

Postcards from Iraq

Lending a hand to Iraq — an historic mission

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I'm a US Navy Civil Engineer Corps Officer finishing up an Individual Augment assignment with the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) in Iraq. This was my second deployment to Operation Iraqi Freedom. During this tour, I feel fortunate to have had a "two for one" that included assignments in both Fallujah and Baghdad.

I started off in December 2006 in the USACE Al Anbar Area Office in Fallujah. Anbar had been considered the Wild West of Iraq, but during my time there, surprisingly, the number of insurgent incidents dropped remarkably as local sheiks became genuinely interested in working with Coalition Forces on improving security in the province. The USACE office where I worked managed construction contracts on the various Marine bases in the region, and we handled reconstruction projects in the rural cities of Fallujah and Ramadi and other smaller towns throughout Anbar province. I really enjoyed working the reconstruction projects, which included repairing sewer and electrical systems that had suffered from years of neglect under Saddam, installing small potable water plants in rural villages, rebuilding bridges over key rivers, renovating schools, and building new public health clinics. The list of projects that our offices handled was immense; we had about 155 projects under construction throughout Anbar. It was definitely a full-time job dealing with all of the unique aspects of contracting with Iraqis and managing construction in a remote, austere and lawless environment. During my time there, I was particularly impressed by the dedication of the USACE civilians in our offices. All were volunteers who left home to serve a year in Iraq. Some stay on for 18 or 24 months or longer. We usually worked 12-hour days, 7 days a week, and the only personal time the civilians took off was Friday morning (they didn't have to come in until noon). Those civilians are the unsung heroes out in Anbar.

About halfway through the deployment, I was sent to Baghdad to fill the USACE engineer position at the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). The US Embassy had provided nearly \$120 million to fund reconstruction projects in Baghdad and USACE needed someone to develop the new projects and track existing construction. The contrast between rural Anbar and Baghdad was striking. Baghdad is a city with over 7 million inhabitants and one of the largest cities in the Middle East. Leaving Anbar, I traded my dusty office trailer in Camp Fallujah for a cubicle on the fifth floor of an office building in the much-publicized Green Zone, and I left my USACE civilian co-workers for State Department Foreign Service Officers in business suits. My new Baghdad department also had a large number of local-national and ex-patriot Iraqi engineers, and I found that working with them offered a great opportunity to view Iraq through their eyes.

I was struck by how dedicated they all were in the effort to bring their country out of the decades of abuse suffered under Saddam's rule. Some of my coworkers were Sunni, some Shia, and some Kurdish, but they all worked together at the PRT toward the same goal. We interacted with the "Amanat" (City Hall) on basic city service projects (sewer, water, trash), and with the Ministry of Education on a plan to build no less than 200 new schools across the city. During the short time I was with the PRT, I was proud to report that we managed to get 10 new schools designed, funded, and approved for construction.

In both Anbar and Baghdad, we made every effort to award construction contracts to companies that would hire local workers. After contract award, we worked with them to ensure they built facilities that not only met our contract requirements, but also were constructed to American standards. As you might imagine, this was very difficult in a country that still uses donkey carts in many areas, but we endeavored to show them modern construction practices. We mentored the Iraqis about workmanship, quality, and jobsite safety. I'm confident these initiatives are, today, helping the Iraqis help themselves in the new post-Saddam era. Also, as a byproduct of this process, it's my opinion that we showed formerly-disenfranchised people that there is a better way of life available to them; a way where the average citizen can take pride and responsibility in his own work, and in the process create a better life, not only for himself, but also his community at large. I'm glad to have had the opportunity to lend a hand in this historic effort.

LCDR Joseph Yates, NAVFAC Europe, Naples



LCDR Joseph Yates in Fallujah



LCDR Yates at a Baghdad construction site.