



National Military Academy of Afghanistan Opens Gates to Future Leaders

By Kansas National Guard Maj. Rick Peat and U.S. Army Lt. Col. Frederick Rice
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KABUL, Afghanistan – Although the Afghan National Army is only about three years young, its leaders have shown great wisdom and foresight in creating a national military academy early in the process.

Established to educate and develop the future leaders of their army and of their nation, the new National Military Academy of Afghanistan celebrated its grand opening March 22 in a special ceremony befitting such an historic occasion.

The opening ceremony was attended by Afghan government ministers, senior U.S. and Afghan military officers, special guests from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, including Dean of Academics Brig. Gen. Daniel Kaufman, as well as numerous ambassadors and other dignitaries.

Speaking at the ceremony were Maj. Gen. Mohammad Sharif, NMAA Commander; Abdul Rahim Wardak, Afghanistan minister of defense; and Professor Abdul Karim Khalili, second vice president of Afghanistan.

“The roll of this academy is vital for



Photo by Kansas Army National Guard Maj. Rick Peat

The color guard of the National Military Academy of Afghanistan parades the newly unfurled and dedicated colors before the NMAA corps of cadets as part of the academy grand opening.

the future of Afghanistan, because this academy will produce loyal, professional and true leaders for Afghanistan’s future without any ethnic, language and tribal distinction,” said Wardak. “These young cadets will be trained in the spirit of national unity and strong military character upon which we can

be proud among the respective nations of the world.”

Khalili emphasized the excellent reputation the ANA has built among the people of Afghanistan.

“The people of Afghanistan appreciate and strongly support the good work of their integrated national army, which represents the true face of the Afghan nation,” he said. “Today, we are going to open an institute which will train the future commanders and leaders of our proud army and of this hopeful nation.”



Photo by Kansas Army National Guard Maj. Rick Peat

U.S. Military Academy Dean of Academics Brig. Gen. Daniel Kaufman presents a traditional West Point saber from the U.S. Military Academy to the National Military Academy of Afghanistan. Receiving the gift is NMAA Commander Maj. Gen. Mohammad Sharif as Second Vice President Professor Abdul Karim Khalili and Minister of Defense Abdul Rahim Wardak look on.

During the ceremony, West Point and NMAA officials showed their mutual admiration and respect for each other's institutions through a gift exchange. Kaufman presented a West Point saber mounted in a display case, while Sharif offered a hand-carved wooden plaque of the NMAA shoulder sleeve insignia encased in a presentation box.

A tremendous investment of financial and human resources has been devoted to the creation of the NMAA by both the Office of Military Cooperation-Afghanistan and the Afghan Ministry of Defense.

Major renovations to academy facilities have created a high-quality learning and living environment for the cadets. Excellent programs and policies have been created and implemented. And the best academy staff, tactical officers and faculty have been recruited to educate and develop the cadets into outstanding leaders.

Sharif confidently vowed success during his address at the ceremony, "Through this podium I promise to Defense Minister Wardak that we will do our best at teaching the cadets to international standards and in the spirit of national unity."

The first class of cadets completed seven challenging weeks of basic training on March 17 and began their first day of academic classes the day following the academy's grand opening.

The cadets represent all of the major ethnic groups throughout Afghanistan and traveled from literally every corner of the country, across rugged and undeveloped terrain and through blizzard-like conditions, to report to the academy. One cadet was more than 20 days late due to his travel troubles, but was welcomed and immediately integrated into the program.

Modeled after West Point, the Academy is a four-year, degree-granting institution that will commission its cadets as second lieutenants in the Afghan National Army. Graduates will earn an engineering degree with an emphasis on civil, mechanical, systems or electrical engineering.

The curriculum focuses on engineering because, "Our country is war-struck and devastated," said Sharif. "We are in the process of rehabilitating it. We need more engineers because we need reconstruction."

Planning for the academy began more than 18 months ago, when Army Maj. Gen. Karl Eikenberry, Chief of OMC-A at the time, and senior Afghan Ministry of Defense leaders agreed upon the need to establish a military academy that would provide the ANA with a highly educated and capable future officer corps.

OMC-A was ready to assist and quickly enlisted the help of the U.S. Military Academy.



Photo by U.S. Army Lt. Col. Frederick Rice

The new colors of the National Military Academy of Afghanistan are unfurled during the NMAA grand opening ceremony.

Military Academy Study Team Chief Col. Barney Forsythe and Maj. Gen. Mohammad Juma Nassar, MOD general staff working group director, submitted the initial plan for the academy to the MOD and the OMC-A chief in November 2003.

West Point staff and faculty members then began the planning process, deploying to Afghanistan for several months at a time to write policy, develop admissions standards and determine the curriculum. They completed all steps hand-in-hand with their Afghan counterparts, ensuring all programs were adapted to meet Afghan standards and culture.

"Our environments (U.S. and Afghan) are different," said Sharif.

"Planners considered all cultural aspects and did not impose anything on us. While the academy will be similar to West Point, it will not be the same."

The most significant challenges involved the logistical requirements of setting up the academy from scratch.

"They didn't have so much as a paper clip on hand to get the academy started," said Col. Chris King, a geography professor at USMA. "You have to find every little thing you need, things you take for granted."

To fill their faculty positions, the MOD identified 1,023 potential academic professors who possessed the necessary advanced degrees. Military Academy Implementation Team Chief Col. James Wilhite, West Point

faculty and OMC-A members Col. Ray Winkle, Col. Gary Krahn and Dr. Larry Butler then narrowed the list to 200 candidates with the desired qualifications to teach everything from world history to physics to chemistry to psychology.

The team eventually hired 30 professors to form the academic faculty.

By the end of November 2004, 353 cadet candidates had completed the competitive entrance exam. The MOD, in conjunction with OMC-A staff, then conducted personal interviews of the prospective cadets. The top 120 young men were offered a place in the first class.

Forsythe, who laid the groundwork for the academy 18 months ago, returned for the grand opening and remarked upon his impressions of seeing the concept turned into reality.

“The academy facility is excellent and represents the excellence that the Afghan government and ANA expect of the officer corps and their service,” he said.

“This institution could play a significant role for the emerging democracy in Afghanistan, much like West Point played a large role in the emerging United States of America; providing leaders of character who would serve the Army and their people. And at some point in time, when they left their service in uniform, would continue to serve the country in another capacity that further



Photo by U.S. Army Reserve Capt. Jay Iannacito

A platoon of cadets proudly march in step as they pass the reviewing stand.

advances the nation,” added Forsythe, visibly moved by what the new academy represents.

The bond formed between West Point and NMAA will be further strengthened over time. The USMA corps of cadets recently adopted the NMAA corps of cadets as their first and only partnership cadet corps. They will correspond with each other, exchange ideas, and share resources.

To fully care for the administrative and logistical needs of new academy, a 300-soldier NMAA support battalion will be assembled over the next year. West Point will continue to send faculty, administrators, and support personnel as needed to assist in

forming and training the support battalion and to further develop the NMAA faculty for the specific course work and curriculum being taught there.

Additional NMAA faculty will be hired as the corps of cadets grows over the next few years. Future classes will have between 250 to 300 students each, and upperclassmen will take on leadership roles in guiding the underclassmen.

Cadets, who are between the ages of 18 and 23, will earn \$80 a month as well as receive free books, supplies, housing and food, in addition to their education. For the privilege of attending the academy, they incur a



Photo by U.S. Army Reserve Capt. Jay Iannacito

Afghanistan Minister of Defense Abdul Rahim Wardak reviews the cadets standing in formation shortly after he arrived for the grand opening ceremony.

Future Leaders

Cadets eye the camera before the ceremony begins and they are called to attention.



Photo by U.S. Army Reserve Master Sgt. D. Keith Johnson

ten-year service commitment to the ANA, twice the commitment length of U.S. Military Academy cadets. But, none of them blinked an eye when taking their oath of office.

Wilhite has grown very close to the NMAA corps of cadets during his work with the academy and will redeploy soon. Before the grand opening ceremony he made a point to shake the hand of each cadet and offer his personal congratulations. Later, when reflecting on the significance of

this act, he remarked that he was likely shaking the hand of a future general, a future minister, a future president of Afghanistan.

Across the board, the cadets show great devotion to their country, a country whose people have historically identified themselves by ethnicity, tribe, and religion rather than by Afghan nationality.

Cadet Jamshaid, the top cadet of the NMAA, said, “As military officers, we will never step back from

learning and will always be disciplined and remain faithful and loyal to our beloved country.”

Hope and love of country are also shown by the cadets’ parents. Cadet Aminullah, from Herat Province, said his father provided special advice to him before leaving home to attend the academy.

“Be faithful to your country,” he said. “Afghanistan is like a mother. If you serve your mother, you have to serve your motherland too.” 



Photo by U.S. Army Reserve Master Sgt. D. Keith Johnson

Preparing

Cadets make final adjustments to their uniforms with the helpful oversight of cadre prior to the start of the grand opening ceremony.