

Postcards from Iraq

The Sewer Princess Diaries

by Danielle Stephens
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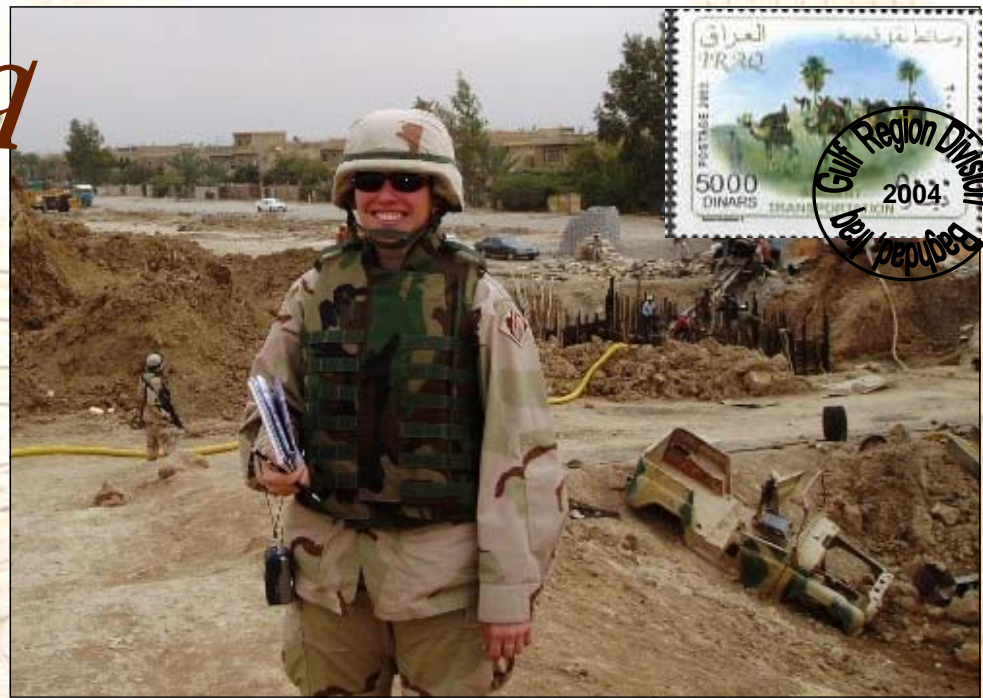
Hello everyone... long time no write and I know it's my fault. Things here are incredibly busy but I have found a few minutes to catch you up on what's been going on. I am working 14-hour days most of the time and find it a treat to get home after only 12 hours. It makes the time fly by and before I know it a week has passed and my 'to do' list is still growing larger instead of shrinking. My job is more defined now than the last time I wrote. I am the construction manager for the sewer projects in Baghdad that the Corps is providing construction management and quality assurance services for. This includes all the projects that were directly funded to the Corps and the ones from the Projects and Contracting Office (PCO, formerly PMO). This is an extensive program involving about 13 contracts worth more than \$125 million. Time has been against us with the June 30 deadline fast approaching and the work just seems to keep coming. With so few people in country compared to what we need to manage over \$3.8 billion in projects ranging from buildings, to sewers, to power lines, to oil lines (this is a plug for all you Corps people to come over here) I've also had the chance to work on the Project Management and contracting side of things. Sewers right now are the No. 1 priority and get visibility on a daily basis. There is a lot of pressure to get contracts awarded, scopes defined, contractors on-board, and workers on the ground. It's a great learning experience and challenging at the same time.

There are some perks to this work, besides playing with sewage all day long. I've been able to take several Blackhawk rides to meetings, go to ground breakings, and site visits to see what work really needs to be done. I think the helo rides are the best but getting to see more of Baghdad and interact with the people is amazing as well. At a ground breaking I attended the other day I had a man come up to me and ask me if it was true we are going to install underground sewer lines in his neighborhood to replace the open slit trench sewer that is currently in this area. To see his disbelief that it could really be true, and his reaction when he saw the hope that it might happen, was incredible. It's people like him, and all the little kids who bombard you with questions about your age, name, if I'm married, do I have a kid, etc. that make all the hard work and effort everyone is putting into the programs over here worth it. I can't even imagine living someplace where the power is sporadic and you're lucky if it's on 4 hours at a time, then off for 6 hours. A place where you have no potable water and a sewer system that involves a bucket you dump out on the street. I will definitely have to come back in 5 or 10 years to see what a difference these projects have made in taking the first step towards a higher quality of life for so many people.

As for the non-work parts of the day (which aren't very much) I have a new roommate and another gal my age working over here. I've still had the chance to hang out when they BBQ and I frequent the pool instead of going to dinner. The weather isn't as horrible as I thought it was going to be (I know, it's not August) but it's weird to walk outside in the morning and it's over 80 degrees already, and when I leave work at 11 p.m. it's still 80. The wind has to be the worst part. It feels like you're in a blow-dryer; but you just get used to it and walk faster to the next building with air conditioning. The bombings and mortars are becoming more frequent but we are all taking the appropriate precautions. I do think the media blows things out of proportion and continues to report only the bad things going on. I know this is what sells to the public, but there are so many organizations doing great things over here. As far as the explosions, it is only a minority of the population causing problems.

I'm about to get off work at a decent time (it's a shocker), but I hope all is going well for you and hope to hear from you soon. I'd love to catch up on what's going on in the states while I'm over here. Enjoy the pictures I'm attaching. I miss you all!

Dani



Danielle Stephens is an Civil Engineer assigned to the Gulf Region Division Central District in Baghdad Iraq. Affectionately known as "Sewer Princess," her focus is on waste water treatment in central Iraq. — Photo by Derrick Dunlap



Sewer trenches in Baghdad are frequently filled with trash. — Photo by Steve Purdy