

Corps of Engineers supports U.S. Air Force operations at Bagram air base

by Joan Kibler

In a truly collaborative effort, the U.S. Air Force and the U.S. Army came together to design and construct a runway and other facilities to support Air Force operations at Bagram air base, Afghanistan. The accomplishments result from the efforts of Afghan and U.S. personnel who are contributing to increased air power that supports international efforts to strengthen and stabilize Afghanistan.

Completion of a new 11,825-foot runway was celebrated in ceremonies in late December 2006 attended by Afghan officials, Air Force and Army personnel, and civilian contractors. Additional facilities are also under construction.

ACC provides project oversight and project execution for U.S. Central Command Air Forces (CENTAF). The Army Corps of Engineers' Transatlantic Programs Center serves as the program execution agent for ACC's expeditionary projects in the U.S. Central Command area of operations. For work at Bagram air base, the Afghanistan Engineer District (AED) is responsible for construction.

"The runway is significant because it increases the Air Force's capabilities at Bagram air base," said Jack Ham, chief of one of TAC's five Project Management Divisions and primary liaison with the U.S. Air Force's Air Combat Command.

"Due to the deteriorated condition of the runway surface, FOD (foreign object debris)- sensitive aircraft could not be operated out of Bagram," said George Gogel, ACC chief for Overseas Construction. "This limited the Air Force to using only A-10s for close air support."

"The Air Force identified specific projects at Bagram that would improve overall airfield operations and safety of its personnel," Ham said. The runway project consisted of building a new, longer asphalt runway with 1,200-foot long concrete sections at each end, parallel and adjacent to the existing Russian-built runway.

"Most aircraft in the Air Force's inventory can be accommodated on that base," Ham said. "Now, the airfield can accommodate the large cargo planes such as the C-5 Galaxy, wide body Boeing 747s, and fighter aircraft such as F-15s and F-16s.

"No longer do air shipments and personnel arrive in the theater at another location to be offloaded and then transported to Bagram or other nearby locations," he said.

The older Russian-built runway was not able to support continuous operations in and out of the airfield. The airfield was experiencing continuous landings or take-offs, averaging every four minutes and requiring continuous maintenance to keep it operational. Hence, the Air Force initiated several projects to improve its support for coalition operations.

From contract award to a new runway

Getting from contract award to construction of a new runway was not an easy step in this project.

TAC awarded a task order contract to Contrack International, Inc., of Arlington, Va., in May 2004 for \$40 million for construction of a new aircraft ramp, repair of all main taxiways, and installation of an airfield lighting system and an instrument landing system. The runway was not included in the awarded task order.

“When this project was initiated, it was fast paced due to the urgency of the mission,” Ham said. “The project was authorized in the FY 2004 MILCON (Military Construction) Supplemental projects approved by Congress to support the global war on terror. When the Air Force justified the program using the DD Form 1391 (which contains cost estimates and a description of the proposed construction), the expectation was that the existing runway would be repaired by overlaying it with pavement.

“As the Corps worked with the Air Force to develop and prepare the request for proposal documents, concerns arose about making repairs to the existing runway while it was being used virtually nonstop. From a technical standpoint, we were also evaluating and comparing the longevity of overlaying the existing runway with new construction. For that reason, we included both repair and new construction in the task order as options.”

Ultimately, the decision was made to construct a new runway for both operational and economic reasons. “Unfortunately, the new runway construction had not been approved through the Congressional appropriations process, so the Air Force had to resubmit the 1391,” Ham said. “By supplemental agreement, the new runway, for \$15 million, was added to Contract International’s task order in April 2005.”

The Air Force continued to use the Russian-built runway throughout the construction period.

“That was advantageous during the construction for several reasons,” Ham said. “First, there were tremendous construction challenges because of the anti-tank and anti-personnel mines all over the site. It was difficult to estimate how long it would take to clear the site, and this process didn’t fit well into a compressed construction duration.”

Richard Dickson, who serves as TAC’s program manager for AED reach back support, said the plot of land for the runway was “one of the worst in the world due to the amount of unexploded ordnance and mines. It was a tough situation for every government agency that was involved and with the contractors as they worked to get the site cleared for construction. The contractor lost five people. It was traumatic.” Dickson had previously served as AED’s Deputy for Programs and Project Management for 20 months.

In addition, other facilities in the immediate vicinity were also affected by the mine clearing and had to be relocated, also contributing to a longer construction period.

In Afghanistan, the work is managed by the Bagram area office. “Because the construction period took much longer than originally scheduled, AED needed to keep consistent people involved with the project,” Dickson said.

“Sometimes that was difficult since AED assignments are normally six months in duration,” Dickson said. “But a couple of dedicated construction representatives were committed to seeing the project through to completion, and they extended multiple times. That says a great deal about the dedication of Corps people to the global war on terror mission.

“Also, certain TAC members who were involved in the project through reach back contributed significantly to the completion. Jamal Fakhouri, one of our materials engineers, spent considerable time working with the contractor on the site to get the right soil compaction to place the asphalt for the runway. His efforts were absolutely vital to the project’s completion.”

During the opening ceremony, then commander of the 455th Air Expeditionary Wing – Brig. Gen. Christopher Miller – said, “This is a vital runway and an essential part of Afghanistan’s future...This is a milestone in Bagram Airfield’s ability to support the battle for a strong and stable Afghanistan. This is a concrete and lasting expression of America’s commitment to the future of the Afghan people.”

Contract International, Inc. is expected to finish taxiway repairs and installation of the airfield lighting and instrument landing systems this summer.

Bagram air base is located in the Parwan Province less than 50 miles north of Kabul. Both the Army and the Air Force are tenants on the base: the Army has responsibility for overall base operations; the Air Force, for providing aerial support for U.S. and coalition forces on the ground.

(Editor’s Notes: Some information in this story came from an article, “Bagram Airfield opens \$68 million runway,” written by Tech. Sgt. Joseph Kapinos, 455th Air Expeditionary Wing Public Affairs. Joan Kibler is the Transatlantic Programs Center’s Public Affairs Officer.)

Posted May 29, 2007.