



Air Corps mentor ends tour

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KABUL, Afghanistan - When Col. John Hansen began his work with the Afghan National Army Air Corps in October of 2005, he found only a remnant of the former Afghan air force. A force that once had 500 aircraft was reduced to only a few flyable craft. However, he was also amazed to find a small but dedicated group of pilots and maintenance people who'd managed to keep a few of those aircraft flying. He decided to build on that human capital.

"I'll never forget my first trip to the airport," he said. "I was driving around the ruins of the airport; thinking about how daunting the task was."

Starting in a single small office with only three people, the Combined Security Transition Command - Afghanistan's Air Corps mission has grown to include more than 60 personnel. Forty-four former Afghan Air Force officers have also been hired recently as contractors to mentor the renewed Air Corps.

The Afghans have been so eager to learn that the program has had to expand to catch up with them. For the last 18 months they've worked to upgrade their computer skills, logistics, maintenance and safety practices in order to modernize their force. Slowly, the minimum standards have risen.

"It hasn't always been pretty. Imagine a twenty-five year evolution compressed into two years," asked Hansen.

Not only did the Afghans learn by instruction, they also learned by watching their mentors. In fact, Hansen gives most of the mentoring credit to his non-commissioned officers. The payoff came on May 16, 2007, when



ABOVE: Brig. Gen Frank Padilla presents the Bronze Star to Col. John Hansen for his work as mentor to the ANA Air Corps. Photo provided by Maj. Jeffrey Wilmoth. **BELOW:** ANA soldiers return from the 2007 Victory Day parade while Air Corps L-39 aircraft pass in review. Photo by Petty Officer David Votroubek.

the ANA Air Corps finally met their goal of flying President Hamid Karzai in Afghan aircraft with an Afghan crew. Previously he'd always flown in coalition aircraft.



Another goal was to be able to support ANA ground combat operations from Kabul. The Air Corps had flown logistics, transport and rescue flights all along, but has only recently contributed combat support to their forces. During Operation Mountain Lion in the spring

of '06, two Air Corps helicopters flew in support of Task Force Falcon. Hansen remembers the astonished looks when the ANA troops realized that they'd be flown into combat aboard their own helicopters, and the look of pride on the faces of the Afghan aircrews.

Hansen is convinced that Afghan citizens have greater confidence in their government when they see their Air Corps aircraft in flight. This was demonstrated recently with the fly-bys during the Victory Day parade in May. Aircraft simply didn't fly during the Taliban era, explained CSTC-A Air Corps Executive Officer, Maj. Jeffrey Wilmoth.

Col. Hansen is so dedicated to the rebirth of the Air Corps he extended his tour in Afghanistan. He is now finishing up two years of service here. Wilmoth summarized Hansen's importance to the renewed Air Corps by saying simply, "Everyone knows him. He *is* Afghan Air Corps. When he leaves, it will be the end of an era." 