

AFPAK Hand mentors ISAF general

By Natela Cutter

Strategic Communications

KABUL, Afghanistan - Thanks to Navy Capt. Edward Zellem, a member of the Afghanistan/Pakistan Hands program, the commanding general of International Security Assistance Forces in Afghanistan, Marine Gen. John R. Allen, has a much better understanding of how the Afghan government works, while his Afghan counterparts have gained more confidence in the intent of coalition forces to aid in the peaceful transition of power to the Afghan government.

When Zellem began studying Dari in 2009, as part of the AFPAK Hands program that was initiated by commanding generals David Petraeus, and Stanley McChrystal, he thought it



Marefat High School Cultural Director Aziz Royesh shakes the hand of Gen. John R. Allen upon the receipt of a personal check Sept 16, 2011, that will pay for 10 annual scholarships for Afghan children. Standing in the middle is Navy Capt. Edward Zellem, an Afghanistan/Pakistan Hands program member, who introduced the general to students who illustrated a book of proverbs that was funded by a U.S. Embassy grant, with the first 40,000 complimentary copies distributed throughout Afghanistan. (U.S. Army photo by Natela Cutter)

would be a good idea to have language and cultural knowledge before deploying to Afghanistan as a senior intelligence officer.

“I knew it was very important to have this background, but until I arrived in Afghanistan I don’t think I fully appreciated how knowledge of culture and language would so profoundly affect the relationships forged on the ground,” said Zellem, who began collecting Dari proverbs as a hobby during the initial 16-week language and culture course, facilitated by the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center.

Zellem began his 16-month deployment with six weeks of language immersion with the Afghan National Army’s 205th Corps in Kandahar, followed by mentoring Afghan National Police



at the Ministry of the Interior in Kabul. But his best chance to demonstrate the value of his AFPAK Hands training came three months into his deployment, following Afghanistan's parliamentary elections in September 2010.

"For the first time, President (Hamid) Karzai had requested a small, full-time ISAF presence in the Afghan Presidential Palace because he wanted to have better visibility in monitoring the elections," explained Zelle. "It was an experiment and opportunity that ISAF had wanted to do for the past ten years." "Based on the success of this temporary situation room, President Karzai and Gen. (David) Petraeus agreed to continue the experiment with an eye toward a permanent joint Afghan-ISAF office, analogous to the White House Situation Room, called the Presidential Information Coordination Center, or PICC." Because of the many sensitivities associated with foreigners working inside the Palace, Petraeus thought the best chance for success was for an AFPAK Hand to build and lead it. Zelle was tapped for the job. But to run the PICC alongside an Afghan Brigadier General and embedded 24/7 with senior Afghans from the Palace and the key security ministries, Zelle had to hand-pick others who could speak the language and understand the Afghan culture. "I immediately knew these were AFPAK Hands jobs," he said.

"I knew the AFPAK Hands skill-set would be essential to the relationship-building. This would help reinforce to the Afghans that they were respected partners in a common goal. We decided early on that we needed to respect the Afghan point of view and let them lead the PICC with the Hands as guides and good examples, instead of rolling in there and telling them 'this is how we do business.'"

"The PICC helped stabilize the often-contentious information environment between ISAF and the government of Afghanistan,

smoothing the way at the strategic level so operations in the field could continue unimpeded."

Today, the PICC continues to coordinate and funnel information between the Presidential Palace and ISAF headquarters, keeping Allen and coalition partners abreast of important events and activities. "Every day, the PICC assembles a briefing book based on information from ISAF and reports from Afghanistan and the provinces that goes up to the President's National Security advisors, who take excerpts from it for the President's daily brief," said Zelle.

"General Petraeus, General Allen, and the other top ISAF generals strongly supported the PICC because it was their primary method of quickly communicating details and facts to the Palace about controversial subjects such as night operations, detainees, and civilian casualties. The PICC, in turn, could often get information to ISAF within hours of an incident because it was tapped into the Afghan chain of communication, so ISAF was ready to act on it and respond to it much faster than it could have otherwise," Zelle elaborated.

By the end of his first year in theater, Zelle developed the PICC into an organization that was respected and valued by both ISAF and Afghanistan, with a staff of 36 officers - seven AFPAK Hands, 26 Afghans, and three interpreters. The unit had become so well-integrated at the Palace that General Petraeus asked Zelle to extend his deployment to 16 months, to carry the relationships through the 2011 summer Afghan "fighting season."

As for Zelle's Dari proverb-collecting hobby, it resulted in the first-ever book published by an AFPAK Hand in Afghanistan. As a side project, he received funding from a U.S. Embassy grant to author a book of 151 proverbs in English and Dari, which he had personally collected and translated in his daily dealings with Afghans. It was

typeset and printed by an Afghan-owned and operated local Kabul print house, with an initial print-run of 40,000 copies.

His book, *Zarbul Masalha* (“Proverbs” in Dari), can be found in the card catalog at Kabul University Library, and due to popular demand, a second edition is pending in both the United States and Afghanistan. The book features original illustrations by 8th and 9th graders from Marefat High School in Kabul.

“You can really see the soul of the country in this artwork,” said Allen, who attended a Marefat High School art exhibit and fundraiser organized by ZelleM after *Zarbul Masalha* was published. “Some of this work reminds me of the places I have been,” commented Allen, looking at a painting of a caravan of Kuchi nomads.

Marefat High School students presented the painting as a gift to the general, who made a generous personal donation of 10 annual scholarships.

“This painting will hang in my office in ISAF Headquarters to remind us of our friendship,” Allen told Marefat High School cultural director, Aziz Royesh.



Gen. John R. Allen, commander of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), shakes the hand of Marefat High School Cultural Director Aziz Royesh, upon receiving a gift from the students Sept 16, 2011 of a painting that depicts people riding on camels in Mongolia. The gesture was in response to Gen. Allen’s generous gift of \$1,700 for 10 annual scholarships for the children of the school. The painting immediately found a new home in the headquarters of the ISAF building in Kabul. (U.S. Army photo by Natela Cutter)

Editor’s note: ZelleM today serves as Chief of Staff for the Afghanistan-Pakistan Center at CENTCOM in Tampa, Florida. The PICC is now commanded by Air Force Col. Brian O’Connor.