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A jewel in the crown of Basrah

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Workers take a lunch break while others work at the Basrah Children's Hospital, a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers project in Basrah province. (USACE photo by Mohammed Aliwi)

BASRAH, Iraq--The Basrah Children's Hospital project can get its hooks into people.

Take Lt. Col. Kenneth McDonald, an Area Deputy Commander in the Gulf Region Division of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

He leads the Basrah Area Office in the Southern District where part of his job is overseeing the Basrah Children's Hospital project--one of the highest profile, most complex and potentially most rewarding projects undertaken by USACE in its four years in Iraq. He extended his tour in Iraq to two years from one to help bring the project to a successful conclusion.

"Where else as an Engineer would you want to be?" asked McDonald, who taught in the Civil and Mechanical Engineering Department at West Point before coming to Iraq in 2006.

The hospital is designed and being constructed as a 94-bed pediatric tertiary care referral hospital with a focus on pediatric oncology. Intended to support the population of southern Iraq, including Basrah, the country's second largest city, the facility also will be a training center capable of improving and expanding the training of health professionals throughout Iraq.

In a very real sense, the project is

about children. "Sick kids," said McDonald, citing the grim statistic that 15 out of 100 children in southern Iraq die before the age of five. Childhood cancers are 8-10 times more common in Iraq than in the West.

Arthur Bennett, the USACE project manager for the hospital, told colleagues at home in a message from Iraq not long ago that "our customer for the project is the Iraqi government, but I really see it as the children." First Lady Laura Bush, a leading supporter of the hospital, said that "every country's success depends upon the health and well-being of its children."

The imperative of caring for children is widely shared across the Basrah community. There were rumors in the city in 2006 that the hospital job site was a CIA headquarters. And the word was out on the street that an attack was imminent. But local religious leaders of several faiths and citizens rallied and Iraqi flags were flown and no attack came then or later--even when British troops battled militants in close proximity to the hospital.

"The mothers and wives leverage real power," said McDonald in recounting how popular sentiment has rallied behind and protected the project. "Not once has the hospital ever been attacked."

McDonald arrived in Basrah just as the hospital project was being revived after stalling out. USACE was selected to lead the effort to get the project restarted and completed. He was greeted on the way in by an IED--an improvised explosive device. "My first day--after arriving in Tallil and then driving to Basrah--we were hit, but sustained minimal damage," he recalled. "My first thoughts were 'What in the hell did I get myself into?'"

Basrah has more than its share of indirect fire (IDF) attacks, with more than 1,000 rounds landing on Contingency Operating Base Basrah last summer.



Iraqi laborers hoist plaster equipment to the second floor in one of the buildings of Basrah Children's Hospital. (USACE photo by Mohammed Aliwi)

"The surreal becomes normal," McDonald said of the IDF attacks, which in his time have seen four rounds land directly in Camp Blackadder, the USACE compound in Basrah. He said the attacks have "bonded the team" and that the USACE contingent in Basrah is "very proactive in procedures" to avoid casualties. "No one does not do the drill," he said.

The motto at Camp Blackadder, "Living the Dream," captures the spirit of a team proud of its mission and aware of its circumstances. The slogan can be uttered on occasion with that particular wryness to be found in a combat zone. (Some British soldiers in Basrah have adopted the slogan, which adorned their shirts at a recent 5 kilometer race).

McDonald has no doubt that the hospital will be completed successfully and that it will be "a jewel in the crown of Basrah."

The hospital project is being conducted in conjunction with partners including Project Hope, a nongovernmental organization, and the United Nations Development Program, which is managing a \$21.75 million contribution by the government of Spain. The project will have state-of-the-art equipment. U.S. funded construction is 77 percent complete.

Before extending his tour, McDonald did a lot of soul searching. He concluded with respect to the hospital job that "something as significant as this comes only once a lifetime."

McDonald consulted his family. "What do you think I should do," he asked his wife, Col. Deborah McDonald, a West Point classmate who is the director of Admissions at the United States Military Academy, and their two children, Anna, 19, and Joshua, 14. Both children are following in their parents' footsteps. Anna has a four year Reserve Officer Training Corps scholarship at Seton Hall University and Joshua is in the junior ROTC program at his high school.

"We are all very proud of Kenny," his wife said. "With pride comes a sense of accomplishment and commitment. Certainly Kenny has shown that to us and to the men and women he works with." She said her husband sent back a video of the hospital project and that "Everyone saw it," including her daughter's ROTC detachment. "It was a wonderful message to show our future officer corps--and helped focus their minds on what their futures might hold."

She added, "It has been a family commitment--and a struggle at times. We completely support Kenny in his efforts and are thankful that he not only has the expertise but the drive to provide this critical support to such a worthy project. We will, however, be very ecstatic when he is home for good. As with any long-term deployment, it is tough on both the deployed and those at home. We know that he will return with a lasting legacy of not only a family who is immensely proud of him--but the knowledge that he stayed committed to the project through its completion."

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