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USACE Electrician helps Iraqis build their country

By A. Al Bahrani
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BASRAH, Iraq—“The source of my enjoyment is that I’m seeing the small projects that we started become bigger and of more benefit to the Iraqi people,” said James Hodges, chief construction representative with the Gulf Region South district, Basrah Area Office of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. “I see everything is getting better. People’s lives are getting better and the goal is coming together.

“There is a huge change from when I first got here,” said Hodges, an electrician on his second deployment to Iraq. “There is a long way to go, [but] when I drive to Basrah and I see palm trees recently planted and I see more people movement out on the streets, I feel that there is hope and a good future for those people.”

A journeyman electrician for Oregon state, Hodges works as a power plant electrician at the Bonneville Dam on the Columbia River. “I do miss seeing my kids grow up,” said the father of four, “but our efforts here are critical and very much needed by the people of Iraq.” He said the Basrah Area Office is doing a great job for the country and its people.

“I am proud of the fact that I have been able to work with so many Iraqi engineers and others who are making a difference in their country,” said Hodges, whose jobs include contacting contractors and the GRS Iraqi engineers in the field. He ensures communication flow and visits project sites about weekly on average.

“Communication is a huge amount of work,” he said. “Everything is difficult with communication.” Hodges said he is getting better at basics of the Arabic language for use on the job site. “I’m still not good at Arabic, but I’m getting better.”



James Hodges (center) visits the Khor Al-Zubair vocational technical center in Basrah province at the completion of the project. (USACE photo)

An adventurer, during his R&R trip home last summer Hodges accomplished a 12,000 mile cross-continental roundtrip on his 1995 Harley-Davidson FLHT motorcycle, covering both coasts and points in between. "I'll never grow tired of motorcycling," he said. "The hills and mountains, cities and on the track."



James Hodges and his 1995 Harley-Davidson FLHT touring motorcycle. (Courtesy)

The Stevenson, Wash. native, who has been working as an electrician for more than 25 years throughout the U.S. said he is not ready to stop and go home. "I really enjoy working here and the kind of work," he said. "It wasn't foreign for me to come here and work with the local nationals. I've worked in Mexico, Africa and in other places in the world."

He said history is being made here, and while the job is challenging, it is worthy of all the effort. Hodges tells his Iraqi co-workers that he hopes others will not see Iraq only as a war-torn country, but appreciate it for its history and heritage.

"I see what it is to be, and I see what can be done with lots of work," he said.



James Hodges relaxes his mind in August 2007 between Iraq tours learning to race on a Suzuki GSX-R 600 on a track in Atlanta. (Courtesy)

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