



'It's good work,' says USACE unit's Engineering and Construction chief

By John Connor
Gulf Region South district
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TALLIL, Iraq – Together, Kelly Brown and Tom Eidson have seen many a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers project in southern Iraq go from the drawing board to completion.

Brown is the head of the Program and Project Management Division (PPMD) for the USACE Gulf Region South district and Eidson is the head of the district's Engineering and Construction operation. Brown and his team take project plans up to the contract award stage, after which Eidson and his people pick up the ball and run with it. But in reality, Brown said, they work together as a unit through all phases of a project.

The projects on which they have worked range from huge facilities such as the new water treatment plant in Nasiriyah to more modest but equally needed projects like primary healthcare centers, compact water units and electrical substations.

Eidson, who comes from the St. Paul, Minn., District, has been in Iraq with USACE since Aug. 7, 2005. Brown, who comes from the LRD (Great Lakes and Ohio River) Division in Cincinnati, is just winding up his third tour to Iraq, two six-month tours and a one-month special project stint.

Why has Eidson stayed so long? "It's good work," he said. "It's a more robust work environment." He said the majority of people who serve in Iraq and go home want to come back to Iraq.

Civilians make up the nucleus of the USACE workforce. There are about 70 civilians in GRS, which covers the nine southern provinces of Iraq. GRS Commander Col. Steve Hill has said he would like to get that number up to 90 or so. And Eidson, an engineer, and Brown, who has a degree in economics and an MBA, are the senior civilians in the district.



Kelly Brown, seated, head of PPMD at GRS, and Tom Eidson, the district's engineering and construction chief. (USACE photo by John Connor)

Both Eidson and Brown spend considerable time on personnel matters. Eidson said he talks just about every day to people back in the States who have applied for positions in GRS to assess their suitability. He said many people seem to come out of a sense of adventure. Brown said his impression is that it has gotten harder to attract people to serve in Iraq, in large part because the people who tend to volunteer have volunteered already. At the same time, he said the USACE backbone civilian workforce has performed admirably in Iraq and has not yet received the outside recognition it deserves.

Since its inception in early 2004, as part of an initiative to bring all USACE efforts in Iraq under one command with the formation of the Gulf Region Division and three regional districts, GRS has completed more than 1,300 projects costing nearly \$2.6 billion. More than \$800 million worth of projects remain on the to-do list.

Brown and Eidson have seen significant changes in their time in Iraq.

Brown said the projects generally have gotten smaller and that the process of selecting projects has moved from the central government to provincial authorities. Similarly, he said, more authority has devolved to the regional USACE districts. The big projects are mostly gone, the \$18.4 billion IRRF (Iraq Relief and Reconstruction Fund) money mostly spent, and ESF (Economic Support Fund) money for fiscal year 2008 is to be determined, Brown said. He noted the existence of section 607 of the Foreign Assistance Act under which the government of Iraq could hire USACE to do what it does now, using Iraqi funds instead of U.S. money.

Eidson started out as area engineer in Basrah and remembers when there was generally free access to project sites in Basrah Province and scant hostile action. "Initially, it was very stable," he recalled. "We went practically everywhere." He said USACE personnel also went to Maysan Province in those days, and held regular meetings in Maysan's capital of Al Amarah. The situation in Basrah went downhill in late 2005, he recollected, and Maysan became increasingly difficult to access as the British reduced their presence in that province.

Concurrent with those changes, Eidson recounted, were changes in the way in which USACE engaged with Iraqis. During the early part of his tour, he related, there were regular direct meetings with Iraqi counterparts—six meetings a month in Basrah Province, for example, one meeting a month per sector. But that changed with increased emphasis on enhancing Iraqi governance, leaving it to Iraqis to schedule meetings. He said coordination was problematic until the emergence of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams revitalized the engagement process.

Commenting on the Iraqis' ability to perform the sort the preventive maintenance needed to keep public facilities in good operating condition over time, Eidson said the record has not been great so far but voiced confidence it will improve.

Brown cited "the law of rising expectations" in this regard, saying that as the Iraqi people become accustomed to such things as clean water, they will put increasing pressure on their leaders to assure that service continues.

It is not all work here in Iraq. One of Eidson's recreational pastimes has been whacking golf balls on what had been a very rough but officially designated driving range near the USACE compound in Tallil. Not long ago, the mats at the range were torn up because the area had been designated for another use. While waiting for the other use to materialize, Eidson ordered up a couple of driving range mats online and has continued to flail away, hardly missing a swing.

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