

Postcards from Iraq



'If you build it . . .'

By Capt Joshua D. Kovacic, USAF
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As an Air Force Civil Engineer, I've been lucky enough to have the rare opportunity of being deployed to Camp Fallujah, where I work simultaneously with Army, Navy, and Marine forces involved with the reconstruction efforts in and around the City of Fallujah.

I'm a Project Engineer in the Fallujah Resident Office, where I've been involved with a variety of projects ranging from schools to health clinics to electrical substations, but I am primarily responsible for the Fallujah Sewer System Project. The city has no existing sanitary sewer system, so our work consists of constructing all of the collection systems, trunk mains, lift stations, and a treatment plant that will ultimately serve a population of at least 200,000. We have over 30 contracts including 14 major construction projects underway, all through Iraqi Contractors. It's kept me on my toes conducting site visits and coordinating construction activities with local contractors, the Marines, and Fallujah City Council members on a daily basis.

This tour has opened my eyes to the unique challenges facing the Reconstruction efforts in Iraq. Our contractors are continually subjected to intimidation and extortion from local insurgent groups, and monitoring construction status has been increasingly difficult, as there is a high risk factor associated with each site visit. Thank goodness for our PSD teams, and especially for the 4th Civil Affairs Group (CAG) Marines that often let us tag along on combat patrols into the city to visit our projects. While the challenges are great, they pale in comparison to the tremendous efforts and resilience exhibited by these Marines and the USACE Engineers working to rebuild this city. I've never seen anyone work harder or with more determination, even in the face of overwhelming obstacles and under such dangerous and discouraging conditions.

The Iraqi Engineers that work quietly within our ranks deserve recognition as their country's true heroes. Risking their own safety and that of their families, they continually travel alone in and out of Baghdad and Fallujah to assess projects and deal with local contractors. They have the best interests of this country at heart and have taken it upon themselves to make a difference, no matter the cost.

These efforts will improve the quality of life and the living conditions for the people of Fallujah, while employing thousands of local workers over the lifespan of the project and beyond. Through our interaction with the local population and city government, I am encouraged that our work here will ultimately help to turn the tide of Iraqi public opinion and support for the coalition forces – and more importantly support for the Iraqi Government. This is badly needed in an area where the intentions of the Shia-led government in Baghdad are viewed with extreme suspicion by the local Sunni population. Breaking down this barrier will be the key to enabling the local government to stand on its own two feet and continuing reconstruction while practicing effective governance after coalition forces depart.

The days go by fast, but progress never seems as fast as we would like. The important thing is that despite the challenges, we are making progress. It's hard to speculate from this limited vantage point whether our efforts will have the true impact we envision, but the collective attitude is that if we each continue to give our all, we'll accomplish what we've set out to do. This is some of the most important work I have ever had the opportunity to be involved with, and I'm extremely proud and grateful to have been a member of the USACE family at Camp Fallujah.

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Ready for a site visit



Capt. Joshua Kovacic



Viewing construction progress at a sewer pump station in downtown Fallujah with members of 4th CAG