

Postcards from Iraq

Starting 4th tour in Iraq —
it's still very motivating work

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Who would have thought being in Iraq, as we say in Mississippi about the river, could get in your blood. Proof is hopping off a C-130 transport at the Baghdad International Airport for my forth tour in as many years. Another sign is running into people from my three previous tours almost every week passing through to other Corps locations. Since 2003 many Corps of Engineers volunteers have made the trip to contribute to the rebuilding of Iraq and many of them, like me, repeat offenders. There is something so rewarding about the people and work that until the mission is over there is a magnetic attraction to see it through to the end. In this way we mirror the military; mission, country and family. Our mission is #1 and we do it for our country but we do miss our families!

My first tour in Iraq in June of 2003 took me to Al Hillah for the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) where I spent 6 months rehabbing 100 schools and several clinics. I clocked thousands of miles going all over central Iraq each day visiting my schools and meeting local Iraqis. Each visit to a school brought out the local children who were so excited to see us come, knowing their school was going to be reopened and made to look and function like new. I would receive ripe dates and big smiles from all of them. Like anything you do for the first time, I was taken by storm with the excitement of a different culture and the pride of giving for the benefit of others through the Corps.

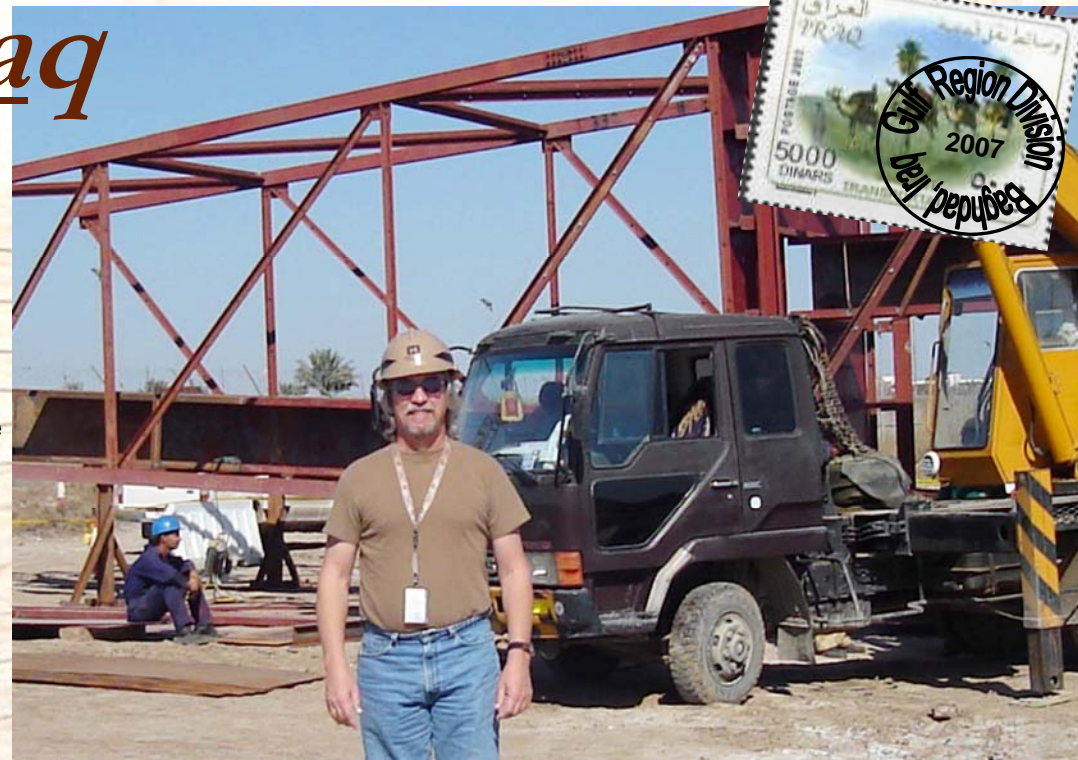
My second tour in 2004 took me to the Green Zone in Baghdad to the newly opened Gulf Region Division Central District. There I was given 23 electrical substations in central Iraq and Baghdad for rehab. Once again I was able to travel to my job sites and experience first hand the country, cities and people. I'm still not sure who was more grateful, them or me.

My third tour came in 2005 and once again landed in the now called International Zone, same place but different name. I was not alone, working with several Corps folks from the second tour. This time Central District allowed me to work on all the major water and sewer treatment plant contracts in Baghdad. By this time I was capable of driving a cab in Baghdad because I knew my way around as if I had lived there most of my life. The Corps was hiring local Iraqi engineers to assist with the day to day inspections allowing me several trips a week to help coordinate with the contractors and the Army. Rehabilitating the existing plants and building additional capacity was the focus of this mission. As with the second tour the theme was, "What have you done for the Iraq people today?" I hope we made General O'Neal of the 3rd ID proud!

After spending the next year working with Hurricane Katrina, as thousands of people did, I made it back to Iraq for one more tour. Now working at Victory Base, for the Central District again, my job is mostly concerned with support for the military soldiers and their needs. Stationed in and around the Baghdad International Airport, I am fortunate to work with several people from all my previous tours. It does get in your blood and the friendships have lasted and will continue to last probably the rest of my life.

I now have a much greater understanding of what the Corps and the Army does for a living, and have become more grateful for what we have in America. When I see how much the Iraqi people want freedom, it drives me to do all I can to see they get it. No one can say you're spoiled if you share!

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