



Kandahar International Airport

Extreme VPP: Kandahar, Afghanistan

By David Baker

An OSHA compliance officer proves that the principles of VPP can work anywhere—even in a combat zone.

Photos by David Baker and the U.S. Army

What do OSHA's Voluntary Protection Programs, the U.S. Army, and the global war on terrorism have to do with each other? Well, it's an interesting story...

When I heard about a new position in the Army Reserve called a "combat safety officer," I wondered, who would have to tell people in combat to be safe? It seemed pretty self-evident, especially to this OSHA compliance officer who's built a career around safety and health. I quickly signed on for the job.

As in most cases, reality turned out to be quite different from initial perceptions. I learned that the Army historically has more fatalities due to accidents than casualties from enemy action. For instance, in World War II, 56 percent of the deaths were from accidents, versus 43 percent from enemy action. During Operation Desert Shield/Storm, the figures were even worse, with 75 percent of the casualties resulting from accidents.

In response, the Army did two things: it developed a program to change the U.S. Army's culture that accepted accidents as a cost of operations, and established a military unit of trained safety professionals, called the Army Safety Augmentee Detachment.

In December 2001, I was notified that I was being called to active duty as a combat safety officer, to deploy to Afghanistan with the 101st Airborne Division. After the shock of my call-up wore off and my wife got me out from under the bed, I realized that I would be responsible for establishing a safety program from the ground up. Saying I was a little apprehensive was an understatement. As a compliance officer, I had a lot of training and experience in reviewing and evaluating safety programs, but none in developing or implementing one.

I arrived in Kandahar, Afghanistan, in January 2002 and became a member of Task Force Rakkasan, made up of units from the U.S. Army, Air Force, Marine Corps, and a Canadian battle group. I reported to the task force commander, Col. Frank Wiercinski, who greeted me with the warm words of "you're my *what?*" Apparently, my arrival had not been trumpeted in advance. Once I explained who I was and what my job entailed, Wiercinski gave me my first order: "Dave, I plan on

Author Dave Baker from OSHA's Bellevue Area Office, above, applied his extensive safety and health experience to protect troops in Kandahar, Afghanistan.

not losing a single soldier during this deployment. Your job is to help me achieve that goal." I knew at this point I had a commander who would support a strong safety and health program. The only problem was that there *wasn't* a safety and health program. Yet!

During my first week on the ground in Afghanistan, the safety program consisted of pure crisis management. (Apparently, Afghanistan OSHA had not done a scheduled inspection at the airport for over 30 years!)

In the first week of February, Richard Terrill, regional administrator for OSHA's Seattle Regional Office, sent me a VPP flag. It suddenly dawned on me that VPP would be a great model on which to base the task force safety and health program—specifically, the elements that involve management commitment, labor commitment, and employee involvement. As a compliance officer, I had participated in several VPP site evaluations and was always impressed by the results.

In regard to management support, I already knew that I had that from Wiercinski. The next element that I needed was employee involvement. The task force sergeant major, luniasolua Savusa, worked directly for the task force commander and was the highest-ranking enlisted person in Task Force Rakkasan. In a civilian context, he is a combination of chief union steward and company vice president. He's highly respected and sometimes feared, and as every military person knows, no one messes with the command sergeant major!

Luckily, Savusa, like Wiercinski, was a strong supporter of safety and health. He headed the Task Force Safety and Health Committee, which had representatives from all the units on Kandahar Airfield. Savusa used his position to aggressively enforce safety standards, sometimes explaining key safety concepts at high volume and with colorful descriptive language that's probably best not to print. With his help, a safety culture was developing throughout the task force, supported by the professionalism of the enlisted soldiers who made the safety program a success.

Let me describe the site at Kandahar International Airport. Imagine yourself among approximately 6,000 people, squeezed into a one-mile by two-mile area, trying to build a city with all the materials being flown in by airplanes. Add to the equation landmines and unexploded

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As during all previous military operations, more troops were injured or killed from accidents like this than from actual combat.

Col. Frank Wiercinski, far left, and Sgt. Maj. luniasolua Savusa, right, provided the support needed for the task force safety and health program to be successful.

Despite round-the-clock operations in an extremely hazardous environment, the troops of Task Force Rakkasan experienced an extremely low accident rate.



bombs, scattered liberally throughout the site. And to add a little excitement, think of people occasionally shooting at you.

(At this point, I have to answer the question that so often comes up: did I get shot at while I was in Afghanistan? Well, the answer is yes, but for some reason all the shooting came from within the camp and always occurred after I did an inspection. Talk about a coincidence!)

Beyond the hazards of exposure to the high-velocity, heavy-particulate lead commonly found in bullets, I tried to concentrate on safety and health hazards that would be present at any large construction or industrial site. The Kandahar Airport was constructed in the early 1960s. By 2002, the airport had been renovated by the Soviet Army, the Taliban with help of Al-Qaida, and the U.S Air Force. For a safety and health professional, it definitely was a “target-rich environment.” It would be close to impossible to cover all the safety and health hazards identified, but a few examples will help tell the story.

For the most part, the safety hazards were similar to those on a construction site. By focusing on the big four construction hazards—falls, electrical shocks, and struck-by and caught in-between incidents—it was relatively easy to identify and correct specific hazards. One of the biggest problems we had was the movement of material-handling equipment to offload planes, often in close proximity to people. At one point, sleeping tents were constructed on the

edge of the main ramp for the airfield, with 5-ton forklifts operating at night, literally feet away from soldier sleeping tents. We got that corrected as the engineers were able to clear more area of landmines so the tents could be moved farther away from the material-handling area.

The biggest challenge we faced was asbestos. The first problem was determining where it was located. So, I did what any self-respecting safety officer would do: I made a frantic phone call to an industrial hygienist. That wasn't as easy as it sounds, with the time difference of 11 hours between Kandahar and the East Coast, and the limited telephone service available in the field. As it turned out, the only OSHA office I was able to contact was the Savannah Area Office. When I finally got my call through, I talked to Liz Freeman. After convincing her that this wasn't a prank call, I got valuable guidance from her about what to look for and where to take samples.

After taking the samples from several locations, I was faced with another problem: where to send them? (The local analytical lab in Kandahar could only test for four elements: fire, earth, wind, and water.) Luckily, the Army has an analytical lab in Germany that could perform the testing. I put the samples on an airplane leaving from the Kandahar Airport, let the military aircrew deliver them to the lab, and had the results emailed back to Afghanistan.

When the test results came in, they showed the presence of chrysotile asbestos

of 5 percent on the piping inside the buildings and 25 percent on the pipe lagging for the boiler. For abatement, our only option was to encapsulate the damaged piping in plastic and wrap it in tape. Then, we washed down the area with water and cleaned it the best we could. We sealed the boiler room with plywood and tape to keep people out. The jury-rigged effort at abatement appeared to work: When we conducted airborne sampling several months later, no detectable levels of asbestos were found in the areas that had been encapsulated.

Putting together written programs was probably the easiest part of the entire process. Once we identified the major hazards, the next step was to develop procedures to reduce or eliminate them. Fortunately, the Army already has a large repository of safety procedures, so it was just a process of culling this information for relevant programs, then incorporating them into a Task Force Safety and Health Program.

What were the results of the safety and health program for Task Force Rakkasan? I am happy to report that for the duration of my deployment, there were no fatal accidents. Using Army historical data, for a force this large deployed for the same period of time, statistically there should have been 21 non-combat-related fatal accidents. Furthermore, not a single accident occurred that resulted in a soldier receiving permanent or disabling injuries. Finally, only 10 accidents occurred that would have been the equivalent to an OSHA recordable injury.

These outstanding results stand as a testimony to the professionalism of the soldiers, marines and airmen of Task Force Rakkasan. They clearly demonstrate that a safety program using the VPP concept of strong management and active labor involvement, which integrates safety into all aspects of the operation, works.

In Afghanistan, we at Task Force Rakkasan adopted a unique sense of humor to deal with the very serious nature of our circumstances. And protecting the safety of our troops is a very serious business—one that the Army leadership emphasized throughout the deployment, and with positive results.

Baker served six months in Afghanistan and returned in August 2002 to his safety position at OSHA's Bellevue Area Office in Washington.

Remembering Those Lost

Unfortunately, I was required to use my training as an accident investigator during my assignment to document two combat-related incidents. On April 15, 2002, four soldiers from our task force who were destroying a weapons cache were killed by a booby-trap set by the Taliban. Three days later, four Canadian soldiers were killed in a friendly fire incident when two U.S. Air Force F-16s mistook a training exercise for enemy fire and dropped a bomb.

Neither of these incidents was classified as an accident, but the results are the same: eight members of our task force did not return home. This article is dedicated to the memory of the soldiers of our task force and all other U.S. servicemembers and coalition forces who died in Afghanistan.

Defense Department Commits to Reducing Accidents

By Gerry J. Gilmore

“World-class organizations do not tolerate preventable accidents,” said Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld. “Our accident rates have increased recently, and we need to turn this situation around.”

Rumsfeld recently challenged the Defense Department’s military and civilian leaders and rank and file “to reduce the number of mishaps and accident rates by at least 50 percent in the next two years.” These goals, he said, “are achievable, and will directly increase our operational readiness. We owe no less to the men and women who defend our nation.”

A new DoD Safety Oversight Council is studying ways to reduce accidents and lost time due to injuries. The council is evaluating methods, processes, and strategies—including the implementation of best business practices—to reduce accident rates department-wide. In addition, the department is soliciting ideas on accident prevention from within the ranks, including observations about dangerous types of equipment and gear.

David S.C. Chu, the undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness who is leading DoD’s accident prevention effort, said he and Rumsfeld share a commitment to changing the department’s attitude and culture regarding accident prevention.

“We don’t need to lose or to get our people hurt,” Chu said. “Our goal is getting preventable accidents to zero.”

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