

Volunteering for GWOT tours; rewarding, challenging, enriching

By Ron Eschmann, USACE Headquarters

“You quickly realize that you are a part of something that is much, much larger than any individual effort you have done before...” Curt Heckelman, Deputy for Programs and Project Management, Gulf Region North District.

Throughout U.S. history, Army Corps of Engineers civilians have had a proud tradition of stepping up to volunteer for worldwide deployment in support of military operations.

Continuing that tradition, many more have deployed overseas in support of the Global War on Terror. This critical mission is not over, and both the Afghanistan Engineer District (AED) and the Gulf Region Division (GRD) are still seeking Corps civilians to fill a multitude of positions.

“At the present time there are over 300 vacancy announcements that are listed on both the Army Civilian Personnel Online and USAJobs websites,” said Helen Lenahan, Chief, Headquarters Deployment Team. Many of these announcements are listed as “Open Continuous” because of the need to recruit talented, experienced people on an ongoing basis.

“Why volunteer?” said Lenahan. “Serving in Afghanistan or



Photo by Lora Greer, USACE Public Affairs - Iraq

Steve Thomas, Lanette Chavez, and David Bond, all assigned to the Albuquerque District are seen looking at an issue of the district's quarterly news publication, RipRap, while deployed to Iraq. The publication was found among several goodies sent to them in a care package, courtesy of coworkers from back home.

Iraq presents a unique opportunity for professional growth and personal enrichment. Many volunteer because they believe in the Corps rebuilding mission in these countries, or they may volunteer out of sense of patriotic duty, or wanting to help people build a better life and future.”

Additional volunteer benefits and incentives for Federal employees may include temporary promotion opportunities; post differential, danger and overtime pay; and separate maintenance allowance among others.

Lt.Col. Kari Otto, AED Deputy Commander said, “No matter why you volunteer, it’s very rewarding to be part of such a worthy cause.

The projects are fast-paced in Afghanistan, and it’s not uncommon to see a major construction project completed during a six or thirteen month deployment.”

AED maintains its headquarters in Kabul, but there are Area and Resident Offices located throughout the country to support the mission. Deployments in Afghanistan offer a wide range of experiences for volunteers to choose from, “and there’s something for everyone,” according to Bruce Huffman, AED Public Affairs Officer. Corps employees based in Afghanistan might work out of Kandahar, Bagram, Gardez, Qalat.

GRD headquarters is located in **more Volunteers page 9**

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Baghdad and has three District offices located in Tikrit, Tallil, and at Baghdad International Airport. Each district office has multiple locations that are co-located with Coalition forces across Iraq.

While deployed to Afghanistan or Iraq, Corps employees will work with Coalition partners, the State Department, and the host country to build health care clinics, schools, roads, power distribution facilities, and other infrastructure projects.

Col. Gary Pease, Chief of Staff, Gulf Region Division, stated, "GRD is great personal and career experience. People assigned here have a level of responsibility and authority well beyond any job they have ever had before."

GRD employees work complex projects and interface with a wide variety of stakeholders, to include Iraqi contractors, Iraqi government officials, Coalition partners, U.S. Department of State and US Agency for International Development employees. "Most importantly," said Pease, "is that they leave Iraq feeling they have made a vital contribution in the birth of a free and democratic nation, which is essential to the future security of the United States. Additionally, they will grow personally and professionally, and return with a real feeling of satisfaction that comes from participating in such an important mission," he added.

"Our work here in Afghanistan is touching people's lives in a positive way, and you can see that everywhere you look," Otto said. "We are doing far more than

building structures; we are creating a better future and quality of life for a country that has been at war for over 30 years." The Corps is providing Afghans with things most people take for granted, such as roads, clean water and adequate health care, noted Otto. "You really gain an appreciation for the possessions and opportunities you have as an American when you see someone drink clean water or get health care for the first time in their life," she said.

One question that is frequently asked is: What will my home away from home be like?

"Living conditions in GRD are excellent," said Pease. All employees get their own room which usually has a television, DVD player, and a bathroom. Also, food and transportation are free. Most GRD locations have gyms, libraries, movies, and other opportunities to rest and relax. Also, civilian employees are now authorized three home leaves during a one year tour. Leave transportation is paid by the government. Additionally, communications with family and friends is "very easy and convenient," added Pease.

Similarly, Huffman with AED, responded, "Accommodations in Afghanistan are quite nice, with modern dining facilities, and nicely equipped gyms, and living quarters, although some forward operating locations can be a bit more rustic." There are many opportunities for R&R leave and recreation while deployed, and most Corps employees in Afghanistan have phone and internet access in their

individual rooms.

"This has been the most rewarding personal and professional experience I have ever had," said Curt Heckelman, Deputy for Programs and Project Management, Gulf Region North District. "You quickly realize that you are a part of something that is much, much larger than any individual effort you have done before now and for me, it has been a great honor. Heckelman said that every person works at a higher intensity and learns very quickly how to execute at a different level.

"The pace is unrelenting, but it is also energizing," said Heckelman. "My most memorable experience is having the ability to teach, coach, and mentor individuals."

Currently, both AED and GRD are in need of area, resident, and project engineers. However, other mission support positions are also available for administrative support, budget analysts, contract specialists, program managers, public affairs specialists and many others. Applicants can self nominate through the Army Vacancy Announcement Board: <http://cpol.army.mil> or at USAJOBS.opm.gov. USACE officials said that in the near future, AED (<http://www.aed.usace.army.mil>) and GRD (<http://www.grd.usace.army.mil>) will be producing videos that will be available online that highlight civilian employees living and work environments.

For first hand accounts of Corps member's tours, please visit: <http://www.grd.usace.army.mil/news/postcards/index.asp>

