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Reflecting on southern Iraq tour

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Lt. Col. McMahan with Ted York (center), site manager for Iskan Thermal Plant (electricity generation) and Brigadier C. L. Wilks, Royal Army, Director of Energy Operations, Energy Fusion Cell. (USACE photo)

Reflecting on his tour of duty in Iraq with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Lt. Col. Gregory McMahan quickly got around to the children.

"Seeing children walking from school in their clean clothes with bags full of books made me happy for them and the future of this exciting country," he said. "Knowing they have better buildings suitable for learning and growing, and that we

helped make that possible, made my tour worthwhile."

McMahan, officer-in-charge of the Gulf Region Division's Forat Area Office, presided over many projects during his nearly completed one-year deployment to Iraq, including a multi-faceted effort to rehabilitate a vocational-technical school in Iskandariyah in Babil Province.



Lt. Col. McMahan briefs Maj. Gen. Lynch on projects at Iskandariyah Vo-Tech. (USACE photo)

The vo-tech project is a top reconstruction priority of Maj. Gen. Rick Lynch, commanding general of the 3rd Infantry Division. When work started on the project in September 2007, there were fewer than 100 students attending classes. Now, after improvements including upgrading water, sewer and electrical systems, the number of students is up to 1,500. They are learning such trades as computer operations and maintenance, sewing, hair care, welding, auto mechanics and body work, carpentry, and residential electrician.

A new job for which a contract just was awarded will renovate dormitories at the school to allow students from outside the immediate area to attend classes and learn new skills.

Among the many GRD projects undertaken in McMahan's area during his soon to be completed tour are construction of a mechanical engineering building at Kufa University in the historic religious city of Najaf at a cost of about \$2.8 million and

new maternity hospital in Mussayyib to replace a deteriorating facility there. The hospital project will cost about \$5.6 million.

Upwards of 86 projects, including roads, schools, electricity projects, water units, and primary health care clinics, have been completed in the Forat Area over the past year, valued collectively at about \$165 million.

"On many occasions, I had the opportunity to travel by helicopter at night," McMahan said. "To see the lights on in the cities in the Forat Area was exciting. True, the electricity was not on all the time, every day, but more power is being provided to the citizens due to the numerous projects to build and refurbish power transmission and distribution lines and substations."

The Forat Area, known throughout Iraq as the "Land between the rivers," encompasses the five provinces of Babil, Kar-

bala, Najaf, Qadisiyah, and Wassit. The Forat Office headed by McMahan is responsible for more than half the nine southern Iraq provinces where the Gulf Region South district does reconstruction work and accounts for more than a quarter of all Iraq provinces. The Office has three remote resident offices, at Camp Delta, Camp Echo and at the Regional Embassy Office at Hilla.

While numbers varied over the year, this sprawling area currently is staffed for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers with about 13 civilians and 10 military personnel, mostly mobilized reservists. And about 50 Iraqi engineers form an integral part of the USACE team in the Forat Area.

McMahan, a Mississippi native who hails from Hattiesburg, is a career reservist with nearly 27 years of service. He holds a mechanical engineer degree from Mississippi State University and worked as a design and manufacturing engineer in civilian life. He has been on active duty since April 2003, and during his fourth year applied for the Call to Active Duty program for Regular Army and was selected. His

current USACE tour is his first Regular Army assignment and his second deployment in less than three years. His first deployment was in Kuwait for six months.

"I feel that each deployment and all my time and active duty has taught me lessons that will be valuable throughout my career, both on the military and civilian side," he said. "Though I have not been continually deployed, I have spent considerable time here and expect several more short tours of four to six months over the next two to three years."

McMahan said the impact on his family has not been as hard as they all expected. He said his wife Paula and children William and Katie "are behind me completely" and "are very strong and independent, capable of making decisions and keeping the household operational without me present." He said modern technology makes it so easy to communicate that many things can be handled long distance with ease. He noted that, in addition speaking regularly with his wife and children, he talks to his parents and grandmothers fairly often.



McMahan enjoys lunch with workers at the MRAP fielding site project [USACE Photo]

McMahan said he was both excited and nervous when he learned in early July a year ago that he was being assigned to head the Forat Area Office. But he said the job of managing the rebuilding of infrastructure throughout the large area was made easier by the top-notch military-civilian team he was fortunate enough to work with.

On the military side, he said, personnel from the 34th Engineer Brigade and 416th Engineer Command were on board when he arrived a year ago. "These citizen soldiers performed admirably as resident engineers, operations officers and non-commissioned officers in charge," he said. "They each provided their own expertise and flavor to their respective offices and led their own teams to success."

In March of 2008, the 416th ENCOM provided another round of "superb officers and NCOs to provide leadership and experience to the efforts," he related.

McMahan also said he benefitted greatly from the tutelage of his boss, Col. Stephen Hill, the GRS commander. "Having Col. Hill for a commander and mentor was like taking graduate courses in engineering, business management, human resources and political science all at the same time," he said. "My awareness of small issues and how to deal with them before they became large issues improved dramatically."

McMahan added: "Having a commander who understands and expects the utmost from each person on his staff made me a better leader than I could have imagined. It wasn't easy being on the receiving end, but now that I look back, I understand the reasoning and appreciate the pains I went through to learn such valuable lessons."

The Mississippian said life on a forward operating base is interesting and exciting. "The rumble of tracks and trucks, the report of our own artillery and the frequent

helicopters flying overhead add to the music of songbirds and the chatter of Soldiers," McMahan said of Kalsu. At the same time, he said, there's chow four times a day (if you want to stay up until midnight), clean laundry, plenty of activities including a fishing pond and driving range and all the books you could possibly read-if only there was time.

"Weather plays an important part in our mission planning and re-planning," McMahan said. "Rain creates mud so thick it is plowed like snow. Dust storms block out the sun and coat everything with a fine powder. Site visit missions are scheduled and changed, creating a domino effect with shuffling requirements to put eyes on critical construction phases.

And, McMahan said, "despite all our positive efforts and improvements, this is still a dangerous area," with militants of various stripes intent on keeping the conflict stirred up and causing harm to coalition forces and those who support them. During his tour, he said, "one of our camps received IDF (indirect fire) nearly every day over four months," without incurring any casualties. He did recall a loss that "will always be on my mind and in my heart"--the death of an Aegis security teammate from a roadside bomb attack while traveling to a remote camp.

As he prepares to move on to his next assignment as Chief of Plans for C-7, Third Army, Ft. McPherson, Ga., McMahan said, "I have thoroughly enjoyed my tour in Iraq." Most memorable, he said, are the small affairs, such as tea with workers at construction sites or perhaps a lunch of rice, braised beef and fresh vegetables, followed by a handful of sweet dried dates for desert.

Note: John Connor is formerly Public Affairs Officer with the Gulf Region South district, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Iraq. For more information, email requests to CEGRD.PAO@usace.army.mil. For more information on the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Iraq, visit www.grd.usace.army.mil