

# Postcards from Iraq

## Safety First...Or Else!

by David Kitzman  
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I have been working on the infrastructure reconstruction of Baghdad International airport for the past seven months. During this time, we have given the airport a new telephone system, refurbished a fire station, satellite communication, radio communication, a checkpoint, runway repairs and painting, power generation, refurbishing the Aircraft Traffic Control Tower, and Substation repairs.

This is a rewarding job getting a vital piece of the transportation picture back on line and operating. It can also be challenging working with the Iraqi subcontractors and the language barrier.

One of my projects is the rebuilding of a bombed out runway substation. The substation handles emergency power for the runway lighting. During the civil construction of the building, the Iraqi workers would hang off the side of the building to do their work. The first time I saw this, I insisted that they buy safety belts to prevent a nasty fall. They bought the belts. The next day, I showed up at the job site, and there they were, hanging off the side of the building with no belts.

I made everyone come down, and insisted they put on the protective devices. They complied. The next day was the same. The workers were again hanging off the building and no safety belts. Again I called all the workers down and made them wear the belts when working at height. The third day was the same situation and I finally snapped.

I told them, "If I come here tomorrow, and find anyone working over 2 meters in height without a belt, and not tied off with a lanyard less than two meters, they are FIRED."

The next day when I arrived on the site, EVERYONE was wearing a belt. Even the guys working on the ground were wearing them. I was so pleased!

At that point the owner ran up to me and asked me, "What did you tell my foreman?!?"

I asked, "Why?"

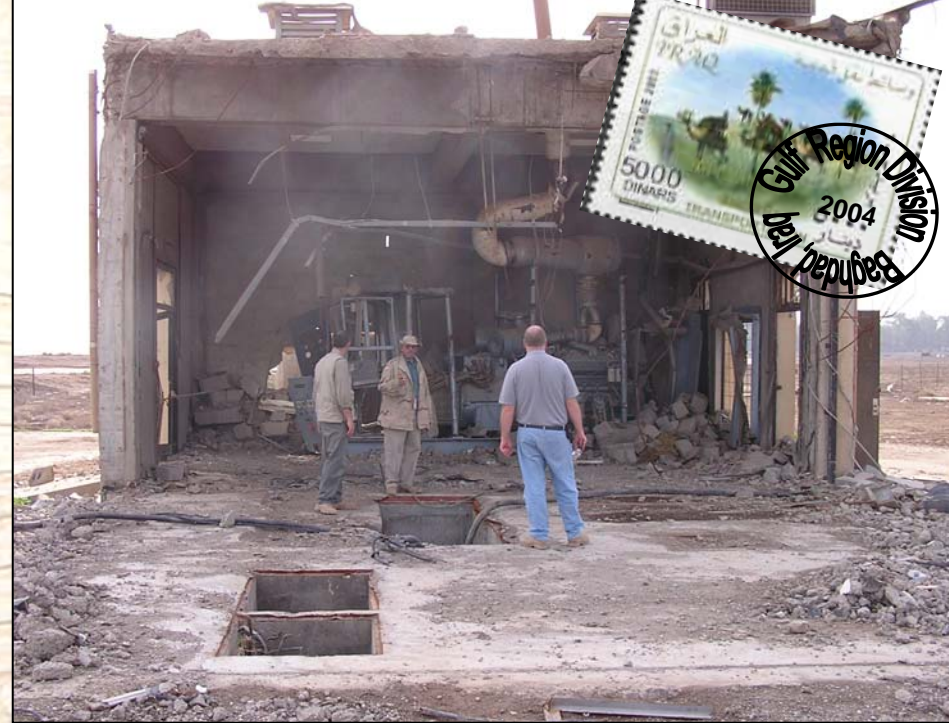
The owner told me, "He said you told him that if the workers didn't wear these belts, you would shoot them."

"Shoot them?", I said.

The owner looked at me and made a gun motion with his hand and said, "You know, ready, aim, FIRE!"

It took a bit of explaining, but I think I straightened it out that I was not going to shoot anyone. At this time, I am pleased to know these workers. They are not only workers on one of my job sites, but they have become friends.

In a way, I am going to be sorry when my job is finished here and I go back to my home. I am going to miss these guys.



Restoring/replacing facilities as damaged as this substation for the Baghdad International Airport are examples of the challenges for engineer in Iraq— *Photos provided by David Kitzman*



David Kitzman and one of his Iraqi buddies in Baghdad.