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Corps of Engineers' Females Lead District in Iraq To Success

By Norris Jones
Gulf Region Division Central District



(Left to right) Derya Smith, Sherry Gaylor, Janet Faust, and Col. Debra Lewis walk between buildings at the Gulf Region Division Central District headquarters on Victory Base Complex in Baghdad. (USACE photo)

CAMP VICTORY, Iraq – Overseeing one of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' busiest Districts are four female leaders in the Gulf Region Central district (GRC), who manage the construction of essential service projects benefiting Iraqis in Baghdad and the Al Anbar Province in Iraq.

Led by District Engineer, Col. Debra Lewis, GRC is responsible for overseeing nearly 400 active projects valued at more than \$1.2 billion. She is assisted by Deputy District Program Manager Derya

Smith, Chief of Contracting Sherry Gaylor and Chief of Resource Management Janet Faust, who oversees the district's programs that are renovating hospitals, building schools, repairing sewer lift stations, paving roads, installing new water and sewer lines, constructing courthouses, electric distribution networks and many more critical components of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers mission to rebuild Iraq.

"In Fallujah, one of our other key cities, we're managing \$80 million in contracts to

put in that community's first-ever wastewater treatment plant and collection system. Residents there are currently using septic tanks with raw sewage running in the streets and into the Euphrates River," said Lewis. "We've also got \$57 million in contracts to upgrade its electrical network including new substations, more than 45,000 utility poles, and 2,400 kilometers of cable. We're building four new primary healthcare centers there each capable of providing medical care to 150 patients daily."

During Lewis' one year in command the district has closed out more than 500 projects valued at more than \$650 million.

These women are in charge of a staff of 170 U.S. military and civilian personnel, as well as more than 100 Iraqi associates. Most of the local nationals are engineers, who serve as quality assurance representatives visiting the various projects every day to ensure the contractors are providing quality construction in a safe manner.

"I volunteered because I wanted to be part of this historic undertaking," explains Smith. "These projects are having a positive impact on people's lives. Iraq is, in large part, an engineers' war and we're making a difference. Those Iraqis on our staff are proud to be a part of this mission. They're building a future for their children and grandchildren," she continued. "Life is all about change and learning. That's the best part of this job – interacting with some very dedicated individuals from throughout the world."

Gaylor, who supervises a staff of 10 contract specialists, says "Iraq has proved to be the most challenging assignment but also the most rewarding."

She speaks from experience as this is her 11th deployment in an expeditionary environment, including tours to Afghanistan, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Bosnia.

One of her main priorities is customer service ensuring — all contracting actions

have been thoroughly coordinated with all interested parties, including the U.S. military, the U.S. Department of State, the Iraqi Ministries, local Iraqi city officials and the contractors themselves.

To encourage more local participation in the bidding process, Gaylor and her staff have hosted one-day workshops in Ramadi, Fallujah, Mahmudiyah and Baghdad to explain to Iraqi construction firms what a "winning proposal" is all about including the various steps involved from the statement of work and advertisement, to the receiving of proposals and awarding the contract. Despite her demanding job, Gaylor always tries to greet people with a smile and upbeat attitude.

Faust says "one of the most important responsibilities is ensuring the Iraqi contractors get paid." She and her staff of six professionals are involved in finance, accounting and budget activities, including workload analysis, project closeouts, manning document reconciliations, fund type process issues, contracting and program management issues.

"I will remember my time in Iraq as a two-year educational journey working alongside some exceptional team members," Faust said. "You can't learn in 10 years in a stateside District what you learn here in one," she added. "Our mission here is an awesome challenge. We work alongside Iraqis every day on a noble mission of improving their infrastructure."

Lewis is the first female district engineer USACE has assigned to a war zone command. She's a woman of many firsts — a member of the first class of women to graduate from West Point in 1980. Her female colleagues at GRC had high praise for her leadership. They say she is one of the hardest working individuals they've ever met, handles her responsibilities with definite grace, and ensures that throughout her command everyone is treated with dignity and respect.

"It's an honor to serve as GRC's commander," Lewis said. "I feel blessed to be working directly with the people of Iraq. I have seen many examples where there is clear initiative, high standards, and a sincere desire to take responsibility and ownership of getting things done. The Iraqis working as a part of our GRC team and those I meet throughout Baghdad and Al Anbar Province are very inspiring and possess great courage, as do the many people from around the world who are here to help the Iraqis build a better future," she continued. "While the only thing constant here seems to be change, one thing that doesn't change is the realization that getting things done is 90-95% interpersonal relationships and communication, with the remainder being the content or technical skills we bring to the table."

Lewis enjoys collecting quotes and one of her favorite is Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe who said, "Treat people as if they were what they ought to be and you will

help them become what they are capable of becoming."

Gulf Region Central's four female leaders have more than a half-century combined experience with the U.S. Army. They lead a team dedicated to making a difference for the people of Iraq today and for future generations.

Editor's note: Janet Faust deployed from USACE's Baltimore District, Sherry Gaylor from USACE's Wilmington District, Col. Lewis from USACE's Seattle District were she was the District Engineer, and Derya Smith was the Program Manager for the U.S. Army Contingency Construction Program at the Assistant Chief of Staff for Installation Management (ACSIM) located in the Pentagon, Arlington, Va.

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