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Global War on Terror: Work Gives Life-Changing Experiences

By Maj. Matthew Luzzatto, Chief, Honolulu District Real Estate

(FORT SHAFTER, HI NR 33-08) Maj. Matthew Luzzatto returned in August 2008 from a volunteer tour of duty within USACE's Gulf Region Division in Iraq. Below are his reflections and opinions about his work, duties and spirit of volunteerism to questions posed by Honolulu District Public Affairs.

Why did you volunteer?

There are two main reasons that I volunteered to deploy. First, my previous deployments to Thailand, Kosovo and Afghanistan have been the most rewarding, exciting, memorable and life changing experiences I have ever had the opportunity to participate in during my professional career. Based on this, I knew a deployment to Iraq with USACE would be no different. Second, I had not been deployed in more than four years and I knew it was my turn to help carry some of the load with respect to the Army's and USACE's #1 priority.

What did you hope to accomplish?

I went there with the goal of working my butt off to help USACE and the Army accomplish its mission in Iraq. It didn't matter to me what I would be doing or where - I just wanted to help.

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2-2-2 LUZZATTO

What did you accomplish?

I accomplished my above stated goal and more. I also initiated, planned, organized and donated to a cause taken on by the (USACE) Kirkuk Area Office. This cause included the purchase, assembly and collection of donations for 800 backpacks full of school supplies, which we personally distributed to the children of five schools built by the Kirkuk Area Office.

Did you get a feeling of accomplishment?

Yes, by seeing finished USACE projects in use. One of the many examples I saw and worked on was a water project that brought clean water to 7,000 people. Before our project was complete these people had to gather water for their families from contaminated canals three miles away. When you see the water from such a project beginning to flow directly to these people who so desperately need it and you know you were part of making that happen - you cannot help but feel proud. You know at that point that you have helped save lives and you are improving the lives of thousands of people who have been through more than many of us can even imagine.

How does that make America Safer?

It is simple. The Iraqi people are our greatest allies against the small radical groups who have sworn to destroy America and its allies. By helping the Iraqi people reestablish their infrastructure and support system, we are providing them a satisfactory means to provide and care for their families. With such systems back in place, the Iraqis will be able to return to a state of normalcy and will no longer tolerate the presence of the radical groups and their violent ways. As a result, the groups lose the ability to recruit new members and fade into a state of isolation. I have even seen this myself on a local level.

What was your mission exactly?

I was officially the Deputy Area Officer in Charge, which is a military only position. I managed all operational and movement requirements of the area office. As such I conducted coordinations with military units and our contracted security teams. However, since we were short project engineers I also managed several construction projects as a project engineer.

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3-3-3 LUZZATTO

Where were you and what did you experience / see?

I was based at Forward Operating Base Warrior just outside of Kirkuk in Northern Iraq. While there I got to experience working with people from all over the world. I had the opportunity to learn about a culture that was very new to me. I got to participate in the development and execution of construction projects that built schools, hospitals, courthouses, water systems, power plants and many more facilities which ultimately will help Iraq develop into a nation that can provide and care for its people. I saw a proud, but tired population of Iraqi citizens who were frustrated with the violence caused by the radical groups and who were ready to move on with their lives and I got to experience the gratification of helping them do just that.

What was the work like?

The work was long and at times challenging; however this was balanced by the fact that I was surrounded by a team of individuals, who had volunteered and were working towards a common cause. This makes for a great team experience and helped create bonds with people I will never forget.

What was it like working in a military environment with civilian contractors and Department of the Army civilians?

I was very impressed by the Iraqi engineers we worked with. While many of them faced being targeted by radical groups, they were very proud to do what they were doing. I was impressed to see how committed many of the Iraqi employees were to making their country better. I felt proud in knowing that they were the future of Iraq and that I was responsible for training them. One thing that I was surprised to find about many of the USACE employees was the fact that many of them had been on several USACE deployments or had extended the length of their original commitment. When I asked them why this was, many of them told me that it was a lot more secure, comfortable and rewarding than they had expected. This combined with getting paid almost double what they get at home, they say it made extending easy.

Did the contractors and GS employees pull their weight?

Most everyone did. Like in any office there are some who do more than others.

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4-4-4 LUZZATTO

Did you feel secure, safe?

Yes, very - for several reasons. First, the violence level throughout Iraq is a fraction of what it was a year ago. Second, the Aegis Security Teams USACE hires to manage our security “outside the wire” are the best of the best. There is no other way to describe it, other than you feel like you are the president of the United States with your own personal Secret Service detail. The Aegis team’s whole purpose in life is to keep you safe. Their pride, their careers, and their reputation depend on your safety and they will sacrifice their lives for you in an instant if they need to. As a soldier this was very frustrating for me and my biggest complaint with them would be that they were too cautious, which would sometimes interfere with the mission. During my time there, we conducted more than 700 missions outside the wire. Of those 700 missions, only three were attacked. That comes out to 0.4 percent of the missions. Also none of these attacks resulted in the death or injury of anyone involved. So yes, I felt very safe. In fact I feel less safe commuting to Bldg. 230 through traffic each morning than I did on the missions over there.

What were the best/worst things?

The best things were completing projects and knowing I directly helped thousands of people; working with a group of motivated individuals who all wanted to make a difference; and building relationships with Iraqi people, which I still maintain today. The worst things were dealing with reporters who only wanted to report bad news stories even when we provided them with many good news stories; having to deal with ethnic hatred that still exists between various groups of Iraqis even though it may not be violent; and having to work our way through the very slow and sometimes corrupt Iraqi government.

What was the deployment process like?

While I may be military, I went through a very similar process that the civilians go through. Like any travel, there are many coordinations which must be made and many things you must take care of before you leave home in order to prepare yourself and your family. It’s a lot of work and sometimes it can be frustrating. However, the fact is USACE has been deploying people for so long now that the process has become much more efficient. Finally, there are many people around you who have already deployed who provide a wealth of knowledge and can assist you through the process.

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5-5-5 LUZZATTO

Would you recommend it to others?

Yes, Yes, Yes - for many reasons, but I will stick with what I feel is the most important. As Americans we grow up in a very sheltered and safe environment. While we as a country are not perfect, we are very blessed. Unfortunately many Americans sometimes don't realize how good we have it because we have never seen the alternative. By going on a deployment like this it enhances your life forever because you gain a new perspective on life and a new appreciation for what you have. This combined with the knowledge that you helped thousands of people gives you an experience that you can pass on. Such dedication to a cause through a deployment like this provides you an opportunity to show your children and grandchildren that you lead by example. That the values in which you instill in them about helping others is not just talk.

What advice would you offer to people who are considering deploying?

I would say do it now while you still can. The fact is that things in Iraq are getting better and the Iraqis are becoming more and more self-sufficient in managing their own projects. USACE may not be needed there for much longer and if you are on the fence about deploying and you pass up on this opportunity, then I promise that you will regret it later.

Final thoughts?

If anyone has any questions about deploying or Iraq, please feel free to call me at 438-3201 or send me an email.

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