

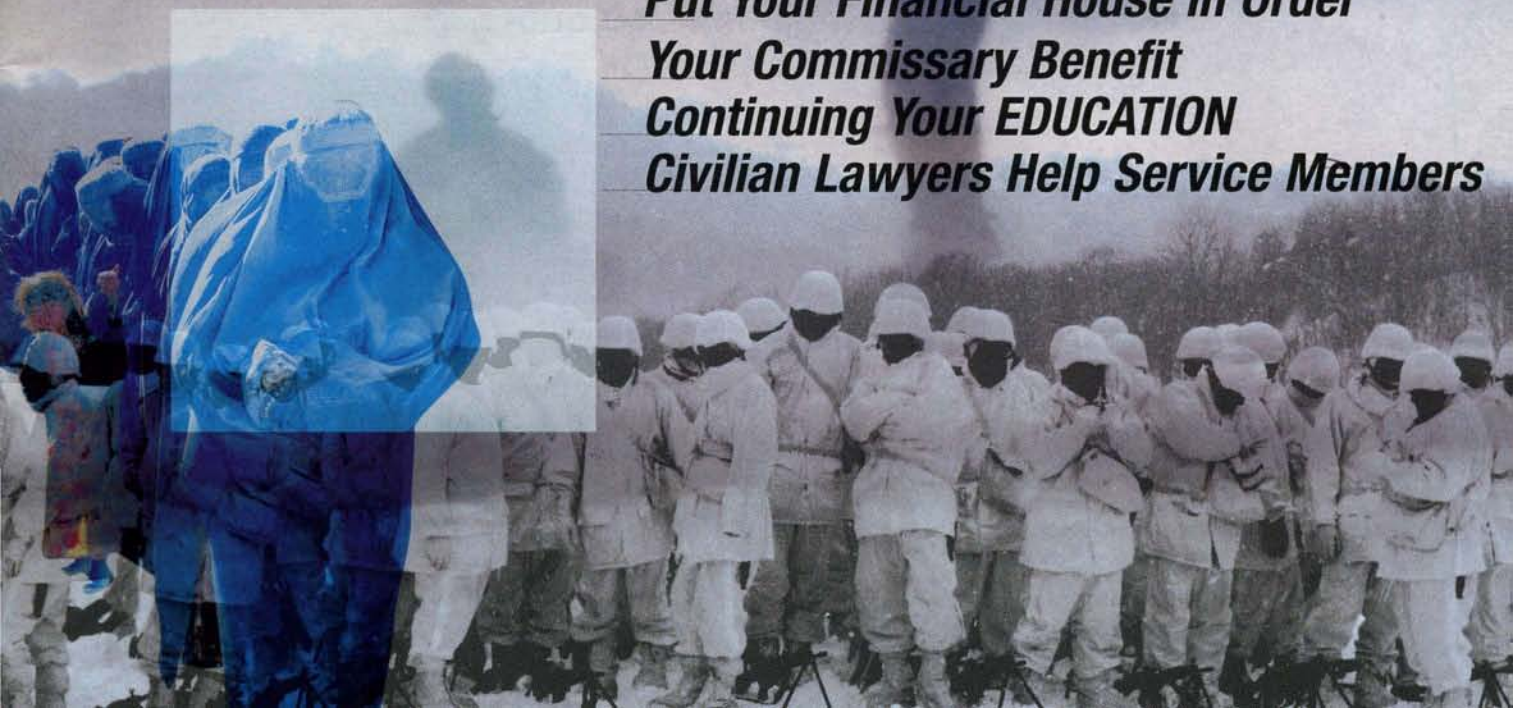


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CATSⁱⁿ AFGHANISTAN

By PAUL AVALLONE

In U.S. military vernacular, CATs are a key element in the rebuilding of post-war Afghanistan—not the furry animals with whiskers and claws that meow. They are the Civil Affairs Teams (CAT) whose responsibility it is to help provide the people of Afghanistan with the initiation, expertise and financial aid to help rebuild their country.

From electricity to running water to paved roads, there was little functional infrastructure in Afghanistan in December 2001. After 25 years of war against the Russians, followed by the civil war that Afghanistan's Northern Alliance waged against the Taliban, the monumental task of getting the country back on its feet fell upon the U.S. Army's Civil Affairs battalions. And in turn, because 91 percent of the U.S. military's civil affairs battalions are Reserve units, the task belonged to citizen-soldiers who make up the Reserve companies of those battalions.

To do their jobs, the Civil Affairs companies go to secured cities, towns and rural outposts in individual six-man teams, called Coalition Humanitarian Liaison Cells, CHLC. That mouthful of letters, C-H-L-C, very soon became "Chiclet," like the gum, for short, and the nickname caught on quickly. Within a year, however, the nickname was lost, as the Army changed the name CHLC to CAT, or Civil Affairs Team.

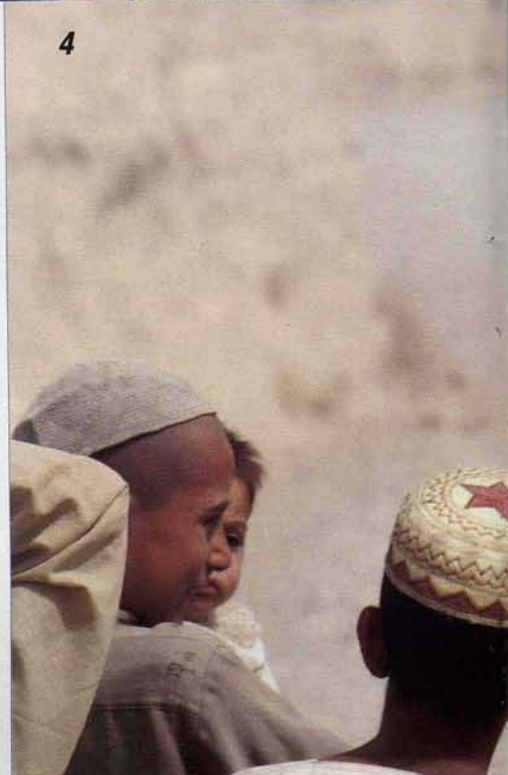
"CAT is more accurate than Chiclet," said Maj. James Hawver, who commanded a team in eastern Afghanistan from November 2002 through July 2003.

Each CAT is composed of a major, a captain, an NCOIC and three enlisted men. For the teams that are stationed away from the major U.S. bases in Kabul and Kandahar, a communications sergeant from an active duty infantry unit is added to give the CAT the ability to maintain a real-time satellite radio link back to its distant headquarters. Because of the various languages and multitude of dialects spoken in Afghanistan, each team hires from the local populace a full-time interpreter or two.

"Actually, the word 'L' part of Chiclet, meaning liaison, is accurate," said Staff Sgt. David Stansverry of what was first CHLC-9 then CAT-9, working from the city of Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan. "That's what we are. Liaisons. We (are liaisons) between the local government and U.S. and foreign relief agencies, and we make it easier to get things done."

Stansverry's CAT was from the 489th Civil Affairs Battalion from Knoxville, Tenn. The NCOIC of the CAT he was with while in Afghanistan, Stansverry in his civilian career is an accountant with the University of Tennessee in Knoxville.

"When we first arrived, we met with the governor, and his priority was, number one, to get more power out of the hydroelectric plant," said Maj. Bryan Cole, commander of Stansverry's CAT. "It's hard to function and progress as a city when power is running less than half the time."





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1. A soldier with the 101st Airborne chats with Iraqi civilians while pulling security April 15 in Baghdad, Iraq. The division's attached civil affairs battalion, the 431st CAB from Little Rock, Ark., surveyed medical sites to assess their operational status. Photo by Pfc. James Matise/U.S. Army.

2. On a walk through the streets of Jalalabad, Afghanistan, Sergeant First Class Michael Bolton of the 414th Civil Affairs Battalion, Utica, N.Y., is swarmed by villagers wanting the pens that he is giving out. Photo by Paul Avallone.

3. Sergeant Michael Dinitto listens to village elders in a rural village in eastern Afghanistan as he takes an assessment, learning the priorities the villagers' needs, from wells dug to schools built. Dinitto is a reservist with the 414th Civil Affairs Battalion in Utica, N.Y. Photo by Paul Avallone.

4. Spc. Heather Johnson from the 481st Civil Affairs speaks with children from the village of Loy Kazerak. U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Kyle Davis.



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Schools were next on the governor's list—improve the ones standing, even to the point of simply getting basic supplies, such as textbooks, chalk, pens, notepads, and the like.

And in the rural areas outside the city, "The children," Cole pointed out, "often attend class in UNICEF tents."

"Our goal is find out where structures are needed and ultimately get the funding from foreign relief agencies and the schools built," he said.

Digging, cementing and piping wells was a third priority. Except for the city of Jalalabad, eastern Afghanistan is rural and, as Stansverry explained, "there isn't any running water except for the Kabul River and some mountain streams, and it's all desert. Wells are a key to survival for these people."

With the priorities established, Cole set his team to work.

A family man who lives in Kentucky where he is a State Park Ranger and commutes a long distance to serve in the 489th in Knoxville, Tenn., Cole is familiar with working through government channels to get the job done.

The team began with the electrical generation problem. It spread out, travelled the eastern countryside, appraised and selected potential sites, analyzed each site's particular needs, then drew up plans, including exact financial figures, and forwarded detailed proposals for project and fund approval.

As for reliable and consistent electricity, the only means of production for the city of Jalalabad, besides individually owned home diesel generators, is the Nangahar Hydroelectric Dam. The dam was built 35 years ago with Russian equipment and, when Cole's team arrived, it was barely functional, with the aged, worn out turbine generators held together with the Afghan equivalent of baling wire, spit and duct tape.

Cole's team performed a detailed analysis of the electrical plant that at maximum output could only perform at 60 percent efficiency—that is, when it was running. On a daily basis all three of the plant's old Russian turbines had to be shut down for maintenance just to keep them from burning up. That daily shutdown would mean that the entire city would be blacked out for 12 hours or more at a time.

Capt. Kristo Miettinen, the team's junior officer, who is an electrical engineer in his civilian career, played a central role in the CAT's analysis of the dam.

"When all three generators were up and running," Miettinen said, "the plant could put out, max, 10 megawatts, which is about a third less than the desired 14 it should be putting out."

"That's why, I guess," Miettinen said, "it's one of the benefits of having Civil Affairs as a Reserve part of the Army. We reservists bring our civilian skills to the job here."



A member of the 401st Civil Affairs Battalion in Rochester, N.Y., Miettinen was assigned to Cole's team in eastern Afghanistan specifically for his engineering expertise—in particular, to provide the specifications and a detailed proposal for the hydroelectric plant improvements. Miettinen had impeccable credentials. As an engineer for Kodak in Rochester, N.Y., Miettinen heads a design group that builds satellite imaging devices.

Miettinen is an example of how essential the Reserve civil affairs battalions have been since the military's 1990s personnel and unit drawdown coinciding with the pre-9/11 and post-9/11 high operational tempo. Miettinen was first called up in early 2001 for an extended tour in Bosnia. Then, in January 2002, soon after the routing of the Taliban, Miettinen was again mobilized, to eventually serve nine months in Afghanistan.

Before joining Cole's CAT for its mission in eastern Afghanistan, Miettinen had worked throughout the country, with the mission to help get radio stations back on the air. During the Taliban rule, radio stations had declined and had been abandoned because of the rulers' ban on music.

Miettinen's job in each location was to analyze the needs and draw up exact proposals as to the equipment, manpower and cost of getting the stations back on the air. Those proposals were forwarded, and the the International Board of Broadcasters (IBB), which is a technical arm of the Voice of America, donated all the equipment.

"We established FM stations in Kabul, Mazir Shirif, Herot and Kandahar," said Miettinen. "Plus, a short-wave station and an AM station in Kabul. Next was Jalalabad."

With a wife and four children, ages 5, 9, 11 and 13, Miettinen admits that his back-to-back mobilizations and overseas deployments are toughest on the family at home.

"Kodak is great about me being gone," he said. "They're really flexible. They understand the importance of the jobs we're doing here. My wife? She's strong. She's an asset." As it is, his wife Denise is an integral part of his Reserve unit, being the manager of its Family Readiness Group.

Cole, Miettinen and the NCOs of the team did the initial work of appraising the most pressing needs of the area and then turned the reins over to the CAT deployed to replace them—a full team from the 414th Battalion in Utica, N.Y., led by Maj. Hawver. This team built upon Cole's team's work, guiding the already-submitted projects through the complicated funding process and canvassing the entire province, assessing the needs of scores upon scores of villages, submitting proposals for projects to be funded by both the United States and international relief agencies.

Hawver, the chief engineer for the city of Oneonta, N.Y., in his civilian career, has years of experience dealing with such things as hydroelectricity, schools and potable drinking water—the three priorities for the rural province.

"There is no immediate quick-fix," Staff Sgt. Ellingson said. "We can get the money from our government and relief agencies to get wells dug and schools built and supplies donated, and then it's up to the people themselves to take the next steps, to make their lives better."

"Our job is to provide the tools for the Afghans to make a better country for themselves," said Stansverry. "When their lives are better, that makes it harder for the enemy to come back. When the people see that it's the Americans getting these schools built or just getting their kids books and pens, it's us they'll want as their friends."

Ultimately, that is the Civil Affairs way—helping to make a better country from the devastation of decades of war and regressive rule, and winning the hearts and minds while they're doing it. One small six-man CAT team at a time.



A freelance writer and photographer, Paul Avallone is a Green Beret with the 20th Special Forces Group (Alabama National Guard) and recently returned from an extended deployment in Afghanistan.



5. Visiting a school on the outskirts of Jalalabad, Major Bryan Cole speaks (through his interpreter, left) to the girls of a class about the United States' desire to try and provide the school with materials for learning, as the girls' teacher (r) looks on. Cole is team leader of CHLC-9 (Coalition Humanitarian Liaison Cell, or "Chiclet"—later called CAT-9) from the 489th Civil Affairs Battalion in Knoxville, TN. Photo by SFC Paul Avallone.

6. Major Bryan Cole presents school supplies and toys to the headmaster of a tent school in the rural district of Chaparhar. Cole is team leader of CHLC-9 (later called CAT-9). Photo by SFC Paul Avallone.

7. Sergeant Michael Dinitto fits an Afghan village girl a pair of shoes that Dinitto's team passed out in rural Afghanistan. Dinitto is a reservist with the 414th Civil Affairs Battalion in Utica, NY. Photo by Paul Avallone.