

Postcards from Iraq

Milestones

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Sometimes you just never know where your career will take you, and what opportunities lie ahead. After working for the US Army Corps of Engineers in Phoenix AZ for all of a day, my supervisor mentioned in my first staff meeting that the Corps was looking for personnel interested in working in Iraq. At the time, two folks from our office were already deployed forward and were sending back great information on their experiences. Wouldn't that be a rare opportunity, I thought, but surely I can't leave my brand new job and deploy! Some eight months later I found myself in Baghdad supporting the US Agency for International Development (USAID) Project Office Team.

After a week of overlap with my successor, I found myself as the Water and Sanitation Sector Manager, responsible for the design and construction (or rehab) of water treatment plants and distribution systems, wastewater treatment plants and collection systems, as well as landfills. USAID's infrastructure mission largely supports our nation's foreign policy, developing critically needed infrastructure in foreign and often war-torn lands in sectors such as surface transportation, ports, airports, railways, water and sanitation, and power generation and distribution. Our Corps of Engineers Project Office supports this program by providing much needed technical expertise and quality assurance oversight.

Nationwide, the Water and Sanitation Sector has approximately \$272 million worth of projects underway, with more projects to come. All of these projects are greatly needed by the people of Iraq. Initially, most of our projects addressed rehab of existing infrastructure. Nearly every facility had been neglected for years and in most cases afforded little, if any, water treatment. Nearly all mechanical and electrical components were worn out, out of service, or had been looted. In some cases, Saddam Hussein stored diesel fuel in sludge digesters! Our new construction helps close the gap between Iraq's societal needs and the existing infrastructure.

Perhaps the most interesting component of my work has been my travels outside of Baghdad. I've been able to fly Blackhawks to numerous project sites and C-130's to more remote regions.

One particularly memorable trip was to the Dead Sea in Jordan, where I attended the International Water Demand Management Conference with several Iraqi Ministers for a week. Naturally, Iraq is not alone in its struggles to provide potable water to its people, and emphasis at the conference was placed on reducing water demand, versus expanding water supply systems, especially in the Middle East. While in Jordan, I was also able to meet the King of Jordan and see his private auto collection. I also viewed the Dead Sea Scrolls, visited ancient Roman and Byzantine ruins, and saw a real Roman "milestone." Now that was an unexpected enrichment experience! By the way, I really hadn't anticipated meeting Ministers and Kings when I deployed from home, so I made this trip with a few borrowed jackets and ties!

As I approach the end of my deployment, I can begin to reflect on how gratifying this experience really is. It has been rewarding and educational to work with such a diverse team of Corps employees, and I'm proud to serve the Iraqi people with them. The Iraqi personnel we have on staff are truly dedicated to the reconstruction mission, and remain one of our greatest assets. The many conversations I've had with Iraqis provide great insight into the history, life and future of Iraq. This personal perspective, coupled with the gratification of improving the infrastructure that serves millions of Iraqis, has made for a memorable experience beyond compare, a true milestone in my career.

Roman milestones that once marked the road to Mount Nebo from Jerusalem gave me a historical perspective on a term I use daily in my construction projects.

