



**18th Engineer Brigade
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902nd EN CO: Hammer Forward

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KABUL, AFGHANISTAN – Elements from the 902nd EN CO, 15th Engineer Battalion arrived at the Kabul Base Cluster on Nov. 21st. Over the coming months, they will be finishing construction on new living areas to support a redistribution of forces within the area of operations. The forward deployed construction force includes a main element from 902nd EN CO, with several supporting attachments from the Battalion staff and Forward Support Company.

The mission is a landmark in Battalion history; this will be one of their first construction missions conducted in a combat theater since Vietnam in 1969, where they participated in eight major operations and received three prestigious awards from the Republic of Vietnam.

For SPC Karlos Contreras, a medic attached to the 902nd EN CO, this is his first deployment to the Middle East. “I was surprised. From everything you hear about Afghanistan, I wasn’t expecting the U.S. footprint to be this well developed; I was expecting dirt roads, battle-scarred T-walls...it’s pretty different than what you hear. At least in Kabul.”

The project started under the 367th EN BN several months ago. Difficulties with the construction materials have halted progress several times already, and it seems to be a problem inherent with working in a developing nation. SFC Carpenter, the Battalion Construction Operations NCOIC, asserts that one of the main problems is inconsistency with the flow of supplies; ordering twenty plumbing fixtures, for example, might arrive in two shipments of ten about three weeks apart.

There are prominent challenges outside of construction, as well. SSG DeLarosa, acting Platoon Sergeant, cited his concerns about maintaining physical fitness while acclimating to Kabul’s combination of thin air and heavy smog.

Since the Battalion’s reactivation in July of 2008, Soldiers have put thousands of training hours into honing their skills and learning their craft. SFC Roland Tajalle, Platoon Sergeant from Yigo, Guam, explains: “This is finally a chance to really use what we’ve been practicing. Our past missions supported [other Army agencies], but with this one, you really feel like you’re helping the fight directly.”

“It’s a big project,” says 1LT Brent Johnson, the Battalion’s forward Construction Officer. “Being on the ground here, and seeing the current conditions, you can really see that

you're doing a job these guys need done, and that nobody else can do. It's what being an Engineer is all about."

The mission is complex; construction will involve erecting several Pre-Engineered Buildings, or PEBs, with extensive dry walling, welding, window installation, roofing, and more. After the main buildings are stood up, they'll have to be outfitted with the infrastructure services such as running water, electricity, and communication lines.

SPC Antonio Jones, a plumber working with 1st Platoon from Warner Robins, Ga, reiterates the problem with construction supplies. "The only real challenge is not having all of the BOM. At times, small leaks can become a challenge if you fix one, and another pops up, [because you might have only allocated enough resources to fix the first one.]"

SPC Jason Jeter, an electrician with 3rd Platoon from Jacksonville, N.C., elaborates. "When it comes to electrical, having the right materials is a must - especially when it comes to bathrooms, since they're required to have certain waterproof items." Despite the challenges, he expressed his excitement in working on the project. "This is the first official electric project my platoon has done. Our four week AIT course gave us a good foundation, but we have a lot to learn in areas like bending conduit, troubleshooting, and advance wiring; this project has allowed every Soldier to learn and combine past knowledge to complete the mission."

In addition to the primary mission, several side missions are being conducted simultaneously for the low density skill sets. For SFC Erich Stemmerding, NCOIC of the 534th Survey and Design Detachment, his element has been taking full advantage of the situation. "One thing our section was really lacking experience with was the design software. So we started working with the camp's Department of Public Works on whatever drawings or quick surveys they need done, to make sure we provide this base cluster the maximum possible support; they haven't seen troop construction capabilities in a long time."

1LT Jerome Jose, the Battalion's forward communications officer, also plans to use his time wisely. "Of course, from a communications perspective, you're going to have a lot of the same problems and work that you have in the rear. But with a smaller element, I'm getting some more down-time, so I've started working with the [base camp's] Information and Telecommunications Office to learn my way around the network better. I think it'll really be useful to work at the bigger picture level for a while." 1LT Jose was sent forward to ensure that 902nd EN CO and supporting elements had effective communications immediately upon arrival.



SPC Jackson receives an impromptu lesson about electrical wiring in Afghanistan



Soldiers of the 902nd EN CO complete wiring on the exterior of a Pre-Engineered Building



SSG Tajalle and SGT Flores discuss the construction plan in the platoon's makeshift office within one of the buildings under construction