

Junior Officers in USACE

By Colonel Christopher W. Martin

As a junior officer in the Army, are you contemplating whether or not a tour in a United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) district is the right job for you? Are you concerned that you will not receive the training you need to be a successful officer in USACE and that the likelihood of further promotions will be lessened? Maybe you are concerned that this is a sleepy job that you will not enjoy, or that working under the supervision of a civilian will impede your professional development.¹ You might even be concerned that although you are an engineer officer, you do not have adequate experience in construction or the ability to perform this job successfully. Perhaps all these things are troubling you, and although you have heard great things about working for the “Corps,” you are still hesitant to talk to the Engineer Branch about assigning you to that type of job. If these things are bothering you, and you aren’t sure if this is the kind of assignment you want, I hope to put your concerns to rest and assure you that a tour with a USACE district is both professionally and personally rewarding, as well as challenging. But the Army, USACE, and the officer will all benefit from the experience.

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A job in a USACE district exposes young officers to a whole new side of the Corps of Engineers, allowing them to gain experience in construction, develop and hone negotiating skills, and develop new leadership skills. Ideally, a new officer reporting to USACE will be assigned as a project engineer to an area office on a military base as part of the military construction (MILCON) program. The construction experience a captain or major gains in the area office is invaluable. There, officers learn to read construction blueprints and inspect actual construction for conformance to required



During a deployment to the Afghanistan Engineer District, these engineers work with Afghan nationals on a project.

specifications, along with learning the basics of construction management. Part of the job will also likely include negotiating modifications to construction contracts with a prime contractor on the project. These same skills are required in Afghanistan and Iraq every day, not just by USACE representatives but also by units and Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs).

Although not normally assigned to “leadership” positions in an area office, officers still have a great opportunity to display, refine, teach, and exercise leadership skills. Not having been exposed to the civilian personnel system in previous assignments, you will have to learn how the new civilian system, known as the National Security Personnel System (NSPS), works. Regardless of your position in the area office, you are looked upon differently, both by contractors and by the Department of the Army civilians you work with. All of them expect the utmost in professionalism, honesty, discipline, and levelheadedness. USACE civilian employees are all required to be in a leadership development program when they first come on board, and you may have opportunities to talk to them about leadership. You will also likely have the opportunity to work for a civilian boss and learn that good leadership is not restricted to just military officers.

A USACE assignment is a great opportunity to continue your professional development following a deployment. You could catch up on your professional reading, progress toward a master's degree, or become licensed as a professional engineer. Everyone around you will work "civilian" time, and regardless of how hard-charging you are, at some point you realize you cannot do anything when you are the only one in the office. Weekends are generally open and available to spend time with your family.

This doesn't mean you won't deploy. Officers are needed in the Afghanistan Engineer District, as well as the Gulf Region Division, which has three districts inside Iraq. In addition, many districts maintain a Field Engineering Support Team-Advanced (FEST-A), which includes a military officer as the leader. The FEST-A's must be ready to deploy worldwide on a rotational basis and routinely deploy to the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) or the National Training Center (NTC) for training with brigade combat teams (BCTs) and/or divisions as they train for, and conduct, mission rehearsal exercises. The FEST-A's are actually expanding to table of organization and equipment (TOE) units, adding a noncommissioned officer (NCO) as well as the engineer captain, and coding civilian personnel positions to be on this team beginning in fiscal year 2008. FEST-A's provide technical reachback to USACE labs and center of engineering expertise and have embedded the following skills:

- Real estate acquisition and disposal of real property
- Facilities design and development and infrastructure planning and assessments
- Environmental engineering, including baseline environmental assessments and environmental assessments of specific host nation facilities to be used by U. S. forces
- Geospatial engineering expertise and identification of groundwater sources
- Facility force protection design and infrastructure engineering/assessment
- Hardened-target weapons-effect assessments

As a battalion commander in Iraq, I often wished I had an officer or NCO with some basic understanding of construction to assist or act as our civil affairs officer and execute our construction program within our area of responsibility. I believe that having a captain with USACE district experience would have made a difference in being able to provide a good set of plans or project specifications to the Iraqi contractors we worked with, to ensure that we got the best possible project. The basic construction skills an officer acquires from overseeing a USACE MILCON project typically includes concrete placement, concrete masonry unit (CMU) construction, and electrical and plumbing installation and would have given an officer in the battalion a tremendous level of credibility in Iraq.

Engineer officers review blueprints for a project at Fort Bliss, Texas.



Military officers bring skills to the district not normally resident in our civilian teammates. For example, recently our district was tasked to develop a “strategic” plan for Customs and Border Protection of the United States Department of Homeland Security. To accomplish this mission, we brought in several of our junior officers who were able to use their military decision-making process skills and help guide our civilian teammates through the development of this plan.

Engineer officers also bring a tremendous capability to support USACE in emergency management operations within the continental United States (CONUS). When USACE is brought in to assist the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) following natural disasters (such as hurricanes and earthquakes) or terrorist actions (such as at the World Trade Center), our officers are invaluable in their ability to assist with setting up a command and control cell, help organize operations, and assist with recovery operations. In the Fort Worth Engineer District, we expect all our officers to complete the Defense Support to Civil Authorities online course offered by United States Army North (USARNORTH) to ensure that they are prepared to support USACE activities following an emergency event.

An area we could improve on in USACE is training our new officers when they arrive in the district. There is a one-week course, usually in December, that each new officer attends. In addition to this course, called the District Officer Course, our officers typically attend formal training courses in negotiating, quality assurance, and contract administration. But we could do a better job of “certifying” our officers to make sure they receive the training and experiences they need to be successful. Several districts, including the Fort Worth Engineer District, are using various certification programs to help focus on developing our officers. This is a work-in-progress that other districts are working on with us to make it even better.

Ideally, the captains that are assigned to an engineer district come to us after completing a company command, but unfortunately that does not always occur. The district and the officer then have to work with the Engineer Branch and the engineer units on post to ensure that our officers are not forgotten and have the opportunity to get in the command queue. In Fort Worth, we generally expect that officers will work for us for two years, and then we try to get them to a unit for command. Because of unit rotations, this is not always possible, but the two-year stint provides a pretty good framework for us to work with. Although it often works best if the officer has already commanded a company, as mentioned previously, an officer with USACE experience is a valuable commodity in any battalion.

An assignment in USACE is a professionally rewarding experience that contributes to the Army, USACE, and the



Soldiers use a nuclear densimeter to determine soil compaction and moisture content.

district. You will be a better officer as a result of this tour. The skills you learn and the time you take for professional advancement will ultimately contribute significantly to your development.



Colonel Martin is the 23d commander and district engineer of the United States Army Corps of Engineers, Fort Worth District. He previously commanded the 91st Engineer Battalion, the first Army engineer battalion to field the Bradley fighting vehicle and then fight it at the National Training Center and ultimately in Iraq. He is a graduate of the United States Military Academy, the Engineer Officer Basic Course, the Infantry Officer Advanced Course, Ranger School, and the United States Army War College, and he holds a master's in civil engineering from the University of Illinois.

Endnote

¹ “Who We Are,” U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, “The United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) is made up of approximately 34,600 civilian and 650 military members.” <<http://www.usace.army.mil/who/>> (accessed on 7 April 2008).

