

## **Bridge over the river Helmand**

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Local residents of the Oruzgan province of Afghanistan and coalition forces operating in the area have long desired the ability to cross the Helmand River by foot or vehicle. That desire has now become a reality.

Local residents had employed a hand ferry in order to bring personnel or supplies to and from each side. Recently, a Bailey Bridge was constructed across the river, near the village of Oshay. Transportation of the bridge components and construction in the remote location would require the assistance of the Canadians, Americans, and most importantly, local Afghans.

Task Force ORION, the Canadian Battle Group based at Kandahar Airfield received the request to spearhead the construction of the Oshay Bridge. As a result, five Canadian combat engineers were tasked to train and assist the Afghan National Army (ANA) on the construction procedures of a Class 30 120 ft, 12 bay, Double Single, Bailey Bridge. The Oshay Bridge was to be constructed near Forward Operating Base (FOB) Cobra, an American FOB in the Oruzgan Province of Afghanistan.

Following a brief meeting with 25 ANA soldiers, we loaded into an American Chinook helicopter filled to the brim with soldiers and equipment and embarked on an exciting, and sometimes scary ride through the mountains of northern Afghanistan.

Our mission would be completed in two phases. The first phase was to train ANA personnel on safe and proper procedures for bridge construction. Phase two was the construction of a permanent Bailey Bridge across the Helmand River.



MWO Ted Bransfield stands with members of the Afghan National Army and local population on the completed Oshay Bridge.

The training aspect was an opportunity for the ANA engineers to familiarize themselves with the various bridge components and construction techniques. In total, five days were spent on training the ANA and one day dedicated entirely to learning safety precautions and heavy lifting procedures. Two days were spent training on the construction of a bridge, a day on dismantling the bridge, and a final day to teach the ANA how to palletize the various bridge components for air-lifting to FOB Cobra.

The bridge parts were air lifted by Chinooks from FOB Davis to FOB Cobra following the completion of phase one. Phase two began at the Oshay site with construction of the abutments. The abutments, in and of themselves, were a very large undertaking. In this part of northern Afghanistan there are very few roads and no heavy equipment. All supplies required for soldiers to live and fight including fuel, rations, ammunition, and drinking water, are airlifted by Chinook helicopters into FOB Cobra.

The bridge abutments were constructed over a two week period by close to 200 local Afghan's from the nearby villages. While the villagers completed this task, the ANA engineers provided local protection of the surrounding area.

Once the abutments were completed the construction of the bridge moved forward quickly. In total, the bridge required only 16 hours to build. The ANA engineers did an outstanding job working in the harsh conditions, with the temperatures reaching 45oC and blowing dust.

The ANA engineers were very proud to be standing on the bridge over the Helmand River on the final day. The five Canadians from 1 Combat Engineer Regiment were equally happy they could be a part of such a historic project.