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Dispatch from Baghdad

by Dr. Eugene Stakhiv

August 2003, Baghdad--These are the days in August the Iraqis call "the furnace." A hot wind swirls dust and searing plumes of 122°F heat around the burned out hulk of what was once the Ministry of Irrigation and the former Iraqi Intelligence Service.

It is readily apparent what floors



The headquarters building of the Iraqi Ministry of Irrigation, later renamed the Ministry of Water Resources, was burned and looted.

belonged to which agency. The looting of the building began after the Intelligence officials burned their records starting on the fourth floor and up. There was a prison in the basement, and a block of houses in the back with bars on their windows. Prisoners were detained and tortured in those buildings, and we were preparing to paint and paper over the past.

"Stretch" Daniels from NY District is patiently describing the sequence of reconstruction activities to two separate Iraqi contractors who show up on the same day, after two months of inactivity. One has a contract from the USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development) to work on the first three floors, the other has money from Ambassador Bremer's ministry reconstruction program. The timing is bad, but the reconstruction of Iraq and its Ministries must begin.

This scene is being replayed many times over, in numerous ministries, schools, hospitals and power plants around Iraq. And just about everywhere where there is construction in Iraq, the Corps is there. In my case, though, the Corps is not only managing the reconstruction of the Ministry building, but we are "running" the Ministry.

Back in April, when MAJ Regan

McDonald (Deputy District Engineer, Detroit District) met with Ministry of Irrigation representatives, the Corps was already involved in the effort to "stand up" the Ministry as part of the overall Coalition effort termed ORHA (Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance) under the leadership of General Jay Garner. About the same time, three senior Corps managers were completing their "basic training" at Fort Benning before being deployed to Kuwait and then on to Baghdad. Pete Gibson (NWD) was to take charge of the Electricity Commission; Dan Hitchings (MVD), the Ministry of Housing and Construction, and I, the Ministry of Irrigation. Steve Browning (SPD) was already in Baghdad running three different Ministries under conditions unimaginable to most viewers of events in the U.S.

As it turned out, many of the senior advisors to Iraq's 24 ministries were former and current Ambassadors, retired Generals, SESs from various agencies and young White House "policy wonks." During my four months in Baghdad, it became clear that the Corps team – at all levels of engagement, both military and civilian – operated the most effectively in getting their respective programs off the ground, standing up the Ministries, and restor- ➤

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vides company names, contact information, and how to order equipment for specific missions. They also provide details allowing the FEST to put together funding requests and contracting details so others can get the work done, including the Iraqis. Reed said they can answer most requests, but call upon experts from within the Corps or other military agencies for expertise they don't readily have.

Raney, Reed, and Picard all agree the

tempo of such operations and the ability to help those on the front make the job very exciting.

"It's knowing there are limitless challenges facing the US forces in Iraq," Picard said, "and by taking on projects and turning them around quickly, we are working to make a positive difference in the conditions for Americans and Iraqis."

And the biggest challenge?

"Predicting the future," Picard said.

"Being able to tell our next group exactly what they will be involved in and what to

expect. Knowing what their mission is will help them prepare mentally for their upcoming service."

Although the future may be unpredictable, one thing is for certain, whatever the problem, wherever the place, their family, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, will be there to help.

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ing basic services to the public.

It was very difficult for all the Ministries. The looting and pillaging of Iraq's public assets was astronomical. Everything was burned, stolen or damaged. We recently estimated that the Ministry of Irrigation, alone, lost over \$100 million worth of assets.

During the first six weeks, Ministry meetings were typically held in looted buildings stripped of furniture, with no windows or doors. There were no communications systems--no maps, reports, files, or records. We were all literally starting from ground zero, while trying to ensure that the Mosul Dam did not fail; the electric power grid was repaired; the water for the irrigation season flowed through the proper gates and channels; and the 275 pumping stations operated to lift water onto the fields, farms and into municipal water intakes.

Further, the Baghdad Zoo and Park had no pumps or water – everything was stripped, and the Corps pitched in to fix it. The trick was to do it with hardly any money.

For the first three months, Saddam's palace was our home and our office. We were packed like sardines in our "offices" with no running water and toilets outside the building! We slept on the second floor, each day getting hotter and hotter.

Every day was a challenge just getting to the Ministry offices, with all the security precautions that were required, yet we never missed a day in four months. Despite the hardships, we managed to get our Corps Dam Safety Assessment team to visit 20 sites all over northern Iraq in late May. They provided the Ministry of Irrigation a very valuable report that was needed for the budget justification for immediate dam safety repairs. A USAID Marsh Assessment Team followed in June, traveling all over southern Iraq. That effort gave the Ministry the impetus to get started with its Environmental Analysis Center and begin studying 10 potential restoration sites.

Through it all, we underwent constant turmoil. Inside the palace, there were



The Ministry of Water Resources Advisory Team: Dr. Eugene Stakhiv (IWR), "Stretch" Daniels (NAN), and MAJ Regan McDonald (LRE).

weekly reorganizations and management changes as new people came in and new directives from Washington were enacted. "DeBaathification" came with Ambassador Bremer, and it caused a considerable stir. It was difficult enough for me to run an empty shell of an agency with the shadows of the past regime filling the empty halls of the 10 state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and 5 Commissions that comprised the Ministry. But who would be left now? How would I decide whom to choose from among unfamiliar candidates with checkered pasts? In the end, I conducted a purge, reducing the Ministry of Irrigation from 20 Directors General (SES-level) down to 6.

Several months later, MAJ McDonald and SSGT Todd Finley (489th Engineer Battalion) completed the training of 350 new guards for a Ministry security force. They were part of the rejuvenation of the Ministry, which was moving forward rapidly, spurred by the success of a \$20 million, 100,000-person Jobs Program to manually clean 6,000 kilometers of irrigation channels and drainage ditches in southern Iraq. Organizing unskilled, unemployed laborers

during a period when each district office was still empty and bearing the scars of recent looting was a huge challenge. But by mid-August, the total employed workers surpassed 100,000 – a phenomenal achievement under the circumstances – and many more Iraqis were demanding jobs.

Yet there would be more to our success. Four marsh restoration projects were initiated as part of the FY03 budget, which also included \$5 million for dam safety repairs and \$13 million for completion of 13 ongoing construction projects. There was nearly \$20 million additional assistance from two key organizations, FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) and USAID for training, modeling, repairing pumping stations and buying equipment for a hydro-meteorological network for the renamed Ministry of Water Resources (MoWR).

Now it is August and we are in the midst of the MoWR's weekly staff meeting in the borrowed office space of a modern, massive office building belonging to the Ministry of Oil. It would look like a typical meeting of 25 top executives, were it not for the fact that we are discussing execution of the FY03 budget; preparation of



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the FY04 budget; staffing new Hydrologic and Environmental Analysis Centers; organizing teams for studying the 10 potential marsh restoration sites, and moving the contracts for the 4 identified eco-restoration sites.

Ambassador Bremer's Jobs Program is the subject of discussion as well, since the MoWR is the only Ministry successfully employing so many unskilled workers. There is excitement, anticipation and some anxiety, since the 10 State Owned Enterprises (design and construction companies) belonging to the Ministry are concerned about privatization that is planned to begin on January 1. (Note: Subsequently, Ambassador Bremer deferred the implementation date for the Iraqi Governing Council.) The Interim Minister, Mohammed Dharey Al-Shybley, was a businessman and former Director General of a well-drilling SOE. He is exhorting his colleagues to take advantage of this period when there will be much need for construction and generous amounts of foreign assistance, to break away from the past, and to move to the future.

Soon I will be returning to the U.S. In the short span of four months, I have watched MoWR transform from a disoriented and demoralized workforce with no



Dr. Eugene Stakhiv meets with the Sheiks during a visit to the marshes.

offices to work in, to one with a vibrant future and great hopes for a revitalized democratic government. I think of the hundreds of thousands of Americans and Coalition partners who contributed to that transformation – every soldier who stood for hours in the broiling sun protecting the dams, barrages and government buildings, along with every Corps employee who selflessly volunteered to give a helping hand when it was most needed. I realize that the Corps has also found a new friend in

MoWR as an institution and in its people.

But the story doesn't end here, for I know there will be continuous contacts with Corps technical specialists over the next few years. Iraq has the potential of becoming the "California of the Middle East," and the Corps is helping MoWR to achieve that goal.

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2003 USACE Military Engineer of the Year

MAJ Regan P. McDonald is the USACE Military Engineer of the Year. He was also chosen as one of the top 10 candidates for the Federal Engineer of the Year.

In February 2003, he was deployed to Kuwait as an infrastructure reconstruction planner for post hostilities and went on to Baghdad, Iraq, immediately after the fall of the regime to provide emergency technical assistance to the Ministry of Water Resources. He served on the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) Advisory Team to the Iraqi Ministry of Water Resources



MAJ Regan P. McDonald

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MAJ McDonald is the Deputy Commander of the Detroit District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. As Chief of Staff, he supervises a diverse administrative and support staff making significant improvements in organization and efficiency. His responsibilities include oversight of an Area Office in Western Michigan, and supervision of the Information Management, Public Affairs, Logistics, Safety, Human Resources, and Equal Opportunity offices and interfacing with numerous local, State, Federal, and Canadian officials including U.S. Congressmen and Senators. **PWD**