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Honolulu District GIS Analyst: Long Days in Afghanistan Assisting Those in the Field

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By Sarah H. Cox, Honolulu District Public Affairs

(FORT SHAFTER, HI - NR-38-06) For Honolulu District Real Estate Geographer Josette Pullen the work day in Kabul, Afghanistan begins at 7 a.m. and usually ends around 8 or 9 p.m.

Pullen, who deployed in July for a four-month tour to support the Afghanistan Engineer District (AED) and the Global War on Terror (GWOT), spends around 12 hours a day developing infrastructure maps and databases to help the engineers in the field. In spite of the long days, she says she loves her work in Afghanistan.

“Being able to somehow support the people out in the field, to make their jobs easier, that’s what I came here to accomplish,” Pullen said.

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According to Pullen making a difference and having a part of the GWOT is a positive life-changing experience. “Deploying to a war torn country-- in a totally different culture and environment, is an unforgettable life experience,” Pullen said.

One of the highlights of her deployment has been to work closely with the local nationals. She said she spends what little free time she has swapping stories with her new friends. She is continually fascinated by the cultural differences and similarities.

Before arriving in Kabul, Pullen said she had a good idea of what to expect. This is her second deployment in support of the GWOT. Three years ago, Pullen spent four months serving in Iraq.

“Ever since I deployed to Iraq in 2003, I had wanted to go back, so when AED had an open position, I took the opportunity,” Pullen said.

One of her most recent assignments is developing a GIS/Access database to capture the Power Utility Data.

GIS is a collection of computer hardware, software and geographic data which simplifies cumbersome data and enables users to present a visual representation for analysis. Ultimately, GIS leads to better understanding and decision making in the field.

For example, the power utility infrastructure database Pullen is helping to create will allow engineers and planners to sit down together and quickly spot any problem areas and brainstorm for solutions.

Pullen’s GIS team includes two other GIS analysts, one a contractor and an Afghan national. She says being a part of something as monumental as the GWOT gives her a rewarding sense of achievement.

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“Years from now when I’m older, I can look back and say ‘Yes, I was there, I did that’,”

Pullen said.

AED recently stepped up the pace of reconstruction projects, with more than 600 projects now planned - twice the number for 2005. Many of the projects will rebuild the transportation, water and power infrastructure which was either inadequate or destroyed by the Taliban before Coalition Forces arrived.

Lt. Gen. Carl A. Strock, Commander of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, recently said that many areas which need help are currently inaccessible. The new and more aggressive construction plan will allow engineers to begin working in the remote villages sooner. Since terrorist recruitment often begins in the impoverished and isolated provincial areas, making these areas accessible opens avenues of commerce for the villagers and has a direct impact on the GWOT. As villagers experience improvement in their quality of life, they will less likely support the Taliban. The GIS team’s work is an integral part of the plan.

Pullen feels her work in Afghanistan is similar to that in Iraq, but the environment is different.

“I feel safe here,” Pullen said. “But still, you have to be able to roll with the punches. If you can’t, this is probably not an environment you will enjoy.”

Pullen also has advice for those considering deploying in support of GWOT.

“Have an open mind and be patient,” she said.

She also recommends that first-timers sign up for a shorter tour.

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“They can always extend {their tour} while over here; once they’ve experienced it and can make a knowledgeable decision of whether to stay longer.”

In spite of the challenges and long hours, the days supporting the GWOT can be pretty fascinating.

“Meeting people who come from all over the world keeps things interesting,” Pullen said.

Pullen added that she is looking forward to returning to Honolulu in November and working in the district’s Technical Integration Group.

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