

Postcards from Iraq

Waterways...

by Marty Seger
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How did I get from being a crane and towboat operator on the Mississippi River to the Water Sector QA Manager in Baghdad? Maybe it was my experience as a water, wastewater plant operator and supervisor. And how did the COE find out about that? They have their ways! Anyway, how about some "high quality H2O?"

Now, as the Water Sector Quality Assurance Manager for the USAID Projects Office (UPO) Baghdad Central District, I am now helping the Iraqi people recover from over 30 years of dictatorship, three wars and more than a decade of economic sanctions. I am now performing QA on all of Baghdad's water and wastewater plants, along with a new water plant and landfill to be built very soon. I also am looking at many other future water initiatives.

As the COE struggles to rebuild Iraq, we are seeing how badly the Iraq infrastructure was neglected. Water and wastewater plants are in absolute disrepair. All of Baghdad's wastewater was dumped UNTREATED into the Tigris River and then pumped back out and treated as drinking water. Yuck!

But guess what, that situation changed on May 19, 2004. On that day, wastewater from Baghdad was treated for the first time in 15 years. I am proud to have worked as quality assurance manager with the prime contractor, Bechtel National, Inc. along with the Iraqi sub-contractors.

My job is to make sure the work comes as close to American standards as possible. I currently have over 30 project site to visits into the red zone and it's a good day when I can get out there and "eyes on" these jobs. I'm assisted by a super team of seven Iraqi engineers, who serve as my eyes and ears at the projects on a daily basis.

One situation developed here that I hadn't (thankfully) encountered before. Some Iraqi workers who feared for their safety approached me. These workers weren't being paid and were being told to not to do their jobs. I couldn't let that happen. I met with key leaders to ensure that the Iraqi workers received all their back pay and that they were protected from threats. Help also came when the Iraqi ministry made this project a high priority and assigned top notch management to making this treatment plant a success. I was proud to have helped move this ahead and grateful that the workers had enough trust in me to ask for help. The workers have now been paid and what was a bad situation is now over.

Other news, two more wastewater plants will soon start operations and after that the restoration of Baghdad's main water plant. I am glad to know that I am part of a team that is providing the Baghdad citizens with 120 million gallons of "high quality H2O" per day. We will also be helping to increase capacity by an additional 68 million gallons per day.

I am proud to be here with the USACE team and wouldn't have missed this opportunity for the world. But soon it will be time for me to rotate back home to the states. Like every team, our USACE team needs replacements. We need quality people like you, and you know who you are, to step up to the plate and hit a home run.

--Marty--

Seger and a local Iraqi engineer discuss project processes for the Rustimiyah North wastewater treatment plant.



Marty Seger (right) shakes hands with the resident Iraqi engineer working for Bechtel as they celebrate the successful completion of this operation — note state-of-the-art ultrasonic flow meter in background. The project, an example of Iraqi-American cooperation, marked the first successful wastewater treatment in the area for more than 15 years.

(Photos provided by Marty Seger)

