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Volunteering for Duty in Iraq-Why We Do It

By John Connor
Gulf Region South District



U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Project Manager Tonya Myrick sorts out donated toys for distribution to youngsters in southern Iraq. (USACE photo)

TALLIL AIR BASE, Iraq – "People back home ask why do we do it," said Tonya Myrick, a project manager in Iraq with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Gulf Region Division.

"Why do we give up our comfortable lives to come to a place where the norm is a seven-day work week, 12 hours a day most days?" questioned the Mississippi native, who is nearing the end of her sec-

ond Iraq tour with USACE.

Why indeed! As Myrick noted, the temperature can soar to 130 degrees or more in the summer in southern Iraq where she resides, leaving one feeling "like you are walking with a hair dryer pointed at you, " and vicious dust storms can roar out of the desert without any warning.

Those are just the elements. There

have been innumerable other challenges during her 22 months in Iraq including mortar and rocket attacks by insurgents, which are much rarer these days than when she first served.

"Why do we do it?" she asked. "I think for me the answer would be to give the Iraqis a chance for things we take for granted -- clean drinking water, electricity, drivable roads, and even a good education."

"I find it very rewarding to see a project go from start to completion in only a few months," Myrick continued. "Don't get me wrong. It takes a certain kind of personality to give up everything to come over here and endure these environmental and working conditions, but if you possess that personality, the rewards can be tremendous."



Project Manager Tonya Myrick with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Gulf Region Division, South district. (USACE photo)

Myrick hails from Vicksburg, MS and works at home for the USACE Vicksburg district where she is with the Standard Permitting Section of the Regulatory Branch. She holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology from the University of Louisiana Monroe (formerly known as Northeast Louisiana University) and a Masters of Science degree in Combined Science (biology and chemistry) from Mississippi College in Clinton, MS.

Myrick spent both of her Iraq tours with USACE's Gulf Region South district, which provides reconstruction services in the nine southern provinces of Iraq. She said there is "a huge difference between my tours -- both in job position and living conditions."

Her first tour in 2005, was spent as a project engineer at Camp Echo in Qadisiyah Province with a staff of seven people in a small office building on what is mainly a Polish Army base. "We had nothing to start with -- no desks, no chairs, no paper, no ink pens," she recalled. "Our hooches were the bare necessities" and "the nearest bathroom and shower was a walk across the camp."

"At Camp Echo, we were the 'boots on the ground,'" Myrick recounted.

"Our job was to start construction on projects once they were awarded at headquarters and see them through to completion."

For her second tour, which will total 17 months later this fall, Myrick works out of the GRS headquarters located in Tallil on a former Iraqi airbase near Nasiriyah. She is a project manager for the Transportation and Communication Sector.

"I oversee all road, bridge, and telecommunication construction projects in Gulf Region South," she said.

"We get to work directly with the Iraq officials, PRT (Provincial Reconstruction

Team) engineers, military brigades, and field offices to develop scopes of work and award projects needed by the Iraqi people," Myrick explained. "Project managers are involved with the projects from the design phase until the project is completed."

"Being able to oversee a project from an idea to its actual construction is truly a great feeling," she added.

Myrick said the living conditions on the GRS compound in Tallil "are as good as they can get in Iraq. I now have a queen bed, refrigerator, TV, microwave, and most importantly, a private bathroom."

Particularly rewarding to Myrick is her work on another sector that was added to her portfolio--the vocational training center rehabilitation program. She said there were several votech centers scattered across the GRS area that were barely functioning due to years of neglect by Saddam Hussein.

Rehabbing the centers became a focus of the U.S. Army's 360th Civil Affairs Brigade, Myrick noted, saying the basic idea was that educating Iraqis in construction trades would help them get jobs and support their families without having to turn to militias for financial aid.

"After the rehabilitation, the centers went from offering one or two classes per semester helping 30-40 students, to a curriculum with 20 or more classes involving over 1,000 students," explained Myrick. "Upon graduation, these students are using their new skills to get steady employment."

Myrick is also Acting Program Lead for GRS' Civil Works and Energy Sector with a total program value of \$458.7 million.

"So why do we do it?" asked Myrick. "We're making a difference here and it's great to be part of this effort."

Note: John Connor is a contributing writer for the Gulf Region South district, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Iraq. For more information, contact public affairs by phone at 540 665-1233, by e-mail to CEGRD.PAO@tac01.usace.army.mil, or visit www.grd.usace.army.mil.