

## **The National Military Academy of Afghanistan: a First-Hand Account**

**by LTC Ray Nelson, USMA '83**

The United States Military Academy has been involved in a project of great import to the people of Afghanistan for about 18 months. It began with a request from the commander of the Office of Military Cooperation, Afghanistan, then Major General Karl Eikenberry, USMA '73, to the Superintendent of the United States Military Academy for assistance in developing a concept plan for a National Military Academy of Afghanistan. This institution is now a reality. This NMAA accepted its first cadets on 3 February 2005, graduated them from Cadet Basic Training on 17 March, and held a grand opening ceremony on 22 March.

The initial plan was written by COL Barney Forsythe, USMA '70 and LTC Casey Neff, USMA '82, to conform to the expressed wishes of the provisional government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan for a four year institution modeled after West Point and awarding its graduates an internationally recognized degree. Since October of 2003 15 officers and one civilian professor (Dr. Larry Butler of DPE) from the staff and faculty of USMA have spent one to three months in Afghanistan working to help turn the vision into an academy. Ravaged by decades of war, Afghanistan is a country that, in a colorful expression coined by Casey Neff, aspires to third world status. Nothing is easy here, not for the people or for the coalition forces lending their efforts to rebuild this country as an Islamic Republic with democratic foundations and values. The creation of the National Military Academy of Afghanistan has been no exception.

This article is not intended to be a complete history of the process; that is better written by someone who has seen more of it than I have. COL James Wilhite, a reservist with 39 years service and a remarkable biography, has been the shepherd of this project from its lowest point in May of 2004, when the budget was zero dollars and no rational person would have predicted success, to the point where cadets are in the classrooms taking instruction from the faculty.

Before going any further, I must point out that there were five other officers from West Point here during my tenure. LTC Vern Davis, USMA '81, was here over the Christmas and New Years holidays putting the Cadet Basic Training plan and resources together. He left the day after I arrived. COL Chris King, Head of the Department of Geography and Environmental Engineering (and USMA '05 parent), and COL Gene Ressler, USMA '78, Deputy Head of the Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science arrived the week before I did. COL King worked mostly on putting together the details of the academic program and preparing the academy to begin teaching classes on 23 March. He was at once the Dean, Registrar, and the Dean's Staff. COL Ressler established an information technology infrastructure second to none in Afghanistan and left behind a detailed plan for completion of the project. LTC Buck Buchanan, USMA '81, arrived a few weeks after me and worked on the

military science curriculum and the opening ceremony. MAJ Brent Novak, former TAC officer and member of the USCC staff, arrived a few weeks before I left and went to work on the SOP for the Afghan Corps of Cadets. I don't want to slight their contributions, but this is a personal story; it is my impression of what I have seen.

I am among the luckiest of the volunteers from West Point because I saw the cadets arrive, watched them train, and witnessed the opening of the academy and the beginning of classes. I arrived here on 21 January and was given the mission of overseeing Cadet Basic Training. On the morning of January 24, I was introduced to the leadership of the Academy, meeting as they did every day at that time in a single office heated by a boukhari, or small wood-burning stove. It was snowing heavily—a fact so unusual in itself that it presaged a great deal about my experience here (see Figure 1). I had already begun to absorb the plans that my predecessor and fellow physics professor, Vern Davis, had put into place. I was worrying about who would train the cadets; how their rooms would be arranged; whether they would have furniture, uniforms, and weapons; and where the fuel, transportation, bullets, and other supplies would come from. R-day was 10 very short days away.



**Figure 1: My first day at the NMAA. The buildings in the background are in various stages of renovation and this is the heaviest snowstorm in decades--and the first of several over the next few weeks. Photo by Ray Nelson.**

I had actually become cautiously optimistic about these things a couple of days earlier. Vern had done a magnificent job of planning, but by far his most important contribution was to make it clear that training can not happen without trainers. I had met a team from Coalition Joint Task Force Phoenix, an Indiana National Guard Brigade, who would make my life over the next eight weeks a

greater pleasure than I could possibly have imagined. TF Phoenix, charged with the training and mentoring of the entire Afghan National Army, had given up a team of 6 magnificent soldiers to support our mission. They were led by a 37 year old high school social studies teacher, CPT Eric Creviston, who was also the director of the Indiana state Officer Candidate School. The rest of the group consisted of 1SG Steven Ridings, 1SG Paul Young, 1SG Anthony Hall, 1SG Todd Brown, and 1SG Rodney Spade. When they came to Kabul Compound for the first meeting at which we discussed training philosophy and goals for CBT, I looked across the table at all those chevrons and knew it was going to work. We were about to set the best possible example for our Afghan friends of how to things get done—find good NCOs and trust them to accomplish the mission.



**Figure 2: My first meeting with the NMAA leadership. From left to right, COL Hamdullah, Deputy Commander for Education (Dean); COL Kazim, Chief of Staff; myself; COL Akhbar, Director of Admissions; MG Sharif, Commander; and COL Amanullah, Executive Officer. Photo by COL Jim Wilhite.**

The team's first mission was to train the trainers. We had been promised a team of 16 Afghan NCOs and 8 Afghan Officers to supplement the training and tactical department staff that had already been accessed at NMAA. It turned out that the hasty deal had circumvented some of the Afghan bureaucracy, so some ruffled feathers had to be smoothed, but they arrived on 25 January (see Figure 3) and began a crash course in United States Army-style training conducted by the Phoenix team.



**Figure 3: The Afghan National Army NCOs and Officers that helped train the new cadets arrived on 25 January. On the right is a profile that says it all—these were among the finest soldiers in the ANA. Photos by Ray Nelson**

Train the trainer went well. As further proof that nothing happens without pain here in Afghanistan, the lack of heat and power in the building at NMAA led us to conduct this training in a borrowed building at the Afghan Central Corps headquarters at Pol e Charki, on the outskirts of Kabul (see Figure 4). Meanwhile, the OMC-A team worked on getting some furniture and bedding so that we could get started. We obtained sufficient stocks out of the ANA depot to hold us over until we could spend the \$1M of Afghan funds allocated to the academy for the fiscal year that would end on 20 March. Deliveries started to happen, and we began to appreciate the energy and independence of our Afghan friends as they arranged the billets and offices. We took possession of the first building, the only one we would have for the duration of basic training, from the construction contractor before it had heat, lights, or water, and started to prepare it for cadets. It was at this point in time that I realized the genius of Jim Wilhite. Rather than seeing time as our enemy in an environment of extreme constraints, Jim saw it as our only real friend. As long as he stubbornly refused to push back R-day, we would have to find a way to make it happen. Some of us have said that the only thing that happened on time in the entire project was the arrival of the cadets. And starting on 3 February, arrive they did.



**Figure 4: CPT Eric Creviston, Indiana National Guard, conducting train-the-trainer at Pol-e-charki. Photo by Ray Nelson**

That first day another big snowstorm hit Kabul, but there was no possibility of ruining the atmosphere of sheer joy that radiated from both our team and the Afghan staff and faculty (see Figure 5). That day, 81 cadets arrived, followed by another 28 during the next several days. Some arrived on foot from remote provinces wearing open-toed sandals. They are as fit and intelligent a group of young men as anyone would care to meet, and it has been a great privilege to watch them progress through their training.



**Figure 5: On the left is the new cadet who ranked highest on the written entrance exam, Jamshid Dizhad, with COL Jim Wilhite. On the right, Jim enjoys a moment of sheer delight with COL Hamdullah. Photos by LTC Tim Porter and Ray Nelson**

Because anything that requires logistics is so very difficult here, R-day was a three day rather than a one day process. On the third day, we bused the cadets to Kabul Military Training Center, where they received their uniforms and equipment. Two days later they looked something like soldiers, with new haircuts and BDUs. Training began in earnest almost immediately. The most remarkable feature of this training was the way in which the Afghan staff of the NMAA immediately took ownership of it. They prepared and rehearsed their lessons and training plans eagerly, and their enthusiasm for the process led me to change my approach. Rather than worrying about whether training would happen, I began to encourage the Afghans to decide for themselves where they wanted to go. To accept the idea that a plan can change was in itself a big step for these officers who had all been trained in old Soviet models of leadership. By the end of CBT they owned the schedule, and I was gratified when they chose to add two days of additional field training including a squad live fire exercise and a machine gun range (See Figure 6). They also added a great fun event, an afternoon of sports competitions between the cadets and soldiers from Task Force Phoenix and OMC-A. The cadets dominated everything except the tug of war (See Figure 7).



**Figure 6. Highlights of Cadet Basic Training--bayonet training on the left and a machine gun range on the right. Photos by Ray Nelson.**

These new cadets had a quality training experience. Was time wasted? Yes. Were there logistical problems with ammunition, transportation, fuel, etc.? Yes. But these obstacles were overcome. I am confident that in the future, with more robust resources and longer planning cycles, the capable staff of the NMAA will produce an even more professional product. Personally, I keep reminding myself that we should be comparing our situation to that at West Point in 1802. By that measure, the job that the NMAA staff, the Afghan trainers, and the TF Phoenix team did was nothing short of miraculous. I could not be more proud of my association with them.



**Figure 7. Sports Day--1SG Spade encourages one of his team members who is about to lose a push up contest to an Afghan cadet. Right: COL Wilhite looks on as the American tug of war team dominates this event. Photos by Ray Nelson.**

As training came to a close, planning for the grand opening of the Academy was well underway, but on Saturday, 12 March, the tactical department staff surprised me with an announcement that there would be a formal graduation ceremony to mark the conclusion of Cadet Basic Training. At this ceremony, to take place on 17 March, cadets would receive certificates marking their completion of the training and some select cadets would be recognized for their particularly noteworthy performance. In addition, the cadets would swear their oath to Afghanistan on this occasion.

During those days, things were happening very quickly. Other members of the team were deeply immersed in their own duties. COL King was finalizing the academic calendar and schedule and conducting faculty development sessions (see Figure 8). LTC Buchanan and LTC Porter were working with the Afghan Ministry of Defense to plan the grand opening ceremony. Shekib Sameh, the entire IT department of the NMAA, was completing the set up of several computer labs (See Figure 9). The byzantine Afghan acquisition process had been tamed by MAJ Doug Hays, and supplies, furniture, and equipment were arriving every day (and almost as frequently being rejected for poor quality). COL Wilhite was juggling the whole set of chainsaws. The Corps of Engineers and its contractor were completing the initial phase of construction, and we had taken possession of two more of the buildings. Classrooms were being set up with new furniture, clocks, and white boards. Buildings were being carpeted and bleachers for the athletic fields were being fabricated on site by a contractor.



**Figure 8: The faculty of the NMAA listen to COL Chris King conducting a faculty development workshop on 5 March. To COL King's left are our interpreter, Dr. Massoum, and COL Hamdullah. Photos by Ray Nelson.**



**Figure 9: COL Gene Ressler and Shekib Sameh configuring the first 5 of the 270 computers slated to be installed at the NMAA this year. Right: Shekib standing in a completed lab on 15 March. Photos by Ray Nelson.**

The graduation ceremony took place amidst this flurry of activity. On the morning of 17 March, we arrived at the NMAA at about 0800 hrs, anticipating a 1000 ceremony. At 0900 the contractor's scaffolding around the reviewing stand was being removed, and at 0940 the final coat of paint was being rolled on. The ceremony started on time. It was an inspirational event. I do not recall at the end of my own CBT experience having a cadet representative of my class give a speech thanking the cadre and trainers for the experience, but it happened here (see Figure 11). Watching these cadets in their uniforms marching proudly past the reviewing stand was the high point of my tour here in Afghanistan. The high point for the cadets was the moment of swearing their oath (see Figure 10). After all the cadets had completed this rite of passage, there were speeches and awards. One of my favorite photographs is the one seen in Figure 11 of one of the top performing cadets, Zabihullah Kohi, marching up to the reviewing stand to receive his certificate.





**Figure 10. Cadets from Company B swearing their oath with their hands on excerpts from the Koran. Photo by Kansas Army National Guard MAJ Rick Peat, OMC-A PAO**



**Figure 11. Left: Cadet Zabihullah Kohi marching to the reviewing stand to receive a certificate for outstanding performance during Cadet Basic Training. Right: Cadet Jamshid Dizhad thanking the cadre, trainers, and staff on behalf of the 109 members of the class of 2009. Photos by Kansas Army National Guard MAJ Rick Peat, OMC-A PAO**

Some weeks before the completion of cadet basic training I was struck by the coincidence of the grand opening of the NMAA falling on 22 March and our own West Point Founder's Day falling on 16 March. I started the process of planning a West Point Founder's Day Dinner by sending an all hands email to all those stationed here at Camp Eggers, asking who would be interested. There is a special camaraderie in a war zone that transcends even the most profound rivalries. A number of graduates, of course, expressed interest in attending, but I also received very gracious replies from two USNA grads, an Air Force spouse of a USMA grad, a chaplain who was a former admissions field force member, and a former B-2 TAC, BG (Ret) Herb Lloyd. Word soon spread beyond the compound until we had 46 prospective attendees. This included the current Dean, BG Dan Kaufman, USMA '68, and his party that came from West Point for the opening ceremony of the NMAA. The Dean's companions included Barney Forsythe and Casey Neff, as well as COL Barry Shoop from the Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science; MAJ Holly West, USMA '91, the Dean's XO; and Vinnie Viola, USMA '77. (COL Shoop had been in Afghanistan the previous summer working on the project; Vinnie Viola is the principal donor for the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.) We also invited MG Sharif, the commander of the NMAA and COL Hamdullah, the Deputy Commander for Education (Dean). BG Kaufman spoke as the oldest graduate present. 1LT Blake Schwarz '03 was the youngest graduate there and spoke eloquently of his preparation for leading soldiers in combat. The featured speaker was COL Jim Wilhite, mentioned earlier in this piece. We had entertainment provided by another member of the implementation team, LTC Tim Porter, and finished with the alma mater and the cadet prayer. We took class photos for Assembly, but a group photo can be seen in Figure 12.



**Figure 12. Most of the attendees at the Camp Eggers Founders Day Dinner, 22 March 2005. BG Dan Kaufman is flanked on his right by COL Hamdullah, Deputy Commander for Education of the NMAA, and on his right by MG Sharif, Commander of the NMAA. Photo by COL Chris King.**

The next morning it all came together in some very special moments. COL King had been working the academic program all along, and I had assisted him a little near the end, but classes had not really been on my mind that much. On 23 March, however, the faculty had its day in the sun. BG Kaufman and his party visited several classes before their departure (See Figures 13 and 14). For me, as a physics teacher, it was a very special moment. That day it was clear that we had created an Academy. The faculty embraced their mission as enthusiastically as the training and tactical staff had embraced Cadet Basic Training.



**Figure 13: COL Mohammed Eqbal Fahzi addresses his English class on the first day of instruction, 23 March. Right: BG Kaufman addresses an Afghan History class on a historic day. The interpreter, Dr. Sardar, has been affiliated with the NMAA project from the very beginning. Photos by COL Jim Wilhite.**

I conclude this reminiscence with two thoughts. First: the “Alma Mater” expresses the wish that “when our work is done...may it be said, “Well, done; Be thou at peace.” I am satisfied that West Point will maintain its commitment to Afghanistan, but I also prepare to leave here satisfied that my little piece of the enterprise has been a success. Second: many of the participants have said that this is the most important thing they have done in their military careers. It may well turn out to be so, but as I listened to Lieutenant Schwartz speak at the Founder’s Day Dinner, I knew that what we do at West Point is still just as important to our own country as this academy is going to be for the future of Afghanistan.

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**Figure 14: The American team and the Dean's party on the first morning of classes, 23 March. Front row, kneeling, left to right: SGM Art Granado, Vinnie Viola. Second row: LTC Buck Buchanan, COL Jim Wilhite, MAJ Holly West, BG Dan Kaufman, Dr. Sardar, COL Barry Shoop. Third Row: LTC Ray Nelson, COL Chris King, COL Barney Forsythe, MAJ Doug Hays. Not shown: LTC Tim Porter, MAJ Brent Novak, LTC Casey Neff. Photo credit unknown.**