

Corps employee has soulful experience in Iraq
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Solely because he cares, Dennis Graham, an Interpretive Park Ranger at Lake Washington Ship Canal Hiram M. Chittenden Locks, deployed in support of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers mission in Iraq.

Though he left some big shoes to fill behind him -- Graham has one of the busiest jobs at the popular Western Washington attraction -- his team supported his decision to deploy. His supervisor Dru Butterfield, park manager, is currently filling in for Graham.

So when the call went out from Graham to the Corps team back home that he needed shoes for the Iraqi workers, the team quickly went to work to support his efforts. Why shoes? Graham thought it was the right thing to do after seeing worker after worker being turned away because of safety issues at a worksite in Baghdad, Iraq.

"The shoe idea came from an apartment renovation project. We had over 350 workers a day at the site. Most of them came from Sadar City, a six by six square kilometer area of Baghdad that Saddam put two million Shiites to live in absolute poverty. They are poor there, so poor that until we got here in 2003 they didn't have running water, sewers or electricity. And with the Corps involvement, they do now, but there is still no money," Graham said.

"These kids would show up to work with sandals or no shoes at all. We were turning them away because of safety, and they were so disappointed because they needed the \$10 a day the contractor was paying," he said.

When the district heard Graham's call for help, they were off and running, lacing together volunteers that could support the effort. The Seattle District headquarters became the drop-off point and point of contact for the program.

Col. Debra M. Lewis, district commander and engineer, never got the chance to put out a donation box for Graham at the district headquarters. After explaining the need at a Society of American Engineers meeting in September, a volunteer stepped forward. Retired colonel Howard Weber socked every bit of effort into it and before she knew it, more than 500 pairs of shoes and socks had been donated to the effort.

At the same time Pam Gumaer, executive assistant for the district, stepped into

action. "Pam took the reins at the district and things started to follow smoothly from there," said Graham. She enlisted the help of two volunteers from the district, Jeri Moshier and Thomas Pitcher in the Logistics Office. Moshier and Pitcher jumped at the idea of helping and sorted the shoes into boxes that showed gender and shoe size.

"The work they performed behind the scenes deserves a tremendous round of applause," said Graham. "And because the shoes show sizes, all I have to do is hand them out!"

Getting the shoes to Iraq was not an easy task. It was tough going, especially since a lot of resources were being devoted to hurricane recovery in the south. Finding the right fit for the job was difficult, until Fort Lewis came to the rescue by providing Gumaer the name and number of a local shipping company. Without the help and assistance of two key individuals located at Fort Lewis, it is Gumaer's opinion that the shoes would not be where they are today. "This effort clearly demonstrates the 'power' of networking and the willingness of Americans to work together in order to assist one man in his dream to make a difference for those in Iraq," Gumaer said.

Pilot Air Freight, Kent, Wash., volunteered to ship the shoes. The company has a track record of donated air shipments in support of our men and women in Iraq, as well as those affected by Hurricane Katrina and the Tsunami.

"This company is absolutely amazing in what they are doing in support of our men and women around the world," said Lewis, who also lauded the efforts of Jerry Reed, transportation officer, and Alberta Banks, of Fort Lewis. These two individuals are to be commended for assisting us in finalizing this effort and did the leg work in identifying the air freight company.

The shoes were sent out Dec. 16 and arrived on Dec. 20. In an excited email, Graham proclaimed, "The shoes are here, the shoes are here, happy days, the shoes are here!"

In the email, he also sent the following message. "Thanks so much to all of you for all your help on this project. We are almost to the end of what has been a very long road, a road nevertheless with a very happy ending. Everyone please remember, none of this could have happened without you! From the bottom of my heart and the bottom of all the feet these shoes will be cradling soon, thank you. You are truly the best!"

Currently Graham is working to distribute the shoes at three different construction sites. He labels the experience a soulful one. The only other event that tops it so far

has been Father's Day or this year when he was joined by his soul mate, his wife Caryn, who arrived in Baghdad to work with the Corps in the International Zone Resident Office.

"She is our administrative assistant here in our office. We have been all around the world together so we thought Baghdad would be another story we can tell the grandkids. It's tough at times working together; I worry about her safety when the rockets and mortars start to fall from the sky," he said.

"Caryn is the mainstay of the office; she keeps us all in line," Graham said. "Trust me, those are tough shoes to fill."

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers mission in Iraq and Afghanistan

The Global War on Terror requires now more than ever that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers be able to fulfill its wartime mission of providing full spectrum engineering and construction management support to American military forces. The Corps deploys capabilities developed in peace-time (water resources development, environment, infrastructure, and disaster response) to meet national and international mission requirements during contingency operations. In January 2004, USACE established a new provisional division in Baghdad. The Gulf Region Division (GRD) has three districts in Mosul (North), Baghdad (Central) and Tallil (South). The division manages construction, administers contract work, and supports oil and electrical infrastructure projects. A separate district office, the Afghanistan Engineer District (AED) was established to oversee the work in Afghanistan. Currently, USACE has about 500 military and civilian employees in Iraq and Afghanistan. There is still much to do. There is a continuous need for volunteers with vital skills and experience in program management, contracting, administrative support, engineering, construction, budget and auditing, human resources and logistics. To date, approximately 2,000 Corps personnel have deployed in support of The Global War on Terror. Nearly 50 Seattle District team members have served in Iraq and Afghanistan. For more information on the mission, visit www.grd.usace.army.mil.

Background on Dennis Graham

Resident of: Lacey, Wash. Born in San Pedro, Calif.

Position at the Corps: Interpretive Park Ranger, Washington Ship Canal, Seattle District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Military Service: Retired Air Force noncommissioned officer. Work in avionics and served with an Airborne Early Warning and Control (AWACS) unit during the first Gulf

War in 1991.

Why did he deploy? Biggest reason was the opportunity to help. Another reason was to get experience in other career fields.

What does he do in Iraq? Graham is currently working on two projects; one is a seven story apartment renovation that is near completion. The other is one of projects that the Corps manages in Baghdad, the Ibn Sina Hospital. It used to be Saddams private hospital here in the International Zone, but now it is the top medical facility in Iraq. He is the quality assurance representative on the project, overseeing operations and maintenance, repair and improvements. The hospital has been built to a Level 3 facility and it equates to the fifth largest trauma center in the U.S. It treats not only American military and civilians but it treats Iraqi military and civilians alike.

What would he say to others thinking about deploying? If you are flexible, want to learn new things and are willing to take on new responsibilities you havent ever experienced before, this is the place for you.

What have been the locations, jobs you have served on? Graham spent 20 years in the Air Force, 10 of them over seas in Europe. After he retired from the Air Force, he worked for the State of Washington developing vocational industries and recruiting businesses to manufacture their goods in jails and prisons. From that position he became a parole officer. He started working with the Corps in 2003.

Best thing that has happened while serving in Iraq? Hands down, Graham says it is being joined by his wife, Caryn Graham, in June. Caryn is employed by Madigan Hospital at Fort Lewis, Wash., and applied for a position in Baghdad, Iraq. There have been at least five other married couples that have served with the Corps while on assignment to Iraq and Afghanistan. More information on jobs can be found at <http://cpolwapp.belvoir.army.mil/coe-gwot>.