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## *Corps of Engineers personnel face heavy but gratifying workload in Iraq*

By John Connor  
Gulf Region South district



From left, Gulf Region South Commander Col. Steve Hill listens to questions from newcomers, Nick Evanco, Jarrod Bonnick, Stephen Pitts and Dannielle Billings at an orientation briefing for new employees. (USACE photo by John Connor)

**TALLIL**, Iraq – Part of the rhythm at the headquarters of the Gulf Region South district of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers revolves around the relentless introduction and exodus of personnel.

Orientation sessions for new employees are common, as are goodbyes for people heading home. And incoming and

departing personnel share center stage when they're welcomed and bid adieu at frequent "hail and farewell" ceremonies.

Among the many things facing new arrivals is lots of work.

"We've got a \$1 billion program," Col. Steve Hill, commander of GRS, told newcomers at a recent orientation ses-

sion. He said there are 230 or so projects now under way in GRS, which covers nine provinces in southern Iraq. The projects include hospitals, schools, healthcare centers, water treatment plants and units, and power facilities.

This workload is being handled by approximately 100 people, 30 military and 70 civilian, the colonel said. He said tasks of comparable magnitude would be undertaken by 350 to 400 people at a Corps of Engineers district back in the U.S. He said he would like to add about 25 people on the civilian side to deepen the district's expertise in key areas of project management and engineering.

Patricia Biltoft, the S-1 - administrative officer for GRS, said people come and go in cycles determined in part by familiar stateside benchmarks such as summer vacations, graduations, holidays, as well as by personal economic decisions. "Now that the holiday season is approaching, our new employees often delay their report date until January," she said. "After the New Year, incoming personnel will increase dramatically when the personnel world gets back in gear after the holiday season."

Saying that taking care of people in the Iraq operating theater is more involved than is typically the case in the personnel field, Biltoft said that "we do everything humanly possible and sometimes even perform miracles to take care of people and their transition from the CONUS theater to Gulf Region Division, Gulf Region South."

Col. Hill said the heavy turnover of personnel reinforces the need for sound systems. "When you have people changing over all the time, you need to have

systems you can hand over to new people." These include systems for tracking contracts, projects, awards and evaluations, and, of course, systems to track incoming and outgoing personnel and prospective employees.

He said the unique challenges faced by the Corps of Engineers in Iraq constitute "a live classroom environment" that provides more and broader learning opportunities than he encountered in any classroom--"even some of my best engineering classes when I was at West Point."

Col. Hill said GRS team, which currently is aided by about 250 private security contractors and 125 or so Iraqis, is "definitely stretched." But he said the team compensates in part by working longer days and focusing 110 percent on the mission of delivering quality projects while building governance among the Iraqi people and providing jobs and money for the local economy.

It is not uncommon for people to return to the U.S. and then want to come back to Iraq before very long because the work pace at home is too slow, according to some veterans of multiple Iraq tours.

"Building a team is tough in any environment," Col. Hill said. "In Iraq, it is especially difficult--but as rewarding as any place I've been. The opportunity to build quality projects is always a highlight. But to gain satisfaction by seeing a product built while assisting the Iraqis is clearly a higher level of success."

Col. Hill told the new GRS arrivals that people go home tired and stretched but glad to have been part of history.

**Note:** John Connor is a public affairs officer with the Gulf Region South district, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Iraq. For more email requests to [CEGRD.PAO@tac01.usace.army.mil](mailto:CEGRD.PAO@tac01.usace.army.mil) or visit [www.grd.usace.army.mil](http://www.grd.usace.army.mil).