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Community Relations



Engineers teach Iraqis construction, build 'Village of Hope'

By Pfc. Joshua Hutcheson

September 24, 2003

MOSUL, Iraq (Army News Service, Sept. 24, 2003) -- National Guard engineers are building the first of five "House of Hope" projects. Along the way, they're teaching former Iraqi soldiers construction skills they can use to find new jobs.

Soldiers of the 52nd Engineer Company -- an Oregon Army National Guard unit attached to the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) -- believe in the adage "It's better to teach a man to fish and feed him for life," or in this case teach him to build a home and house him for life.

Under the House of Hope project, the former soldiers initially planned to build a house for a family of displaced locals.

But the project quickly grew in size, blossoming into the Village of Hope, where 100 homes are scheduled to be built for 800 people, said Maj. Christopher Lestochi, operations officer, 326th Engineer Battalion, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault).

With new skills in masonry, carpentry, electricity, plumbing and other skills used in building, the ex-soldiers will be useful in rebuilding Iraq, said division officials.

The Village of Hope will replace an abandoned Iraqi military school in the southern part of the city of Mosul that currently houses at least 200 displaced families living in gutted, half collapsed buildings.

The first house built was a prototype three-bedroom house built by the engineers and Kurdish contractors, said 101st division officials. That house will be the basis of all



Former Iraqi soldiers build homes for displaced locals and hone their new construction skills taught to them by the 52nd Engineer Company, attached to the 101st Airborne Division. It's all part of Village of Hope, a project where ex-Iraqi soldiers will build 100 homes and acquire marketable skills.

PFC Joshua Hutcheson

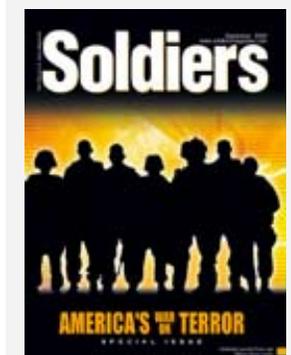
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other homes.

Though some might have larger or smaller rooms, they'll all look like the prototype, said Sgt. Charles Verbrugge, squad leader, Bravo Company, 52nd Eng. Co.

The construction is to be done under a three-phase process. In the first phase the American engineers taught the Iraqis basic construction skills. The U.S. engineers also had to learn how building is done in the Middle East. The materials and techniques used in Iraq differ from the wood homes the engineers are used to building in Oregon, Verbrugge said.

In the second phase the engineers will supervise the former soldiers as they construct the 100 homes. The prototype was built in a little over a month and a half. The process should speed up as people hone their skills, Verbrugge said.

"We're teaching them how to build and as we go along it should go faster and faster," he said.

The third phase, the engineers will leave all of the work to the Iraqis. At this point the Iraqi laborers will train their fellow countrymen in construction techniques.

So far, 30 Iraqis are building the village. With proper funding, another 30 people could be hired, eventually leading to the formation of an independent Iraqi construction company, Lestochi said.

The project has been bankrolled by the division's Commander's Emergency Relief Project fund. But that fund might soon dry up, leaving the engineers looking for a new source of money. They have set up meetings with non-governmental organizations to find more funding, Lestochi said.

If funding continues, the project is scheduled to be completed by May.

"This exceeds what we thought we'd do, we had no idea what engineers would be doing (in Mosul)," Verbrugge said. "Being involved with this is great."

(Editor's note: Spc. Joshua Hutcheson is a journalist with the 101st Airborne Divisions Public Affairs Office in Iraq.)

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