



Through an Iraqi child's eyes

Written, prior to her departure, by Nicole Dalrymple Gulf Region Northern District U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

MOSUL , Iraq-- Seeing children's eyes light up and a smile spread across their faces has made Charlie Comer's whole deployment to Iraq worth it. Shortly after arriving at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Anaconda Area Office in October, Comer was made the onsite construction representative for five ongoing projects. His subsequent routine of meeting his Iraqi workers at the perimeter gate offered Comer the most rewarding experience of his deployment.

Every day, except Fridays, Comer drives to one of Anaconda's perimeter gates and awaits the entry of his assigned Iraqi workers. It is a lengthy process that requires the workers to clear several check points and ID stations, and can often take up to two hours.

While waiting Comer has been able to interact with and visit Iraqi children waiting to be seen at the Anaconda Hospital . "It's the one thing I look forward to every day," he said.

The children, as well as adults, come to see the hospital staff for various injuries and illnesses. They sit long hours, waiting on benches that are within a secure area of the base. Comer has noticed everything from broken arms and legs, to other more serious injuries suffered from gun fire and explosives.

Charlie Comer, construction representative and volunteer with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Northern District's Anaconda Area Office, poses with a young girl waiting to see doctors at the Anaconda Hospital. Comer said his trip to Iraq was worth it just to see the children's eyes light up and smiles on their faces as they opened their sack of gifts. " It would be so neat to be able to take each of them to Disneyland for a day," he said. (GRD Photo by Nicole Dalrymple)

"I can't help but feel for all these kids, especially after all they've been through," he said. "Most of them sit quietly waiting their turn to go into the hospital. Some just sit in deep thought. Some come alone and others come with their parents. Their parents often look tired from all the years of worrying about what was going to happen next."

Prior to deploying, Comer collected small gifts in hope of being able to give them to Iraqi children. He got Smokey Bear baseballs, comic books, pencils and rulers from

the U.S. Forest Service, and his daughter gathered together Ranger Rick badges, whistles and many other small gifts from the Corps' Libby Dam project in Montana , where Comer works.

"When I found out I was selected for an assignment in Iraq , I was excited about the opportunity to help with reconstruction, but I was also hoping I'd have the opportunity to interact with the local people," he recalled.

Shortly after arriving in Iraq , Comer began to take those small gifts to the children at the gate. It wasn't long before almost the entire Anaconda Area Office was collecting things for Comer to give the children. The gifts soon included school supplies, stuffed animals and shoes.

Rich Halverson, from the Corps' Walla Walla District, contributed school supplies he'd received from his local Lions Club. Jeanie Klingman, from the Seattle District, received a box of stuffed animals, and Comer's mother sent a box of dolls and assorted balls.

"The list goes on and on," Comer said of all those who contributed gifts for the Iraqi children. He estimates that he received over 20 boxes of miscellaneous items and an additional 10 boxes of shoes. His family and co-workers at Libby Dam collected the shoes after he mentioned the need. Most of the adult shoes were given to the Iraqi workers, while the children's shoes were given to those waiting in line at the hospital.

"We are doing a lot of good things over here in Iraq ," he said, mentioning the reconstruction of Iraq 's schools, fire stations, hospitals and other public infrastructure. "It's been a good experience working with the locals, but I think what I've enjoyed most is the time I spent with the kids. They are the future of Iraq . "

Comer acknowledges that rebuilding Iraq is a lengthy process and that it's going to take some time to get things back to normal, but he said if we take it "one day at a time, one child at a time, we will succeed."

Back at Libby Dam, Charlie Comer is a jack of all trades. His duties include being the dam's safety and security officer, providing emergency management oversight and ensuring the project is environmentally compliant. Comer will be redeploying home Feb. 7 after a fulfilling and rewarding deployment to Iraq .