

Postcards from Iraq

Facing the unique challenges of Iraq



A lot of people ask me, I know you are an attorney, but what do you do exactly? And what are you doing in Iraq? Even other attorneys wonder what it means to be an attorney working for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE). Well, it's truly challenging.

The Corps' Central District (GRC) in Baghdad manages 300 construction projects, worth more than \$1.8 billion, start to finish. We work with the customer to determine their needs, write the specifications and plans, develop a solicitation plan, advertise the contract, select the contractor company, and then manage the project until the keys are handed to the customer. My job is to ensure that we do all of these legally. The majority of my practice has been involved after the award is made. Any time after that, when the wheels start to come off, that's when I get involved. Hopefully, I am called in earlier rather than later, because I have more options to fix a situation if I know what's happening early. But in Iraq, there's a lot more to it. More challenges.

One of the other things that we are trying to do here is "build capacity." What this generally means is that the GRC team is trying to teach U.S. construction means and methods to the Iraqi construction industry. We are trying to "teach a man to fish" so some day the Iraqis can do it on their own. But getting the Iraqis to adopt all of the U.S. practices is tough. The safety measures we require in the U.S. and in Europe such as fall protection, proper headgear, equipment and safe practices are not well observed here and are difficult to enforce on the jobsite. We have had contractors climbing electrical towers in tennis shoes and jeans and working with live wires with their bare hands.

The Iraqis say in Arabic, "Inshallah," which means "if Allah wills" or "God willing." For example, in response to a question as to whether a project will finish on time, "Inshallah." There is an attitude that safety precautions are not necessary because if you are injured or killed then Allah must have willed it. That presents some unique legal implications, to say nothing of the challenges of finishing a project on time and safely.

Aside from all the challenges in construction, there is a special challenge to which we all, as a nation, come to face. When I was living in the U.S. the Iraq war was more an idea-- something I read in the newspaper or saw on TV. I never had to address death in Iraq as an actual event. This changed in June when a co-worker's nephew was killed in combat. I heard the news from her after she got the call. SPC Thomas Duncan, 21, of Rowlett, Texas, died June 9 in Sinjar, Iraq, of wounds suffered during combat operations.

This death was different. Although I never met him, Tommy Duncan was a person, not an idea. He was no longer just a name in the newspaper. If Tommy had not died in Iraq, you would probably never have heard of him. But he did die, and we need to show our respect by slowing down for a moment to reflect on his life. We need to give kids like him the respect they deserve. They are heroes who met the challenges and gave it everything they had. When I think about Tommy and his family, the challenges I face every day seem a bit smaller in comparison.

Brett Howard

District Counsel,
Central District HQ, Baghdad, Iraq,
Gulf Region Division, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers



Brett Howard stands by one of the few remaining Saddam images in Baghdad, Iraq.

For more information on challenging GRC jobs in Iraq visit: <http://cpolwapp.belvoir.army.mil/coe-gwot/>