

Team effort

Measuring up

**Civilians step up to help
combat engineers in Iraq**

By Lou Fioto
North Atlantic Division

Photo by Fritz Ligday

Combat engineers are on the front lines in Iraq trying to stabilize the nation, rebuild its infrastructure, and help it recover from the devastation of a tyrannical regime and the war that toppled it.

Besides working in harsh conditions with the threat of terrorists and saboteurs, they must achieve their objectives with limited resources.

However, they are not alone. Their family, thousands of Corps of Engineers employees worldwide, stand ready to help. By e-mail, conference calls, or video teleconference, most of them help from afar. But some, civilian volunteers from Europe District and around the Corps, are willing to join soldiers on the front lines, working as part of Forward Engineering Support Teams (FESTs).

The FEST evaluates problems and engineering challenges up on the front lines and figures out how to solve the problems and overcome the challenges. Often, the FEST reaches back for help from the Corps work force because some skills, such as the electrical engineer, are the hardest to find.

"We don't have many, and those we do have are very critical to ongoing work, or are ... not interested in deploying. Otherwise we have done very well in matching people to skill requirements," Picard said.

"I've been told by many people here that they are very proud of their office mates who have volunteered to go to Iraq," Picard said. "Many people who would like to go, but cannot, have asked what they can do to help."

Those are the people working by e-mail and teleconference. They come up with the necessities the

Thousands of Corps of Engineers employees worldwide stand ready to help. By e-mail, conference calls, or videoteleconference, most of them help from afar.

These civilian volunteers, experts in engineering, architecture, design, contracting, and human resources, help the combat engineers overcome challenges they face.

"I have been pleasantly surprised and very proud of the great response we've had each time we've reached out for volunteers to deploy," Lt. Col. Michael Picard, former chief, military operations, Europe District said.

Even though there are obvious dangers, Picard said, people, including local nationals, volunteer for these assignments.

One of the most important capabilities Picard looks for in volunteers is a positive mental attitude because that helps them meet the challenges they will face, he said.

Of course, there are some special incentives to volunteer.

North Atlantic Division pays a bonus to volunteers who support Field Force Engineering (FFE). Those who deploy to Iraq receive premium pay entitlements once they have returned, but how much depends on time in theater and their pay grade, he said.

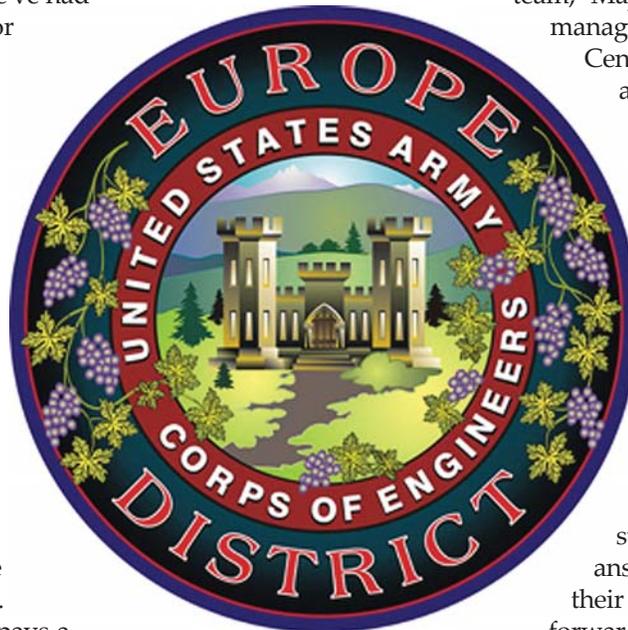
FEST team does not have. They find the answers, prepare the designs, and create the information packages the FEST needs to do its job quickly and efficiently.

"I'm impressed with how much effort Corps employees put into getting answers for the FEST team," Maj. Kenneth "Al" Reed, project manager, International Engineering Center said. "They make getting answers for those on the front lines their priority."

Reed said everyone supporting the FEST appreciates their dedication and sacrifice and ... they go the extra mile to provide world-class support.

"What is really amazing about the reach-back capability is the compounding nature of it," Reed added. "If the FEST can describe their requirements sufficiently, they can get an answer or design back to meet their requirement. For every forward deployed person we have at least 100 people supporting them."

When the FEST needs assistance, it typically sends an e-mail request, Reed said, and the Corps works around the clock to answer it. Simple requests can be completed in eight to 36 hours, he said.



Facing page: Capt. Edward "Ed" Chamberlayne of Europe District, measures structural elements of the 14th of July bridge in Baghdad over the Tigris River to prepare bridge classification. Chamberlayne and other Forward Engineer Support Team members compiled information and communicated frequently with "reach back" technology with the Corps' Europe District staff in Wiesbaden, Germany.



Photo by Fritz Ligday

Shawn Pelowitz (right) hosts a site visit with contractors interested in the construction of a corps distribution center at LSA Anaconda--the first MILCON project to be executed at LSA Anaconda.

For complex projects or challenging problems, forward teams set up video teleconferences on site to receive online guidance from throughout the Corps.

Requests for technical expertise vary, said Jeff Raney, team leader for the Barracks Design and Infrastructure Assessment Support teams, but the most often requested is cost estimating.

"I can't even imagine what could come up that we couldn't support," Raney said. "Most people on the Infrastructure Assessment Support Team already have experience being deployed so they know what the situation is like there and what is required."

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***Lt. Col. Michael Picard
Former chief
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Reed said this reach-back staff provides 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 U.S. 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 Corps of Engineers, will be there to help.



Photo by Fritz Ligday

Capt. Guy Joseph, 248th Combat Heavy Company attached to the 130th Engineer Brigade, along with Capt. Ed Chamberlayne and Fritz Ligday, both of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Europe District, inspect water coagulation tanks in Baghdadi, northwest of Ar Ramadi, Iraq.

Shawn Keefe, an engineer technician and FEST member from Europe district, updates an inventory sheet upon his arrival at LSA Anaconda.

Photo by Fritz Ligday

