The Asphalt Ribbon of Afghanistan
Rebuilding the Kabul-to-Kandahar Highway

By Xavier A. Cronin
Introduction by Andrew S. Natsios
The Asphalt Ribbon of Afghanistan
The blacktop is down at Kilometer 372—110 kilometers northeast of Kandahar, November 2003.
Kilometer 43: December 2003

Prologue

Kilometer 43: December 2003

A WIND SWEPT ACROSS THE DESERT TERRAIN under a cloudless blue sky. Mountains loomed in the distance. It was bone-chilling cold.

And the blacktop was down.

This was the Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan, 43 kilometers southwest of Kabul on Highway One, the morning of December 16, 2003. The road, stretching 482 kilometers (300 miles) from Kabul to Kandahar, would soon be officially opened with the country’s president cutting a ceremonial ribbon.

Hundreds of people gathered for the event, sitting on fold-out chairs in front of a makeshift stage or mingling nearby. Villagers arrived from provinces along the highway. Members of Afghanistan’s Loya Jirga, the legislative body convened two days before, were among the throng.[1] Security forces with automatic rifles mixed with the crowd. Snipers from the U.S. Army’s Fifth Brigade were positioned out of sight—in valleys, foothills, on roofs of construction camp buildings. CNN and other news organizations were among the scrum of camera crews, photographers and reporters recording the event. The big international news of the day was the capture of Saddam Hussein three days before, but the highway opening represented a milestone in the “war on terror” and a civil engineering feat on a scale and at a pace without comparison.
There’d been talk President George W. Bush would arrive. It was President Bush who promised Afghan President Hamid Karzai that the road would be reconstructed and opened by year’s end. Highway One, as it was named by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers when built in the 1960s, is the country’s most important road, linking its largest cities. It’s about the driving distance from Washington, D.C., northeast to New Haven, Connecticut, from Paris south to Lyon, France, from New Delhi west to Bikaner in India’s state of Rajasthan. The highway forms the first part of Afghanistan’s major road system, the Ring Road, itself forming a 3,000-kilometer circle from Kabul to Kandahar, northwest to Herat before tracking northeast near the Turkmenistan border and snaking south of Uzbekistan and back to Kabul.

Much of Highway One, also known as K-K, had been reduced to a pockmarked desert track. During the Mujahideen-Soviet war in the 1980s, bombs, grenades, tank and mortar shells pulverized its surface. Mines had blown sections into chunks of asphalt. Tank treads ripped road sections to shreds. Bombs had carved out craters that “gouged underbellies of cars.” Floods from torrential rains washed out entire sections. Overweight trucks stacked with cars and tires and bloated sacks of rice and whatever else could be piled on crushed the pavement. Bridges and culverts were bombed out or had crumbled into disrepair.

U.S. Ambassador William B. Taylor Jr., stationed in Kabul in 2002 and 2003, drove from Kabul to Kandahar in late summer 2002. “Outside of Kilometer 43, it was really just a rutted path,” Ambassador Taylor remembers. “Big trucks would inch along on either side of the road or in the middle, so cars coming from the opposite direction would have to dodge them. We knew, given the amount of commerce in this corridor of the country, that a new road would be an enormous economic boom. It would also be a great benefit overall to the country’s economy and help farmers get away from growing poppies, as they could get other crops to market along the road. It was also crucial for the health of the people. It was almost impossible to get an ambulance on the road.”

The 21st century K-K was a far cry from the smooth-riding road engineer Pat Quinn experienced when driving the entire stretch in a rental car in 1973. Quinn was in Afghanistan to survey a few roads for civil engineering company Louis Berger International. He was stationed at the time in Iran as the company’s country manager. Quinn could never have guessed he’d return nearly 30 years after his trek in the 1970s as a chief architect of the highway’s reconstruction.
In September 2002, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) hired Quinn’s employer, now called The Louis Berger Group (LBG), to reconstruct K-K as part of a massive infrastructure rebuilding contract. By April 2003, Berger agreed to take on an accelerated deadline of getting an all-weather blacktop down by the end of 2003—on orders from the White House.

By early 2003, Iraq and Afghanistan had emerged front-and-center in the “war on terror,” and putting a single layer of asphalt over the entire stretch of K-K had become an important U.S. foreign policy goal. This fresh blacktop would show the rebuilding of Afghanistan, once home to al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, proceeding briskly.

Now in the brilliant sunshine and bitter chill, President Karzai would cut the ribbon with a pair of gold scissors brought to him on a platter by an Afghan girl as a swarm of dignitaries crowded around. Fingers were crossed there’d be no attacks by insurgents, bandits or warlords who’d killed security, construction and humanitarian workers during the road’s reconstruction. “This is one of the best days of our life,” said President Karzai. “The rebuilding of Afghanistan, the bringing back to us the life that we all desired, like every other people in the rest of the world.”

Frank Kenefick, USAID engineer manager for the project, wrote about how the new road improved the lives of average Afghan villagers: “Market prices dropped, reflecting the improved transport options. Buses and traditional ‘jingle-trucks’ passed frequently; cargo and travel fares declined; and villagers could now get to towns and city markets to sell their produce, buy needed supplies and return by nightfall.”

USAID hung tough with LBG under daily pressure from Washington to show progress. It persevered through killings, attacks on construction and demining staff, the crashing of its helicopter, a shortage of liquid asphalt (bitumen) and countless logistical nightmares. Workers pulled shifts as long as 20 hours a day; work proceeded seven days a week.

It proved a massive operation, with thousands of people from around the world deploying to Afghanistan in a matter of months. Using five subcontractors assigned to different road sections, LBG rebuilt and paved 389 kilometers of the road in 204 days, using the official start date of May 19, 2003, when the White House announced the end-of-year completion date and the clock started ticking. The final kilometers were rolled with the asphalt-treated base (ATB) forming the blacktop on December 8. Forty-three kilometers from Kabul
Afghan President Karzai has just cut ribbon to open K-K on December 16, 2003, with a pair of gold scissors brought to him on platter by Afghan girl. U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad is in dark overcoat with arms raised, to President Karzai’s left. Japan’s Ambassador Komano is at far left of photo. USAID Administrator Andrew Natsios is at far right in green jacket.
Subgrade is finished at Kilometer 317 of Highway One, July 15, 1965.
south had been paved by the Taliban and required only minor repair work, done in 2004. The government of Japan was responsible for 50 kilometers from Kandahar north-northwest.  

Many people said completing the project in the short time was impossible. The country had little in the way of supplies, materials, equipment or vehicles needed to build a highway. There were few if any qualified Afghan highway engineers in the country. The threat of attacks was constant. Firefights between coalition forces and the Taliban could erupt at any time. Thousands of land mines, unexploded ordnance (UXO) and roadside bombs littered the landscape. Crossing borders with supplies and equipment often took days if not weeks.

USAID and LBG orchestrated the project working with professionals and laborers from Afghanistan, Australia, Egypt, India, Japan, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Peru, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States and other countries. Dan Kelly, manager of the U.N.’s demining program in Afghanistan, was one of them. In a conversation at his home in Mirachimi, New Brunswick, Canada, in February 2009 he remembered that December morning more than five years before and what it meant to ordinary Afghans: “With the highway done, the Afghan people saw that all the talk about rebuilding the country wasn’t just talk. It wasn’t just politics; it was real, something was happening. And it happened quickly. There was lots of talk about getting things done, schools being put in place, hospitals being put in place. Here they saw that the road had been completed. They could use it. They could drive from Kabul to Kandahar in less than a day [as little as five hours for some]. It showed the people there was hope for Afghanistan.”

The blacktop also helped the U.S. military, which used the road to reach camps and bases along the way.

‘Berger transformed a largely unusable 300-mile-long highway into a vital commercial and transportation link in one of the most volatile regions of the world. The hidden excellence of the effort was establishing relationships with locals to allow this engineering triumph to be accomplished.’

Alan D. Crockett
Communications Director,
American Council of Engineering Companies
`Peace Dividend’

For Kinichi Komano, Japan’s Ambassador to Afghanistan at the time, K-K’s completion signified a “peace dividend” delivered to the Afghan people. Japan spent about $30 million rebuilding the 50 kilometers it was responsible for. Komano delivered his remarks at the ribbon-cutting in Dari, one of the country’s two official languages. He considers the rebuilding of the highway “extremely important. … It was something to show the people that peace had come, and they could expect to have a decent future for themselves and their children. For decades, people didn’t see much hope for their future.”

Many people from USAID, LBG and other organizations were responsible for the project’s success. Jim Myers, the chief of party (COP), and Pat Quinn, LBG senior engineer and corporate vice president, emerged as leaders. Myers and Quinn, friends and colleagues since the 1970s, brainstormed constantly among themselves and with USAID officials Bob Wilson and Jim Bever to create a plan to deliver the blacktop on time. Afghans were central to the success. It’s clear the deadline wouldn’t have been met without Afghan deminers, security guards, drivers, interpreters, masons, laborers—even villagers hauling rocks to work sites during bridge and culvert repairs. Three Afghan-American expatriates also worked on the project. Afghans also paid the highest price: Of those killed during the accelerated reconstruction, most were Afghans, including at least six guards from the Afghan Interior Ministry. A monument dedicated at the ribbon-cutting lists the names of four Afghans killed—Yaar Mohammad, Jawid, Rohullah and Hamayoon. Others killed in the proximity of the road during the 2003 reconstruction included four Afghans working for a Danish humanitarian group and workers for the Red Cross and U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees.

Many people in the civil engineering and international development communities saw LBG’s construction plan as especially bold given the short time it had to complete the project in this war-ravaged country. “Berger transformed a largely unusable 300-mile-long highway into a vital commercial and transportation link in one of the most volatile regions of the world,” said Alan D. Crockett, communications director for the American Council of Engineering Companies (ACEC). “The hidden excellence of the effort was establishing relationships with locals to allow this engineering triumph to be accomplished.”

Five subcontractors were hired to build five separate road sections. The plan required the subcontractors to allow each other to work in any of the five sections if any issues prevented work from proceeding on schedule. “It was one-for-all, all-for-one,” remembers Quinn. LBG determined quickly in early 2003 that river-run gravel near the road could be screened into aggregate—a rock base mixed with liquid
asphalt to form the ATB. Turkish subcontractor Gulsan-Cukurova was able to truck seven screening plants in sections from Istanbul to Afghanistan in a matter of weeks.

Afghan-Californian Returns Home

Sayed Hashemyan nearly lost his life in 1979 while fleeing the Soviets. He graduated in 1977 from the American-run Faculty of Engineering at Kabul University and knew the Soviets would consider him a spy and either jail or kill him. During the invasion he escaped to Iran during a three-week trek from Herat. From there he made it to Germany via Pakistan and by 1982 was granted political asylum in the United States. He worked in California as a civil engineer for the California Department of Transportation for more than 20 years. He stayed in touch with friends and colleagues in Afghanistan while living in the United States. In 2002, he was asked by the Afghan government to return to the country for six weeks to help with reconstruction. He stayed for 18 months. He worked on K-K stationed in Kabul as senior advisor to the Afghan Minister of Public Works and was master-of-ceremonies for the ribbon-cutting. The event was especially emotional for Sayed in light of his escape and exile. For over two decades he had watched from a distant land the suffering of Afghans as the country plunged into a state of near-constant war.

“I left my wife and three children behind in California, my job, but this was a critical time for my country,” Sayed remembers. “And we had delivered—in less than a year we gave them a blacktop. Now patients in villages could get to hospitals quickly. Before, it took four-to-five hours to drive from Kabul to Ghazni, now it took less than an hour. I have pictures from the [ribbon-cutting] ceremony in my house, pictures in my office of Afghanistan’s Ring Road. We promised the road and we delivered.”

Sayed Hashemyan
Senior Advisor, Afghan Minister of Public Works during K-K project
In 2010, Sayed returned to Afghanistan to work for LBG as the task order manager for the design, winter maintenance and initial construction of 164 kilometers of the Bamyan-Dushi Road.

Zalmay Khalilzad was named U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan in November 2003. He’d been a special assistant to President George W. Bush at the National Security Council and was an advisor to the U.S. government on Afghanistan policy dating to Ronald Reagan’s presidency. In his remarks on that December morning in 2003, the Afghan-American predicted: “We are standing, literally, on the road to Afghanistan’s future. The opening of the Kabul-Kandahar Road is not the end of our work—it is just the beginning.”
Global Turnout

The K-K accelerated reconstruction called on laborers, construction specialists and professionals from all walks of life from all over the world to work in a hostile environment that was often a war zone. It was an important chapter in the global response to the September 11 attacks, an unprecedented turnout to execute a complex and risky highway rebuilding plan in one of the world's poorest and most violent countries.

And it began with a telephone call to Jim Myers.
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THE Louis Berger Group, INC.
K-K has been a heavily traveled road since built in the 1960s. Photo shows a stretch of the road in June 2003.
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Foreword

The rebuilding of the Kabul-to-Kandahar Highway in 2003 will be remembered as one of the signature civil engineering achievements of the 21st century. When word came to us from the United States Agency for International Development that President George W. Bush had promised Afghan President Hamid Karzai that the road would be open in December of 2003, we knew that rebuilding 389 kilometers in an eight-month period would be the most challenging project our Company had ever confronted. The result was a massive logistics effort and one of the most creative approaches to road building in history. Led by our project manager, the indomitable Jim Myers, we fulfilled the President’s commitment two weeks early.

The men and women involved in this herculean task came together from all over the world. From Texas to South Africa, from Italy to the Philippines, the staff from many countries joined together with their Afghan colleagues to ensure that the job would be completed on schedule and under budget. This project was completed under truly austere and hostile conditions. There were many attacks by the Taliban and other anti-government elements. Lives were lost, yet the team persevered.

In recent years, bridges and culverts rebuilt during the project have been attacked and damaged or destroyed. The road itself has been a target of attacks and the Taliban have again tried to sever Kandahar from Kabul. With this backdrop, a reporter asked me whether the road was worth rebuilding in the first place. I told him that the road is under attack because the link between Afghanistan’s two largest cities is critically important to the future of Afghanistan; and if the road is important, it was worth rebuilding.

Today, as this book is being published, the future of Afghanistan is being contested by those who wish a stable and prosperous future for the people of Afghanistan and those who would return the country to the climate of repression that existed under the Taliban’s harsh rule. For the thousands of workers who sacrificed much to rebuild this critical highway, we all owe a tremendous debt of thanks. This book was written so that the efforts of that tremendous team and what they accomplished will not be forgotten.

Larry D. Walker, President, The Louis Berger Group
Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank The Louis Berger Group (LBG) for the opportunity to tell this compelling and important story—a neglected story of rebuilding in post-Taliban Afghanistan from which many lessons of courage, determination and civil engineering ingenuity can be learned. Throughout the research, interview and writing aspects of the book, LBG provided invaluable guidance. Thanks to LBG’s Tom Nicastro, Pat Quinn, Elahe Vakil, Kent Lande, Lee Ahlstrom, Fredric Berger, Bernard L. Sacks, Margarita Cronin, Ron Kornell, Mary Stiff and Terry Williams. Thanks also to Andrew Burke and Tim Gaul of LBG’s GIS map team (Map source: ESRI Data & Maps [CD-ROM]. (2008). Redlands, CA; Environmental Systems Research Institute). A special thanks to Karen Kramer of Berger Group Holdings for guidance on layout, visuals and design, and for the layout work itself. Also, special thanks to Rebeka Spires for providing insight into the project and gathering many internal documents, and my office mate, Jean Mazurelle, who offered perspective on the situation in Afghanistan. We are also grateful to those who submitted pictures for the book.

We would like to thank current and former United States Agency for International Development (USAID) officials for their time and insights into the Kabul-to-Kandahar project: Jim Kunder, Elisabeth Kvitashvili, Jim Bever, Robert Wilson, Fred Schieck, Patrick Fine and Craig Buck. Also, thanks to U.S. Ambassador William B. Taylor Jr., Japan’s Ambassador Kinichi Komano and U.S. Ambassador James F. Dobbins for their comments and perspective. Former USAID Administrator Andrew Natsios has also provided valuable perspective on the project and its impact on Afghanistan in his introduction.

Thanks to Dan Kelly, former U.N. demining manager, for his hospitality and demining expertise; former USAID engineer manager Frank Kenefick, for perspective and comments on every aspect of the project; Gazi Darici, Afghanistan country manager for Gulsan-Cukurova during the K-K project, for his hospitality and poignant memories of life and work on the ground in 2003; LBG President Larry D. Walker, Chad Tragakis, Nina Popel and Holly Fisher for editorial guidance; Warren Miller for copy editing; J. Elspeth Smith for reporting from Kabul; Nawabi, Mostafa Yasa, Abdul Qayuom Rashidi, Sayed Idrees and Dr. Noor, all with the Afghanistan Infrastructure and Rehabilitation Program (AIRP), for interviews done in Afghanistan for the postscript; Dan Bairley and Mike McGovern for road section diagram; and Jim and Mary Myers for their hospitality and sharing memories of their life together.
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<th>Abbreviations/Acronyms</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>ARCC</td>
<td>Joint-venture subcontractor ARC Construction Company</td>
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<td>ATB</td>
<td>Asphalt-treated base</td>
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<td>BSC/C&amp;C</td>
<td>Joint-venture subcontractor B. Seenaiah &amp; Co./C&amp;C Constructions</td>
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<td>Caltrans</td>
<td>California Department of Transportation</td>
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<td>COP</td>
<td>Chief of Party, USAID term for chief manager of construction projects</td>
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<td>DBST</td>
<td>Double Bituminous Surface Treatment</td>
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<td>DOD</td>
<td>United States Department of Defense</td>
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<td>ENR</td>
<td>Engineering News-Record trade journal</td>
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<td>GAO</td>
<td>United States Government Accountability Office</td>
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<td>G-C</td>
<td>Joint-venture subcontractor Gulsan-Cukurova</td>
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<td>IEDs</td>
<td>Improvised Explosive Devices</td>
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<td>K-K</td>
<td>Kabul-to-Kandahar highway, also known as Highway One</td>
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<td>KolNat</td>
<td>Joint-venture subcontractor Kolin Construction Co./Nafter</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Nongovernmental Organization</td>
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<td>NSC</td>
<td>United States National Security Council</td>
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<td>OMB</td>
<td>United States Office of Management and Budget</td>
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<td>REFS</td>
<td>Rehabilitation of Economic Facilities and Services, USAID’s 2002 rebuilding program for Afghanistan</td>
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<tr>
<td>RPG</td>
<td>Rocket-propelled grenade</td>
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<tr>
<td>SBST</td>
<td>Single Bituminous Surface Treatment</td>
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<td>USACE</td>
<td>United States Army Corps of Engineers</td>
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<td>USAID</td>
<td>United States Agency for International Development</td>
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<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<td>UXO</td>
<td>Unexploded Ordnance</td>
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In Memoriam

James S. Myers

July 3, 1934 – May 13, 2010

This book is also dedicated to the professionals from around the world who deployed to Afghanistan in 2003 to rebuild the highway, and to those who gave their lives in the effort.
Introduction

By Andrew S. Natsios, former Administrator, United States Agency for International Development (USAID)
Distinguished Professor at Georgetown University’s Walsh School of Foreign Service

Deputy National Security Advisor Steve Hadley called in the spring of 2002 to tell me that Afghan President Karzai had asked President Bush to have the U.S. government rebuild the highway from Kabul to Kandahar and then the highway from Kandahar to Herat.

The President was assigning the task to USAID. The deadline for the first stage, the 300 miles from Kabul to Kandahar, was the end of December 2003. I realized the undertaking was not just a large infrastructure project; it had diplomatic and military implications as well. Many of our staff believed it would be impossible to complete a highway through the middle of the Pashtun tribal region, where Taliban support was based, in a country with no indigenous construction industry left after 22 years of war, virtually no infrastructure and no construction equipment in the country. I privately had doubts myself. Reportedly, Secretary of Defense Don Rumsfeld told President Bush that the first phase would take three years and could not possibly be completed in one year.

While under construction and for some time after it was completed, the Kabul-to-Kandahar highway proved to be the single most important reconstruction project in post-Taliban Afghanistan. For the Afghan people, exhausted from years of war and chaos, it represented the U.S. government’s commitment to stay the course and help them rebuild their country. Many Afghan leaders remembered U.S. military and humanitarian support for their resistance against the Soviets in the 1980s, only to have their ally abandon Afghanistan after the Soviet defeat. The result was Afghans fighting each other in new wars.

The common theme in conversations I had across Afghanistan in 2002 was the fear of another American withdrawal—until the highway construction began. The project calmed the nerves of wavering traditional leaders who began to back the new Karzai government and the West. In December 2003, with the first phase of the Highway One project completed, I asked a group of young children on the streets in Kandahar after the ribbon-cutting ceremony if they knew about the great highway being built to their city from Kabul. They all said, yes, it was the Americans who were building it, they told me. Its symbolism reached that far down into Afghan society.
At the ribbon-cutting ceremony, President Karzai, standing in front of the diplomatic delegation, the ministers of his government and the international media, turned to me as he cut the ribbon and said, “Thank you, Mr. Natsios.” Karzai’s thanks, of course, was not to me personally. It was to USAID, The Louis Berger Group and its subcontractors, who had all done what skeptics regarded as nearly impossible.

I had asked USAID Deputy Administrator Fred Schieck to coordinate the project with Jim Kunder, deputy assistant administrator of USAID’s Asia Near East Bureau. I asked Fred how we were going to do the impossible. He replied that we were going to break the project down into smaller parts and undertake them simultaneously.

Fred brought Frank Kenefick out of retirement to work as USAID project supervisor. Frank had been a USAID development engineer for several decades and served in a counter-insurgency campaign in Thailand in the 1960s. Once during his periodic briefings, Frank told me that the Taliban could have shut the project down permanently, if they really wanted to, by lobbing a few mortar rounds into the asphalt plants assembled at subcontractor work sites. This would have ignited fires that would have been difficult to extinguish. The Taliban never did this because the project was so popular among the Afghan people; overtly sabotaging it would have eroded their public support. Instead, the Taliban harassed and killed managers and workers to intimidate aid workers and slow the project down.

We paid for the highway, not just in dollars and cents, but also in blood. Forty people died during the rebuilding of Highway One in 2003. A total of 300 people were killed on USAID reconstruction projects in Afghanistan through 2009, including 136 working on Highway One and the Kandahar-to-Herat highway from 2003 through 2006. These casualty rates were unprecedented in USAID history. They were twice the casualty rate USAID experienced in Iraq during the same period.

In retrospect, the massive project to rebuild a major portion of Afghanistan’s Ring Road served many national building objectives simultaneously, some not so obvious. Because of its rugged terrain, moving around Afghanistan had always been a major challenge and kept many regions of the country isolated. This in turn encouraged tribalism. The highway projects helped tie the country together politically, economically and administratively. The rebuilt highways also facilitated trade between regions and helped build an integrated national economy. They have allowed the central government access to regions that had been autonomous previously, helping break down the isolation plaguing many areas.
The rebuilding of Highway One was the foundation for all other development projects that followed in Afghanistan. It made it much easier for aid workers to get around the country and for the delivery of reconstruction and agricultural materials, such as tools and seeds to farmers and medical supplies to health clinics.

We have learned a great deal about the importance of infrastructure projects during insurgencies and the early stages of reconstruction. We now have an example of a major development that served and continues to serve diplomatic, military and development objectives simultaneously.
A stretch of Highway One, above, during construction in the early 1960s. The USACE hired six American firms to convert the road into a two-lane highway. Work began in 1961 and was completed in July 1966. Photo below shows asphalt work during the project.
Then the army moved north into central Afghanistan and the area today that constitutes Kabul, where Alexander subdued the local people, known as the Parapamisadae. These tribes controlled the mountain passes of the Panjshir Valley, the valley at Kabul, and the Ghorband and Kabul rivers. These were important areas for Alexander to control as they were the crossroads of Central Asia.  

Mountains. Along the way he founded the city of Alexandria of Ghazni, location more than 2,000 years later of the LBG compound during Highway One's reconstruction.

The road saw no shortage of travelers as the centuries clicked by. The more notable included, “The likes of Darius, Chinese pilgrims, Mahmud of Ghazni and Tamerlane, with all their elephants and splendid trappings. Nadir Afshar, carrying the Peacock throne from Delhi, British generals galore with their hunting dogs, including the famous Roberts March from Kabul to Kandahar.” They all plodded along the general route of what today is K-K.

Fast-forward from the failed British occupations of Afghanistan in the 19th century to the end of World War II. By the 1950s, the United States and Soviet Union were jockeying for political influence in the Central Asian buffer state of Afghanistan as the Cold War now defined the countries’ foreign policies. The Soviets embarked on an ambitious highway-building program, including the 567-kilometer concrete highway from Kandahar to Herat. (LBG rebuilt 442 kilometers of this road in 2004-2007). With the Soviets ahead in the race to build roads, the United States decided it better get going on its own projects. Building roads was as critical to U.S. foreign policy infrastructure development 50 years ago as it is today.

USACE began with a 154-kilometer road from Kandahar southeast to the border town of Spin Buldak, completed in December 1961 at a cost of $3.86 million. In February 1959, it called on Denver-based Kenneth R. White Consulting Engineers to design a two-lane highway that would replace the road that stretched from Kabul to Kandahar. Two years later, in the spring of 1961, USACE hired the Afghanistan Construction Company to build K-K. It would include 49 new concrete-reinforced bridges and bridge structures and more than 2,000 culverts. The Afghanistan Construction Company was a joint venture of six American firms: Oman Construction Co., R.P. Farnsworth & Co., Wright Contracting Co., J.A. Jones Construction Co., Morrison-Knudsen Overseas Inc. and Peter Kiewit Sons Co. USAID got involved with the project in 1962, the year after the agency was formed, and hired the Colorado State Highway Department as consultants for the project.
‘Hellish Experience’

Reporter Kathy Gannon traveled the length of K-K. Her descriptions of the road appeared in the March 22, 2004, issue of The New Yorker.10

The terrain along the road is starkly beautiful. There are no power lines, just sun-baked mud houses that disappear behind swirls of dust whipped up by the wind. Irrigation ditches feed water to a land seared by five years of drought, and farmers squat on their haunches and use handheld scythes to cut the dry brush they burn for fuel. Occasionally, you come across a band of nomads who have set up tents. Their sheep and goats nibble lazily on the brush, while women stoke cooking fires. The women wear heavy dresses embroidered in bright colors and decorated with small pins and tin buttons—anything it seems, that might make a soft jangling noise as they walk.

As for the road itself, Gannon described it as:

...a hellish experience. It took sixteen hours to drive the three hundred miles between the two cities. The road was like a dry riverbed, undulating and full of boulders, with blown-up bridges and craters that gouged the underbellies of cars.
Celebrate

There was no shortage of celebrations to mark the start and finish of K-K, in the 1960s and again under the accelerated project 40 years later. On one level, it was typical: Important highways get recognized on the ground with ribbon cuttings and other events marking the start and finish, like officials wearing hard hats shoveling the first load of dirt at building projects. The Afghanistan road celebrations were also meant to boost the morale of the Afghans, who often had little to officially celebrate given the country's violence and poverty. The highway's first groundbreaking came on August 17, 1961, near Kabul. Work got under way and proceeded slowly as fighting between Pakistan and Afghanistan at borders limited the movement of supplies, equipment and materials to work sites. It took five years, but the highway was officially opened with the next celebration, on July 13, 1966, during which it was handed over to the government of Afghanistan at a ceremony near Ghazni presided over by U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Orville L. Freeman and Afghan King Mohammed Zahir Shah. Five others attending included U.S. Peace Corps volunteers. One of them was Thomas E. Gouttierre, now director of the Center for Afghanistan Studies at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. USAID bused Gouttierre and his Peace Corps mates from Kabul to the ribbon cutting as it wanted to ensure a good turnout.

The road's opening was seen as a pivotal accomplishment for the United States as it competed for the hearts and minds of Afghans, a theme repeating itself for the next five decades, up to the present. “It was hot, I remember that,” Gouttierre recalls. “I remember a crowd of people at the highway opening, Afghans and Americans. People were clapping and everybody was exceedingly excited. Some of the men were doing the Attan national dance, wearing all white and spinning and circling around. This was a major thing for everyone. It was in the midst of the Cold War, and the United States and the Soviets were very competitive with their projects in Afghanistan. The Soviets had done the Kabul airport, while we did the Kandahar airport and irrigation projects. We had to look good with this road as the Soviets were nearing completion of the Herat to Kandahar road.”

Thomas E. Gouttierre
Director, Center for Afghanistan Studies at the University of Nebraska

‘It was in the midst of the Cold War, and the United States and the Soviets were very competitive with their projects in Afghanistan. The Soviets had done the Kabul airport, while we did the Kandahar airport and irrigation projects. We had to look good with this road as the Soviets were nearing completion of the Herat to Kandahar road.’
Both K-K and the Soviet’s highway to Herat extended into Kandahar: “The two countries could not agree on who was responsible for a one-mile section that would have joined the two roads just west of Kandahar City, near the Chehel Zina, the Forty Steps arched grotto. … The result was that a section to the west of Kandahar City was left unpaved for a number of years. It was still like that in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was referred to by the Kandaharris as the ‘Road of Misunderstanding.’”

K-K’s final cost in 1966 was $42.9 million. The United States contributed $39.3 million, the Afghan government picked up the balance.

The new highway made traveling between Kabul and Kandahar routine. “People in Kandahar told me in the old days they would drive from Kandahar to Kabul to watch movies, and drive back, all in one day,” remembers U.S. Ambassador William B. Taylor Jr., assigned in 2002 to Afghanistan from his post as ambassador-at-large for countries of the former Soviet Union. LBG’s Pat Quinn enjoyed a smooth ride cruising down the highway in 1973 in his rented American car: “It was in excellent condition, blacktop all the way.”

Then came the Soviets. K-K, as well as most of the country, took a severe beating in the 1980s during the war with the Soviets. The Soviet withdrawal was completed in February 1989, but the 1990s offered no relief from war and poverty. The country plunged into civil war, and by 1996 the Taliban seized power in most of the country, further decimating Afghanistan’s infrastructure.

Then came the September 11 attacks and the United States’ invasion of Afghanistan. By December 2001, with the Taliban out of power, K-K wasn’t a highway by any accounts—except for the 43 kilometers from Kabul south, which the Taliban had paved. There were scattered stretches of the road which, oddly, remained mostly intact over the years. But overall the road was a slow and often treacherous ride. Old trucks and buses, many stacked high with massive loads, rumbled along at 20-30 kilometers/hour, kicking up plumes of dust and a barrage of stones and pebbles. Sandstorms at a moment’s notice could render the road un-drivable. Few people would travel at night, fearing attacks.

The Taliban’s ouster did not bring peace to the country. Bloodshed remained in no short supply. The BBC reported on March 4, 2002: “You might have thought it was all over, but it isn’t. The deaths of American
Overweight trucks, like those in photos above and on the following page, crushed the surface of Afghanistan’s roads, including its most heavily traveled, K-K.
soldiers in an operation against al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters in eastern Afghanistan shows that the war is still very much going on—and that, for the first time, the Americans are taking serious casualties.” On a Saturday in late April 2002, the city of Gardez was hit with a barrage of shells and rockets that lasted all day. At least 18 people were reportedly killed.9

Despite the violence, rebuilding Afghanistan was on the mind of the Bush administration’s foreign policy team. It held discussions in 2002 with leaders of Afghanistan’s evolving government over how best to do this. There’d be new schools and clinics, agricultural and irrigation projects to help farmers, a currency conversion program, women’s initiatives to involve them in the political process. And there’d be road building, plenty of road building, with the centerpiece project a reconstructed K-K.

It wasn’t a great environment for rebuilding a highway. Actually, it couldn’t have been much worse. But LBG prided itself on taking on difficult projects in post-conflict and fragile states. It had constructed roads in Burma (Myanmar), Sudan, Haiti, Guyana, Nigeria and Serbia. In 2010, it was continuing its road-building and other infrastructure projects in Afghanistan, and also helping the people of Southern Sudan reconstruct the Juba to Nimule Road as part of a major infrastructure development and capacity-building program.

But of all of its infrastructure projects since the company was formed in 1953, the accelerated K-K reconstruction presented LBG with its biggest challenge ever and the most aggressive completion deadline it was ever assigned.

It turns out the company had the right guy on the ground in Afghanistan when the order to accelerate came: the gritty civil engineer in the Stetson hat from Arizona who loved big-game hunting and flying his plane and building roads in hot spots around the world.
Much of K-K had crumbled into a pockmarked desert track or fragmented asphalt road during decades of war, neglect and constant pounding from overweight trucks and buses. Photo shows van passing Afghan ‘jingle’ truck on the road in June 2003.
Destroyed Soviet tanks littered Afghanistan’s landscape throughout the 1990s and early years of the 21st century. Photo above shows men atop destroyed tank in March 2003 at unidentified location in Afghanistan.
Chapter 2

December 2001: On the Ground in Kabul

BORED, SEMI-RETIRED, READY FOR ANOTHER ASSIGNMENT. Jim Myers was holed up at his house in northern Washington state in the Cascade Mountains when he got the telephone call. It was late fall 2001 and Fred Berger, LBG senior vice president at the time, was on the line: Was Myers up to going to Afghanistan to assess the condition of the soon-to-be reopened U.S. Embassy in Kabul for a report for the U.S. State Department?

It was the early days after the September 11 attacks. U.S.-led coalition forces had launched Operation Enduring Freedom to oust the Taliban from power. It appeared to be just a matter of time before Afghanistan would undergo another regime change.

Myers had always welcomed work in hostile environments during decades as a civil engineer and manager of building projects around the world. He spent more than five years in the 1990s working for LBG in Cambodia as manager of reconstruction of the highway linking Phnom Penh to the Kampong Som Seaport.

Traffic waits to enter Salang Tunnel in northern Afghanistan in March 2003.
The Khmer Rouge were still active and bombed the road at night. During this assignment, Myers crashed his motorcycle in the jungle and had to be airlifted to Bangkok for medical care. He also worked in war-torn Croatia, assessing infrastructure projects and negotiating with contractors.

Myers had worked on seaports, airports, railroads, bridges, housing projects, industrial buildings. But his passion was building roads and highways. He was an “asphalt man,” as he told Engineering News-Record for a December 2003 article. Come to think of it, he says he’d rather be known as a highway and bridge guy.

**Bored No More**

The highway and bridge guy was 67 years old when he got the call from Fred Berger. He’d taken on assignments for LBG as far back as the 1960s when he worked on a public housing project in Guyana. Many at the company saw no reason to think he didn’t have a project or two left in him.

Soon there’d be no time to be bored. About 16 months after the call, Myers was in charge of the K-K project with the accelerated completion deadline. A deadline that had to be met or he and others in charge would be fired.

Myers signed on to Afghanistan. LBG had no office in Kabul and flights there were limited as the war to oust the Taliban played out in late 2001 and thousands of refugees streamed back into the country from Pakistan and Iran. Myers’ first stop, leaving the United States on December 19, 2001, was Islamabad, where he checked into the Islamabad Marriott. He celebrated Christmas dinner there and a few days later caught a U.N. World Food Program flight to Kabul, where he set up living quarters at the U.N. compound (and celebrated the New Year’s holiday). After Myers arrived in Kabul, Fred Berger sent an email to company staff declaring, “The eagle has landed.”

The Taliban had retreated, but much of the country remained chaotic and dangerous. “Roving bands of heavily armed, ethnically cast factions re-emerged as revenge seekers and the de facto governance in many areas,” wrote Frank Kenefick. “Random clashes between such groups added more woe to the scene of bombed and burned villages, blackened armored-vehicle hulks and spent munitions littering Afghanistan’s harsh but picturesque landscape.” Myers remembers: “Essentially it was one warlord against another. Unofficially, the Taliban were still out there killing people.”
On the Road

It didn’t take long for Myers to assess the condition of the embassy. It had been officially reopened two days before he left the United States in a ceremony presided over by U.S. Ambassador James F. Dobbins, President George W. Bush’s special envoy to Afghanistan at the time. Less than a year later there’d be another U.S.-led ceremony in Afghanistan, in November 2002, marking the start of work on K-K.

There’d actually been a caretaker or two living at the embassy, despite the complex being officially unoccupied since late 1989. It was in decent shape, considering the extreme violence Kabul experienced in the 1990s. Some toilets were smashed and bullet holes riddled some walls. But overall the damage was limited. The embassy’s baseball field had been converted into a helicopter landing pad and a U.S. Marine rifle company had set up sniper nests on the top of the chancellery. The entire embassy complex was walled off, with Marines stationed outside. None of the embassy’s buildings had heat or electricity, except for an
underground bunker near the chancellery, where there was also running water. The bunker served as living quarters for dozens of U.S. government officials starting in 2002.

Myers finished his embassy report and suddenly found himself with downtime: “After I’d done the embassy, I was going crazy, I had nothing to do. And I said, the hell with this, I’m going out and look at that road.”

‘All But Choking’

It was 427 kilometers long, the road in question, from Kabul northwest to Mazar-e-Sharif, about 80 kilometers south of the Uzbekistan border. It hadn’t been surveyed by Western engineers in decades and by all accounts wasn’t for the faint of heart. It was plagued by land mines and roadside bombs (IEDs) and prone to ambushes by warlords and bandits. There was the possibility of aftershocks from a major earthquake that struck Afghanistan in early January 2002.

Myers secured a driver, Najib, who like many Afghans goes by one name, a few security guards and a few Land Cruisers. Najib became Myers’ personal driver for the four years he worked in Afghanistan.

The road passed through the Salang Tunnel, elevation 3,319 meters (10,889 feet), which cuts through the Hindu Kush mountains. The tunnel is well-known for a deadly fire that erupted inside on November 3, 1982, killing scores of people. The incident, considered one of the worst road disasters ever, made international headlines. Myers noted the tunnel’s infamous history at the start of the engineering “investigation” he did on the road.\(^2\)

The Land Cruisers made it through the tunnel in 15 minutes. It was 2.8 kilometers, one-way traffic only. Visibility was “no more than three meters because of dust and exhaust fumes, which were all but choking. The southern portal of this structure has been totally destroyed with an unknown number of breaches occurring with respect to the sides and roof of the interior as evidenced by the extent of earth and rock lying on the floor throughout its entire length. Just inward from the north portal a hole approaching 30 feet in diameter exists, presumably caused by a bomb dropped by someone…”\(^3\)
Shortly after exiting the tunnel, the travelers came upon a tank. No one was inside or near the tank, yet its engine was running, a curiosity Myers didn’t stay around to investigate.

**Opens LBG Office**

It was clear by early 2002 that Afghanistan would soon undergo massive reconstruction, the “infrastructure rehabilitation” the U.S. Agency for International Development would be charged with getting done. LBG needed an office in the country. About the time he was planning his road trip, Myers established the LBG office in Kabul, renting out part of a house.

LBG stated in a press release that the company had “…established a presence and opened an office in Kabul to meet the international community’s needs for Afghanistan’s reconstruction efforts. James Myers, senior civil engineer and construction manager with over 40 years of professional service worldwide, is stationed in Kabul to support the country’s emergency relief and reconstruction efforts.” Six months later, Fred Berger arrived in Kabul and hung the company sign on the office front door.

During this time, Myers also met Dan Kelly, program manager for the U.N. Mine Action Center for Afghanistan. Kelly and Myers had worked together in Cambodia. “We discussed how demining was being done in the country,” Kelly recalls. “Jim and I knew we could work together. We knew we could trust each other.” Kelly and Afghan deminers, working with specialists from South Africa, played a key role allowing work on K-K to proceed rapidly in 2003.

With all the attention Afghanistan was getting, agencies and organizations charged with rebuilding the country were eager to review Myers’ report. They included the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, NGOs already engaged in humanitarian work in Afghanistan, U.S. government agencies (including USAID and USACE) and the United Nations.
LBG had established itself as the first civil engineering firm in post-Taliban Afghanistan. The highway, bridge and asphalt guy had delivered. But the work had just begun.

Jim Myers surveyed the road from Kabul to Mazar-e-Sharif, 427 kilometers long, in January 2002. The road was heavily mined and prone to attacks by warlord tribes and the Taliban.
Jim Myers’ “investigation” report on the road from Kabul to Mazar-e-Sharif, based on his survey of the road in January 2002, became a defining document for reconstruction in Afghanistan. At the time, there was little if any current information on the condition of the country’s roads. Now there was a just-completed survey of a major road from a veteran engineer who’d traveled its entire length. It was read widely by development agencies and NGOs charged with rebuilding the country. Here are excerpts from the report.

“…[All] shoulders, slopes and ditches have been mined at one time or the other for the past 20-plus years, to one degree or another. In addition, the roads are not safe to travel on because of bandits and soldiers from the various tribes who have been at war with each other for many years.”

The report detailed blown-out bridges; “thirty disabled or destroyed tanks” in the proximity of the road; collapsed road sections; a refugee camp at Khogaal Wani with 6,000 people living in tents: “The highway in this area [the refugee camp] was in good condition, with pavement widths of 26 feet and shoulders varying between 3 and 6 feet. Reshaping of the shoulders and placing an overlay is all that is required.”

The report detailed repairs needed on and along the road: “The picture [at kilometer 78.8] denotes a destroyed tank at the south abutment location of the same bridge location seen in the prior picture. Note the masonry retaining walls as well as the slope...
There’d been a strong earthquake in Afghanistan a week-and-a-half before Myers set out on his trip; damage from it was evident in some road sections. One picture showed a crumbling roadway about 15 feet above the Pangshar River: “Collapsed roadway areas…are costly to correct especially when confronted with depths reaching 40-some feet. Note collapsed retaining wall, which appears with disturbing frequency through this entire area. Approximately 10 days prior to visiting this highway, an earthquake had occurred in excess of 6 [on the Richter scale], having its epicenter in the Hindu Kush Mountains. It is believed [the] quake precipitated the failures noted in this picture and elsewhere. … During the spring melt of the mountain snow this river must become a raging torrent.”

Not all dispatches were negative. Myers noticed “…fruit trees growing walnuts, apples and plums,” and stretches of pavement in excellent shape. In the city of Jabal was “another destroyed bridge structure…[but] in spite of the destruction of many of its buildings, people were going about with their daily lives and starting to clean and rebuild.”

As for the Salang Tunnel, Myers estimated, “Probable costs…to restore and strengthen the existing pavement structure…reconstruct retaining walls, remove rock fall and excavate additional materials, improve drainage, place a liner and install lights along with a ventilation system in the Salang Tunnel…[are] in the neighborhood of $131 million…”
USAID Deputy Administrator Fred Schieck in September 2002 at the opening of kindergarten-daycare center in Afghanistan built with USAID funds.
Chapter 3

2002: ‘Rehabilitation’ Begins

After nearly three decades of political instability—including years of savage warfare and wholesale destruction of political and physical infrastructure, as well as inflaming ethnic divisions, the task of rebuilding [Afghanistan] is immense.

USAID Rehabilitation of Economic Facilities and Services (REFS) tender document, August 2002

WITH THE TALIBAN OUT OF POWER, the stage was set for rebuilding what was left standing of Afghanistan’s infrastructure and economy, despite the violence still plaguing the country. Funding for this effort was discussed at the Tokyo Pledging Conference in January 2002. The September 11 attacks had rallied world leaders to confront the threat of terrorists; Afghanistan had been an incubator and safe-haven for the most notorious of them all—Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. A rebuilt and democratic Afghanistan would be good for the security of the world. Donors at the conference committed a total of $4.5 billion toward rebuilding Afghanistan. The donors included the United States, Japan, Saudi Arabia, the European Union, United Kingdom, the World Bank and Asian Development Bank.
USAID was called on to execute a large share of the rebuilding work. Since formed in 1961, it has been the U.S. government's primary agency to help developing countries and fragile states—those struggling with poverty and the aftermath of war. It works with NGOs, private contractors, U.N. agencies and U.S. government agencies, such as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, to get its work done.

Afghanistan posed a major problem for USAID. “There was not a penny in our budget for Afghanistan” for the fiscal year which ran from October 1, 2001, through September 30, 2002, recalls Fred Schieck, USAID deputy administrator at the time. “Because USAID’s budget request for this fiscal year was formulated well before 9/11, there was nothing in it for Afghanistan.”

By early 2002, a transitional government was named and plans for the country’s development began to surface. Afghanistan was a mess, among the poorest countries in the world. The jubilation seen among people in Kabul following the Taliban’s ouster was tempered with the reality of an infrastructure that had been decimated or didn’t exist at all. The country had no banking system to speak of, five currencies circulating. Refugees were returning in droves. A drought still plagued parts of the country. There were skirmishes and firefights between Taliban and coalition forces, not to mention criminals attacking, robbing and kidnapping people. Even NGOs weren’t immune from the lawlessness. CARE’s office in Ghazni was broken into on the night of February 1, 2002. Thieves tied up CARE workers and dumped them in the basement before making off with computers, radios and other equipment. (The workers were unharmed, the thieves traced to a house about a mile from the CARE office, and the equipment recovered.)

Yet there was reason for hope. A new government with the support of world leaders was in place. Many Taliban fighters had retreated or been killed. And the world’s major donor nations would soon be committing several billion dollars to rebuild the country: A total of $3.7 billion was promised for fiscal years 2002-2003, with the United States contributing 38 percent of this, or $1.4 billion.

The humanitarian response was robust. USAID, for its part, worked with the United Nations and NGOs through its Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance in Pakistan to help Afghan refugees and displaced families. They provided seeds and tools to farmers and potable water and health-care supplies to refugees. Trucks were brought in to clear snow from roads. USAID worked with the International Organization of Migration to deliver 10,000 “kitchen sets” and 20,000 blankets from Pisa, Italy, to Turkmenabad, Turkmenistan,
for distribution in northern Afghanistan. It also helped pay for and deliver 30,000 radios to “internally displaced persons and other vulnerable groups in Afghanistan.”

Carrot Peels in the Shower

With the embassy in Kabul reopened, USAID was ready to move into the country in earnest. In January 2002 it dispatched veteran disaster relief specialist Jim Kunder to Kabul to set up a mission there. He was followed at the end of January by Elizabeth Kvitashvili, head of USAID’s Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance in Washington. Kunder had been chief of disaster relief for USAID during the administration of President George H. W. Bush; Kvitashvili was a veteran foreign service officer whose work in Afghanistan dated to the 1980s.

Kunder moved into the embassy’s bunker in January 2002, sleeping on a cot. “It was a damp, bug-infested basement,” he recalls. “There was one tiny bathroom with a tiny little shower. There was a line in the morning to use the bathroom. The bathroom also served as a kitchen because it was the only place with running water. USAID hired an Afghan cook who used an old stove set up in a corner of the bunker, and occasionally some vegetable peelings were left behind in the bathroom. I remember taking a shower with carrot peels under my feet.” Five women living in the bunker shared a single room.

Kabul lay mostly in ruins: “It was shocking to us, the physical devastation in Kabul. It was astonishing. The old USAID building in west Kabul was part of a block which had been reduced to rubble. This was right in the shadow of 9/11—B-52s were still flying overhead for bombing runs.”

With quarters cramped but functional, USAID now had a mission in Kabul and a lot of work to do. Living quarters remained spartan for USAID staffers as they shared the embassy with Marines, the diplomatic corps and others as the U.S. government set about the task of nation-building and humanitarian work. Sleeping quarters did improve from cots in the moldy basement as “hooches” were eventually delivered. These are instant living quarters delivered in containers, opening up into sleeping area, bathroom and living space, 15 feet by 20 feet.

USAID focused on humanitarian, governance and schooling issues in the first half of 2002. “By providing food and shelter to returning refugees and other vulnerable populations, early U.S. assistance helped avert a humanitarian crisis,” the U.S. Government Accountability Office wrote. This included emergency food
USAID got to work on this, hiring the Center for Afghanistan Studies at the University of Nebraska at Omaha to update and print millions of textbooks. Many were in classrooms by the start of school in March or later that spring as several thousand schools reopened. USAID also helped rebuild the country’s Ministry of Women’s Affairs, which promoted women’s involvement in Afghanistan’s Loya Jirga, and worked on Afghanistan’s currency conversion project. It awarded the currency work to LBG, which collected existing paper money, burned it, and replaced it with a single currency, the new Afghani.

**Bush Cites Marshall Plan**

Back in Washington, the Bush administration continued brainstorming over how best to help Afghanistan emerge from its failed-state status. In a speech on April 17, 2002, at the Virginia Military Institute, President George W. Bush vowed to help rebuild Afghanistan in the spirit of the Marshall Plan. Bush stated: “By helping to build an Afghanistan that is free from this evil and is a better place in which to live, we are working in the best of traditions of George Marshall.”

The U.S. government’s development plan for Afghanistan’s infrastructure was emerging. It included lots of road building and repair, with K-K identified as the signature project. Jim Bever was director of USAID’s South Asian division in Washington at the time, and discussed Afghan infrastructure development with Bush administration officials in early 2002. “We were looking for some big, bold ideas, some game changers,” he recalls. “One of them was restoring this highway.”
By early 2003, the project moved into accelerated mode: A new all-weather, two-lane blacktop from Kabul to Kandahar by the end of 2003 would be the White House’s top non-military Afghan priority. “There was a great desire from the Bush administration to show progress in Afghanistan,” recalls Schieck, the USAID deputy administrator. “We wanted to do the road, even though we didn’t have the money at the time. We saw this as part of our mission, given it was a political imperative.”

Craig Buck was USAID’s first post-Taliban mission director for Afghanistan. He considered the highway project “a sidebar. This was only one element of the larger infrastructure program. But the road seemed to take on a life of its own.” (Buck was stricken with pneumonia while in Afghanistan and had to leave the country.) Bob Wilson, a USAID project officer, took on the day to day K-K technical management oversight.

Kvitashvili, six years later, had this perspective on K-K: “It did reaffirm our commitment to reconstruction [in Afghanistan]. It was politically symbolic, a big-ticket project. And it did provide an enormous benefit to the Afghans, opening up commerce and passenger traffic. And it was important psychologically—a very positive signal to the population.”

Schieck and Kvitashvili both stress that USAID was as committed to humanitarian and social programs as it was to rebuilding K-K. It was short-staffed and had an enormous amount of work to do: The more help it could get on the highway, a complex project involving several thousand people, the better. There was also concern the project would siphon funds targeted to other projects. (This issue was resolved when separate funding was provided for the highway reconstruction, an “additive” to USAID’s overall Afghan infrastructure budget.)

Travel outside the U.S. embassy in Kabul was restricted for USAID staff in January and February 2002, mostly because of security concerns and a lack of vehicles. But as a fresh fleet of Land Cruisers and other off-road vehicles arrived, Kvitashvili, for one, hit the road. Twice she traveled to Helmand Province to work with contractor Development Alternatives Inc. (DAI) to help farmers. One project involved training Afghans to clear out canals for irrigation projects. Kvitashvili also visited Afghanistan’s Nahrin District, hit hard by an earthquake in January 2002, working with French Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development to help rebuild villages.

In Washington in early 2002, Jim Myers’ Kabul to Mazar-e-Sharif road and Salang Tunnel report was making the rounds. Myers had wrapped up his initial work in Afghanistan and flown to Washington, where he
presented his report to USAID, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the World Bank. (The World Bank would award a contract to Turkey’s Cukurova-Makimsan joint venture in August 2002 to rebuild the Salang Tunnel. LBG hired Cukurova and another Turkish firm, Gulsan, as one of the joint-venture subcontractors to rebuild K-K.)

It was clear by now that Afghanistan would be rebuilt on a massive level. Roads would be front and center for USAID.

The company dispatched Myers back to Afghanistan to survey all of them—at least all of the major roads, as many as time would allow. By now it was the summer of 2002. On June 13, Myers and three colleagues set out to assess the condition of the roads for an assessment report, or “windshield survey.” It was a lot of territory to cover, and the group was able to cover it—the entire country except Herat Province in the west and the Kabul to Mazar-e-Sharif road Myers had already investigated. They wrapped up the work in five weeks, on July 18, and prepared a report that would be part of LBG’s bid on USAID’s rebuilding program, called Rehabilitation of Economic Facilities and Services (REFS). A tender for the REFS contract was set for the next month.

The REFS Tender

The White House was tracking USAID’s Afghanistan rebuilding plans, and remained focused on the two main arteries of the Ring Road—K-K and the Kandahar-to-Herat (K-H) highway. USAID opened the REFS tender to international competitive bidding and invited LBG and four other firms to its office in Budapest, Hungary, on August 29, 2002, for a “pre-solicitation conference.” LBG Vice President Thomas Nicastro represented the company. Two weeks later, the company presented a formal proposal for the tender. It included “design and construction of 2,000 kilometers of roads,” and 100 highway bridges, throughout the country. The title page stated that LBG was ready to start work on K-K by November 2002, with a road-building company already on the ground in Kabul. On September 12, the White House issued a statement that President Bush had pledged $80 million toward rebuilding the two highways. It was the day after Afghan President Karzai arrived in the United States to mark the one-year anniversary of the terrorist attacks. President Karzai and others in his evolving government had convinced President Bush that turning the tattered and treacherous roads into smoothly paved highways was critical to Afghanistan’s economic transformation. K-K remained the priority, with K-H work set to start in mid-2003.
USAID’s Elisabeth Kvitashvili pictured here with children in the Istalif-Shomali Valley in 2002, where she cut the ribbon on a new irrigation program.
USAID awarded LBG the REFS contract on September 30, 2002. USAID also liked the fact that the company had experienced engineers with good reputations in the civil engineering community, who had worked with USAID before on the ground in Afghanistan. Bever believes the roads report was critical to USAID’s decision to award the company the contract: “Berger had the foresight to do this windshield survey tour of the roads. We were stunned that they had gotten in a car and driven around the Ring Road. It gave us an initial feel for what needed to be done.”

USAID stated this was “another major step toward rebuilding Afghanistan’s national infrastructure. … This and other infrastructure projects are essential to revitalizing this country and creating a corridor of development.”

The REFS project included roads, schools, clinics, irrigation projects and other work. “The reason we put everything except the kitchen sink into REFS was we could throw the responsibility for all these things to the contractor, and then the contractor would sub them out,” Schieck recalls. LBG would use five subcontractors to rebuild K-K.

USAID charged LBG with doing its best to use local Afghan engineers on REFS projects. The problem was there were few if any around. The company pointed out in its technical proposal that “…the sustainability of the program [REFS] requires the development of an Afghan engineering community that currently doesn’t exist. … The consulting or construction industry in place right now [in Afghanistan] to carry out the work is very weak.” This shouldn’t have surprised anyone given that during more than two decades of near-constant warfare, many Afghan professionals had fled the country. LBG did agree in the technical proposal to use Afghans for REFS work who were unqualified but would be “…capable of acquiring these qualifications through a training program that takes place during the execution of their project.” More than 1,000 Afghans did help rebuild the road. By the time the blacktop covered K-K in December 2003, Afghan deminers, security guards, masons and laborers had been central to the project’s success.
Work Starts

The REFS tender called for a ground-breaking ceremony to mark the start of work. LBG and its lone subcontractor at the time, the Afghanistan Construction Company (ARCC), prepared a site. ARCC was a joint venture of the Afghanistan Reconstruction Co., comprised of Afghan-Americans, and Turkish construction company Yuksel. ARCC had set up its work site 43 kilometers south of Kabul, at the point where the paving done by the Taliban ended.

It set up a staging area for the ceremony two kilometers south, at Kilometer 45. A water tanker, grader, generator and bulldozer were airlifted from Dubai to Kabul for the ceremony, at a cost of $672,000, to allow work to begin.

The ceremony occurred on November 10, 2002. Among those attending were President Karzai, U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Robert P. Finn, Japan’s Ambassador to Afghanistan Kinichi Komano, representatives of the government of Saudi Arabia, Afghan villagers, LBG and USAID’s Jim Kunder.¹²

Eleven thousand kilometers away in Washington, the White House considered the start of work important enough to issue a press statement released the same day: “…The U.S.-Japanese-Saudi Arabian-Afghan partnership to build this road is part of a comprehensive, multi-billion dollar international reconstruction effort for Afghanistan. … This road, along with others that will connect Afghanistan to its neighbors, can set the stage for a complete transportation system that will integrate the country, increase trade, and establish links through Afghanistan, from the Indian Ocean to Central Asia and along the ‘Silk Road,’ bridging East and West.”

USAID chose LBG to get the job done as it set about other post-Taliban development work. “We simply relied on Louie Berger to do what they said they would do,” recalls Kvitashvili.
January 2003: Where’s the Asphalt?

The USAID REFS tender issued in August suggested K-K would be rebuilt in four years, with work on a 49-kilometer section started before December 2002. By the end of 2002, Bush administration officials wanted assurances work was proceeding briskly. So they went to Afghanistan.

Front-and-center were Paul D. Wolfowitz, U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense, and Robin Cleveland, associate director of the U.S. Office of Management and Budget. On January 15, 2003, Wolfowitz, Cleveland and other high-ranking U.S. government officials were among a delegation of 40 people visiting ARCC’s work site. LBG cleared an area nearby where four helicopters carrying the officials would land.13 What happened on the ground made it into a Wall Street Journal article: “…Wolfowitz inspected the project. A waiting group of dignitaries and engineers was sprayed with dust and stones as the Chinook helicopter carrying him landed near a work site. More uncomfortable was a spray of questions: Why, Mr. Wolfowitz wanted to know, was there no asphalt yet?”14

The helicopters had landed in an area where ARCC was working as best it could on road preparation. But in the cold of winter, earthworks like raising road embankments and rough grading was limited. Paving in this environment would have been virtually impossible given the weather conditions.
Bob Wilson, USAID's general development officer for Afghanistan at the time, was leading the delegation. “Wolfowitz wanted to know where the asphalt was and where all the people were. I explained to him that we weren’t in labor-intensive mode yet, it was mostly grading. The paving was weather-dependent. There was demining going on and at that point we didn’t have a lot of money. Wolfowitz emphasized that we had to be engaging Afghans in the work. He was concerned, probably feeling pressure from his boss [Rumsfeld] and the President.”

Some time after this visit, the White House began discussing an accelerated completion deadline.
Reopening the U.S. Embassy in Kabul

Ambassador James F. Dobbins was charged with assembling Afghanistan’s new government from various factions, including those of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance and Afghanistan’s government-in-exile in Rome, at the Bonn Conference in November 2001. The next month he arrived in Kabul to reopen the U.S. Embassy. Inside the embassy it appeared as if time had stood still for more than a decade. “At first glance, it seemed intact and the surrounding grounds well tended,” he wrote in his 2008 book, *After the Taliban: Nation-Building in Afghanistan*. “Closer inspection revealed the consequences of its neglect. The building had no heat, electricity, or water. A thick layer of dust covered every surface. Underneath the grime the interior remained as a sort of time capsule. Offices stood just as they had when their occupants departed twelve years earlier. Pictures of Ronald Regan and George Schultz adorned the walls. Warm beer and Coca-Cola sat in the refrigerator and a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels stood on the bar in the basement. Dated telegrams filled in boxes, and one ashtray contained a half-smoked cigar. In the garage stood a fleet of late-1980s American sedans, at least one of which was still operable.”

The embassy was reopened at a ceremony on December 17, 2001. LBG’s Jim Myers would arrive in Pakistan two days later and make it to Kabul by the month’s end. Gathered at the embassy reopening were Special Forces commander Colonel John Mulholland; a few members of the U.S. diplomatic corps; U.S. Marines (providing a color guard); a few journalists; and a handful of Afghans who’d maintained the embassy over the previous 12 years. Ambassador Dobbins remembered: “As *The Star-Spangled Banner* rang out from a portable boom box, they [the Marines] were able to raise the very flag that had been lowered when the last American diplomat had departed. On arrival, they had found [the] American flag in a locked vault in the embassy’s basement.”

USAID, which hired LBG to rebuild K-K, would open its mission at the embassy in January 2002. A handful of USAID staff deployed to the embassy that month and moved into the cramped and moldy quarters of the embassy bunker.
Chapter 4

‘Failure Ain’t an Option’

‘Jim, the President of the United States has promised the President of Afghanistan that the road will be finished by Christmas.’ I realized we’d just been given an order to do the impossible.

USAID Deputy Assistant Administrator Jim Kunder, remembering comment by Deputy National Security Director Steven J. Hadley at April 2003 National Security Council meeting

It cannot be overemphasized that while this project is technically feasible, there are still a large number of factors which could prevent its realization. In particular, the logistical aspects of materials supply are daunting and it could be that they become simply overwhelming in the Afghan context.

LBG internal memo, April 16, 2003

Jim [Myers] and I had talked about how we would get this done for hours and hours. And we were absolutely convinced we could.

LBG Corporate Vice President and Senior Engineer Pat Quinn, Spring 2009

…failure ain’t an option.

K.K. Chief of Party Jim Myers, Spring 2003
BEFORE THE WHITE HOUSE’S DECISION TO ACCELERATE the rebuilding of K-K, subcontractor ARCC and LBG were working on the 49 kilometers south from ARCC’s work site. This was designated Section B and included long stretches of dirt road. It was a cold and snowy winter in this part of the country, and equipment, vehicles and workers were being dispatched to the work site. By January 2003, the company reported from Kabul that demining and UXO clearance had begun: “The demining team continues to be about two kilometers ahead of the road construction team. On January 15, the Mine Action Team found a British anti-tank mine, MARC 7, at Kilometer 29.6, about 200 centimeters from the road, which they destroyed.”1 Wintery weather continued into February: “Only one demining team was available during the period and they were only able to work beginning February 5, due to snow cover and frozen ground. Due to the inclement weather, they stopped their work on February 6.”2

Heavy snow continued into late February and early March, and late March and early April saw heavy rainfall; by this time, much of Section B was mired in mud and pockmarked with potholes. Given these conditions, work was limited to some rough grading and road shoulder work.

A “cone” rock crusher machine was operating at ARCC’s site. The unit was too small to crush rocks and stones gathered from the nearby quarry and stream and river beds to produce aggregate for mixing with the liquid asphalt (bitumen) to form the asphalt-treated base (ATB) laid down as blacktop. A large crusher with “jaws” was custom-ordered from Sweden and would be shipped in pieces to Kabul by summer, one of several hundred deliveries of construction equipment and disassembled asphalt and rock screening plants made to Afghanistan in 2003, by air, sea and truck, for the K-K project. By March, drilling at the quarry had begun as water would be needed to operate the new crusher. Oil and materials testing equipment was en route in trucks from western Afghanistan while, “The asphalt plant reportedly was shipped via truck from Italy. Five of nine trucks have arrived with the remaining four still in transit. Set-up of the plant cannot be completed until all components are on site.”3

LBG divided K-K into five work sections for the acceleration project, assigning each to a separate subcontractor, as detailed in map at left. The 43 kilometers out of Kabul had been repaved by the Taliban and the final 50 kilometers into Kandahar were being rebuilt by Japan’s government.
LBG wanted to get an idea of the volume of traffic on the road and the estimated weight of overweight trucks and buses. It set up a traffic count system, running fiber cables across the road in a few locations to record this. An average of 1,044 vehicles of daily traffic was recorded at the time.

In the weeks before April’s acceleration order, violence in Afghanistan made recruiting expatriates for the project difficult. The company noted, “Many qualified individuals are reluctant to work in Afghanistan because of the war in Iraq and the recent violence towards foreigners in Afghanistan.” The next week it reiterated: “Recruiting of expat staff continues to be difficult. One expat engineer reneged on his agreement after the March 27, 2003, killing of an ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] worker.”

The Surge Begins

On March 20, 2003, the United States invaded Iraq. But even as attention shifted there, the U.S. government wanted to show it was wasting no time rebuilding Afghanistan, and K-K remained the signature project. “It did make the work in Afghanistan more difficult, because the energy and attention eventually was shifting to Iraq,” remembers U.S. Ambassador Taylor. “But we still wanted to do this as a high-priority, high-political impact project to demonstrate to all concerns, particularly the Afghans, that we took this commitment seriously. We wanted to set a date [deadline] and keep it.”

A ‘jaws’ rock crusher, left, at ARCC work site. This unit was needed as the ‘cone’ crusher in use was too small and not designed to crush the large rocks and stones used for aggregate for K-K and other building projects. The jaws crusher was custom-made for this project and shipped in from Sweden. Photo at right, taken on March 19, 2003, shows drilling rig at quarry near ARCC work site. The rig was used to drill for water needed for the crusher.
USAID received the deadline in question—December 31, 2003—on April 1, 2003. Robin Cleveland of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) summoned USAID’s Jim Bever and Fred Schieck to a meeting at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building (also called the Old Executive Office Building), adjacent to the West Wing of the White House. “Why are you lollygagging around with the K-K road?” Schieck recalls being asked. “I said that we had limited money in our budget. And she said, ‘The President wants to do the road.’” Bever remembers being told President Bush wanted the road done by the end of December: “‘OK,’ I said, ‘December 2004.’ They looked at me like they were asking, ‘What planet are you from?’ They were talking about December 2003.” Bever asked if this was an April Fool’s joke; the quip fell on unamused ears. The road done by the end of December 2003—that was the order. “We were stunned by this,” Bever recalls. “We were sweating bullets.”

Jim Kunder had returned to Washington as deputy assistant administrator for Afghanistan after his five-month stint in the country at the start of 2002. Kunder, a former U.S. Marine, wanted to return to civilian life, but duty called. At a National Security Council meeting, about the same time Bever and Schieck were summoned to the White House, the Afghan highway project was discussed. NSC Deputy Director Stephen J. Hadley told him: “Jim, the President of the United States has promised the President of Afghanistan that the road will be finished by Christmas.’ I realized we’d just been given an order to do the impossible. I told him, ‘Got it.’”

USAID informed LBG of the new deadline. Company managers and engineers huddled up. They decided they could meet the deadline—a single layer of all-weather blacktop by the end of 2003 (and two additional layers of asphalt needed to finish the road by the end of 2004). They would need an innovative construction plan, extra funding, limited government bureaucracy, and a little, or maybe, a lot of luck. One crucial call was deciding quickly, in a matter of weeks, that enough river run gravel of the right size and shape was available from areas near the road to be screened into aggregate. ARCC’s rock crusher was being shipped to its work site, but it would take months before the other subcontractors would get their own crushers to work sites. It was decided the only way to produce enough aggregate to meet the acceleration deadline was by
Kabul-to-Kandahar Road
Typical Cross-Section Detail and Excerpted Design Data
### GEOMETRIC DESIGN CRITERIA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Horizontal Alignment:</th>
<th>Maximum Speed = 80 KPH</th>
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<tr>
<td>Cross-Section Elements:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Traveled Way Width = 2 at 3.5 M</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paved Shoulder Width = 2 at 2.0 M</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earthen Shoulder Width = 2 at 0.5 M</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normal Cross Fall = 2%</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Slide Slope Ratio:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fill = 3.1 (0 to 3.0 M Height)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 (3.0 to 4.5 M Height)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5:1 (Above 4.5 M Height)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut = 1.1 (Above 3.0 M Height)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut = 1.1 (Above 3.0 M Depth)</td>
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<td>Sight Distances:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stopping Sight Distance = 130 M</td>
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<tr>
<td>Driver's Eye Height = 1.08 M</td>
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<td>Height of Object for Stopping = 0.60 M</td>
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### DESIGN LOADS

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<td>Vehicle Loads:</td>
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<td>The Greater of 130% of HS20-44 Truck Plus Impact; or</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Weight of a Military Vehicle with Two 24,000 lb. Axles</td>
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<td>Wind Load:</td>
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<td>Based on 100 MPH (160 KM/HR) Wind Speed</td>
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<td>Thermal Forces:</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on 70 Degree (C) Temperature Difference</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stream Current Forces:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on 4.00 M/Sec Flow Speed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earthquakes:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on Seismic Coefficient of Acceleration (A) of 0.15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(AASHTO Seismic Zone B)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
using screening plants, shipped in pieces via truck from Turkey to Afghanistan. The road’s first layer would get a blacktop made from screened aggregate—except ARCC’s section, which used crushed rock for all of its asphalt production. The middle and top asphalt layers for all sections would be comprised of asphalt made from crushed rock.

Another critical decision made in April 2003: dividing the road’s reconstruction into five sections, using five separate subcontractors.

There were many risks and uncertainties. But LBG had come up with a plan it believed would work and communicated this to USAID. The agency in turn promised the Bush administration the blacktop by year’s end. The Administration promised USAID the money it needed. The Administration also promised that if the deadline wasn’t met, heads would roll. Dan Kelly, the U.N. demining manager, remembers Jim Myers telling him, “Damn it, Kelly, do you know what the consequences of failure are? We’re going to be fired if we don’t get this done!” Bever recalls Deputy Secretary of State Richard L. Armitage telling him. “Our jobs were on the line...if we didn’t get this done. Not one hour delay beyond the deadline.” USAID’s Frank Kenefick put it simply: “The President made a promise to Karzai; he wanted it done.”
Saudi Arabia had dropped out of funding under the acceleration project. Japan remained committed to rebuilding and paving the 50 kilometers out of Kandahar. That left USAID and LBG responsible for 389 kilometers, starting south from Kilometer 43, and work had just begun with spring just arriving and ARCC the only subcontractor on the ground.

**Acceleration**

LBG wasted no time shifting into high gear when the order to accelerate came. April was a busy month. A drainage survey of kilometers 92 to 142 was finished and LBG chose a site in Ghazni to build a field office and compound. ARCC’s Durani work camp was completed; 17 Turkish workers and 170 Afghans were working there. Portable office buildings for use by company staff arrived in Kabul on April 23. Myers was getting quotes for bitumen (“penetration grade asphalt,” as it was called) from asphalt plants in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, although no bitumen would be used from these countries.

Joe Pecht, the company’s materials manager, was the point person on the ground for the gravel survey. A native of Missouri, he arrived in Afghanistan in February 2003 to work on K-K from Vietnam, where he’d been working on another road project. After discussing Pecht’s findings, Myers and Pat Quinn agreed this material was suitable for screening into aggregate. They now needed to know if there was enough throughout the entire 389 kilometers.

Myers called Gazi Darici, Cukurova’s country manager for Afghanistan. Early in 2003 LBG hired Cukurova for one of its other USAID projects—the repair and reinforcement of the Sar-e-Haus dam, near the Salang Tunnel. (“Emergency stabilization,” as USAID put it.) It wasn’t long before the company had another job for Cukurova. Myers called Gazi and asked if he was up for some road work. First assignment: a comprehensive survey of river run gravel along the highway.
Gazi agreed. He set out with two colleagues, a civil engineer and materials engineer, and two Afghans, in a couple of Toyota pickups. Over a two-week period they surveyed the entire terrain. Gazi relied on village elders to point out suspected mine and UXO locations. Some knew exact locations, having planted the explosives themselves.

Gazi’s team collected gravel and stones in buckets and brought them to the basement of a house in Kabul, where the company had a materials testing lab. He reported the survey results to LBG. Myers, Quinn and their colleagues agreed there’d be enough material of the right size, shape and consistency for the acceleration project. Cukurova agreed it would provide screeners and aggregate for the project and signed a contract with LBG for this work. It would later team with Turkey’s Gulsan construction company to form the joint venture, Gulsan-Cukurova (G-C), as one of the construction subcontractors.

Former Soviet tank carriers were used to transport construction equipment to K-K work sites. Early in the project, Gulsan-Cukurova replaced old tires on some of these carriers in hopes the Afghan Army would allow it to use them to transport screening plant sections to work sites.

River and streams along the K-K corridor, outlined on map on page 58, were major sources of gravel and stone crushed or screened into aggregate, subsequently blended with bitumen to produce the ATB forming the blacktop. Map also shows one of Afghanistan’s few lakes, Istadeh-e-Moqor.
New Tires for Soviet Tank Carriers

Gazi needed to get the screeners to work sites. They were being trucked from Istanbul to Kabul in sections. He asked an "ex-commander" of the Afghan Army if he could use old Soviet tank carriers for this. These were long, flatbed trailers stored at a military installation near Kabul. They were beat up and needed tires; Gazi told the ex-commander he’d get new tires put on and make other repairs, and got an OK to do this. With the tires on and Gazi’s drivers ready to roll, the ex-commander had bad news: Someone from the Afghan Army told him the carriers were not for use by anyone but the military, sorry. There were no hard feelings, Gazi let the Afghans keep the tires and the ex-commander helped him out on other projects.

Plan B called for a Pakistani company to transport the plant sections to work sites; soon thereafter, the screeners were being trucked to work sites along the highway.

Mobilization Begins

By late April, LBG signed a job order with USAID with the new acceleration completion date. On April 30, USAID approved a contract allowing mobilization of the screening plants, weighbridges (platforms weighing vehicles), loaders and dump trucks to K-K work sites. It also approved the company’s plan to demolish, redesign and construct three highway bridges that had seen better days.

Violence was still discouraging expats from signing on to the project. “The threat to travel and work on the road between Kabul and Kandahar is considered to be high. There are continuing reported problems of illegal check points and road blockages in the provinces of Ghazni, Zabul and Kandahar resulting in theft of money, vehicles, equipment and most recently the killing of two expatriates. These two killings were not the result of a robbery gone bad as one expatriate was shot approximately 20 times.”7 The specter of extreme violence like this was a constant throughout 2003 and subsequent years for those working on the road.

LBG’s mobilization proceeded nonstop. It worked with U.S.-based supplier AMEG to procure equipment, vehicles and supplies, including body armor, lab and surveying equipment, and jet fuel for a leased helicopter. The helicopter proved crucial to the project’s success, cutting travel time from company headquarters in Kabul to the Ghazni compound from four hours by vehicle to 45 minutes. The helicopter was leased from humanitarian group Air Serv International, which secured it from Pacific Helicopters, based in Papua New Guinea. The rotor blades were disassembled and the aircraft was airlifted from Papua New Guinea to Kabul.
Massive volumes of diesel for generators and vehicles were secured from supplier Tryco. An import-export company, RM Asia Group, sold LBG three new Ford Rangers. They were shipped on a vessel from Bangkok to Karachi and trucked north to Peshawar through the Khyber Pass and on to Kabul. Telemedia Communications provided satellite phones, a docking adapter, and SIM cards; the Peeraj Group provided Imperial mattresses, porta-cabins, a cordless keyboard and optical mouse and a cell phone. Dubai proved a critical location for shipments of supplies and equipment to Afghanistan, not to mention U.S. dollars from banks used to pay subcontractors in the field. Generators and air conditioners were flown in from this United Arab Emirates hub. Prefabricated buildings for the compound were secured from Dubai-based Spacemaker.

LBG eventually lined up the workers and managers it needed and they deployed to Kabul.

**May Day: Rumsfeld Sees ‘Reconstruction’**

The schedule was playing out as if following a script. On May 1, 2003, Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld, in a speech from Kabul, stated, “We’re at a point where we clearly have moved from major combat activity to a period of stability and stabilization and reconstruction activities.” Four days later, LBG was negotiating with four subcontractors at its Washington offices on contracts for the acceleration project.

The company decided to use five subcontractors—ARCC plus four others to be selected at meetings in Washington—as an insurance policy, in case a subcontractor wasn’t performing up to speed, and for speed itself. It created a team effort and allowed subcontractors to work on each others’ sections. If a subcontractor was behind schedule, threatening the deadline completion, then LBG had the right to assign any or all of its section to a different subcontractor(s). The work week would be seven days: Some workers logged 20-hour days, especially when paving began in September.

Contractors are typically territorial on construction projects to maintain control over the work assigned to them and assure they’re paid for the work. For K-K, territorialism was out of the question. The message was, “We were all going to cross the finish line together,” Kenefick recalls. The strategy also gave subcontractors...
The mobilization and logistics effort during the accelerated reconstruction proved staggering in size and speed. Red lines show movement of supplies, equipment, vehicles, plant sections and people into Afghanistan in 2003 from points around the world. U.S. shipments included laboratory testing equipment from Gilson Company’s plant in Lewis Center, Ohio, a suburb of Columbus, to Kabul, and Chemcrete, an asphalt strengthener, shipped from Long Beach, California, to Karachi, where it was trucked to the Afghan border post of Spin Buldak. An asphalt plant was trucked in sections to ARCC’s work site near Kabul from Bussolengo, Italy. Indian subcontractor BSC/C&C airlifted vehicles and equipment from New Dehli to Kabul and chartered a vessel to ship bitumen and supplies from Mumbai to the Iranian port of Bander-e Abbas. A new rock “crusher” machine was shipped to Kabul from Sweden. Japan shipped testing equipment to its site via sea and then inland by truck; its construction equipment and supplies came from Pakistan and Afghanistan. LBG staff deployed from locations in the United States, including the Washington, D.C., area; the state of Texas; Mid-Atlantic states; Las Vegas, Nevada; and Spokane, Washington. Staff also deployed from the Philippines, Australia, Peru and other locations around the world.
the incentive to do a top-notch job, knowing there’d be plenty of road-building and other construction work in Afghanistan for years to come, and LBG had the largest contract with the U.S. government for this kind of work.

Subcontractors Go to Washington

LBG started looking for subcontractors to work on the road before the acceleration deadline was in place. It had issued a request for proposals for rebuilding Section C, which would be 85 kilometers, about the time the Washington dignitaries visited the ARCC work site in January 2003. Sixteen firms responded with proposals. LBG wanted to use Afghan companies, but it wasn’t possible. “We did a survey of the construction companies in Afghanistan with equipment, and there weren’t any,” recalls company Vice President Thomas Nicastro. “There were no banks, no credit, no equipment, no expertise to call on for this kind of project.” The company also looked for regional contractors, but found none. It considered a Pakistani firm, but its equipment was either broken or very old.

LBG was reviewing the 16 proposals when the order to accelerate came. It asked the firms to re-bid with the new timetable. It chose four to negotiate with and summoned them to Washington. A “negotiated procurement” would be used because of “the vastly expanded scope of work, the changes proposed in the design parameters for the work and the exceedingly short time allowing for execution of the work.” This was a departure from typical USAID construction project negotiations, which often took weeks and sometimes months. The goal was getting contracts signed within a week.

Negotiations in Washington began on Sunday, May 4, 2003. A handful of representatives arrived from each of the Turkish joint ventures, Kolin Construction/Nafter and Gulsan-Cukurova, and India’s B. Seenaiah & Co./C&C Constructions (BSC/C&C); a fourth firm was also represented. Two representatives of Chemcrete USA were there to answer questions regarding the asphalt strenghtener to be injected into the asphalt plants during production. LBG’s management, engineering and legal teams were also present, as were USAID officials. Pat Quinn led the negotiations. Jim Myers flew in from Kabul.

The parties holed up at the Capital Hilton Hotel in Washington. After a meeting that evening work began Monday morning at the company’s office. They worked all day, over lunch, over dinner, late into the night. It was understood no one would leave before Friday, with contracts signed. “We said, ‘Let’s get this done
by Friday and get out of D.C. and get to work,” recalls Bernie Sacks, LBG’s lead counsel. Senior engineer Kent Lande, dispatched the next month for due diligence at subcontractor work sites in Turkey and India, remembers, “We definitely burned the midnight oil for several nights.”

A “design-build” plan would be used to allow subcontractors to adapt their work plans to the contours and dynamics of the road as they proceeded with earthworks, grading and paving. Subcontractors were responsible for supplying their own bitumen, but LBG secured more than 5,000 metric tons of its own as backup. Twenty-first century state-of-the-art road-building technology and techniques would be used. Case in point was the nuclear densitometer—a handheld device calculating road-surface density. The densitometer, sending out nuclear particles, indicates if a surface needs more tinkering with, like adding water or loosening up soil, before paving. The road would be rebuilt under the highest U.S. highway-building standards: “FP-96, Standard Specifications for Construction of Roads and Bridges on Federal Highway Projects,” published by the U.S. Federal Highway Administration. The “geometric design criteria” were based on American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) specifications.

The negotiating team did its best to keep costs down. Sacks, for instance, secured a workers’ compensation insurance premium for $750,000 for a subcontractor that had gotten a $2 million quote. Lee Ahlstrom, an LBG senior engineer, teamed with Myers during subcontractor negotiations, covering issues like unit prices to be paid for bitumen and other supplies and materials. Sacks remembers, “One major challenge was having four different joint ventures committed to work together as a team, setting aside their differences. We said no one would overbid [for material like bitumen] and everyone would lend equipment in kind.” LBG would also “embed” its own construction specialists and managers with each subcontractor team. Subcontractors all agreed they could conceivably work in others’ sections or have others work in theirs. This proved critical given performance and delivery issues that surfaced.

By Friday, May 9, contracts were signed by the two Turkish joint ventures, Gulsan-Cukurova and KolNat, and India’s BSC/C&C. LBG was unable to come to terms with the fourth firm.

A third Turkish firm, Mensel, was hired. Mensel was on the initial list of 16 and was working on construction projects in Turkmenistan with equipment nearby.
Rollers build up a K-K road embankment in summer 2003.
Due Diligence in Turkey, India, Afghanistan

With the stakes so high, LBG left nothing to chance. It needed to ensure subcontractors could perform at the capacity and speed needed to meet the deadline. It needed to know first-hand, so it dispatched Lande to Turkey, India and Afghanistan to perform due diligence on the subcontractors hired in Washington, just as Pat Quinn had traveled to Ankara the previous fall for due diligence on Yuksel, part of the ARCC joint venture, and Pecht flew to Istanbul in April 2003 for due diligence on Cukurova, regarding its aggregate screening work.

Lande’s first stop, on June 6, 2003, was Istanbul, to meet with principals of G-C. He photographed workers disassembling an asphalt plant set to be airlifted to Kabul and reviewed a “listing of their equipment to be shipped, expected land and air shipment schedules, cash flow schedules and other pertinent information relative to mobilization and operations.”9 The next stop was Ankara, to meet with representatives of KolNat. They brought him to the “maintenance yard, where equipment scheduled for transport to the project was being repaired/maintained.”10 KolNat also provided information on scheduling, mobilization and operations. Lande then met with Mensel officials in Ankara. Most of the company’s equipment for use on K-K was in Turkmenistan. Mensel also provided a breakdown of scheduling, mobilization and operations.

Next up, a return to Istanbul, on June 11, to meet with KolNat reps for a visit to one of its construction sites. KolNat wanted to show LBG the quality of work it was capable of and brought Lande to a “motorway construction” site where it was wrapping up a project for Turkey’s Ministry of Transport.

Lande left Turkey and flew to New Delhi to visit principals of BSC/C&C. They provided similar information as the Turkish officials. He also met with managers of Indian Oil Limited regarding bitumen shipments. Lande left for Kabul on June 16 on what proved to be an eventful flight. He boarded an old Boeing 727 and entered through a ventral stairway: “I looked up, and under the center engine there was an oil slick on the bottom of the fuselage. I said, ‘There’s something wrong with this, Lande.’”11 Once on board he noticed a little boy, eight or nine years old, sitting in first-class. Before he knew it, a flight attendant gave the boy a toy Kalashnikov machine gun. Once in flight, twice he saw men knock on the cockpit door before it was opened and they proceeded to have conversations with the flight crew. As the plane hit the tarmac in Kabul, Lande glanced to the left and right and everywhere saw bombed-out tanks, planes and trucks. A few days later, after visits to K-K work sites, Lande was flying back to Washington and his home in Virginia.
Where’s the Spaghetti and Meatballs?

After the contracts were signed in Washington in early May, a celebration was in order. A dinner was held on May 9 at an elegant Italian restaurant in downtown Washington. Not accustomed to the upscale food selection, Myers, never one to mince words, asked Ahlstrom, “Where the hell is the spaghetti and meatballs? This is an Italian restaurant, isn’t it?”

‘Right Answer’

The White House was keeping an eye on Afghanistan as it orchestrated the recently launched war in Iraq. This time, in late April or early May 2003, it was Bob Wilson being queried by the OMB’s Cleveland. “Tell me how much money you need to get it done [K-K] by December,” Cleveland wanted to know, as Wilson remembers this conversation. “And after I consulted with Ambassador Taylor, Kenefick and Jim Myers, I told her we’d need about $180 million more than what was in the original budget. And she said, ‘Right answer.’” Wilson believes her point was that the White House wanted a can-do attitude toward this project, and giving a concrete number without fudging over the timetable showed USAID was getting serious about meeting the end-of-year completion deadline.

This was an estimated figure, given many uncertainties, like security, demining, airlifts, sourcing bitumen—a concrete number this early in the game was impossible to arrive at. Kenefick recalls being with Wilson and Ambassador Taylor on a Thursday night at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul. The ambassador was on the phone with the White House. “We needed a letter of credit of $200 million-plus,” Kenefick remembers thinking. “LBG would counter-sign on this. We had to have cash flow to pay the subcontractors. But it was impossible to know exactly how much we’d need.” Kenefick threw out a ballpark figure for the acceleration work in 2003 and work in 2004 to finish the road. Ambassador Taylor relayed the number to the White House official. He was told USAID would have the money.

On May 19, 2003, the White House issued a press statement: “The United States has committed $180 million to the rebuilding of the road. The Kabul-Kandahar portion will be completed by the end of December 2003.” This was essentially the down payment on the project, at least a commitment for the down payment. The operative mindset was simple: “Just get it done,” remembers USAID’s Elisabeth Kvitashvili. “Get it done.”

But the reality of getting the job done was anything but simple. For one, there was the reality of mines, UXO and roadside bombs.
An excavator in photo at right engaged in shoulder work on K-K in 2003. Shoulders were one of many areas needing to be cleared of mines and unexploded ordnance and roadside bombs before work could proceed. An excavator bucket hitting an anti-tank mine would likely result in the death of the operator and the excavator’s complete destruction.

A plastic TC 6 anti-tank mine in front of an excavator bucket during K-K shoulder work in 2003. “The TC 6 mines were very difficult to detect with a metal detector, therefore dogs were very effective in finding these,” remembers Dan Kelly, U.N. demining manager during the reconstruction. A total of 2,644 “items of unexploded ordnance,” four anti-personnel mines and 22 anti-tank mines were cleared from the road and its environs during the 2003 reconstruction. The total area cleared was 7.6 square kilometers, or about 20 percent of Afghanistan’s “road contamination,” as the United Nations referred to road areas plagued with mines, UXO and IED.
Chapter 5

Mines and Unexploded Ordnance

AFTER DECADES OF WAR AFGHANISTAN had earned the notorious designation of having the world’s highest density of land mines. The country, about the size of Texas at 652,290 square kilometers, is 80 percent mountains and mountainous terrain, dissected with long desert tracks. Much of the rest of the country—valleys, foothills, stream beds, forest areas—was saturated with mines, unexploded ordnance (UXO) and improvised explosive devices (IED), otherwise known as roadside bombs. UXO could be a 100-pound artillery shell, a cluster-bomb bomblet, an RPG round—all live and strewn about the landscape.

With the Taliban’s ouster, demining work picked up. By early 2003, work on the highway was moving south from ARCC’s work site near Kilometer 43. Deminers were using maps of mine fields. Some of these maps were created from surveys done since 1990 while others were obtained from the Russian government and Russian engineers. Even with this information, the United Nations expected it would take three-to-four years to clear the entire road under a schedule set up in 2002 when the plan to reconstruct the road was announced.

Divide and Complicate

Dividing K-K’s reconstruction into five sections in April 2003 complicated the demining and UXO/IED clearance program already in place. The United Nations had actually started demining the road in 1990 after
the Soviet withdrawal, but years of civil war and Taliban rule limited how much work was done. Fresh mine and IED plantings and scattered UXO kept the road and its environs saturated with explosives.

Now USAID and LBG were asking the United Nations to simultaneously demine and clear five road sections, all to undergo reconstruction, within nine months, not to mention Japan’s 50-kilometer section. Deminers were also being asked to clear areas comprising a no-man’s-land, places where the extent of mines and UXO/IED on the ground was unknown. Areas where work camps would be built. Stream and river beds where gravel would be gathered. Dirt roads leading to these locations. Detour areas allowing traffic to circumvent construction. Culverts, bridge abutments and drainage pipes—all this area had to be checked and cleared. At the same time, much of the land was peppered with “nuisance mining,” including mines planted by Mujahideen fighters when they turned on each other during the civil war in the 1990s. Most worrisome were recent plantings by warring tribal factions and insurgents hoping to kill people working on the road or whomever they targeted on a given day. No one knew where these mines were.

Dan Kelly was the demining point person for LBG as it set about planning for the accelerated work. He’d been in Afghanistan since 1999, when he took the job as manager of demining operations for the United Nations. He was a lifetime combat engineer, starting his career in 1966 with the Canadian Army, and spent the 1990s managing demining operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cambodia and Iraq. When informed of the end-of-year blacktop deadline, Kelly told USAID and LBG it couldn’t be done with his current work force: “We didn’t have the capacity to do the work on the accelerated schedule with our manual survey teams [comprised of deminers and dogs]. The money that was coming in for demining was from donors, that was humanitarian money. Donors wanted to see deminers working on clearing villages, for returnees to be able to go back. They wanted us to clear fields for agriculture to ensure we didn’t continue to have the human tragedy that was Afghanistan, like the 300 casualties a month we were seeing. We had to clear the valley north of Kabul, with refugees pouring back into the country.”

During this time, Richard G. Stickels was program manager for the U.S. State Department’s Office of Weapons Removal & Abatement in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs. The office was charged with demining work around the world and was funding a few demining NGOs in Afghanistan. Stickels was based in Pakistan in 2003 and traveled to Afghanistan for one- to two-week stints to check on demining progress. In the spring of 2003 he met with the State Department’s deputy chief of mission in Kabul. He was told mine clearance wasn’t going fast enough. Stickels met with Kelly, Jim Myers and USAID officials to discuss the
Stockpiles of unexploded ordnance in Afghanistan were destroyed by blowing them up. Typically a plastic booster charge was used to detonate stockpiles remotely. At the time of the acceleration project, there were 45 “explosive ordnance disposal teams,” managed and operated by Afghans, throughout the country. Photos, taken in Herat, show UXO ready for destruction and the stockpile during detonation.
situation: “Myers started to coordinate construction work in the different sections with deminers’ schedules, so they could clear ahead of the construction people.”

It was decided some demining teams would be redirected to the four new “starting points” of each 85-kilometer stretch, Sections C, D, E and F, which had been assigned to the new subcontractors. The construction work would start from the middle of each section, simultaneously moving north and south. ARCC was working due south from the start of its section at Kilometer 43.

Kelly and Myers also decided demining managers were needed. The United Nations brought in Noel Spencer, a demining veteran from the United Kingdom, while Myers called on Phil Ferraro, an American and demining specialist who worked on LBG’s highway project in Cambodia in the 1990s. Ferraro was already in the country, working on the traffic survey in ARCC’s section.

**Odor to the Dogs**

The United Nations’ manual demining teams would not be enough to clear K-K to meet the acceleration deadline. “What we had in place in May, it would have taken three more years to finish the demining,” Kelly recalls. “We needed another means. And the only option available at the time was the Mechem technology from South Africa.”

Mechem, a company based in Lyttelton, South Africa, specializes in demining and “contraband detection.” It was agreed that Mechem’s Mine Explosive and Drug Detection System (MEDDS), used with success in Mozambique and Angola, would speed up demining while reducing the risk of death and injury to deminers and everyone else working on the ground. MEDDS uses what it calls a Remote Explosive Scent Tracing System: Deminers with vacuum packs strapped on their backs, or riding in small tank-like vehicles, collect air samples from suspected mine/UXO locations into canisters. The canisters, or filters as they are also called, are sent to a lab where dogs identify explosive scents in the samples. The system saves time, especially in hot climates like Afghanistan in the summer, as dogs (not to mention people) tire quickly in the searing heat, limiting time spent in the field: “The MEDDS approach mitigates…limiting factors by ‘taking the odour to the dog, rather than taking the dog to the odour.’”
There was no money in the United Nations’ demining budget to pay for Mechem’s services. Kelly flew to U.N. headquarters in New York to secure funding. He met with officials of the U.N. Office of Project Services, USAID and Mechem. USAID agreed to pay $2 million for Mechem’s work on K-K, Kelly recalls. At the same time, the United Nations decided to bring another agency into the mix: It hired the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining for quality assurance on Mechem’s work. Two demining experts from the Centre were dispatched to Afghanistan for three- to four-week stints during the 2003 acceleration project.6

May: A Violent Month

At the start of May 2003, an estimated 204 kilometers of the highway and its environs were plagued with mines, UXO and IED. Another 20 kilometers had yet to be surveyed. Work was hampered by a rash of attacks, and the United Nations suspended all demining activity closest to Kandahar in road Sections D, E and F. This in turn stopped all mobilization and construction work in these sections.

A breakthrough came in late May when a major source of explosives used for mine/IED plantings was found and destroyed. “The capture of Taliban in Kandahar reveals after interrogation that the Taliban were getting their mines and explosives from the ASP [Ammunition Supply Point of the Afghan Ministry of Defense], hit by coalition forces in the south of Kandahar City. Local authorities request the rapid clearance of this site. Task underway the same day.”7 This didn’t eliminate the source of explosives warlords and insurgents could draw on, as there were ammo depots across the area and country. But it appeared to have slowed the pace of attacks against those working on the road.
Now USAID and LBG were asking the United Nations to simultaneously demine and clear five road sections, all to undergo reconstruction, within nine months, not to mention Japan’s 50-kilometer section. Deminers were also being asked to clear areas comprising a no-man’s-land, places where the extent of mines and UXO/IED on the ground was unknown.

There was intense pressure from Washington not to waste a single day of work. Ferraro acknowledged work stoppages in May due to “security incidents and direct threats made against the deminers [but] prior to the complete work stoppage, deminers were relocated from areas South of Ghazni, Sections D, E, & F, up to work on Sections B & C. Two working days were lost in moving the deminers (travel time). They were moved north on 7 May and allowed to return working south of Ghazni on 15 June. However, during this time the relocated teams were NOT idle. They were all working on the project in Sections B & C.”8

The specter of violence lingered. IEDs were of particular concern. Spencer wrote that there’d been “…a slight decrease in the number of incidents, but the incidents have become more violent, with an increase in command-detonated devices on the road and the introduction of radio-controlled devices. It is believed that five such devices have so far been used against LBG, and local security personnel in and near the town of Ghazni. The security situation has not stopped any of the demining operations during the reporting period, but a small number of teams had to be relocated for short periods from the more volatile areas.”9

By early June, most construction was still limited to earthworks, like road embankment building and rough grading, as work camps were built and screening plants assembled. LBG was finishing building the compound at Ghazni.

It wasn’t until June that all deminers had returned to work: “In Sections C, D and F...U.N. deminers have clearance to return to work in all project sections after May incidents that stopped all demining activities. First priority is to clear enough space to allow contractors to begin parking and offloading equipment. Estimated camp/work site clearance time is four-five days per-site.”10
Pickups Stolen, Deminers Reject Security

Attacks on deminers and construction workers remained a concern. LBG also had to worry about the theft of vehicles. In early June, two Toyota pickups belonging to Afghan deminers were stolen from a street in Zabul Province. Kelly, Myers and the head of security agreed this was unacceptable, and if they didn’t address it immediately it could set a bad example and encourage other thefts. They took the helicopter from Kabul to see the governor of the province for help recovering the vehicles. They entered his office, sat down in front of his desk and made their request. The governor pointed to the wall behind him, where a bomb had just exploded, ripping out a section of the wall, and explained it was plain to see he had enough problems to deal with and couldn’t help recover the pickups. Kelly and his colleagues eventually found out where the vehicles were, but they made no effort to retrieve them as it would probably have resulted in a firefight or some other violent encounter, and it was not worth the risk.11

After this incident, LBG hired more Afghan security guards to work alongside deminers. But most Afghan deminers depended on local villagers where they worked to protect them from insurgent and bandit attacks, and in some cases to point out mine and UXO or IED sites. Kelly remembers, “They wanted the local villagers to provide the security. They wanted the elders, the greybeards, to say, ‘We will provide you security, because you’re doing something beneficial for us.’”

The MEDDS teams were in the field by early July. They worked in teams of two or three and were charged with vacuuming air samples on the road itself and 30 meters to either side. They worked two kilometers ahead of construction crews, who were all working south or southwest from the start of their sections. They worked separately at stream beds and quarries, and screening plant and work camp locations. The samples were sent to the (air-conditioned) Mechem dog lab in Kabul.

USAID reported on the demining work at “Situation Room” meetings in Washington. One from July noted: “The initial test run of the MEDDS vehicular-mounted ‘sniffer’ equipment covered about 25 kilometers of roadbed the first week, indicating ‘hot areas’ at about a half dozen points. This has accelerated field mine clearing examinations on the order of 10 times the former rate.”12

The lab dogs did their job, sitting down next to canisters where they had sniffed explosive scents. Lab technicians logged location coordinates to be checked and cleared by deminers on the ground. Turnaround from sample gathering to the delivery of lab results to the field was as quick as 48 hours when the helicopter
was used. The results pinpointed areas for Afghan deminers to check, and they’d set out with metal detectors, prodders (bayonet-like sticks) and their dogs. When explosives were identified, the area was cleared and they were de-armed and detonated remotely with small plastic explosives or TNT. After areas were cleared, the United Nations issued “clearance certificates,” and road work proceeded.

Mines could come from unexpected sources. Ferraro remembers one day when a young Afghan man approached him: “He was carrying two Russian anti-tank mines—one in each hand, and he wanted to give them to me. I said, ‘Thank you—can you put them down right there, please?’ They were live and I had my deminers de-arm them before we took them out and blew them up.”

Mines, UXO and IEDs took a surprisingly small toll given there were thousands of them on the ground. No one was killed, no major injuries suffered. A few construction vehicles were damaged. KolNat reported four—“One dozer, one motor grader, one loader and one truck. However, the damage was not major. Only the blades and the wheels were damaged.” A roller operated by subcontractor Mensel was hit badly and knocked out of commission. An excavator reshaping a shoulder area was taken out by a mine buried deep in the ground—below the detection level of deminers’ equipment. A roller vehicle working a shoulder area hit a mine, blowing a worker standing nearby across the road. The worker was not seriously injured and the conversation turned to where a replacement roller could be located.

The final demining tally for the K-K acceleration project, culled from U.N. data, showed 2,644 “items of unexploded ordnance,” four anti-personnel mines and 22 anti-tank mines cleared from the road and its environs and destroyed. A total of 112,597 “metal or vapour indications were investigated.”

The total area cleared was 7.6 square kilometers, or about 20 percent of Afghanistan’s “road contamination,” in demining parlance.

What the United Nations thought would take three to four years to complete would be completed in about six months.
TNT, wrapped in plastic and tied with a red band, in photo at bottom left, was sometimes used to destroy mines, UXO and IED, in this case an anti-tank mine. Top left photo shows anti-tank mine buried under road surface, discovered during demining operations. The bulldozer in the photo ran over an anti-personnel mine during the summer of 2003. A piece of its left front tire was blown off.
May: A Violent Month for Deminers

A United Nations “Security Incidents” report in May 2003 summarized some of the attacks on deminers working on the K-K acceleration project:

May 3: On the Kandahar to Kabul Road near Ghazni, an ARCC work site was raided by armed gunmen looking for Turkish expatriates.

May 4: ADA [Afghan Development Agency, a demining NGO] vehicle traveling at 20:00 hours shot north of Ghazni. Driver killed and two engineers wounded. Appears to be robbery attempt—new car.

May 5: ATC [Afghan Technical Consultants, demining NGO] ambushed on Kandahar to Kabul Road near Shah Joy. Three white vehicles all fired on, the last one, an ambulance, has tires shot out. Medic badly injured and driver slightly injured. Appears to be Taliban looking for internationals.

May 22: According to Mr. Fazal, site supervisor of ATC on the Kabul to Kandahar road, ATC Team No. 24 also has been threatened by two persons on a motor bike. The team was working on Section B of the road.

May 24: MCPA [Mine Clearance Planning Agency, demining NGO] Survey Team No. 37 reported that an anti-tank mine was remotely exploded on a local vehicle on the Kandahar/Kabul road in Andar District of Ghazni Province. Casualties are unknown. There are rumors among the local people that more mines may be laid for remote explosion. MAPA teams are expressing extreme caution…working in this insecure environment.

May 26: Team MDS 28 [Mine Dog Set, comprised of two deminers, two dogs], working with Survey Team No. 43 at Rowzza village north of Ghazni, were fired upon from the wheat field by approximately 12 bullets. The rounds fell between the MDS set leader and the MCPA team leader.

‘Appears to be Taliban looking for internationals.’
‘Appears to be robbery attempt—new car.’
Afghan Deminers

Afghan deminers in an undated photo. They lost lower limbs while demining and received prosthetic replacements and returned to work. Demining, from the 1990s to the present, remains a major enterprise in Afghanistan. The 2001 book, *Taliban*, pointed out: “The only productive factories in the country are those where artificial limbs, crutches and wheelchairs are produced by the aid agencies.”
It was June 2003 and a massive and rapid mobilization of construction apparatus was well underway. Several hundred construction vehicles, screening plant sections, prefabricated work cabins, materials labs, heavy equipment and supplies had been airlifted or trucked to Kabul and trucked to work sites. Earthworks in some areas of the four new road sections had begun even as work camps and LBG’s compound at Ghazni hadn’t yet been built, and there was plenty of demining, UXO and IED clearance to do. KolNat’s camp wouldn’t be built until July due to lingering demining activity.

Steel-blades bulldozers were tearing up the roadbed, working alongside excavators, compactor-roller rigs and dump trucks to build up and raise road embankments. Slopes in the road were being reshaped. Drainage ditches and shoulder areas excavated. Gravel dug up and screened into aggregate.

Airlifts

Airlifts were nonstop for the acceleration project. They began in April and by the end of November 2003 there’d been more than 70 on massive Antonov aircraft, at a total cost of $7.3 million. KolNat alone booked 23 airlifts from Ankara to Kabul. Each aircraft carried a load capacity of 80 metric tons and no space was
Antonov aircraft were used to airlift construction vehicles and other supplies and equipment from Istanbul, Ankara, New Delhi, Dubai and other locations to Kabul. More than 70 airlifts were made during the acceleration project.

wasted. “The most critical issue was placing all these bulky and heavy pieces in a very limited space,” remembers Kolin Construction General Manager Tankut Balkir. “So first we prepared a detailed sketch showing where all the pieces would be placed on the plane. The required machinery, plants, etcetera, were ready at the airport in Ankara and organized according to this loading plan, and the custom formalities were completed beforehand. Then the planes were ordered from the [airlift] company’s London office. The pieces were loaded very carefully, using every bit of space in the plane. We believe this loading plan and timely flight scheduling were crucial.”1 BSC/C&C’s airlifts from New Delhi to Kabul included vehicles and two disassembled asphalt plants. A USAID/LBG report for June 27 through July 3 noted, “Logistics processed the paperwork for 10 shipments containing more than 248 pieces of equipment and commodities for ARCC, Kol-Nat, Mensel and REFS/Louis Berger for customs clearance.”

Caravans

Tractor-trailer and truck convoys traveled thousands of kilometers from Turkey. Sometimes just crossing the border and getting trucks ready for deliveries to work sites took days, as everything moving into Afghanistan had to be unloaded and reloaded on to Afghan trucks with Afghan drivers. The U.S. Department of Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control granted LBG a license to allow subcontractors to transport machinery and supplies through Iran without violating U.S. embargos in place at the time.

One remarkable journey involved a caravan of long-bed tractor trailers carrying 30 dump trucks of Gulsan-Cukurova (G-C) from Istanbul to Afghanistan. G-C contracted the job out to Turkey’s DILHAN Transportation Co. The caravan left Istanbul on June 6, 2003, traveling through Ankara and eastern Turkey into Iran—to Tabriz, Tehran, Mashhad and the Iranian-Afghan border town of Tayyebat. From here they crossed over to the Afghan border post of Islam Qala. The trailers had traveled about 4,000 kilometers in 10 days. The trucks needed to clear customs and the dump truck keys were handed over to customs officials.
Black line shows route of tractor trailers carrying 30 Gulsan-Cukurova dump trucks from Istanbul into Afghanistan. The caravan left Istanbul on June 6, 2003, and in 10 days reached the Afghan border town of Islam Qala. Tractor trailers also carried screening plant sections along this route.
Gulsan-Cukurova’s fleet of dump trucks, delivered in June 2003 on tractor trailers, traveled more than 4,000 kilometers from Istanbul to its work site at Jaldak, Afghanistan. The keys to the trucks were apparently “lost” by customs officials at the Afghan border, so replacement keys were shipped to Jaldak from the truck manufacturer in France.

By mid-June, screening plants had been trucked to Kabul in sections and by July were assembled and operating at work sites throughout K-K. Photo above shows screening plant at Gulsan-Cukurova’s work site. Material from river and stream beds on conveyor belt was screened into aggregate, deposited in pile behind the unit. Powdery material in pile at right is fines, or waste material.
The drivers waited for five days before they got the bad news: Customs officials said they’d lost the keys to
the trucks, they simply couldn’t find them. Discussions went nowhere. So G-C had duplicate keys shipped
to its work site in Jaldak from the truck manufacturer in France. The trucks were offloaded and reloaded
on to Afghan tractor trailors. The new caravan carrying the trucks-without-keys now proceeded to Herat,
Kandahar and G-C’s work camp at Jaldak. The replacement keys arrived at the end of June.

No Road At All

The road would be rebuilt using “the existing horizontal and vertical alignment as much as possible.”
The original roadbed in many areas was so badly damaged subcontractors had to scarify it, or rip it up.
USAID’s Frank Kenefick was on the ground when some of this work was being done: “They reconfigured
the ‘basement’ layer of the road into a properly aligned foundation for the new highway. The new roadbed
alignment included better centerline grades, longer sight distances for drivers and ‘super-elevation,’ or tilting,
of the road where it curved, to safely carry the expected higher-speed traffic.”

In some areas there was nothing to rip up. “There was no road at all,” remembers Charanbir Singh Sethi,
managing director of C&C Constructions, which formed half of the BSC/C&C joint venture. This could be
seen in Section E and also Section F, where swaths of the road and roadbed had washed away. Subcontractors
dumped two million cubic meters of soil, rock and earth into road sections throughout K-K, a volume that
would fill two Empire State Buildings. “Thankfully, the quarry or pits they used for materials were very close
to the road and the areas which needed materials,” recalls materials manager Joe Pecht. “The contractors for the most part
did not have to haul their embankment materials too far, and all of them had a lot of equipment to get the job done. There
was a lot of good material in those river beds if you looked
and were somewhat careful where you were digging [to avoid mines-UXO-IED]. It was pretty simple. They used excavators
to dig it out and load it into the trucks, which hauled it to the road sites.” Flash floods gushing over the road after torrential
downpours had wiped out some causeways—concrete sections
covering long dips in the road. Subcontractors built up the

‘In many areas it was better to travel 300 meters off the road.
Sometimes with the buses and trucks out there, it looked like Rommel’s tanks rolling across
the desert, blowing dust and sand and pebbles all over.’

Joe Pecht
LBG materials manager
for K-K project
roadbed in these areas and graded and compacted the surface before covering it with precast causeways made at a concrete yard at KolNat’s work site.

Not all sections required a complete rebuilding of the road’s surface: The asphalt in Sections D and F, totaling about 60 kilometers, was mostly intact and would be repaired with a single bituminous surface treatment, or SBST—liquid asphalt (bitumen) blended with stone chips. An SBST is less than an inch thick, compared with the asphalt-treated base (ATB) that would form most of the blacktop, at least three inches thick.

**Like Rommel’s Tanks**

Traffic didn’t grind to a halt as subcontractors set to work. K-K remained the country’s main transportation route, and trucks and buses especially relied on it. More than 1,000 vehicles were traveling on Section B on a typical day in early 2003. Detours around work sites were provided as needed by grading lanes off the road. In many stretches south of Ghazni, the road couldn’t be differentiated from the desert terrain itself. If a construction crew was working in one of these areas, vehicles would rumble over wherever the surface allowed. “In many areas it was better to travel 300 meters off the road,” remembers Pecht. “Sometimes with the buses and trucks out there, it looked like [German Field Marshal Erin] Rommel’s tanks rolling across the desert, blowing dust and sand and pebbles all over.” Sometimes vehicles would be speeding directly at each other as the line of which way was which blurred beyond recognition.

**Turkish Workers Revolt**

People were killed working on the project. Attacks and assaults were commonplace. The final count for the accelerated reconstruction was 40 killed—including humanitarian workers in the proximity of road construction—and dozens wounded. USAID and LBG knew that Afghanistan was a volatile post-conflict environment with coalition forces still chasing Taliban factions and warlords battling each other at any given time, not to mention bandits robbing and killing people. And it was typically open season on Westerners. “You don’t have to be a Taliban defector to feel a little queasy about taking the road from Kabul to Kandahar,” wrote Kathy Gannon, referring to violence along the road in 2003. “In the past year, an Italian tourist traveling on the road in a taxi was shot dead; four Afghans working for a Danish relief agency were killed; two Afghans working for the Afghan Red Crescent and four security guards working for The Louis Berger Group were ambushed and killed; a Pakistani and a Turkish engineer were killed; two Turkish engineers, two Indian engineers, an Afghan driver, and an employee of an American aid organization,
Preassembled bridge sections were placed in some areas by the freshly paved highway. The bridges were paved over and connected with the highway during construction work in 2004.
Bunker used for cover during rocket attacks at Gulsan-Cukurova work camp.
Shelter for Life, were kidnapped, and dozens of vehicles have been fired upon.” The United Nations’ Dan Kelly remembers: “There were so many incidents of machines being burnt, destroyed along the roads. Not from mines and UXO, but from armed groups or terrorists burning the machines.” The Wall Street Journal reported that insurgents had killed several Interior Ministry guards, ambushed a convoy killing four security guards, and that “…motorbike assassins murdered a French woman working for the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees.”

This didn’t mean subcontractors expected to take casualties. As deminers were attacked in May, so were construction workers. There were also nighttime rocket attacks on camp sites. Work was just getting off the ground, and now as May rolled into June violence was threatening to bring it to a halt.

“The Turks were in a revolt,” recalls Pat Quinn, who flew with Jim Myers to G-C and KolNat work sites to reassure managers that security would be increased. “They didn’t feel they were getting adequate security, and attacks were picking up. We told them we understood what they were going through and were in the process of hiring more security forces. We told them to give us some time to get the security increased. It was also a kind of pep talk. We stressed how important this project was to the U.S. and Turkish governments.” G-C said it would be patient and at the same time hired 20 retired Turkish soldiers to provide personal protection for its workers. “Our Turkish workers were feeling more secure themselves with our own Turkish security crew,” remembers G-C’s Gazi Darici.

As more security was provided and work progressed, Quinn noticed Turkish workers appeared defiant toward their attackers: “As time went on, the attitude of the workers hardened. They weren’t going to get run off.” Kenefick believes the workers were determined to show they could pull off the project despite threats and attacks: “Their Turkish pride was on the line, I think. They wanted to show their Muslim brothers in Central Asia, ‘We will stand with you.’ Some of them [Turkish subcontractors] had worked in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan.”

Sometimes USAID and LBG were literally caught in the middle as tensions surfaced between rival warlords. USAID’s Jim Kunder remembers landing in a helicopter at Ghazni to meet Myers: “As we were landing and the dust was kicking up, I noticed there was something strange about the perimeter. The guns of the opposing parties were pointed at each other, inward toward us. There were two warring warlords and their men. Jim explained that this was the only place there was to land.” Remembering the episode, Myers
quipped, “That [stuff] happened all the time,” without elaborating. Myers’ people skills, or “on-the-ground diplomacy” as Kunder put it, settled the situation: “He had effectively come up with a way to defuse the situation,” and Kunder and Myers proceeded to a work site.

People who worked with Myers say this situation shows why he was so respected: He’d put himself in harm’s way without a second thought if the project called for it.

A security guard at Section F work site in mid-November 2003.

Good Food, Overtime Pay, Soccer Match

Work days were long and the summer heat oppressive—to workers and demining dogs, especially in the southern sections of the road. Laborers, deminers, equipment and vehicle operators, construction site supervisors—everyone was working seven days a week, many for 14-hour shifts or longer. G-C’s camp had a concrete bunker as a shelter from rockets sometimes fired overhead at night.

Gazi remembers keeping worker morale up during long work days with good food, recreation and, most importantly, overtime bonuses and pay. Special food requests were honored. “Say the guys wanted a special kind of cheese [feta, in this case], you had to make them happy,” so the cheese was shipped from Istanbul to Kabul and on to the work camp, remembers Cukurova Vice Chairman Burak Vardan. Camp cooks prepared sea bass when Turkey’s ambassador to Afghanistan visited.

Burak’s father, Muhterem Vardan, owner of Cukurova, made two or three visits to the camp, staying a few days to mingle with workers and play cards, mostly poker. (“He always won,” Gazi says. “He got $200 of mine.”) The G-C camp had satellite dishes for phone and Internet service. A basketball hoop was set up on the camp’s helipad. Workers could relax in a recreation room with ping pong, foosball and pool tables. What boosted workers’ spirits perhaps more than any factor (besides bonuses and overtime pay), as Gazi remembers
it, was weekend soccer matches workers watched on TV, made possible by a special satellite dish—pay-per-view games of Turkey’s major soccer league.

At least once, workers engaged in their own soccer match. On August 22, a group of Turkish and Afghan workers formed soccer teams for an impromptu match in front of KolNat’s camp. Twenty-five motorcycles and 10 cars and vans had parked in front of the camp; 75 men watched from the sidelines. LBG noted in an internal report that its security people seized weapons from three men in the crowd but the match ended without incident. Future games would be cleared 24 hours before kick-off. (It wasn’t clear who won the match.)

Problems Surface

By the end of June, it remained unclear if LBG could pull off the project. There were too many uncertainties. The demining-UXO-IED clearance, for one, could only be done so fast, and the special South African demining operation was still setting up shop: “It is extremely difficult to estimate section completion times, as we have no idea as to how many mines and UXOs are in the ground. There have been major battles and evidence of [recent] mining in Sections C through F, so clearance could take three-four more months.”

By July, it was clear that cash flow would be critical to the project’s success. Afghanistan in 2003 was a cash economy and the currency of choice, or necessity, was the U.S. dollar. “No one had bank accounts,” points out Gazi, who paid Afghan laborers and suppliers of diesel and concrete in dollars. “There weren’t any banks.” LBG had worked on a currency conversion project for USAID in 2002, consolidating from five currencies to one, the new Afghani. But it wasn’t until late 2003 when this currency was used to any significant degree. The U.S. dollar remained the currency of choice during the project. Subcontractors paid laborers and suppliers at work sites in cash, which they had secured, or which LBG gave them. The company drew dollars from banks in Dubai and a Crown Agents bank facility which had been set up in Kabul. (LBG paid subcontractor ARCC through the company’s New York office, with ARCC staff in Afghanistan arranging for payments to suppliers and workers on the ground.)

“We were burning a million dollars a day by June,” remembers Kenefick. And the initial disbursement to cover mobilization and other costs was dwindling. Although the Bush administration had promised funds to pay for the road’s reconstruction, USAID payment protocol required invoices to be physically delivered from Kabul to its office in Manila, Philippines, a distance of 5,623 kilometers, for review and approval, before
LBG Construction Supervisor Mark Humphries watching workers at Gulsan-Cukurova work site at Jaldak during a mini-revolt when cash payments hadn’t arrived. Humphries, a native of Texas, died in a plane crash in Afghanistan in February 2005. Chris Humphries, Mark’s brother, remembers his brother explaining to him the situation in this photo: “The satellite phone didn’t work. The battery was dead. Mark thought the locals would see him on the phone and have a change of heart. There was no cell phone service at that time down south. You only used your satellite phone for emergencies and the locals knew that. It was a bluff. The workers were truck drivers and laborers critical to the paving effort.” LBG used its own funds to provide cash to pay laborers and suppliers while it waited for reimbursement from USAID.
funds would be wired to LBG’s bank account. This process could take as long as 47 days from submittal of invoices, which at times left a cash-flow gap. The volume of invoice paperwork building in Kabul was significant. “The invoices were stacked in binders that reached the ceiling,” Kenefick recalls.

USAID officials said their hands were tied, they had no way of changing the invoicing and payment system, regardless of the nature of the project and the contracts. When invoices were submitted for vital supplies of diesel and bitumen, to pay laborers’ wages, or any other costs and expenses, the monthly invoicing system remained unaltered.

The cash-flow problem at times threatened the project’s completion. “I clearly recall KolNat and Mensel having run out of funds for critical purchases and saying they would have to shut down,” Kenefick recalls. For Gazi there were “some nervous days in late summer” due to the cash-flow crunch. Five hundred Afghan laborers were working at G-C’s site. They weren’t pleased to hear one day that their monthly pay, $200-$300, wouldn’t be coming for another 30 days or so. It was a deadly bottom line: “If you don’t pay them, they kill you,” Gazi remembers. To stave off a revolt, he pledged to “local commanders” who communicated with workers that they’d be paid in no more than 30 days: “Jim Myers had promised me the money would be there, and I trusted him. I showed the commanders a payment certificate and told them ‘The workers will be paid, please go tell your guys.’ I told him it was a procedure, the payment system. Every country has a bureaucracy for something like this. So they trusted me and I kept my promise.” The fact that most Afghan workers were being housed and fed at G-C’s camp helped quell tensions as they had no worries about where their next meal would come from.

To quell the unrest, LBG paid subcontractors’ invoices, drawing on its own bank account and delivered cash to work sites while waiting for reimbursements from USAID.

**Bridges, Culverts and Causeways**

As the road was rebuilt so, too, were bridges, including five in Sections E and F. Most existing bridge piers had been blasted off or washed away by floods. The bridges at Kilometers 265, 300 and 306 were all collapsed, the spans cracked in two. The concrete foundation of the bridge at Ghazni (rebuilt in 2004) was crumbling, with jagged pieces tenuously supporting concrete bases. Bridges at Kilometers 303 and 392 were also targeted for repair or rebuilding. By July, LBG awarded KolNat a contract to supply precast concrete bridge spans for the five bridges in Sections E and F. KolNat produced the spans at its work site, using a small rock crusher
to produce special aggregate mixed with water, imported cement (from Pakistan) and rebar steel (Afghan supplier via Russia).

There were 1,870 pipe culverts throughout the five work sections, all repaired or replaced during the project, including work done in 2004. In the early days of the project, “It was impossible to locate or evaluate these drainage items because of the potential presence of land mines. From driving along the main roadbed, it was apparent that many of these structures were either clogged with dirt and debris or collapsed.”9 Once work to clear mines, UXO and IED kicked in, culvert work began and local Afghans were ready to chip in and make a few dollars: “Villagers pried stone chunks out of mountainsides and cliffs with bars and sledge hammers, and hauled it down by donkey and in carts and sold it to the road-section contractors for culvert extensions and channel rip-rap [large pieces of rock].”10 ARCC raised the embankment in one area to allow culvert covers to be built. Afghan stone masons were called on to shore up exposed culverts with stabilizing walls.

**Pressure from Washington**

As it took on a life of its own, the accelerated reconstruction became a race against the clock. Pressure from Washington came daily. “By July 1, the National Security Council (NSC) was screaming that we hadn’t laid down any asphalt,” Kenefick recalls. “We had to explain to them how you build a road. Everyone thought asphalt came first.” Jim Kunder recounts: “There was massive, unrelenting pressure from the White House. They wanted daily indicators. The reality was this wasn’t coming in linear fashion.” During the first week of July, ARCC had put down a crushed aggregate base over a few kilometers of its section.

Almost every day Bush administration officials called USAID officials in Washington, who in turn called its people on the ground in Kabul, including Bob Wilson, USAID’s general development officer for Afghanistan, who would query LBG managers on progress. “Every day they were asking, ‘How many kilometers are done?’” remembers USAID’s Elizabeth Kvitashvili.
Top photos show K-K bridge at Kilometer 306 before and after reconstruction. Bottom photo shows Afghan stone masons and laborers by culvert wall during K-K’s reconstruction.
Work on five bridges began in the summer of 2003 as subcontractor KolNat was awarded a separate contract to rebuild or repair them. Two were completed by the end of the acceleration project, the other three in 2004. The bridge at Ghazni was rebuilt in 2004.
Quinn and Kenefick had an idea: a how-to-build-a-highway visual aid for NSC officials to detail the work’s relative complexity. It started as a map-like document showing the road, dotted with taped-on pictures of bulldozers, scoop loaders, cranes and other construction vehicles and equipment. Pictures were cut out of “a kind of Bob-the-BUILDER newspaper advertisement supplement—little Tonka Toy construction equipment figures.”

The document also included charts showing work progress—demining, aggregate production, roadbed grading—as well as security and accident incidents. Different colors represented different work phases in each of the six road sections (five subcontractors plus Japan). The Bob the Builder document was named “Kabulstones” and used by Jeremiah Carew, an IBM consultant working for USAID in Washington, as source material to create an Excel document named “Road Powerpoint,” to chart the reconstruction’s progress.

Carew used this document and weekly updates from LBG’s Mike Staples, a communications specialist based in Kabul, to produce a short report detailing USAID’s Afghan projects. He printed out the report early Tuesday morning for Kunder, who brought it with him to the weekly Situation Room meeting on Afghanistan. “My job was to bridge the gap between the people in the field and the thousand-dollar suits in the Situation Room,” Carew remembers. “Kunder would come by and pick up my report, and walk over to the NSC.” Kenefick praises Carew as having done “a masterful job of helping to keep the Washington beast informed, and out of the physical implementation.” Kunder believes he was able to make Deputy National Security Director Steve Hadley understand the road construction work process with a home improvement metaphor: “I told him this was like painting your kitchen—you spackle, wash down the walls, then the final, easy part is actually painting the wall. This is all prep work going on now on the road. Paving is the final stage.”

Helicopter Crashes

The specter of violence was constant. There were days like August 19, when just after midnight, “[the] demining camp at Kilometer 92 [was] attacked by 10 gunmen. Some deminers beaten, one vehicle shot up, another stolen and found burned up 50 kilometers away.”

Attacks, killings, delivery delays, cash-flow issues, demining issues, the summer heat, daily requests from USAID and the White House over when paving would begin—by late August many obstacles remained and pressure was unrelenting with the deadline just four months away.
And then the helicopter crashed.

There were three people on board. One was Erik Coker, of Oakland, California, vice president of Coker Pumps, the company providing a special “dosing” system to pump asphalt strengthener into asphalt batch plants during production. To assure the dosing systems were working, Coker flew to Kabul and on to work sites in the helicopter. On the morning of Friday, August 29, he finished an inspection of the Section D plant. The next stop that afternoon was LBG’s compound at Ghazni.

Coker was ensconced in the helicopter’s back seating area. In the front were Joe Pecht and pilot Mark Burdorf, a native of Australia. They took off for the 45-minute flight. “About 15 klicks [kilometers] from Ghazni, with maybe five minutes to go, I saw this big wall of sand coming at us,” Coker recalls. “And then I braced myself and the next thing I knew I heard emergency beacons going off. We weren’t right side up, I remember that, and I popped my buckle off and stuck my arm forward with thumbs up to let them know I was OK. But I couldn’t move. It turned out my lower disc was toast. We managed to crawl out, and when I tried to stand up, I was nauseous. Joe was standing there, on his satellite phone, we were maybe 100 yards off the road. A U.N. demining team in a Toyota truck came and took me to a clinic, a cinder-block building with armed guards all around [a hospital in Ghazni]. I didn’t have an ID on me and I asked them if they could take me to the Berger safe house [at Ghazni]. I was there two-and-a-half hours before Afghans working for LBG got me. Joe’s wife, Vikki, she’d come over there and negotiated with them to release me.”

Pecht remembers crossing the road as the chopper plunged: “Damn, I said, we’re going down pretty fast, and the last thing I knew we crashed. When I came to, I could hear one of the engines running, and I saw Mark hanging from his harness, looking down at me, and he said, ‘Help me.’ He was hanging there from the buckles, so I held him steady and he unbuckled himself. I could still hear the whine of the engine’s turbine. I climbed out and grabbed my sat phone and tried to call my wife at Ghazni, but there was no answer. There was fuel coming out of the back of the helicopter and I said, ‘Hell, we better get outta here.’ I walked around to the front and started climbing on top [of the helicopter], and the engine ground to a halt and sparks started flying. I got Erik out and he crawled away, and then a Toyota demining pickup truck came, and we got Erik in the back and they took him away. I was walking around like an old man with a cane. There was a crowd of Afghans staring at us. It wasn’t long before there were about a hundred or more of them hanging out there. I tried the sat phone again and got Jim [Myers]. Word had already gotten back to Ghazni that we were down.”
The War Council in the White House Situation Room, March 21, 2003. The Bush administration’s Deputies Committee on Afghanistan discussed the K-K highway project in the Situation Room on Tuesday mornings in 2003. Secretary of State Colin Powell placed a road core sample from a K-K work site on the table at one of these meetings in the summer of 2003. U.S. Ambassador William B. Taylor Jr. gave the sample to Deputy Secretary of State Richard L. Armitage who passed it on to General Powell. It was meant as a gesture to show work on the project was proceeding. Photo at left shows road core sample from Afghanistan, like the one placed on the Situation Room table.
The three men were eventually brought to the compound and transported in a military helicopter to the hospital at Bagram Air Base, north of Kabul. About a week later, Pecht flew to a hospital in Dubai for treatment of a back injury (“turns out I’d crushed a couple of vertebrae,” he says), before flying home to Kansas City, Missouri. (He returned to Afghanistan in March 2004 after Myers asked him to work on K-K’s second phase.) Burdorf suffered minor injuries and returned to work. Coker, a former staff sergeant with the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve, was flown to Ramstein Air Base in Germany and taken by ambulance to Hamburg University Hospital. He stayed there for four weeks, undergoing two back surgeries. He was released and flown to Andrews Air Force Base and on to Travis Air Force Base in Fairfield, California, about 45 miles east of San Francisco. The surgeries, which involved inserting screws into his back, were successful. “My back’s fine,” he said in July 2009 from Oakland. “I came out of this pretty good, considering everything.”

Killings

A rash of killings followed the crash: “An employee of Louis Berger’s security contractor and three Ministry of Interior guards were killed in an ambush along the highway in the early morning of September 1. The attack took place near the camp of BSC/C&C. … Although roadwork was temporarily suspended, it has since resumed. Additional forces are being provided by the MOI [Afghan Ministry of Interior] to beef up security along the highway.” Sethi of C&C Constructions recalls, “The security guards were on a hill at a checkpoint on a night patrol when the attack began. The Taliban started firing on our equipment and fired rockets at our camp.” About two months later, two BSC/C&C engineers were kidnapped after driving a worker to a nearby village. The engineers were released in December, unharmed.
By late August, USAID’s Jim Bever—who had been named acting mission director to Afghanistan—and Pat Quinn traveled the entire stretch of the road, from Kabul to Kandahar, in a small military convoy. One stop was a police check point in Qalat to pay respects to the security workers who had lost their lives. The security manager was killed while taking cover under a vehicle while Taliban fighters shot out the tires. Bever remembers seeing fresh blood splattered over the station building.

DOD Lends Helping Hand

There’d initially been some lack of communication between the military, LBG’s private security firm and the Afghan Army. The Wall Street Journal reported that in late August, “Slowly the U.S. military began to get more involved. Fighter jets made occasional nighttime flights over the road. Special forces appeared on a hilltop near the scene of the worst attack. When militants planted a bomb in a U.S. security coordinator’s car while it was in for repairs, troops raided the repair shop.”

The U.S. military helped with rescue missions, like flying Erik Coker to Germany. It provided the convoy for Bever and Quinn’s trip in late August. In November, the U.S. military helped provide security at Japan’s work site after workers had been called off due to threats and attacks. U.S. Army snipers staked out the ribbon-cutting area at Kilometer 43 in December 2003. “We got the U.S. military to pony up assets to help get a USAID project done,” says Kunder. “It was a real breakthrough. Berger broke new ground here. The American military had taken the position that its fighting men and women did not do road-guard duty. But in this case, the president, the commander in chief, had ordered it.”

Bitumen supply became a concern, especially shipments coming through the Khyber Pass from Pakistan via the often chaotic border post of Torkum. Like the river run gravel, with no bitumen there’d be no blacktop. Gazi remembers Myers calling him at 4:30 in the morning one day to check on the status of
bitumen shipments. The price of bitumen was also rising and the quality of some material from Pakistan was questionable.

With this backdrop, subcontractors booked as much as they could from Egypt and Bahrain. Iran remained the obvious choice for a fresh supply that would likely have eliminated the problem. The quality was said to be good, and loads could be trucked to Afghanistan relatively quickly. But the United States had a ban on trade with Iran and it was not waived for the K-K project.

LBG had backup bitumen, 5,000 metric tons, which Myers had booked in May for this contingency. One of its engineers was dispatched on May 7, 2003, to Rawalpindi and Karachi to check on bitumen availability. Myers followed a few weeks later and booked the material from Rawalpindi. LBG portioned out this material to subcontractors as they needed it.

Supply was tight, but the bitumen was getting into the country, and the asphalt plants were being readied for production. By the end of September there’d be seven of them pumping out ATB—five batch plants and two continuous feed plants—as the campaign toward a December blacktop moved forward.
A major supply route for K-K reconstruction was the more than 1,000-kilometer truck route from the Pakistani Port of Karachi north through the Afghanistan border post of Spin Buldak into Kandahar and on to work sites. Deliveries from Karachi to work sites took a minimum of 10 days.
Airbill

A Kolin/Nafter airbill from August 2003 lists the following, delivered from Ankara to Kabul and on to KolNat’s work site. There were more than 70 airlifts bringing equipment, supplies, machinery and construction vehicles into Afghanistan for all the subcontractors during the acceleration project in 2003.

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<tr>
<th>Welding machines</th>
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<td>“Hi-up” truck</td>
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Armored Carrier Fills Road Culvert

One graphic indicator of the violence seen on K-K during the previous 23 years of war was near Kilometer 83. Mujahideen fighters had used a culvert under a road causeway at this spot to ambush Soviet tanks and armored personnel carriers. USAID engineering manager Frank Kenefick was at this location in the summer of 2003 and wrote this excerpt for LBG in 2009:

There was a long, high earthen causeway where the old K-K Road crossed a large, deep stream bed. This ‘fill’ was placed by the original constructors in the 1960s and included, at the bottom, a six-foot in diameter corrugated steel culvert with bolted panels for the stream to flow through. As noted by the locals, this large culvert was used by the Afghan Mujahideen fighters as an ambush site against the Soviet tank crews. Although land mines were reportedly in the embankment material, we picked our way down the visible trails—likely ‘demined’ (by goats)—and inspected the culvert from the inside to determine its structural integrity.

Most of the culvert’s bolted sections in the ceiling-arch plates were missing fasteners. In the center of the long culvert, several ceiling plates were missing. The locals said the ‘Muj’ had removed those ceiling plates, dug upward through the fill material and placed a large cache of explosives at the top, just under the road above. When a Soviet armor column passed over the (modified) culvert, the Muj detonated the large explosive charge, blowing up the tanks above and leaving a huge crater in the roadway. To repair this important causeway, Soviet troops just pushed the destroyed tanks and personnel carriers into the crater and covered them over with stones and dirt. One of the blackened bodies was there, upside down, plugging the hole in the steel-arch culvert. Since the causeway fill was many meters high over this culvert, we decided the Soviet ‘repair’ was good enough. My God, I wondered if the bodies were still in there. What kind of memorial was this?
Summer Acceleration

Frank Kenefick, far left in top photo, makes his way through a K-K culvert in summer 2003. Mr. Salik, director of project development for Afghanistan’s Ministry of Public Works, is standing in suit and tie. A burned-out Soviet armored personnel carrier, most likely booby-trapped by the Mujahideen, was found inside. Bottom photo shows pieces of the destroyed carrier.
A guard at Gulsan-Cukurova work site looks over several hundred barrels of bitumen. Bitumen for use on the accelerated reconstruction came from Egypt, Bahrain, Pakistan and India.
Gulsan-Cukurova lays ATB on December 5, 2003.
AUGUST ROLLED INTO SEPTEMBER AND PAVING IN ALL SECTIONS BEGAN. Pressure to meet the deadline remained intense. Obstacles continued to surface. “There were missed shipments, attacks, equipment breakdowns, weather problems when it started to get cold,” remembers USAID’s Bob Wilson. LBG reported quirky problems like a “lack of labor to open the liquid bitumen [asphalt] drums.”

Satellite phones didn’t always work or had limited coverage. A fuel convoy was stranded on the wrong side of the Pakistani border. A flash flood washed away a bridge foundation under construction near Qalat.

Naysayers doubted the project would succeed until the end. It was Jim Myers whom LBG managers in Washington trusted for the bottom-line reality on what was happening on the ground. And that was: The project was moving forward, 24-7, despite problems. U.N. demining manager Dan Kelly met Myers one night in his room at a house office in Kabul to coordinate clearance work. It was about 10 o’clock. Myers was in “a massive telephone conversation with LBG people in D.C. They needed to hear him speak to have confidence the road would get done. They were hearing lots of other stuff from other people. A lot of people didn’t believe it could get done.”
Asphalt Under the Lights

The race to get the blacktop down had begun in earnest, and the end game was a tally of kilometers paved for Washington, especially the National Security Council. Subcontractor ARCC was out in front. It had just 49 kilometers to cover, compared to 85 for the other subcontractors, and had been working about six months longer. KolNat started paving its section on September 7 and work proceeded around the clock. Generator- and diesel-powered floodlights were brought to work sites where asphalt plants were ramping up to capacity production. Nighttime construction work was probably a first for Afghanistan. “Once darkness fell, we were wide open for the Taliban to shoot up our work crews and equipment,” USAID’s Frank Kenefick recalls. “Hundreds of people were wide open to deadly risk.”

Attacks could occur at any time. “An Afghan engineer was shot in the hip and a police officer was shot in the hand,” while riding in a leased vehicle, according to a weekly progress report covering the period September 21-27, 2003. The report noted incidents like this caused “…some of the contractors’ competent engineers, foremen and other workers [to resign] out of safety concerns.”

Security was increased. By the end of September, there were 961 guards, drivers and supervisors, and 54 vehicles, working the five sections: “Armed escort is provided [for] inspector staff, nighttime construction work with lighting is especially nerve-wracking.” At the same time, daytime attacks and killings continued. In mid-September, four Afghan workers with a Danish charity group were pulled from a car in Ghazni and shot dead.

Night work was restricted for several days in mid-September due to security concerns. Zabul Province was especially troublesome, “highly active with elements that attacked security forces and threatened workers on the project. Due to near nightly incidents on the project, it was decided in the interest of safety to delay start of work in the morning until patrols could ascertain that there were no threats to the workers. Also in the interest of safety, it was decided to move equipment and personnel to secure locations in the afternoon so security provisions could be made for the night.” Violence wasn’t pervasive in KolNat’s section, at least in 2003. “We tried to have good relations with local Afghan authorities and the local people,” recalls the company’s Tankut Balkir. “For Turkish people, it wasn’t so difficult because of the religion and historical relations. So in 2003, we didn’t face any major difficulty of such kind.”
It was determined another asphalt plant was needed to simultaneously produce enough of the asphalt-treated base (ATB) to meet the paving schedule. KolNat had this plant airlifted to Kabul and trucked in pieces to Ghazni, where it was set up south of LBG’s compound.

The plant’s tanks were the final parts to arrive, on September 18, and it was running a week later. By September 26, the plant drum was dumping ATB into paving trucks working north from Kilometer 177 as KolNat began work in Mensel’s section. “Under great pressure, Kolin decided to work 20-22 hours daily and reached 3,500 tons of asphalt production capacity for each plant,” Tankut remembers. “Due to this hard work, 2.2 kilometers of road section was paved daily, on average. This included night work never seen before in Afghanistan. But there was no other choice for us to be able to complete the job in time. In my opinion, this was the real challenge of the project, and the keystone of the success.”

‘He Never Gave Up’

Kenefick talked with Jim Myers nearly every day during this period. He’s still amazed at Myers’ relentless tenacity during the project, even as he was bed-ridden in Kabul for several weeks with blood circulation and breathing problems: “He never gave up. Hour after hour he would agonize over numbers—he was constantly running over numbers [using his HP calculator in leather case]. How many tons of aggregate were being produced? How many dump-truck runs being made? The speed of deliveries coming in through the borders. How many kilometers were there to go? A garden-variety manager would have caved in from the pressure he was dealing with.” Gulsan-Cukurova’s Gazi Darici recalls Myers’ workaholic style in play every day, even when bed-ridden: “He didn’t sleep, you know.”

Speed remained critical. The biggest concern was possible early snowfalls, especially in higher elevations in northern road sections. This would have made paving almost impossible. “During the first week of November, there will be new ATB pavement from Km 43 to the traffic circle at Ghazni at Km 134 and beyond,” according to the “engineer’s comments” in the progress report for the week covering October 5-11, 2003. “It is good to see the ATB on these northern sections finishing up—the cold weather comes early in this part of the country.” The same report noted, “On Oct. 9, the nighttime temperature dipped to 28 degrees Fahrenheit in Ghazni for the first time this fall. South of Km 300, it will be possible to work most of the 81 days that remain in the year; north of that, the highway lies above the altitude that brings critically cold weather to the project, and working days may be fewer than 50.”
Another concern was sabotage of the asphalt plants by the Taliban—a direct hit with a single mortar round or rocket-propelled grenade would probably have knocked them out. By this time, the reconstructed road was benefiting villagers, and the Taliban needed their support.

The weather cooperated and the Taliban left the asphalt plants alone.

LBG and the subcontractors scrambled to secure bitumen, the liquid asphalt, as deliveries from both the north and south were often sluggish. Pakistan was seen as the most important source, given its proximity to Afghanistan. Myers’ decision to secure 5,000 tons from the refinery in Rawalpindi in May proved critical as the company portioned out material to subcontractors as needed.

Despite this supply, and shipments secured from Egypt and Bahrain, there were fears a bitumen shortage could torpedo the project. ARCC, for one, missed four or five days of paving due to a bitumen shortage. Myers and his colleagues huddled up and decided that a total of 60 kilometers in several sections could be “repaired” with a Single Bituminous Surface Treatment (SBST). This would reduce the overall quantity of bitumen needed: SBST is less than an inch thick, ATB more than three inches thick. These 60 kilometers were thought to be part of the original road built in the 1960s, a Double Bituminous Surface Treatment (DBST) that had stood the test of time (and erosion) and been spared the wreckage seen in other sections. Twenty kilometers in Section C, leading to the road’s highest elevation north of Ghazni, also got an SBST. This was the most difficult area to pave, as the paving rigs had to work uphill to the summit. There was also concern that an early snowfall would prevent paving altogether of the 20 kilometers by the end of the year. “Chip spreaders” were secured and shipped to Mensel’s work site. The SBST was laid down by tanker trucks spraying the road’s surface with a thin layer of bitumen. Dump trucks inching along in reverse followed, spreading a layer of finely crushed stone and rock chips. Laborers then evened out this new surface with rakes before roller/compactor rigs flattened it down into an SBST.

As it turned out, time and bitumen supply allowed an ATB layer to be laid over the 20 kilometers of SBST later that fall.
Encroachment Allowed

Another call made earlier that year proved critical to the project’s success: Each subcontractor could work in any section.

The major concern was BSC/C&C, which had fallen behind schedule because of delays in deliveries tied to long shipping times from India to Bandar-E-Abbas. Karachi was off limits because of political issues. There were also attacks on BSC/C&C’s workers, equipment and vehicles. Mensel was called on for earthworks and grading in BSC/C&C’s section and had to jockey equipment, vehicles and manpower down to this section. This put Mensel behind on its own section. LBG in turn assigned KolNat the paving of 40 kilometers of Mensel’s stretch, Kilometers 137 to 177, and 20 kilometers of BSC/C&C’s, 262 to 282. This required KolNat to set up a second work camp at Ghazni and bring in the additional asphalt plant. ARCC, for its part, laid ATB over Mensel’s first five kilometers (92 to 97), having finished its section on October 23. Further shuffling section responsibility, LBG transferred the paving of BSC/C&C’s 10 most southern kilometers, 337 to 347, to G-C. (Despite BSC/C&C’s problems, it completed paving 13 kilometers by mid-October.) G-C also helped the Japanese workers in their section in late November and early December when the work crew returned to work after being pulled off the site after being threatened by insurgents.

As paving proceeded, massive loads of equipment and supplies continued to arrive. An October 15 airbill shows KolNat bringing in a hot-oil generator, a second de-drumming unit, a Hamm roller-compactor, 20 drums of hot oil and steel pipes and fittings. The subcontractors kept booking bitumen. The Alexandria Refinery in Egypt was a major source, shipping drums of bitumen from the Port of Said to Karachi. Pakistan didn’t allow “loose drum” shipments on trucks making inland deliveries, so drums had to be loaded from the vessel into containers before being put on trucks carrying loads through Chaman, Pakistan, to the border post of Spin Buldak. “We would [deliver] the containers on the trucks to the Afghan-Pakistan border, pass the border, empty out the containers and load the drums on to the regular trucks [driven by Afghans] to be shipped to our job site,” recalls G-C’s Burak Vardan. Bitumen deliveries from Karachi to work sites took a minimum of 10 days.
G-C also booked bitumen from Bahrain to Karachi on vessels in “bitutainers,” each carrying 20 metric tons of frozen bitumen. These special containers are heated, allowing bitumen to be kept at an appropriate temperature before being thawed and reheated when discharged at a job site. Sixty bitutainers were shipped from Bahrain to Karachi for G-C; other bitumen from Bahrain was transferred from storage tanks into individual drums and shipped to Karachi.

BSC/C&C secured bitumen from two sources. It was trucked in bulk from Indian Oil’s Koyali Refinery, near Mumbai, to the Port of Mumbai, where it was loaded on a vessel and delivered to the Iranian port of Bandar-E-Abbas. From here it was trucked to BSC/C&C’s work site at Shah Joy. BSC/C&C chartered a vessel for two-and-a-half months to get bitumen, supplies and equipment to Bandar-E-Abbas. These deliveries were often too slow to allow BSC/C&C to meet the accelerated schedule, so most of its bitumen (120 bitutainers) was booked out of Bahrain and also shipped to Bandar-E-Abbas.

October also saw a continuation of violence, from simple assaults like the “Afghan engineer punched in head and kicked in assault at Kilometer 157,” and the Taliban’s kidnapping of a G-C mechanical engineer on October 1. He was released 30 days later.8

But the road was getting paved. By mid-October, subcontractors had received 22,301 tons of bitumen, with another 9,344 tons en route to work sites and another 20,495 tons ordered. If all the bitumen en route made it to work sites, there’d be enough to get the blacktop down by the deadline.

ARCC was covered. It had completed its 49 kilometers—two layers of a crushed aggregate base and an asphalt “binder” layer—and marked the occasion with “the traditional celebratory sacrifice of a sheep,” as the LBG/USAID weekly report for October 19-25 noted. “Already travelers are experiencing great benefits from the construction work. The two-day journey (from Kabul to Kandahar) is down to under seven hours.”9

By the end of October, prep work for all sections had been completed. This included most fine grading, the last step before paving. Also at this time, paving peaked at about 12,000 tons of ATB laid down per day. Paving trucks were each carrying an average load of about 20 tons of ATB. Kenefick remembers: “When we hit 12,000 tons a day, I told Jim, we got this sucker in the bag.”

LBG agreed. By October 25, it reported to USAID that a total of 190 kilometers had been paved, including an SBST over 58 kilometers, and estimated the blacktop would be down by December 20.
Laying the blacktop in Section F on December 5, 2003. Three days later, the final four kilometers of Section F were paved, and the blacktop was down over the entire 389 kilometers of K-K that LBG was charged with rebuilding.
November 2003

But it wasn’t over. November and early December showed no shortage of violence—killings, kidnappings, attacks. On November 16, a woman working for a U.N. refugee agency was shot dead in Ghazni. On November 22, a vehicle traveling near Kilometer 291 came under fire; security detail returned fire. In early December, a Pakistani engineer was killed and an Afghan worker wounded in an incident in Ghazni Province. On December 6, two days before LBG would declare the blacktop down, two Indian workers were kidnapped (and released on December 24.) The company noted that on December 6 “…three armed men stopped a white Toyota Hilux pickup driven by an Afghan with two employees of BSC/C&C JV. They dragged the Afghan driver out of the vehicle and beat him. The three armed men got into the vehicle and drove west with the Indian employees. This happened about 10 km north of Sha Joy. The MOI [Afghan Ministry of Interior] patrol came upon the driver and started pursuing this vehicle. These employees refused security when they left the gate at Camp E. At last report, the MOI were still searching for the kidnapped victims.”10 Trade journal ENR reported: “The Taliban is also threatening to kill two Indian construction workers who were abducted Dec 6 near Qalat. … A Pakistani working for another Berger project in Ghazni province was killed in an ambush on Dec 8.”11

November also saw Japanese workers pulled from their 50-kilometer section at the 11th hour after they were threatened by insurgents. Japan’s section included heavily damaged roadway, with “potholes the size of automobiles,” as Pat Quinn remembers it. The Japanese managing the project were persuaded to allow workers to return to work in a diplomatic effort led by U.S. officials. USAID, with help from Ambassador Taylor, “reached out to Ambassador Komano [Japan’s ambassador to Afghanistan] and said we would work with the Afghan and U.S. military forces to enhance security. We also asked the Louie Berger guys [private security firm] to help with information-sharing with the Japanese and U.S. militaries. It did the trick,” Bever remembers.12

The Japanese workers returned to work on November 27.

Subcontractors maintained their round-the-clock work schedule. By November 2, KolNat had completed its 85 kilometers as it worked to finish the additional 60 kilometers it was responsible for in other sections. By November 22, a total of 297 kilometers were paved; of these, 60 kilometers had been an SBST. An LBG internal report matter-of-factly noted there was enough bitumen at work sites to complete paving the final kilometers.
Afghan security guards on the K-K highway.
On November 29, a Saturday, the company reported that 371 of the 389 kilometers were covered with blacktop. (This was also the day a kidnapped G-C worker was turned over to tribal elders, who released him the next day.) By this time, security numbers for K-K hit a peak of 1,120 guards, drivers and supervisors and 54 vehicles.

**Blacktop Down Over Ancient Crossroads**

It was official on a Monday, December 8. LBG, in an internal memo to USAID filed from Kabul, stated that all 389 kilometers now constituted a continuous blacktop: “The first-phase paving of the last four kilometers in Section F [was] completed at 5:00 p.m."

It was 23 days to 2004.

Three-hundred-twenty-nine kilometers of ATB blacktop and 60 kilometers of an SBST stretched over the rebuilt two-lane highway, seven meters wide (23 feet) in most sections, with 2.5-meter shoulders, widened from the original 1.5-meter shoulders (where there were actual road shoulders).

‘Well-Done!’

Back in Washington, even the skeptics were pleased. USAID’s Jim Kunder sent an e-mail to his colleague Jim Bever on December 2, 2003, when it was all-but-certain the blacktop would be down in a matter of days: “As today’s Deputies Committee meeting on Afghanistan was breaking up at the White House Situation Room, Deputy National Security Advisor Steve Hadley asked everyone to stay for a moment. He then proceeded to tell Administrator Natsios how grateful and excite[d] he was that the road was within nine kilometers of completion; what a tremendous morale boost the road was for everyone involved in the reconstruction of Afghanistan; and how he himself had doubted any organization could ever have completed the project in the face of such hardships. He gave USAID a rousing ‘well-done!’ It was a great tribute to all parts of our Afghanistan team, and especially to those of you working in Kabul under such difficult circumstances. I have at least some inkling of how much work takes place behind the scenes, by each of you, to achieve such reconstruction successes in Afghanistan, in highways and in all the other sectors in which we are working. Many, many thanks for all your efforts.”
I said that the United States recognized its mistake in abandoning Afghanistan after the Soviet Union’s withdrawal in 1989. The 9/11 attacks had demonstrated the consequences of such neglect. We Americans would not turn our backs on his [former Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani] country again.

From Ambassador James F. Dobbins’ After the Taliban: Nation-Building in Afghanistan, recalling conversation from late 2001

We are not going to do what we did in 1989 and turn our backs on Afghanistan.


‘But what’s going to save this nation is the creation of a contemporary world—a new economic system, a real representative form of government, dams, roads, farms…the things that we can create.’ As he said this he snapped his fingers and cried…

Nazrullah, from James Michener’s Caravans
JON LEE ANDERSON drove the length of K-K in the spring of 2005. “It was a beautiful road, one of the best I’ve been on,” said Anderson, author of *The Lion’s Grave: Dispatches from Afghanistan*, in an interview with LBG. “There was nothing wrong with the road, it was flawless, the entire length. You had this modern road connecting Kabul with the south, a landscape of lunar-like mountains and rocky desert and periodically fortified towns around old forts and rivers.” Anderson, a staff writer for *The New Yorker* magazine, was in the country to interview people for a profile of President Hamid Karzai. Nighttime driving was not a good idea, given security concerns. But during the day it was plain to see LBG and its team had built a splendid highway. There wasn’t much traffic, an occasional truck or taxi and “long periods of nothing. It was like being in the American Southwest.”

Another writer, Joel Hafvenstein, working in Afghanistan, also enjoyed the ride on K-K. “It was an excellent, smooth highway, and it cut travel time between Kabul and Kandahar to seven hours at a reasonable pace (five or six at the speed of most Afghan drivers,)” Hafvenstein wrote in a November 24, 2004, dispatch from his book, *Opium Season*.

The U.S. Government Accountability Office had praise for the highway: “Notable accomplishments [during 2002 and 2003] include building a road from Kabul to Kandahar. The road, a U.S. presidential priority, represents a significant political symbol within Afghanistan and is the main transport route for north-south trade from Central Asia to the Indian Ocean.”

USAID’s final report on the completed highway includes many details showing how focused LBG and the subcontractors were on making it a driver-and-villager friendly road. In Section D, for instance, “The shoulders in four villages were changed from an SBST shoulder to an asphalt paved shoulder, due to traffic driving on the shoulders to access the shops in the villages. … This widening and provision of a defined paved shoulder in urban areas and SBST for the remaining shoulder areas have improved traffic flow and safety, giving more space for motorized vehicles and animal-drawn transport.” Page after page provides analysis and calculations. There are charts showing “Typical Cross Sections of Pavement Structure” and traffic analysis, including the weight of vehicles traveling the road and the weight of individual axles of given vehicles.
The final cost for rebuilding the 389 kilometers, including subsequent asphalt layers, lining, signage, and other work completed in 2004, came in at $260.2 million. LBG estimates the road paid for itself in about three years considering the economic benefits to Afghans from the commerce and trade it opened up. U.S. Ambassador Taylor, who moved from Afghanistan in 2003 to oversee reconstruction in Iraq, points out that, “for under $300 million we got a high-quality road in Afghanistan. We spent about $18 billion on reconstruction in Iraq,” during his tenure in that country. Ambassador Taylor, now vice president at the United States Institute for Peace’s Center for Post-Conflict Peace and Stability Operations, said too often in Iraq he saw construction projects destroyed as they were being built, or soon after completion. He also pointed out that Iraq had infrastructure building capacity in place, despite the war, while in Afghanistan there was none, and yet the highway was rebuilt under an extraordinarily tight deadline with countless obstacles to overcome.

Patrick C. Fine was USAID Mission Director for Afghanistan for one year, starting in July 2004, when work on the second phase of K-K’s reconstruction was proceeding. Fine, in an interview with LBG, reflected on the atmosphere in 2004 surrounding the project: “A lot of the critics of the road had no background on the building of roads. For instance, there was a health guide who saw cracks in the road and said this showed it was poorly made. Well, asphalt cracks in roads all over. This kind of criticism was picked up by the popular press and some politicians and perpetuated a lot of misguided criticism about our road-building program in Afghanistan. Some of the criticism was driven by political agendas by some individuals, maybe four or five people...”
The project represented a major U.S. foreign policy success. It united several thousand people from around the world to work together on a construction project in a war-ravaged country that had harbored terrorists pulling off the worst terrorist attack in U.S. history.

The rebuilding of the road was part of a long-term effort to bring peace and stability to a part of world which has experienced little over the millennia. It was part of a larger U.S. post-9/11 strategic foreign policy.

Jim Kunder is now a private consultant and a fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States. He also teaches a course on post-conflict reconstruction and stabilization at the U.S. State Department’s Foreign Service Institute. “There’s always the perception on the part of political leaders that if this [Afghanistan] was the United States, you patch the place back together,” said Kunder, speaking in mid-2010. “Afghanistan was one of the most desperately poor places on the face of the earth—before the 23 years of fighting, before we came in. The idea really was that this [reconstruction, infrastructure development] was a 20- to 30-year proposition.”

U.S. foreign aid and rebuilding efforts have improved the lives of many Afghans. Kunder pointed out that, “The Afghan currency remains sturdy; the number of kids in school and the quality of health far exceed what the numbers had been; and economic growth continues. Continuing problems with governance in Afghanistan are the result of many factors: feudalism in the countryside; criminality; Pashtun nationalism; and adventurism by neighboring countries, to name a few. Continued progress requires addressing these complex, underlying causes of instability and suffering, not just thinking of the problems in terms of battling the Taliban.”

Afghans Speak

Seven years after the accelerated reconstruction, K-K continues to benefit the people of Afghanistan, even as security remains a concern. The country remains at war, and as Afghanistan’s most important transportation route, K-K is sometimes the target of insurgents.

But average Afghans depend on the road in their everyday lives.
One Afghan doctor, who goes by Dr. Shahabuddin, noted that, “The asphalt road plays a very key role in the country, as we can compare this with the role blood plays in transportation in the human body. In the years 2002 and 2003, there were a lot of problems because the passengers were getting sick due to the dust and the long trip [from Kabul to Kandahar]. It was difficult for children, aged people and sick people, and was very difficult for women in particular. As the road is asphalt now, the sick people are traveling with comfort to their destination. It is also to be mentioned that the medical team can now get to locations where there is a traffic [accident] on the Kabul-Kandahar Highway.”

At a police check point on K-K, a national police officer, who goes by Mr. Rahmatullah, noted, “As you know, our duty is to serve our people and our country. We are doing our best to maintain security along the road day and night so our people can travel without any concerns. The benefit of the road [K-K] is well known to everyone. It is worth mentioning that the asphalt road plays a vital role in the security of the country and creates different business opportunities, and helps in all aspects of our lives.”

Ghulam Rahman Naseri is a regional manager for International Relief and Development with Afghanistan’s Mine Action Program. He started working in the demining field in 1991. He talked about the road before and after it was rebuilt: “After the road was built, it was really unbelievable. Sometimes you could not tell you were traveling, really. The change was really enjoyable then. It was a main topic of conversation among people. You could go see your friends. Before the road was built, people did not like bus trips because they were so long and hard. After the road was built, people began to demand buses again because they were safer and faster.”

‘You had an impossible, drop-dead deadline. You had the most powerful man in the world handing down a deadline. You had President Karzai, the Secretary of Defense, all the way down to the members of USAID—all around the world people had their eyes on this to see if we could complete what we were doing. You had people trying to sabotage the project. There was always the chance of getting shot at. You had car accidents, logistics problems. You just don’t get this kind of pressure doing normal construction projects. It was just a lot of fun. You live to work on jobs like this.’

Joe Pecht
LBG materials manager
for K-K project
An Afghan 'jingle' truck on K-K, Section F.
Ghulam was working in Kandahar, before the road was rebuilt, one of his staff died. He needed to get the body to the family in a village: “If the road had been paved, we could have done this in a few hours. Instead we had to take him back overnight, it was the only way.” The paved road also makes it more difficult for insurgents to plant and conceal roadside bombs. Ghulam noted, “If we had a dirt road now, there would be more ambushes, more IEDs. People with pick axes are able to bury IEDs on a dirt road, not a paved one.”

Abdul Razaq Fiaz works for an NGO active in several Afghan provinces. “We always use the Kabul-Kandahar Highway for business matters,” Abdul said. “We are working with the local communities in these provinces and have experienced very well the benefit of the road, because we can get from Kabul to Ghazni in a timely fashion. We can transport our produce in time to the provinces—also trees, pesticides and other agricultural products. The local people are very happy with the Kabul to Kandahar road because they can take their sick people in time to Kabul for treatment. … In the end, I have to say the distances are now shorter, and this is one of the positive aspects of the road.”

Mohammed Dad operates a shop in Kabul and relies on K-K for deliveries, including car parts for his brother’s car dealership. He also travels the road by bus. “I travel once a month using the passenger bus,” he said. “In the past, it was a very tiring trip because the road was in very bad shape, and I was getting sick due to dust and pollution. Since the road has been improved, transport costs are lower and our selling has increased.”

Hazrat Gul has been driving a bus in Afghanistan for the last 30 years: “In the past when the road was very bumpy, it was taking me 17 hours to reach Kandahar from Kabul. The trip was full of troubles. There were technical problems with the bus, the fuel consumption was very high, and the fare for passengers was high. Now that the road is improved, my fuel consumption is low, the time to make the trip is very short, and the technical problems have been drastically reduced.”

Abdul Aziz is a businessman who uses K-K and the highway from Kandahar to Herat on a regular basis. “We usually use the road for business purposes, and use the trucks to deliver our goods from Herat to Kandahar and then to Kabul and the same road back to Herat,” he said while being interviewed at the Kabul bus station. “Before our goods were delivered to the clients in about 10 days, but now we receive and deliver goods to clients and back in one day.”
Sayed Jan is a fuel truck driver: “I am traveling on the road [K-K] for about 10 years. I have a fuel truck, and we are delivering the fuel to coalition forces. The new road helped us a lot. For example, we have to make less repairs on the truck, and we make at least two trips in a week. Before it was one trip in about two weeks, and 50 percent of our income was spent on the truck repairs.”

‘We Did What We Needed to Do’

The human element in play getting the blacktop down was sometimes overlooked by those following the project from a distance, for one because of the colossal scale of the engineering and logistics efforts. Construction workers, managers and superintendents, demining supervisors, security managers, helicopter pilots—everyone had to interact with local villagers and elders and assure them they were there to help. Phil Ferraro, LBG’s demining manager during the project, speaking in 2010, pointed out: “We had to establish a rapport with the villagers and village elders, win their hearts and minds, so to speak. Some of these villages were right on top of the road. We had to sit down with them and win their confidence so they wouldn’t turn around at night and attack us.” This was seen when subcontractors accommodated villagers by making road shoulders running near villages a full layer of asphalt rather than the thinner layer normally applied to shoulders.

Ferraro spent 20 years serving with U.S. Special Forces and is now a manager of computer security for the U.S. Department of Defense's systems and networks in Europe, based in Germany. For Ferraro and other expats called to Afghanistan in 2003, the accelerated reconstruction was about getting a job done. Yes, it was an order handed down by the White House, but at the end of the day it was another job to be completed: “I didn’t find it unusual. We did the exact same thing in Cambodia for the Berger project there [a highway from Phnom Phen to the Kampong Som Seaport]. We had to deal with the Khmer Rouge which came at night and cratered the road with IEDs. Our government had a project in Afghanistan. For me, it was another road project we had to secure and build. We did what we needed to do to get it done.”

Joe Pecht, the LBG materials manager for the K-K project, looks back on the experience as one of the best times of his professional career, despite being in the helicopter crash. “This was like the perfect storm of a construction project,” he said in 2010 from Indonesia, where he was working as a materials engineer on the Aceh Road/Bridge Reconstruction Project on Sumatra Island. “You had an impossible, drop-dead deadline. You had the most powerful man in the world handing down a deadline. You had President Karzai,
Mrs. Miher Nigar Naziry, a business trainer, interviewed by Dr. Noor Mohammad, community developer officer for the Afghanistan Infrastructure and Rehabilitation Program, in June 2010. Mrs. Naziry organizes seminars for a women’s foundation in Ghazni where women are trained for agricultural work. She travels on K-K in small cars and noted, “The asphalt road created a lot of opportunities in our day-to-day life.”
I asked a group of young children on the streets in Kandahar after the ribbon-cutting ceremony in December of 2003 if they knew about the great highway being built to their city from Kabul. They all said yes; it was the Americans who were building it, they told me. Its symbolism reached down that far into Afghan society.

Andrew S. Natsios  
Former USAID Administrator

the Secretary of Defense, all the way down to the members of USAID—all around the world people had their eyes on this to see if we could complete what we were doing. You had people trying to sabotage the project. There was always the chance of getting shot at. You had car accidents, logistics problems. You just don't get this kind of pressure doing normal construction projects. It was just a lot of fun. You live to work on jobs like this.”

K-K’s accelerated reconstruction was completed under extraordinary circumstances and at a high price, as detailed in this book. The road remains vital to Afghanistan’s economy and the health of its people. The project represented a major U.S. foreign policy achievement. It united several thousand people from around the world to work together on a construction project in a war-ravaged country that had harbored terrorists pulling off the worst terrorist attack in U.S. history.
Afghan President Hamid Karzai, at right, was happy to accept a Stetson hat as a gift from Jim Myers at the presidential palace in Kabul. Myers suggested he and the President exchange hats during the K-K celebration dinner in December 2003. The President’s Karakul fur hat fit Myers nicely, but Myers’ Stetson was a bit small. He promised to bring one back that would fit when he returned in early 2004. In return, President Karzai gave Myers a cape he donned for this photo.
The celebrations

GETTING THE BLACKTOP DOWN by the end of December was a major accomplishment for all parties involved, and USAID and LBG agreed major celebrations were in order. Preparations for the ribbon-cutting and celebration dinner, both held on December 16, 2003, were weeks in the making.

A carpenter was hired to build a wood podium. Afghan calligraphers used special pens purchased in Kabul to write invitation cards. Porta-potties were rented and trucked to the ribbon-cutting area. Parking lots and helipads were laid out at Kilometer 43.

The celebrations were occurring during Ramadan, the Islamic observance of prayer and fasting. Three tents were set up at the staging area, two for prayer (one for men, one for women) and one for food. The local mullah was called down to point out the direction of Mecca, indicated in each prayer tent by a ribbon tied to a pole. A kabob stand in Kabul prepared boxed meals of meat or chicken, bread and fruit. A section of the food tent was cordoned off so those eating would be shielded from those fasting. Beverages were in barrels packed with ice. The food was good and the people were hungry. LBG’s Rebeka Spires ran the events planning program. She’d just arrived in Afghanistan in late October from the company’s Washington office. “It became such a large group of people eating after the ceremony, no one stayed in the tent,” she recalls, as they spilled out into the brilliant sunshine to enjoy their lunch despite the frigid temperature.
Music From Sitar, Tabla

That night, several hundred people arrived for the celebration dinner at Afghanistan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The building had no electricity, no heat, and it was freezing cold. Generators were hauled in. A door was removed so a hose pumping hot air could fit into an empty banquet hall. The Intercontinental Hotel catered food—roasted lamb, chicken, vegetables, Afghan rice. Live music came from musicians playing a sitar and tabla, brought by Sayed Hashemyan, the Afghan-American California Department of Transportation engineer.

The next night, LBG held its own dinner at a Kabul restaurant where about 200 people who worked on the project celebrated the blacktop now stretching across one of Central Asia's ancient crossroads.
The staging area for the December 16 ribbon cutting.
Gathered on the morning of December 16, 2003, near the site of the ribbon cutting, from left to right, front row: Yilmaz Ergun, vice chairman, Cukurova Construction Company; Rebeka Spires, LBG deputy administrative chief; Aziz Gul, board member, Gulsan Construction Company. Back row, from left to right: Michel Jichlinski, LBG executive vice president; Mako Akou, project director, Gulsan-Cukurova joint venture; Thomas Nicastro, LBG vice president; Margarita Cronin, LBG contracts manager; Burak Vardan, manager, Cukurova Construction Company; Jim Myers, project chief of party; Nevzet Gulec, project engineer, Gulsan-Cukurova joint venture; P.K. Das, LBG senior contracts administrator; Don Noble, LBG project manager; Vahit Tekin, project manager, Gulsan-Cukurova joint venture.
Jim Myers, in center of photo, standing by bulldozer at a K-K work site in 2003.
Publisher’s note: Jim Myers passed away on May 13, 2010. This profile was written in April 2009 after the author spent a day with Myers and his wife, Mary Myers.

Jim Myers lives deep in the woods in northern Washington state, a mile-and-a-half from the border with British Columbia. His porch looks out over a wide expanse of the Columbia River as it cuts through the Cascade Mountains. There’s probably enough stone by the river’s shore for aggregate to get a blacktop down on the dirt road that leads seven miles from Myers’ house out to the state road. Deer and elk graze under trees around his property. Bear and coyote are among animals seen at the forest’s edge. He and a neighbor teamed up to shoot a bobcat; its hide and skin are tacked on the wall of Myers’ basement.

The first thing you see entering Myers’ basement is the preserved head of a lion laid out on his pool table. Myers shot the “man-eater” in Ethiopia near the border with Somalia at the Ethiopian government’s request in November 1975. “Enclosed is a picture of a man-eater the government of Ethiopia requested I exterminate,” Myers wrote to LBG in February 1976 at the end of a letter about a project in Indonesia he’d soon be working on. “It had killed three people and numerous livestock and took me four days to hunt down. He made his last mistake by taking one of my mules for his supper, not 30 meters in front of my rifle; small mane but large cat, over 10 feet 4 inches, of the desert species.”
Myers is best known at LBG as the man most responsible for the success of the Kabul-to-Kandahar road project, as chief of party, the USAID title for project manager. When others said the “accelerated” deadline couldn’t possibly be met, Myers and his colleague and friend, LBG corporate vice president and senior engineer, Pat Quinn, said with the right plan and funding it was doable, and he and the team delivered. “He’s a driving force,” says LBG chief corporate counsel Bernie Sacks, who negotiated subcontractor contracts for the project. “You get in his way and he’ll steamroll you over. There were a lot of naysayers in the beginning of this project. Jim said, ‘OK, this is what we need, we’ll do it.’” Myers is quick to give credit for the project’s success to those he worked with, emphasizing his management style of gaining people’s trust and delegating authority: “I had good people over there, I’ll tell ya. I’m proud of ‘em.”

Myers’ career building roads and bridges and other infrastructure projects spans six decades and included long-term assignments in countries plagued with violence and poverty. He considers Afghanistan the most treacherous of them all; by the end of the accelerated work, 40 people working on or near the project had been killed, scores wounded. By the end of his stay in 2006, 136 had been killed on USAID infrastructure projects.

He was born in Cedar Grove, New Jersey, but grew up in Glendale, Arizona. He spent summers at his grandfather’s ranch in Mayer, Arizona, 20 miles from Prescott. His grandfather ran a construction business and Myers was drawn to the field. He learned carpentry as a teenager and put his craftsmanship to work on many projects. Perhaps the most remarkable was a replica model of the Sea Witch clipper ship (built in 1846), which Myers built 1/44th to scale during down time over the nearly five years he spent working for LBG in Indonesia.

Despite his thin five-foot-ten-inch frame, Myers remains a larger-than-life character to those who know him and worked with him. Given the many Jim stories of action and intrigue, he also carries a certain mystique. Everyone who’s worked with Myers seems to have a Jim story or two. Stories of tough jobs done well, like helping blow up underwater bridge foundations in the St. Lawrence Seaway, using scuba diving skills he also put to use teaching a friend how to hunt sharks with a CO2 gun in Indonesia. While scuba diving for the Seaway project, “He always stayed down twice as long as anyone else,” remembers Quinn, who met (and hired) Myers in 1977 in Indonesia where they worked together on the Kabupaten Luwu Highway Project in Sulawesi. During this assignment, Myers obliged local farmers who asked him to hunt down boars:
“They were damaging the farmers’ crops, it was devastating to the farmers. And the best time to get ‘em was at night.”

Mary Myers, remembering her husband’s exploits, mentioned the time he was almost trampled by a herd of buffalo in Ethiopia. Jim and his hunting partner had each shot a buffalo. One was killed, the other wounded. The dying beast started wailing, and the herd responded with a rampaging charge toward the men. Myers’ mate managed to get up a tree, but the branch of the tree Jim dashed for snapped off as he climbed on it: “He fell right in front of the herd of stampeding buffalo. If he had run, that would have been the end of him. He grabbed his hat and he ran toward them, going ‘Yahoo! Yahoo!’ and going straight at the buffalo. And he was quivering in his boots. And the buffalo, they didn’t know what to make of this. And they came to a halt, and they parted and went around him.” Myers nodded in consent as he listened to his wife’s account, laid out on his back on a padded bench in his basement.

Myers’ reputation for toughness came, for one, from his physical resiliency. His body had taken a beating over the years from plane, motorcycle and four-wheeler crashes, and yet he never failed to recover, get back to a job and get it done. To some at LBG, he remains the “Marlboro Man,” given his penchant for Stetson hats and cowboy boots and passion for hunting and weapons. Myers loves his pistols. “He was an expert shot. He practiced shooting his pistols, hour after hour,” remembers Quinn. The Wall Street Journal mentioned that Myers had a “Czech-made pistol” tucked inside his jacket while on site during the K-K project. LBG’s Rebeka Spires, who worked with Myers during the final months of 2003, remembers he always carried his “HP calculator with leather case and his pistol.”

Myers is also a pilot and flew missions for LBG in the Caribbean. During Labor Day weekend 1987 he was forced to ditch his twin-engine Piper plane with six people aboard near a coral reef island off the coast of Antigua. No one was hurt, although Myers’ plane was destroyed. The trouble began about 40 miles from Antigua when the left engine overheated, forcing Myers to shut it down. Twenty minutes later he started losing power in the right engine. “When that happened, we had nowhere to go. We ditched it, it was just getting dark. We ditched it in the ocean off a place called Sandy Island. I’d been in radio communication with air traffic control. We put it down in the water and swam 40 yards to Sandy Island.” Jackie Coolidge was on the plane, working at the time for the World Bank. “It was exactly like the Hudson River plane,” she remembers, referring to the January 2009 “Miracle on the Hudson” US Airways jetliner accident, during which the plane’s engines lost power forcing the pilot to land on the river. “He [Myers] told us, ‘Put on your
life jackets. I’m gonna put her in the ocean.’ And he brought the plane down and we were skating over the
waves. He brought that plane down perfectly, no one suffered a bump. And then we went down into the
water and then right back up and floated. He put us down about 50 yards from a tiny coral island. We swam
over there and got out on the beach.” (One passenger didn’t swim and had to be pulled to shore.) A nearby
cruise ship dispatched a lifeboat to pick up the stranded travelers. With help from the Coast Guard, most of
the party’s luggage was recovered, but Myers’ plane was down for good. That was clear the next day when he
returned to the scene with scuba gear to visit his sunken Piper.

His work in Cambodia included supervising the building of the National Route Number Four Highway, from
Phnom Phen to the Kampong Som Seaport, which took place while the Khmer Rouge was still active in the
country. Ian McGovern was deputy project manager with Myers during the K-K project and also worked for
LBG in Cambodia in the late 1990s. “Jim’s a legend in Cambodia,” McGovern remembers. “His name was
synonymous with Louis Berger. Everyone there knew of him, he was bigger than life.” One day Myers was
riding his motorcycle through the jungle in Cambodia and came across the helmet of an American pilot on a
fence post. He paid the farmer who owned the property $10 for the helmet and gave it to the U.S. military.

Those who’ve worked with Myers and know him best are quick to emphasize he’s more than a pistol-packing,
adventure-seeking cowboy engineer. He’s able to quickly understand complex engineering problems and
materials issues. Myers, brainstorming with Quinn, was central to the decision to use river run gravel for the
accelerated K-K project, determining after consulting with subcontractor Cukurova that the rock would be
suitable for screening into aggregate. Company chairman Fred Berger regards Myers as “an on-the-ground,
hard-working engineer who got the job done. He was constantly searching for new materials and had a
wide range of technical expertise. He was as comfortable arguing design principals with engineers as he was
discussing process with contractors.” Fred Berger met Myers on a road in Ethiopia. The roads at the time
were often dangerous places. He asked Myers at the time how he managed to travel on them: “He told me he
had a pass that allowed him to get around—a .357 [Magnum].”

Myers returned to Afghanistan in 2004 and stayed through 2006 to finish LBG’s first infrastructure
contract for USAID. He supervised the 2004 work done on K-K and reconstruction of the Kandahar
to Herat highway, stretching 557 kilometers, which had begun in 2003. Leon Waskin, USAID mission
director for Afghanistan in 2006 to 2007, pointed out the positive influence Myers had on engineers and
other construction industry professionals: “Although he’s most often associated with the highly successful
completion of the Kabul-Kandahar road...Jim’s greatest legacy may be the impact he has had on developing young Afghan engineers and nascent subcontractors, who in many respects are key to developing a self-sustaining economy and hold this country’s future.”

**Fresh Call to Afghanistan**

Myers lives with his wife of 40 years, Mary, five cats and two dogs, at his Washington state home. He met Mary in Georgetown, Guyana, in 1967, and they were married there on Valentine’s Day 1969. More than 30 years later, here at his home, Jim Myers got the call from Fred Berger about the embassy assignment in Kabul. And it was here where he returned at the end of 2006 when his work in the country was done. He had left a legacy of accomplishment, toughness and professionalism. Afghan President Hamid Karzai awarded Myers the Ghazi Mir Masjidi High State Prize for his work unifying Afghanistan. Myers’ driver Najib—who drove Myers to Mazar-e-Sharif in January 2002—drove him to the award ceremony to accept a medal.

Myers was also honored literally at street level: An outcrop of rock on the road from Kandahar to Herat was named “Myers Rock,” written in black lettering in a rectangular block painted white, about 100 feet above the road. “We needed rock, we were always looking for rock,” Myers remembers, given the many roads LBG built and rebuilt in the country. So Chris Humphries, an LBG construction site supervisor in Afghanistan at the time, regarded it a fitting tribute to plaster his name on a big chunk of Afghan rock.

Jim Myers' work in Afghanistan may have been his professional swan song. But in April 2009 LBG called and asked if he might help on a road and dam project. Location: Afghanistan. Myers was ready to go. It had been more than two years since he’d returned from Afghanistan. And just as he was restless in the fall of 2001 before dispatched to Kabul, he was restless again, eager to be on site, on the job.

At 75, Myers had slowed down a bit, given up hunting, but was still ready for a fresh assignment. Health issues made this latest one impossible, at least for the time being. But he was ready to go, wherever the job might be, the way it had always been.
Jim Myers stands in front of rock outcrop bearing his name on highway from Kandahar to Herat. Myers’ colleagues honored him with this inscription in 2006.
November 2, 1975. Ethiopia’s government hired Myers to hunt down this lion, which had killed several people.
Mark Humphries, left, in Afghanistan in 2004. Mark was a construction site supervisor for Section F during K-K’s accelerated phase, joining LBG in Afghanistan in August 2003 from his native Texas. He died in a plane crash in Afghanistan in February 2005. He was key to the success of both the Kabul-to-Kandahar and Kandahar-to-Herat highway projects. His love of children, including his own three, was exemplified by his generosity and kindness toward Afghan shoeshine boys. Gigi Barattin, right, a native of Italy, worked as an engineer on the K-K project in 2004 and was also killed in the crash. “Gigi had a way of entering a room that would light up the entire facility and engage all in his presence,” remembered his friend, LBG Afghanistan construction engineer Steve Yahn.
Mark Humphries

Several thousand people worked on the accelerated K-K project.

There were expatriates from the United States, some eager to contribute to the recently launched “war on terror.” Mark Humphries, who worked for a family concrete and paving company in Dallas, Texas, was one of them. Humphries was among 104 people killed in a plane crash in Afghanistan on February 3, 2005. The Boeing 737 left Herat for Kabul and was diverted to Pakistan during heavy snow before crashing into a mountain.

Humphries began his work in Afghanistan in August 2003 with LBG as construction site supervisor for Section F.

He was a family man with three children and developed a special affinity for the street children of Kabul, especially the shoeshine boys. The children were mostly orphans, many about the same age as Humphries’ son, who was nine at the time. With the shoeshine rate going at one U.S. dollar, the Afghan boys got five from the affable Texan.

Chris Humphries, Mark’s brother, talked about Mark while in the United States for a few weeks in 2009, on leave from his job as construction superintendent for an LBG road-building project in Afghanistan. He’d followed his older brother to the country, arriving in March 2004, to work on K-K’s phase two. Chris also mentioned his brother’s generosity toward the shoeshine boys and remembered the day Mark arranged for special transport for one of them: “We came out of the office in Kabul and one of the kids said he had to shine shoes at the pilot house. So Mark called his driver and he puts the kid in the back seat of an armored Land Cruiser and tells Sadal [the driver] to deliver the kid to the pilot house. He indentified with these kids. He bought them clothes, shoes, coats.”

Mark’s homemade chili (his wife Jamie Sue’s recipe) was coveted by whomever was around when he’d cook up a pot or two, typically on Friday nights when expats would have a go at cooking their own meals at the Kabul compound or one of the work camps. Mark would stand up for Afghans in various situations. Chris
Afghan shoeshine boys in Kabul on February 1, 2002. Mark Humphries would pay shoeshine boys five dollars when the going rate was one. The children were mostly orphans, many about the same age as Humphries’ son.
recounted the time an Afghan driver was “pulling into one of the guest houses, and he backed into an expat who was walking behind the car. The expat opened the driver’s side of the car and started cursing the driver out. He happened to have a little more rank than Mark, but Mark got out of the car and told him to apologize...” Mark and Chris were Texas A&M graduates and devoted Aggie college football fans. LBG’s Rebeka Spires remembers one night in 2004 when Mark and Chris walked into a room where she and friends were playing cards; both were wearing “matching plaid A&M Aggie pajamas—Christmas presents from back home.”

At a memorial service at a Kabul restaurant in February 2005, a few days after the crash, Chris was engulfed in grief, sitting on a chair in front of a podium, unable to address the crowd. A National Guard chaplain leading the service read Chris' written remarks: “Mark was not only my brother but also my friend and mentor. He was my hero in high school football. He was an example of what I wanted to be as a professional. In all aspects of my life we wanted to be able to fill his shoes, and he wanted to fill our father’s.”

Seventy-five people gathered for the service to hear the chaplain and others eulogize the men. The Afghans later honored Humphries and Gianluigi (Gigi) Barattin, a native of Treviso, Italy, who worked as a construction site supervisor on the K-K project and was also killed in the plane crash, with plaques on bridges on the road from Kandahar to Herat.

**Gigi Barattin**

Before arriving in Afghanistan in 2003, Gigi worked on construction projects in Iraq following 14 years with the Italian Air Force Corps of Engineers. His first job in Afghanistan was setting up camps for NATO.

LBG materials manger Joe Pecht worked with Gigi in Afghanistan: “Gigi was a very good person to be around. I do not think I have seen a picture of him without a smile on his face, and I do not remember him not smiling. He could light up a room unlike anyone else; it was like the sun came in the room when Gigi walked in. He was a good man and someone to have on your project, especially in a place like Afghanistan.”

LBG Afghanistan construction supervisor Steve Yahn was Gigi’s close friend. At the memorial service, he cited a few passages from the Bible and recounted “Gigi stories,” like when he was kidnapped in Iraq but released after telling his captors jokes. Barattin would party in Afghanistan with U.S. soldiers and enjoy Merlot wine. Holding back tears, Yahn said, “Gigi was my friend, my brother. Gigi was a man who brought
joy, laughter and good news to those around him. He was a peacemaker. ... Gigi had a way of entering a room that would light up the entire facility and engage all in his presence. That light is now gone, but his presence will remain with us forever.” With Chris Humphries sitting in the crowd, his head lowered, Yahn said, “I also wanted to express my sorrow to you and your family on the loss of your brother, Mark. I regret I never had the chance to get to know Mark the way I know Gigi. And I know that as much as I will miss my friend, my brother Gigi, you will miss your friend and your brother Mark.”
Sadal, far right in white, who goes by one name, was Mark Humphries’ driver in Afghanistan. Here he looks at a plaque on a bridge on the Kandahar-to-Herat highway memorializing Mark.
Tribute to Turkish Workers Killed in Plane Crash

Also killed in the plane crash were six Gulsan-Cukurova workers, named on the memorial plaque above. The Turkish subcontractor was key to the success of K-K’s accelerated phase, working on two LBG contracts—providing aggregate and reconstructing Section F.
Pictured in photo is Ahmet Hamdi Saral, one of the workers killed in the crash.
Sayyed Hashemyan, on one knee in white vest, at K-K’s Section B in 2003, surrounded by a security detail. Sayyed, a native of Kabul and civil engineer, escaped during the Soviet invasion in 1979 when he was 24 years old, made his way to California after two years’ exile in Germany, and returned to Afghanistan in 2003 for 18 months to help with the K-K and other road projects. In 2010, Sayyed returned to Afghanistan again to work for LBG as a task manager for the Bamyan-Dushi Road project.
Sayed Hashemyan

Sayed Hashemyan has worked as a civil engineer for the California Department of Transportation since 1987. He was born and raised in Afghanistan and escaped in late 1979 as the Soviets were invading the country. In 2003, he was called on to help with the country’s reconstruction. The original plan was to stay for six weeks; Sayed (pronounced Sigh-Ed) stayed for 18 months.

He was named senior advisor to the Afghan Minister of Public Works. He was also master-of-ceremonies for the December 16 ribbon-cutting and provided the instruments played at the celebration dinner that night.

His journey to his current home in Manteca, California, 80 miles east of San Francisco, began in December 1979 when he was 24 years old. Sayed had graduated in 1977 with a civil engineering degree from the U.S.-supported Faculty of Engineering at Kabul University. The Soviets were expected to consider those associated with the Faculty of Engineering as spies and either kill or jail them.

Sayed was part of a group of 30 people who hired smugglers to get them into Iran. They flew from Kabul to Herat and began a three-week trek on foot through desert and mountainous terrain to the Iranian border post of Tayyebat. Soviet troops were now pouring into the country so the party traveled only at night. Food and water at times were in short supply, forcing a diet of grass and dank rain water from muddied pools. One night Soviet dogs picked up their scent and started barking. Before long floodlights flashed and flickered. The group fled over a small bridge crossing a river and “hid behind big rocks,” as Sayed remembers. The tanks followed them over the bridge, firing off a few rounds. They waited out the attack and no one was killed or injured.

The group made it to the border. “That’s where we were caught by the border police. They put us in a basement jail and asked us a lot of questions and told us you have to wait. A day later, they put us on a truck, an 18-wheeler with no top on it, and put a big blanket over us. We were all supposed to go to a safe place in Iran.”

The truck was 30 miles from Mashhad, Iran, when it was stopped by the police, who took the travelers to a police station in Turbat Jaam. “Then the police told us, ‘OK, you have to wait until the mujahidin come.’
Everyone had a card from the mujahidin but me. I had no card. Most of those people had an ID card showing that they belonged to one of the Mujahideen groups fighting against the Soviet army in Afghanistan. I did not belong to any of those groups. So they accused me of being communist. And they said, ‘We’re gonna take you and shoot you.’ But it turns out there was a leader of a Shiite group there, and he said he’d take care of me. He told me and three of my friends to follow him, and after five minutes we arrived in a big house with a nice yard. And we just sat there. There were Afghan rugs, pillows. We had tea. In the next room there were meetings going on, they were distributing weapons. I asked if we could take a bath, and he said, ‘No, you can’t leave.’ And I said I was hungry, and he said, ‘No, you can’t go eat. One of you can go and bring food for the rest.’

“After lunch, I went to the leader, a white-bearded guy, and I asked again if I could take a bath, and he said no. So I started talking to him, and he told us that his plan for all four of us was to send us to a labor camp to make bricks and then take them to an oven. ‘You get fifty percent, we get fifty percent,’ he told us.”

After a few days of this work, Sayed offered the elder money for transport to Mashhad and this was arranged: They took the money and let Sayed and his companions go.

Sayed and a few of his companions found a room in Mashhad with three beds in a house owned by an elderly woman. They stayed there for 10 days before taking a bus to Tehran. “By then, I was totally lost and had decided to go back home. But one of the people with me said, ‘No, my cousin is here in Tehran, somewhere.’ So we spent three nights in a hotel before he found his friend, and he took us to his house. We stayed there for a while, and accidentally I met Rakin, this guy I went to Kabul University with. He was a year behind me. I happened to see him on the street. He was living with another Afghan, working for a carpet merchant. So they hired me to translate to and from English. For the first week he was very nice, he called me ‘Mr. Engineer.’ Then the situation changed. They wanted me to do more labor, moving rugs and that kind of thing. They wanted me to sleep in the store for security. For a month or so I did this, locking up the store at six and sleeping on rugs. Finally I decided to leave Iran and go to Germany. Rakin had made it to Germany via Pakistan, and I was going to try and do the same.”

Sayed’s brother had given him his passport, which included an Iranian visa. “I gave them some money at the Afghan embassy in Tehran to change the name on the passport to mine. For about $50 they also changed the picture in the passport to mine and extended it for two years. So I went to the police to get an exit visa
and they saw a discrepancy and said they would have to send my passport to Mashhad. Rather than wait, I took the passport back and dressed in a three-piece suit, and we took a bus from Tehran to Zahedan. I saw three people on the bus who looked Indian or Pakistani, and they said they would help me get to Pakistan. In Zahedan, I changed from my three-piece suit to a traditional loose-fitting Afghan Kameez-shalwar. In Zahedan, they told us to get into the back of a pickup truck. I remember it was so hot the pavement was melting. The road was all desert and dust, and after about two hours we arrived in [the Pakistani border town] Taftan. It was before sunset, and we got on a bus full of smuggled material and smugglers headed for Quetta.

“A young Pakistani man I met inside the bus helped me to cross the Iran border on to Pakistani soil. It was the beginning of July, around one or two p.m. The temperature was 45-plus degrees Celsius, and there were no trees or shade. There was only one bus parked in the middle of nowhere, and we waited for the smugglers. Finally, after four or five hours, the bus was full of smugglers and smuggled goods and heading to Quetta. I squeezed myself next to the young Pakistani man inside the bus. There were many other passengers without seats, like me. Whenever someone stood up to stretch, another person was jumping in his seat. There were no rules. I just followed the crowd and managed a few times to find a seat. There were no arguments, no fighting. After a torturous, nine-hour trip, we finally arrived in Quetta. It was late at night, and I rented a room with two beds in a motel (Mesafer Khaneh) and slept for a few hours. When I woke up in the morning and walked around the motel, I thought I was in Kandahar, Afghanistan. Quetta looked very much like Kandahar, with people wearing the same traditional cloths, turban style, and with the Kandahari Pashtu accent. My plan for the day was to go to Peshawar.

“We rented a room there and made plans to get to Peshawar via train. I got a first-class ticket but there were no seats, so I had to stand for the 48-hour ride. My brother had a friend in Peshawar who let me stay in a room with a nice mattress. But he told me to leave as soon as possible, this wasn’t a good place to be. By this time I had $600 left, and I bought a one-way ticket on Pakistani Airlines to London via Frankfurt, for $480. My plan was to get off at Frankfurt and declare myself a political exile. So I hid in the airport transit hall and as soon as the plane left for London I went to an Afghan guy working for the German government and told him I wanted to declare political exile. The police were taking care of families with children first, so I had to stay 10 days at the airport before it was my turn. I just went from store to store [killing time]. The terminal was full of refugees from Somalia and Afghanistan. There were a lot of families with small children. Every day more and more refugees were coming. Airport police were providing us with three meals a day for the time I was inside the arrival terminal. At nighttime, we were sleeping on the floor and had no shower. The
German police were providing us with meals. And then finally I had the interview and they told me to find a hotel and the German government would pay for it.”

Two of Sayed’s friends had arrived at the airport a few days after him, and the three of them moved into a hotel. Sayed spent 26 months in Germany, attending two German language schools. He eventually applied with the Tolstoy Foundation for exile to the United States, and three weeks later the American consulate in Frankfurt called him in for interview:

“As soon as we said we were from Kabul University, they granted us entry to the U.S. It was July 1982 when me and my friend landed in San Francisco. And they brought us to a townhouse for temporary living quarters. The job situation was so bad, I couldn’t find any work and I stayed there three or four months. We were getting welfare from the state of California and I decided to go to New York. I sold the sitar I bought in Germany for a ticket to New York. I got a job as a part-time cashier at an Alexander’s department store in Queens, for $3.25 an hour. I got another job with a chemical company, making $3.50 an hour, and a nighttime job as a janitor for $10 an hour. I was staying with relatives in Queens and then rented an apartment for $40 a week in Jamaica [Queens], a small room in a two-story house. I applied for a job at Tishman Construction Management and got hired as a scheduling engineer.”

By 1984, Sayed had married a woman he knew from Kabul, Huma, who’d made it to Queens.

“I lost my job at Tishman and drove a yellow cab for three months. Then I decided to return to California. My wife was pregnant, and we didn’t have any insurance. I didn’t like driving a cab. So we went back to California, and I found a job for $5.60 an hour distributing flyers to houses for a solar energy company. Then I found a job as a field engineer with Consolidated Engineering; the pay was much better.”

Meanwhile, Sayed had been on waiting lists for engineering jobs with the state of California and Monterey County. He passed an exam and was hired as a junior engineer with Monterey County. About four months later, he got a letter from the state saying it had an opening for him. At the interview, he was offered a job in San Francisco and in May 1987 moved, with his wife and three-year-old son, to Haywood, California. In 1995, Sayed received his professional engineering license from the state of California.
Sayed still felt the need to return to Afghanistan to help his country: “My heart is with my country. I was born there, I was raised there. Everything was provided to me. I need to give back to my country.”

Sayed returned in 2010 to Afghanistan to work for LBG as a task manager for the Bamyan-Dushi Road project.
Several workers were kidnapped during the accelerated reconstruction. One of them was engineer Hasan Onal, who worked for subcontractor Gulsan-Cukurova, third from left in black vest. He was released from captivity on November 30, 2003, the date this photo was taken. Others in the photo, taken outside Turkey’s command center in Kabul, from left to right: unidentified security guards; Hasan; an unidentified clinic officer; Gazi Darici, Gulsan-Cukurova country manager; Kurtulus Ergin, Gulsan office manager; and an unidentified clinic doctor.
Tariq Nazarwall, center, at his graduation from Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, May 2009, flanked by LBG Chairman Fredric S. Berger, left, and company President Larry D. Walker.
Tariq Nazarwall

Tariq Nazarwall loved *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. He must have seen the classic 1966 Spaghetti Western movie 20 times on his DVD player in his porta-cabin at the work camp of Indian subcontractor BSC/C&C (Kilometer 300) in the fall of 2003. After a long day as driver and interpreter for a security detail, he’d click on the movie, with English subtitles, and write them down to work on his English.

The movie is set during the American Civil War and stars Clint Eastwood. Tariq saw it as offering a glimpse into American culture, which he was eager to learn about. The setting also matched the territory he was working in—desert and mountains. It appears the notetaking paid off. Tariq can reel off memorable lines from the movie, including the character Tuco saying: “There are two kinds of people in the world, my friend. Those who have a rope around their neck and those who have the job of doing the cutting.”

Tariq grew up in Afghanistan and was happy to have found work given the still-dysfunctional state of the country’s economy in 2003. He was 26 years old when he took the job as driver and interpreter for a security coordinator and his bodyguards. He’d been working on a U.N. food program before accepting the K-K assignment. Tariq was brought in as the project moved into the paving stage and violent incidents were on the rise. There had been a rash of killings at or near BSC/C&C’s camp in late August.

Tariq started work in mid-September 2003 and continued until the blacktop was down. The work camp where Tariq lived included porta-cabins for Indian workers and others for Afghan doctors and the security detail. There was also a separate building used as a pharmacy. Many Afghan workers returned to their homes after a day’s work. There was a contingent of Turkish workers about a kilometer away, excavating at a gravel pit and screening aggregate: “It was the first time I was working with Indians and Turks and other nationalities. I was happy to learn about their cultures.” Tariq thought it especially good to see Indian laborers in the country because so many had been forced to leave under the Taliban’s rule. And of course there were the expats—Americans, Brits, Canadians, Australians.
The risk of attacks and sense of urgency created by the end-of-year deadline created tension among some workers, but Tariq remembers his three-month stint as a life experience not without humorous incidents: “The Indians were not used to working in the cold weather. One day I saw a guy eating chic peas, mixing them with rice with his hands, and he was wearing gloves.” Construction activity—rigs hauling aggregate, bulldozers carrying cracked chunks of asphalts, batch plants producing asphalt, not to mention security vehicles racing up and down the road—was entertaining to villagers: “They would be watching us, watching the construction like it was their Afghan TV.”

Tariq’s first vehicle was a Toyota 4Runner, circa 1991, donated by USAID. After six weeks of rocking and rolling on the pockmarked terrain, the 4Runner had taken a serious pounding: “We had a few breakdowns with that car.” The 4Runner was replaced with a Land Cruiser, also circa 1991.

**Pebbles and Dust Flying**

Tariq’s biggest challenge was navigating the roads: “Sometimes you couldn’t see the car in front of you; there were pebbles and dust flying all over. And sometimes we had detours around the road into the desert. Sometimes the water tanker would sprinkle water on the road to limit the dust.”

A typical day for Tariq began with an inspection of security vehicles and an ambulance to ensure they hadn’t been booby-trapped overnight. Despite a barbed wire fence surrounding the camp, it was conceivable insurgents or the Taliban could find a way to penetrate inside, or had managed to place a time bomb under vehicles the previous day. As the weather got colder, Tariq and fellow drivers would start up vehicles at about midnight and let them run for 30 minutes or so to ensure batteries didn’t die out during the night. After morning inspections, Tariq proceeded to drive the lead vehicle in a group carrying security guards to work sites. Then he’d return to camp for a breakfast of tea and bread and butter, maybe some cheese, sometimes in the porta-cabin kitchen of Turkish laborers.

Throughout the day he’d drive the security coordinator and guards around to different construction sites. His work day often ended with a cleaning of his vehicle’s air filter and a car wash. Tariq would drive it to the edge of a creek behind the camp and set to work with bucket, sponge and rags: “I think we had just regular dishwashing detergent as soap. We were changing the rags every two or three days.”
A few times the security detail needed to go to Kabul. This is where Tariq picked up a television set, DVD player and DVDs. (Another favorite DVD was the 1998 British crime movie, *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels.* ) He also picked up some MREs, or “Meal, Ready-to-Eat” military rations, typically chicken or beef patties with rice. The MRE hit the spot after a day on the road and a car wash, with *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* playing on the TV screen. A few nights he took in the cratery moon through a fellow driver’s telescope, or would eat with the Turks when they were barbequing lamb. With the temperature dropping, the number of nomads, or kuchi, traveling north to south increased. Tariq remembers caravans of camels, donkeys, dogs, horses and the nomads themselves moving along K-K shoulders: “There were two-year-olds riding on the camels, old ladies sitting on horses and some beautiful girls, too. The nomads didn’t cover their faces.”

Tariq saw the project as a clear indication Afghanistan was rolling, slowly but visibly, out of the morass of war and chaos: “I could certainly see that the country was making progress. Watching all the machines working on the roads—the pavers, rollers, graders, trucks traveling up and down the road, it felt really good. I could see our country was on the right track.”

The blacktop was down by the December 2003 deadline. Tariq stayed in the country as a driver and interpreter. On February 22, 2004, he was working on a USAID project in Kandahar. He’d flown there in the morning on a helicopter with pilot Mark Burdorf, a security manager and an LBG engineer who was inspecting a school and clinic. The inspection was finished, and Burdorf and his three passengers were back in the helicopter, ready for takeoff, when shots rang out. A gunman had fired rounds from an automatic weapon into the helicopter. Burdorf was killed instantly while the security manager and engineer were hit and wounded. Tariq wasn’t hit and managed to drag the security manager out of the helicopter into a nearby ditch. The engineer had made it out of the helicopter and lay motionless on the ground. Tariq assumed she’d been killed: “The helicopter engine was still on, and there was dust everywhere, it was hard to hear anything.”

About an hour passed before a U.S. military jet flew overhead. Shortly thereafter, two helicopters arrived while U.S. troops secured the area. The security manager and engineer were Medevaced out—both survived their wounds—while Tariq stayed behind.
Tariq stayed on in Afghanistan, taking on various engineering work while also driving and interpreting. He wanted to study engineering, and LBG wanted to reward him for his valor and work ethic. By the fall of 2005, LBG had arranged for Tariq to attend Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia. He graduated in May 2009 with a bachelor’s degree in civil engineering, and in the fall of 2009 had started on a master’s degree program at the University of California San Diego’s Jacobs School of Engineering, where he is studying seismic engineering. “As a kid, I remember worrying about my school collapsing on us,” Tariq remembers, referring to the frequent earthquakes in Afghanistan. “My dream is to return to Afghanistan and help build the country so children won’t have this fear.”
1960s
USACE oversees construction of Highway One, from Kabul to Kandahar

1973
Louis Berger International engineer Pat Quinn surveys Highway One

1980-1990s
Highway One heavily damaged during Mujahideen-Soviet war and Afghan civil war

December 2001
Coalition forces complete ouster of Taliban from power

January 2002
LBG engineer Jim Myers assesses condition of road from Kabul to Mazar-e-Sharif and writes report; opens LBG office in Kabul

* Bernd Obermann/Ovoworks/TIME & LIFE Images/Getty Images
** Paula Bronstein/Getty Images News
The Asphalt Ribbon of Afghanistan
Rebuilding the Kabul-to-Kandahar Highway

November 10
2002
Construction on the Kabul-to-Kandahar Highway begins

April 1
2003
White House tells USAID that project must be completed by end of 2003

December 8
2003
Project is completed

2010
K-K Section C
Chronology

Early-to-mid 1960s
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers oversees construction of Highway One, from Kabul to Kandahar (K-K). Ribbon-cutting held in July 1966.

1973
Louis Berger International engineer Pat Quinn travels length of Highway One while on trip to Afghanistan to survey roads.

1979 through 2001
Highway One heavily damaged or destroyed in most sections during Mujahideen-Soviet war and subsequent Afghan civil war and fighting during Taliban reign. Taliban rebuilds 43 kilometers of the road from Kabul south.

September 11, 2001
United States attacked, World Trade Center Twin Towers destroyed; Pentagon is hit; nearly 3,000 killed.

December 2001
Hamid Karzai chosen interim president of Afghanistan.

LBG dispatches civil engineer Jim Myers to Afghanistan to assess condition of U.S. Embassy in Kabul. Myers flies to Pakistan; makes it to Kabul by end of December on U.N. World Food Program flight.

Coalition forces complete ouster of Taliban from power.

LBG reviews reports it prepared for U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in the late 1980s on Afghanistan. Results in workshops/seminars of “lessons learned” with USAID Central Asia Task Force.
January 2002
Myers assesses condition of U.S. Embassy in Kabul, files report with LBG.

Myers opens LBG office in private house in Kabul.

Myers assesses road from Kabul to Mazar-e-Sharif. Report from this trip becomes defining document in discussions on rebuilding post-Taliban Afghanistan.

United States, Japan, Saudi Arabia and other countries pledge $4.5 billion for reconstruction in Afghanistan at Tokyo Pledging Conference.

USAID dispatches Jim Kunder to Kabul to establish agency mission at U.S. Embassy.

Winter/Spring 2002
Bush administration officials discuss infrastructure and other reconstruction plans for Afghanistan.

Spring 2002
Myers presents report on Mazar-e-Sharif road and tunnel to World Bank, USAID, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and others. It is first report of its kind, assessing condition of major road in Afghanistan, in many years.

April 17, 2002
President George W. Bush in speech promises to rebuild Afghanistan in spirit of Marshall Plan.

June 13, 2002
Myers begins survey of Afghanistan’s roads, bridges and “rural market centers” with small engineering team.

August 29, 2002
USAID holds conference in Budapest with contractors to discuss Afghanistan’s Rehabilitation of Economic Facilities and Services (REFS) tender.
September 13, 2002
The United States, Japan and Saudi Arabia promise $180 million to rebuild more than half of Afghanistan’s Ring Road, from Kabul to Kandahar to Herat.

September 30, 2002
USAID awards REFS contract to LBG.

Fall 2002
LBG’s Pat Quinn travels to Turkey for due diligence on Turkish contractor Yuksel. Yuksel becomes part of ARCC subcontractor joint venture.

November 2002
First airlift of heavy equipment and construction vehicles by Antonov aircraft lands in Kabul.

November 10, 2002
K-K groundbreaking ceremony held 45 kilometers south of Kabul. ARCC begins grading first four kilometers of roadway. White House press release states: “President Bush welcomes the start of construction today on the Kabul-Kandahar-Herat Highway.”

December 2002
U.S. Congress passes Afghanistan Freedom Support Act, authorizing funds to rebuild the country.

January 2003
Group of 40 dignitaries, including Deputy Defense Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz, visits K-K work site. Wolfowitz concerned with pace of work.

March 2003
Asphalt plant sections for ARCC being delivered in trucks from Italy.

March 20, 2003
United States invades Iraq.
Late March 2003
LBG evaluating 16 proposals from contractors for K-K work.

April 1, 2003
USAID officials called to White House by Bush administration officials; are told K-K blacktop must be down by end of 2003. Was not “April Fool’s” joke.

April 2003
Deputy National Security Director Stephen J. Hadley tells Jim Kunder: “The President of the United States has promised the President of Afghanistan that the road will be done by Christmas.”

LBG’s Joe Pecht travels to Istanbul for due diligence on Gulsan-Cukurova, which would win contract to provide screening plants for K-K project.

Portable office buildings for work sites and materials testing labs arrive in Kabul. LBG begins negotiations to secure more airlifts to fly equipment and supplies to Afghanistan.

Subcontractor ARCC’s Durani Camp completed; work force consists of 17 Turks, 170 Afghans.

Late April 2003
LBG and USAID agree on job order for accelerated K-K project. Plan calls for “all-weather surface [389 kilometers] of sub-grade preparation and placement of a seven-meter-wide (23 feet), 15-centimeter (5.9 inches) thick layer of asphalt-treated base (ATB).” Japan responsible for 50 kilometers north from Kandahar.

May 1, 2003
U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in speech from Kabul states: “We’re at a point where we clearly have moved from major combat activity to a period of stability and stabilization and reconstruction activities.”
Early May 2003
LBG and four subcontractors gather in Washington for weeklong negotiations on K-K contracts. Contracts signed with three subcontractors. LBG hires fourth subcontractor, Turkish firm Mensel, negotiating in Kabul. Contracts allow subcontractors to work on each others’ sections.

Violence against deminers and others working on K-K stops demining work for 10 days.

June 2, 2003
Screening plant at K-K’s Section C screening starts production.

Early June 2003
Jim Myers, LBG’s security director and U.N. demining manager visit governor of Zabul to ask for help retrieving demining trucks stolen from Zabul street. Governor points to crumbling wall of his office following bomb attack and says he has enough problems to deal with, can’t be of help. LBG hires extra Afghan security guards.

June 11, 2003
LBG Engineer Kent Lande travels to Turkey, India and Afghanistan for due diligence on subcontractors.

Mid-June 2003
Leased helicopter placed into service; used to help set up LBG field office in Ghazni. ARCC workers trained to test hot-mix aggregate and Portland cement concrete. LBG “in intense coordination with U.N. demining agencies to get the camp, plant and quarry sites cleared so sites could be occupied and facilities set up for accommodations, offices and communications” for road Sections D, E and F.

Late June 2003
LBG reports camps at Sections C, D and F completely cleared of mines and UXO. Clearance of same in Section E begins June 26. Clearance priority for Sections B, C, D and F now on borrow pits and along roads.

Early July 2003
South Africa’s Mechem begins demining operation on the road and its environs.
July 22, 2003
KolNat signs contract with LBG to rebuild five bridges along K-K. Imports small crusher machine, rebar steel and cement. Builds concrete yard at work site to produce precast bridge spans.

August 2003
Ambassador Taylor gives core sample from road to Deputy Secretary of State Richard L. Armitage in Washington. Armitage gives it to Secretary of State Colin Powell who puts it on table during Situation Room meeting.

Earthworks and grading for sub-grade in all sections complete. Vehicles can now travel as fast as 80 km/hour, up from 15-20 km/hour.

August 19, 2003
Just after midnight, demining camp at Kilometer 92 attacked by 10 gunmen. Some deminers beaten, one vehicle shot up, another stolen and found burned up 50 kilometers away.

August 20, 2003
President Karzai, U.S. Special Envoy to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad and others tour Section B, where paving is proceeding at good pace. LBG staff notice unusual “mint” plant in garden used to flavor special snack.

Mid-August 2003
Concerns arise over delays in bitumen deliveries from Pakistan and India. LBG considers plan to use 25-millimeter-thick (one inch) Single Bituminous Surface Treatment (SBST) in some areas to protect sub-grade until bitumen arrives. “Chip spreaders” being shipped to work sites to produce stone aggregate chips for SBST.

August 29, 2003
LBG helicopter crashes in sandstorm en route to Ghazni from Section D work site. Materials manager Joe Pecht and Coker Pumps Vice President Erik Coker suffer back injuries. Helicopter destroyed, replacement delivered in September.
Late August 2003
Asphalt mixing plants are being readied for production.

Late August/Early September 2003
USAID’s Jim Bever and Pat Quinn travel entire length of K-K with small military convoy. Pay respects to security guards killed at police check point near Qalat.

September 7, 2003
KolNat begins paving its section. Has been assigned 36 kilometers of Section C and 24 km of Section E. KolNat averaging 2.2 km/day of paving.

Night work begins at KolNat sections with plants running as long as 22 hours a day.

Mid-September 2003
Eighty-three kilometers have been paved with ATB, 25 kilometers with SBST.

Four Afghan workers for Danish charity pulled from car and shot dead in Ghazni.

Roller drum damaged after rolling over anti-tank mine at Kilometer 80.

Several Afghan Ministry of Interior security personnel killed in attack.

Late September 2003
Security reaches highest level yet—961 guards, drivers and supervisors, 54 vehicles.

October 1, 2003
Gulsan-Cukurova mechanical engineer kidnapped by Taliban while working on road. (Released 30 days later). LBG notes in report, “Armed escort is provided [for] inspector staff; nighttime construction work with lighting is especially nerve-wracking.”
Mid-October 2003
ARCC completes its section (surface and binder course layers) and begins to assist laying ATB on kilometers 93-97 of Mensel section. KolNat works south into BSC/C&C section.

Shipments of bitumen from Egypt to Gulsan-Cukurova work site begin.

As of October 25, a total of 190 kilometers are paved. LBG estimates completion by December 20.

November 16, 2003
Woman working for U.N. refugee agency shot dead in Ghazni.

November 22, 2003
Total of 297 kilometers have been paved, 61 kilometers repaired. There is enough bitumen at work sites to complete paving of final kilometers. A week later, 371 of the 389 kilometers have been paved or repaired.

LBG vehicle traveling near Kilometer 291 comes under fire by gunmen; security detail in car returns fire, no one hurt.

November 29, 2003
Kidnapped Gulsan-Cukurova worker turned over to tribal elders and released the next day.

Late November 2003
Security reaches highest level—1,120 guards, drivers and supervisors, 54 vehicles.

December 2, 2003
Jim Kunder conveys message from NSC’s Steve Hadley to Bever of job “well-done,” as it appears imminent blacktop will be down in a matter of days.

December 6, 2003
Two Indian workers kidnapped, released December 24.

Early December 2003
Pakistani engineer killed, Afghan worker wounded in incident in Ghazni province.
December 8, 2003
LBG, in internal memo filed from Kabul, states that all 389 kilometers have been paved or repaired “…the first-phase paving of the last four kilometers in Section F (Kilometer 347 to 432) completed at 5:00 p.m. on December 8.”

December 16, 2003
Ribbon-cutting ceremony held at Kilometer 43.

Late December 2003
Jim Myers leaves for United States for short vacation. Returns to Afghanistan in early 2004 to continue work on highway, bridge and other rebuilding projects. Stays until December 2006, at which time President Karzai presents him with medal for contribution to country’s unification.
Prologue
Afghan girls en route to wedding party on December 15, 2003, near site of ribbon-cutting ceremony the following day.

Chapter 1, Page 13
Afghan Kuchi, or nomads, travel along road in undated photo.

Chapter 2, Page 25
Chapter 3, Page 35
An Afghan ‘jingle’ truck.

Chapter 4, Page 49
Afghan boy with mule carrying hay, November 2003.

Chapter 5, Page 71
Afghan deminer with dog during K-K accelerated reconstruction.
Chapter 6, Page 83
Afghan boys pose under bridge near Ghazni on July 2, 2003.

Chapter 7, Page 113
Rolling asphalt-treated-base in K.K’s Section C in fall 2003.

‘A Beautiful Road,’ Page 125
An Afghan man carries sacks on bicycle.
Celebrations, Page 137
Najib, Jim Myers’ driver in Afghanistan, dances at celebration in dinner in Kabul on December 17, 2003.

Tributes and Profiles, Page 143
Jim Myers, left, sits with Afghan official.
Workers on unidentified road in Afghanistan.
Notes

Prologue
Sources quoted in prologue were interviewed by the author in 2009.

1. Afghanistan’s Loya Jirga, or grand council, had just begun drafting a new constitution.
2. Mujahideen refers to “freedom fighters” who fought troops of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan during the war, which began in late 1979.
4. The all-weather blacktop conformed to H-20 highway building standards of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO).
6. The 50 kilometers north from Kandahar were rebuilt by the Japan International Cooperation Agency, comprised of three Japanese contractors.
7. Some Afghans use only one name.
8. 2010 e-mail from Alan D. Crockett. LBG won an ACEC Grand Award for the K-K accelerated project.

Chapter 1

1. From Envy of the Gods, page 114; see bibliography.
2. Quote is from Afghan travel book author Nancy Hatch Dupree in 2009 e-mail to LBG. The Roberts March refers to Sir Frederick Roberts’ March from Kabul to Kandahar in 1880 during the Second Anglo-Afghan War.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Thomas Gouttierre, from 2009 interview with the author.
7. Ibid. The 40 stairs or steps of the Chehel Zina monument lead to a chamber with an inscription stating that it was built by Babur, founder of the Mughal Empire.

8. From *Bricks, Sand, and Marble*. It cost LBG $260,238,131 to reconstruct 389 kilometers of Highway One in 2003 and 2004. This included costs during the accelerated phase for airlifts, security, demining, a leased helicopter and liquid asphalt. It also included costs for work done in 2004—a second layer of asphalt, a wearing course (top asphalt layer), new bridges, guard rails, lining, signage, repaired culverts/causeways, widened shoulders. Using a construction cost price index adjusted for inflation—which figures in labor, equipment and materials costs—the cost per kilometer for the original road and Berger’s reconstruction are about the same, at about $668,000 per kilometer.


Chapter 2

Sources quoted in chapter were interviewed by the author in 2009.


3. Ibid.


Chapter 3

Sources quoted in chapter not mentioned below were interviewed by the author in 2009.


Chapter 4

Sources quoted in chapter not mentioned below were interviewed by the author in 2009.

4. Ibid.
6. 2009 interview with Jim Kunder.
10. Ibid.
11. 2009 interview with Kent Lande.
Chapter 5

1. 2009 interview with Dan Kelly.
2. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
11. 2009 interview with Dan Kelly.
13. 2009 e-mail from Tankut Balkir, general manager of Kolin Construction.
14. 2010 interview with Frank Kenefick.
15. From United Nations Mine Action Center of Afghanistan spreadsheet provided by Dan Kelly.

Chapter 6

Sources quoted in chapter not mentioned below were interviewed by the author in 2009.

1. Tankut Balkir 2009 e-mail to LBG.
3. 2010 e-mail from Frank Kenefick.
6. 2009 interview with Jim Myers.
9. LBG internal report on K-K bridges.
10. 2009 e-mail from Frank Kenefick.
11. 2009 interview with Frank Kenefick.

**Chapter 7**

Sources quoted in chapter not mentioned below were interviewed by the author in 2009 or early 2010.

3. 2010 interview with Dan Kelly.
6. Ibid.
7. 2010 interview with Frank Kenefick.
9. Ibid.
10. LBG internal e-mail.
12. 2009 Interview with Jim Bever.

**Epilogue ‘A Beautiful Road’**

3. Ibid.
4. Interviews with Afghans were conducted in Afghanistan in March and June 2010.
Tributes and Profiles

Jim Myers
1. 2009 interview with Jim Myers.
2. Ibid.
3. 2009 interview with Mary Myers.
5. 2009 interview with Jim Myers.
6. From testimonial for LBG’s nomination of Jim Myers for the 2008 American Society of Civil Engineers Outstanding Projects and Leaders Award.

Mark Humphries/Gigi Barattin
1. 2009 interview with Chris Humphries.
2. 2009 e-mail from Joe Pecht.

Sayed Hashemyan
All quotes are Sayed Hashemyan from 2009 interviews and 2010 e-mails.

Tariq Nazarwell
Quotes are Tariq Nazarwell, from 2009 and 2010 interviews.


