



"I Can't Get Away From Him"

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"And that's a fact," quips LTC Robert Spano. Back home in Elk Grove, CA, Mark lives a few doors away. Now, here in Iraq, our 8'x20' modified, shipping container "homes" are even closer!"

His two continent neighbor, and present U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Gulf Region Division (USACE-GRD) colleague, Mark Ellis is less than a week away from returning home after "A year and a day deployment."



"How fast the time has flown," says Spano, a California National Guardsman whose full-time work is that of National Guard liaison for Governor Schwarzenegger. In the Guard he was a Battalion Commander in the 40th Aviation Brigade and, just prior to deployment, became the Chief of Staff of HHD, Engineer Brigade, 40th Infantry Division. Interestingly, back in California that Brigade is commanded by COL Michael Herman who, here in his activated role, is the Deputy USACE-GRD Commander.

In Iraq, Spano serves as the Gulf Region Division's Strategic Planner.

His "neighbor", Ellis, has served in another challenging position as a USACE-GRD Program Manager working with Multi National Security and Training Corps - Iraq (MNSTC-I) projects which included construction on all of the Iraqi military

installations, border forts and police stations. "Originally, I came over here on a 'tasker' of 120 days, but the extensive scope of it all required my continued efforts up to, ultimately, 366," he explained.

With a grimace that turns to a grin, he points to his naked pate joking, "When I got here I had a full head of hair that had no gray in it. Now look at me!"

Ellis continued, "I remember sitting in Bob's kitchen talking to him about my pending assignment over here. Little did we imagine that before long his unit would be activated and mobilized to come as well."

Back home he is a full time Corps of Engineers employee for the Sacramento District. He oversees Flood Damage Reduction projects on rivers and levees in Northern California and being Federal Emergency Management Administration qualified, does FEMA work as well. On numerous occasions he has coordinated aerial reconnaissance flight missions with LTC Spano expanding their neighborly role yet further!

Spano adds, "I was more than a little surprised when – barely six hours in country – I walked past Mark. Now, in retrospect, I realize that our jobs have afforded us exceptional opportunities to see the 'really big' picture. For me, working with MNF-I, I see the effort here in Iraq and throughout the region from the highest level. Mark, in turn, has had the perspective from not only the Corps regional district's point of view but from the country-wide, program level as well. "

Both pause briefly, look at each other and then break into big smiles. Spano breaks the silence saying, Mark, be careful where you go next 'cause I may well be right behind you!"