

Postcards from Iraq

Iraq duty — a great assignment

By LTC Robert “Ken” O’Connor

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As I conclude a year’s deployment to Iraq, I leave knowing my team of dedicated professionals have made a difference. As the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Victory Area Office, our mission is to provide quality, responsive, full spectrum engineering services in support of military and civil construction as well as assist the Baghdad Government as it assumes full responsibility for provincial reconstruction.

With 27 military and civilian personnel, we’re overseeing 120 projects valued at \$380 million. I can say with some confidence, no stateside USACE office would expect a staff that small to manage a workload that large, getting quality projects completed in a timely fashion. Fortunately, we have some of the best and brightest – remarkable individuals who are committed to getting the job done.

Of all the projects we’ve completed, I’m most proud of the seven overhead protection systems we’ve installed on Victory Base Complex’s DFACs and the PX. Our troops can now eat and shop knowing they’re in a safe environment without having to worry about indirect fire that occasionally hits our camp. It’s a great system and well worth the \$60 million investment. They finished ahead of schedule and with the current troop build-up are even more important in their force protection role. They’re definitely saving soldier’s lives.

Apart from our normal project management duties, we occasionally are thrust into a situation demanding high priority action. One such incident was when electrical feeder lines to a pump station along the Tigris River in downtown Baghdad was interrupted and thousands of soldiers and civilians here at Victory Base had no incoming raw water. Even though that pump station was located outside our area of responsibility, we leaned forward, identified the problem, worked with Iraq’s Ministry of Electricity on a course of action, and ensured the repairs were completed. Our engineers, both U.S. and Iraqi, were pro-active and it’s during times like these one truly appreciates the talented individuals we have as they tirelessly worked day and night to implement a solution.

As our mission states, we’re here to help Iraq move forward. Despite what you may hear on nightly news reports, most Iraqis I deal with are committed to helping their nation improve basic essential services so their children and grandchildren can look forward to a brighter future. In the Mahmoudiya-Rashid area in south Baghdad Province, we’re managing the completion of primary healthcare centers in those two communities. When those facilities open, they will each have the capability of providing medical and dental care to about 150 patients daily. City leaders are looking forward to the ribbon cuttings as their residents will have modern medical facilities offering quality healthcare for the first time ever.

This has been one of the best assignments in my 30-year military career. As I return home, I look forward to saying thanks to my wife Deb and my family for their tremendous support.

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LCDR Jay Mitchell (left), Maj. Steve Martinelli,
LTC Robert ‘Ken’ O’Connor.