

Postcards from Iraq

Reconstruction in Iraq is like gardening in a dry sandy soil

By LCDR Arturo Aseo, PE, CEC, USN
OIC Ramadi Resident Office
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

One of my hobbies is gardening - planting vegetables. A good stress reliever after a long day at work. I got to have it here in Iraq, but how? In an austere environment - sandy soil, hot weather, scarce rainfall - just the opposite of the fertile farms in Oxnard, California. Alas, I found a packet of sweet corn kernels from the Civil Affairs office. I grabbed a shovel and started preparing the sandy soil next to my trailer. It would take 90 days until harvest time, just in time before I leave Iraq.

I reported to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Resident Office at Camp Blue Diamond, Ramadi, Iraq, at the end of 2006 for 6-month Individual Augmentee assignment tasked with overseeing the construction of infrastructure and essential service projects such as roads, bridges, generators, power substations, water treatment plants, and hospitals. Reconstruction in Ramadi - once an insurgent-infested city until the last half of my tour - is not easy, but not impossible. There is always the threat of terrorist activity looming in the dark to disrupt work, the difficulty of getting materials, the challenge for the contractors to travel to and from jobsites due to security, shortage of local skilled manpower, and the difficulty of going to the job sites to perform Quality Assurance visits. These adversities require a tremendous amount of energy, courage, coordination, patience, and common sense to stay alive and succeed with the task at hand.

Because of the persistent joint effort of the U.S. and Iraqi forces to flush out the insurgents, security conditions have greatly improved. As a result, contractors are now able to accomplish more work, and USACE staff is able to get out to the job sites more often to ensure quality construction and safety. I am happy to leave Iraq knowing that my team of U.S. civilians and military along with our local Iraqi engineers - all courageous and dedicated professionals - have accomplished something for the Iraqi people.

As with construction, taking care of my garden of corn in the desert requires diligence for them to thrive. And yes, the corn has yielded some ears for harvest. Although they were not as fat as the ones sold at the farm produce stands in Oxnard, they sure have brought smiles to my team as I handed them their share - cooked in a microwave - knowing that with perseverance all things are possible in Iraq.

LCDR Arturo Aseo, PE, CEC, USN
PWD NAF Atsugi, NAVFAC Far East
Hometown: Oxnard, CA



LCDR Arturo Aseo, PE, CEC, USN