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[CEFCOM Home](#) > [Feature Story Archives](#) > Building bridges in Afghanistan : Multinational effort improves infrastructure for Afghans

Feature Story

[Archive](#)

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[Newsroom](#)

[Operations](#)

[Media Embedding Program](#)

[Feature Story Archive](#)

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Building bridges in Afghanistan : Multinational effort improves infrastructure for Afghans

By Captain Glen Parent

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan - The first time you see a Mabey-Johnson bridge, you're likely to say to yourself, "That thing looks heavy!" You would be right. Just ask the field engineers who have to lift it.

In the sweltering summer heat of southern Afghanistan, field engineers from Canada and the United States are teaching 60 Romanian Army counterparts how to construct steel bridges over the streams and wadis of the region.

"These Romanian engineers are excellent workers — and they are eager to learn," said Chief Warrant Officer Alain Guimond, a field engineer from Kingston, Ont., deployed in Afghanistan with the headquarters of ISAF Regional Command (South). "This work is very hard. The pieces of the bridge are heavy and a lot of preparation is required to construct this type of bridge."

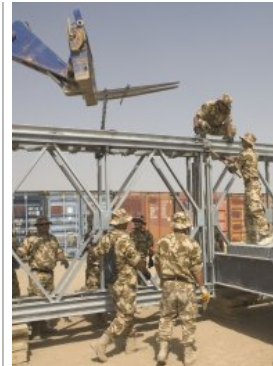
CWO Guimond and Master Sergeant Harold Russell, a U.S. Army National Guard engineer from Vicksburg, Mississippi, spent nine days with the Romanian engineers. "It's challenging to teach [bridge construction] skills to other English-speaking engineers in a classroom and training environment. Add in a language barrier and the job is even tougher, but we got it done," said CWO Guimond.

The newly qualified Romanian bridge crews will soon be constructing their own bridges in Zabul Province, in southern Afghanistan. Their work will allow Afghans to travel more freely in the rugged terrain. "These bridges aren't for us," said Master Sergeant Russell. "We can drive through the wadis. Our mission is to improve 'trafficability' for the people of Afghanistan."

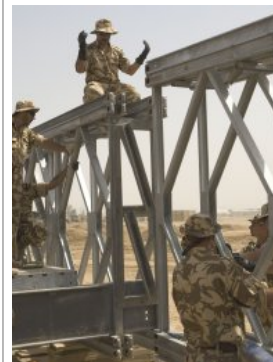
"We worked great together, we are a team," said Private Iute Marius, an engineer from Romania's 280th Manoeuvre Battalion. Language barriers were an issue at first, but the engineers quickly found that different nationalities use the same hand signals to direct the forklift operators moving sections of the bridge.

The Romanian engineers will play a vital role in the NATO-led operation in Afghanistan. With the construction of new bridges in Zabul Province, Afghans will be able to move more freely between their communities and conditions for agriculture and commerce will improve in the province.

Capt Glen Parent is a Public Affairs Officer from 1 Area Support Group Headquarters in Edmonton. He is currently serving on the staff of ISAF Regional Command (South) Headquarters at Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan.



Romanian Army field engineers in training use a forklift to join bridge sections.



Romanian Army field engineers assemble a steel bridge during a training session.