense Robert Gates.

Many Air Force officers enjoy the familiarity of a sturdy C-17 Globemaster, the deadly accuracy of an F-16 Fighting Falcon and the rugged reliability of a UH-60 Blackhawk. Yet this contingent of officers operating in Afghanistan works under different circumstances altogether, where problem solving and adaptation are a way of life. Orie comments, "A significant challenge has been the Russian technical orders and documentation. The Mil Design Bureau and Antonov aircraft have a completely different method for components and airframe management. With the requirement to ensure the aircraft are maintained to as close to OEM standards as possible, it has been a continual challenge to ensure we are not missing any steps in the process."

The 440th has made huge strides during the past year and continues to push towards western aviation standards. Driving towards regular scheduled maintenance and getting away from flying their hardware to the point of failure has been just one of the major successes. Orie has since handed over command to Lt. Col. Kimberly (Kadryna) Tooman, '94.

Col. Jeff Meyer, '88, commands the 439th Air Expeditionary Advisory Squadron. His squadron consists of 54 USAF, USMC and Afghan interpreters who train, advise and equip over 900 Afghan Air Corps personnel. The Afghan Mission Support Group (MSG) covers five functional areas—Logistics, Civil Engineering, Communications, Security Forces and Technical



The 438th Air Expeditionary Wing

Services. The 439th mirrors the ANAAC MSG organization and also covers Personnel and Finance. Meyer is confident the Air Corps could function at the bare bones level if provided the resources and contracts for technical support functions such as civil engineering craftsmen, vehicle mechanics and computer technicians. During his command, resources have improved, but developing training for the technical functions has been the greatest challenge.

The 439th has capitalized on existing contracts to get on-the-job training for certain functions. Meyer has focused on training and working with the Kabul Air Corp Training Center to develop technical schools that can provide the basic “3-level” technicians they need. Meyer stated, “Finding an Afghan solution to an Incident Management Response system has been an exciting project. After trying to talk and write our way into developing a system, we learned that the best approach was to just develop simple scenarios and exercise them. This way the Afghan personnel can see for themselves what works and what doesn’t. It’s been an exciting and challenging year building an Air Force based on experience and ingenuity, adapting known solutions to another culture.”

Capt. Walt Heathcoat, deployed from USAFA’s Superintendent’s command sec-

tion, serves as Manpower Advisor to the ANAAC Headquarters, G3 Operations Directorate, Force Management Office. Working within Afghan and United States channels, using the iron-flow schedule, infrastructure plans and training pipeline data, Heathcoat built a manpower database that captures Air Corps needs over a six-year period. He identified a 1,000 personnel authorization shortfall, gained approval for a 44 percent increase by 2016, and ensured Afghan leadership understood the campaign plan’s strategic direction. Heathcoat also partnered with team leaders and built the detailed 2010 tashkil (Unit Equipment and Manning Document) implementing a single-year 55 percent increase in manpower. While doing all this, he earned the convoy commander qualification and led over 30 convoys in the high-threat environment.

MSgt. John Agnew, former staff to the Academy’s Dean of Faculty, is the backbone of the 438th Air Expeditionary Advisory Group Civil Engineering team. Not only does he support the group and wing with day to day facilities management, he is integrated into the development of the ANAAC base structure. Every advisor at Kabul International Airport is dependent upon the support Agnew provides. When there are problems with the facilities, he is

the first on the scene to correct the issue. With the spotty civil engineering work and poor quality from Chinese components that went into setting up the compound, he is never short on things to fix.

While significant effort has gone into building a command infrastructure in Kabul, the province is only one of many in Afghanistan which are undergoing a major overhaul. Capt. Scott Howe, ’05, is a 438th AEW Civil Engineering Planner and deputy J-7 Director. Bringing his experience from a previous deployment in Iraq, he has traveled Afghanistan extensively, laying plans for the future. Scott managed the completion of a 90 million dollar infrastructure program, literally building the foundation for the future Afghan Air Corps. He developed 35 projects valued at over 139 million dollars all across the nation, from Kabul to Kandahar to Her’At. Howe also drove significant operational initiatives, including the design of two separate camps, in all, supporting 225 forward deployed U.S. advisors.

Lt. Col. John McCurdy, ’88, is commander of the 738th Air Expeditionary Advisory Squadron, which supports the Afghan “Air University” (AU). AU is essentially Maxwell, Goodfellow and Lackland rolled into one. Currently in Afghanistan, there is about an 80% illiteracy rate among new Air Corps recruits. Therefore, one of McCurdy’s biggest

goals is to help build a remedial educational program to ensure Afghan airmen are ready for training. In America, it's easy to take basic education for granted. Reading and writing are a way of life for every 10-year-old child. However, in the Middle East, such basic skills are not so readily available to the average citizen. In an effort to bring Afghan personnel up to speed, McCurdy recently added instructors to help new recruits through 3rd-grade math, reading, and writing, before starting more advanced technical training. The next step is to deploy unit-based instructors to implement after-work programs through the 12th grade level, while standing up a basic 60-hour in-residence junior college for senior enlisted and officers who need college degrees. Professional military education is also offered, beginning with an Air Corps orientation course, for new recruits. March 2010 saw the beginning of an Air Basic Course, and these two programs will be expanded over the next year to cover mid and senior-level officers and enlisted. Technical training is offered at Kabul, and by the end of the year it will cover every career field in the Air Corps.

McCurdy loves the challenges and rewards of being at the ground floor of something that can have a profound impact on not only the Air Corps, but on Afghanistan overall. "The potential effects of strong education and professional development programs are pretty exciting," he says. "This is definitely the most satisfying job I've ever had in the Air Force."

Thanks in large part to the Academy graduates and staff members, the 438th Air Expeditionary Wing is on schedule to complete their task of preparing the Afghans to independently operate their Air Corps before 2016. At present, the Afghans have 45 military aircraft and fewer than 3,000 assigned personnel. Those numbers are expected to grow to 154 aircraft and over 8,000 personnel between now and 2016. The USAFA members are having a strategic influence through their tactical actions on a daily basis. Just as the United States Air Force grew out of the Army Air Corps after World War II, the 438th is building the nucleus of a future Afghan Air Force out of the ANAAC. ✓



From top: Lt. Col. Steve Orie, '90, explains training policies to Col. Abdul Shafi. Lt. Col. Berni Willi, '90, makes friends with local Afghan airmen. From the Left: John Agnew, Steve Orie, Mark Hersant, Walt Heathcoat, Jeff Meyer and John McCurdy.