

Postcards from Iraq

Living in Iraq-a New Yorker's Perspective

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I've spent over three years in Central Iraq – about half in Baghdad, the other half, in Al Anbar Province. Although I was born in Manhattan, besides living in New York City, I have also lived many years on Long Island, Upstate New York, and elsewhere in the country and the world. New York is a far cry from Iraq but there are dangers there too which provide some interesting parallels at times.

While Iraq is still a dangerous place, there are no more incoming rockets or mortars these days and life for USACE folks has gotten quite comfortable, relatively speaking. I have had the opportunity to associate with Iraqi citizens, Iraqi professionals, Iraqi workers, Iraqi sheikhs, as well as other foreign nationals from many countries in the same professions. In the Central District (GRC), Gulf Region Division, Contracting Office, we routinely work with all U.S. military services, many governmental organizations and contractors from around the world.

Like New York, which is a microcosm of many cultures in a large multicultural, multiethnic city, here in Iraq, on a vastly different level, you get the opportunity to work with, socialize with, and yes, eat with, an enormous variety of people. There is a lot of hard work, yes, frustration, yes, but the camaraderie, and most of all, the satisfaction that you directly impacted the lives of many people, is well worth it in the long run. Work in Iraq is both rewarding and stressful; unlike anything else I have ever done. There have been numerous changes and life has gotten better for many Iraqis in many ways.

I must tell you that GRC's efforts contributed greatly to showing the Iraqi people that we were here not only to build prisons, which is what Al Qaida told Iraqis we were doing, but we build schools, medical facilities, and bring "clean drinking water" to villages residing only a few HUNDRED meters from the Euphrates River for the first time in their history! We showed Iraqis, by example, that we were trying to help them and that was worth more than bullets and bombs. It took many setbacks and terrible moments, but it slowly turned.

You may have heard of Sheikh Sattar Abu Risha being killed after meeting with President Bush last year. When he started the "Awakening Movement" with the Sunni Tribes in Al Anbar, he had been working with USACE and the Marines for over a year. As dangerous as it was, he had been to our GRC Area Office several times to meet with us. Back then, Al Anbar, Ramadi and Fallujah were some of the most dangerous places in Iraq.

During the "SURGE," the "Awakening Movement" contributed greatly to the security efforts of our troops against Al Qaida and, unfortunately, much of that was unreported. Many of USACE's good works were also unreported in the American and foreign media.

USACE's early beginnings of setting goodwill examples greatly contributed to local tribes changing their opinions of America's intentions. When foreign fighters from Al Qaida tried to reverse that through brutal methods against Iraqis, men like Sheik Sattar pulled the tribes together and welcomed our efforts to improve the security of our projects. They welcomed GRC/USACE seminars and initiatives to improve their Province. You have to experience the faces of appreciative Iraqis, especially the children, to understand that.

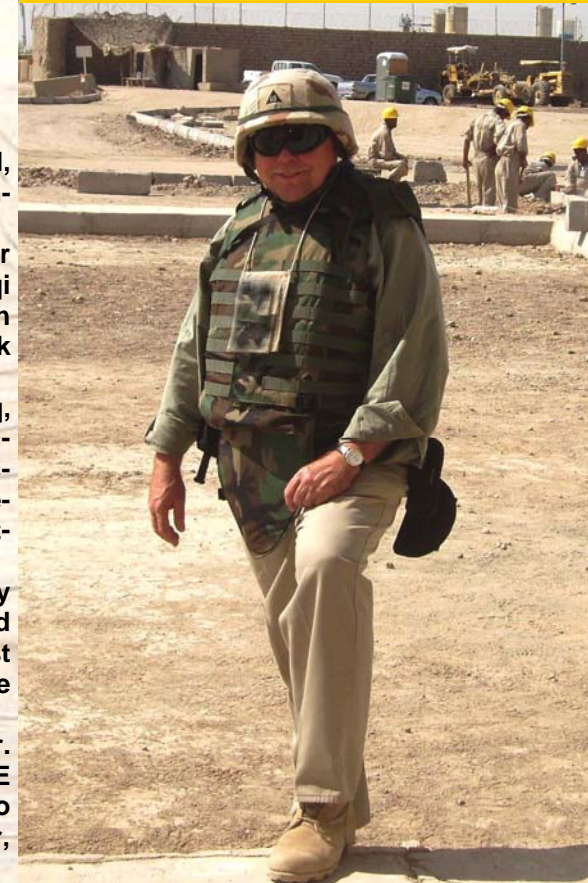
I've no doubt there are others who are both excited and a bit apprehensive about a possible deployment here, but let me assure you, you will rise to the occasion.

Good Luck to you! Daniel Cahill.

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



Dan Cahill visits a project site in Baghdad.



Dan confers with Sheikh Sattar and an Iraqi engineer during a contracting conference in Ramadi.