Students practice using fuel equipment and hand and arm signals during an initial exercise. (Photo by 1st Lt. Jon Sullivan)

Afghan Air Force Refuel Training

While providing logistics support for an aviation task force in Afghanistan, a forward support company trained Afghan airmen on forward arming and refueling point operations.

■ By Capt. Lanea J. Sudweeks, Capt. David G. Jenkins, and 1st Lt. Jon P. Sullivan

In December 2013, the forward support company (FSC) with Task Force Attack, 3rd Battalion, 101st Aviation Regiment, 159th Combat Aviation Brigade, deployed to Afghanistan's Regional Command (RC) East to provide logistics support to the aviation task force and the surrounding region. The company's deployment mission was to provide primarily classes III (petroleum, oils, and lubricants) and V (ammunition) support for brigade, coalition, and Afghan aircraft and ground maintenance support for the task force.

Midway through the deployment, the FSC had a unique and somewhat unprecedented opportunity to provide forward arming and refueling point (FARP) training for select airmen of the Afghan Air Force (AAF) as they prepared to assume this mission in the near future. This article describes the processes and methods the FSC used to successfully train the AAF counterparts to assume the critically important FARP mission.

Shortfall Identified

In early 2014, as coalition forces continued to retrograde equipment and personnel from outlying regions, small bases and outposts were rapidly being turned over to Afghan forces. It became apparent that in order to maintain the operational reach provided by coalition forces and meet its refueling needs, the AAF would need to assume responsibility for the FARPs.

According to Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3–04.94, Army Techniques Publication for Forward Arming and Refueling Points, "The FARP's ability to provide fuel and

ammunition where and when needed on the battlefield is vital to the success of Army aviation combat missions." Although this description applies to U.S. Army-run FARPs, the same principles also apply to the AAF's refueling mission.

Because of the Task Force's relationship and proactive involvement with the AAF element at Forward Operating Base Fenty, discussions on building a refueling capability organic to the AAF started immediately. Both units recognized that maintaining a refueling capability in Kunar province was mission essential. However, the possibility of losing a coalition FARP in the relatively near future accelerated discussions and planning for building a refueling capability for the AAF.

Mutual interest in ensuring mission success and avoiding the "not our problem" mentality led to a unique training opportunity that strengthened the task force's partnership with the AAF. Since Task Force Attack was co-located with the Afghan aviation contingent, the mission was formally given to the task force to ensure the AAF element at the forward operating base had the capability to assume complete responsibility for FARP operations independent of U.S. or coalition forces.

Developing a Plan

The memorandum of instruction for training focused on the AAF's refueling requirements. The question became, "How do U.S. Army FARP operations and practices need to be modified in order to provide the training required for the AAF?"

The FSC decided to focus on universal practices that would ensure accountability of both the fuel and the FARP equipment, equipment maintenance, and fuel quality. For planning purposes, the FSC assumed that most of the FARP equipment would be equipment previously transferred to the Afghan military or equipment that would transfer to the AAF once coalition forces retrograded.

The training plan development was collaborative and included input from technical experts within the FSC fuel section and the distribution platoon leader. The plan assumed that none of the airmen had refueling experience and would begin with the basics. The instruction would then shift to familiarizing the airmen with the orientation and layout of a FARP and its associated equipment.

Safety procedures, hand and arm signals, and grounding and bonding procedures were to be taught first. Next, airmen would receive an in-depth understanding of FARP equipment operation, fuel site recirculation, fuel transfer, receipt of bulk fuel, fuel quality testing, and fuel accountability procedures.

Armed with a training outline, the FSC's distribution platoon leader and the Task Force Attack primary liaison officer with the AAF presented their recommended training plan to the AAF detachment commander. With a number of meetings, they determined the length and location of training and the number of students to be trained.

The task force liaison then arranged for the temporary reassignment of the brigade's cultural adviser to the task force to help facilitate the training. The daily lesson plans were created and the cultural adviser translated them by hand into Pashto for the students. Translating was a lengthy process that required the platoon leader to explain each slide's meaning to the adviser.

Training Begins

The first class began with an air of trepidation as the students, instructors, and interpreter worked through the initial awkward moments of broken communications. Although the first day was intended as a FARP overview, the students quickly expressed their interest in each piece of equipment, asking insightful, quality questions about the mechanics of the equipment, its sustainability, and long-term capabilities. The students maintained this eagerness to learn throughout the course.

On the second day, it became obvious that hands-on learning was universally preferred, especially since the Pashto language could not support the technical jargon associated with the training.

Shortly after concluding a practical exercise where students validated what they learned in class, two MI–17 Afghan Air Force cargo helicopters landed, allowing an impromptu opportunity to refuel Afghan aircraft.

The students instantly recognized the opportunity and requested personal protective equipment to refuel the aircraft. The students successfully refueled the helicopters, operating all equipment and conducting the proper hand and arm signals. This event set a positive tone for the course.

Course Challenges

Several areas of the course were destined to be difficult. The instructors anticipated that the fuel quality tests (testing for the presence of water and for filter effectiveness) and fuel accountability would be the most challenging to teach. The students proved them wrong about the fuel quality tests. They quickly caught on to the mechanics of the testing equipment and could accurately talk each other through conducting the test.

One student challenged the validity of the test and the testing equip-

ment and wanted to ensure it gave an accurate reading. He added water to the fuel sample and was satisfied when the equipment went off the scale in water readings.

Fuel accountability proved to be the most difficult subject to instruct. The process for taking accurate and consistent measurements while gauging a collapsible fabric fuel tank is a challenge for even trained Army petroleum supply specialists.

After measurements are taken, a hydrometer is used to measure the American Petroleum Institute gravity and temperature of the fuel. These measurements are cross-referenced on strapping charts and conversion tables to convert the fuel temperature to 60 degrees Fahrenheit, the standard temperature for fuel accountability.

From this point, the final amount of fuel on hand can be determined. The entire process used the American standard measurement system in addition to the American Petroleum Institute gravity measurement from the hydrometers in the testing kit. It was the most frustrating day because of the challenging measurement processes and language barriers.

At the end of the course, a final practical exercise was organized and completed using the equipment at the FARP. Students recirculated the fuel through the system, completed all required testing procedures, operated the necessary FARP equipment, and completed the exercise successfully.

Success and Graduation

A trip was planned to a FARP in RC East that the AAF may take over in the future. The possibility of turning over a coalition FARP was an important step to ensuring the Afghan leaders had buy-in before the training began. The students and the platoon leader met at the FARP, and the FARP noncommissioned officer-in-charge (NCOIC) proceeded to walk the group through the new footprint, highlighting the key differences between the two locations.

One of the AAF officers talked the other students through each piece of equipment that the NCOIC showed them, describing function and purpose and surprising the NCOIC

Cpl. Joseph Walton explains preventive maintenance checks and services on the closed circuit refueling nozzle. (Photo by 2nd Lt. Levi Leonard)

with the knowledge the students had regarding the equipment and FARP operations. Two MI–17s arrived to retrieve the students, and before leaving, the students refueled the aircraft from the new site with no assistance.

A graduation event at the AAF compound was coordinated to recognize the students at the end of the course.

Cultural Growth Opportunities

Coming into this deployment, the FSC was not prepared to advise or assist the Afghan military. Changes in the operational environment led to a requirement that opened opportunities for leaders at the company and battalion task force levels to interact with the Afghan military.

The training provided a unique experience because Army aviation units have not typically partnered with Afghan forces in the past, as other maneuver elements routinely do. It pushed the instructors and liaisons outside their comfort zones, giving them the opportunity to use an interpreter and interact with the Afghan people. All who were involved with the course had to rethink the way they speak and communicate ideas.

The brigade cultural adviser provided additional insights, describing the rich history and ethnic diversity found in Afghanistan. Over the course of the training, members of Task Force Attack shared multiple meals, both Afghan and American, with the Afghan students, increasing the cultural understanding between the two groups and providing more occasions to discuss their respective cultures.

Breaking away from tradition and exploring new opportunities enabled the task force not only to help shape the future of Afghan support for Afghan military operations but also to build and strengthen relationships among the AAF, the task force, and ultimately coalition forces.

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