

In the trenches

Airmen work, live with Iraqi Army at historic desert base

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332nd Air Expeditionary Wing Public Affairs

Tucked in a valley between the Euphrates River and some of the most dangerous territory in Iraq is an oasis in the middle of the desert – Camp Habbaniyah.

The British operated at this location from 1934 through 1959, when it was known as Royal Air Force Habbaniyah. Forty-seven years later, the democratic government of Iraq is in control of the base, and approximately 20 Airmen assigned to the 732nd Expeditionary Mission Support Group are stationed there, serving as advisors to an Iraqi Army still trying to find its footing.

The base is a ghost of its former self. Roads that were once paved and smooth are now marked with potholes, and weeds spring from cracks in the ground. Living quarters are weathered and sometimes lack electricity or running water. For the Iraqis, supplies are scarce, and funding is hard to come by. Many of the Airmen live off food received in care packages from home as an alternative to the “red stuff and rice” prepared by locals.

Outside the perimeter of the base is perhaps the most dangerous area of Iraq. Improvised explosive devices, sectarian violence and other insurgent activity are as common as sunrise and sunset. The threat to life is very real.

During a visit this week, Brig. Gen. Robin Rand, 332nd Air Expeditionary Wing commander, said Camp Habbaniyah makes Balad Air Base, Iraq, look like a country club in comparison.

“Everything is a challenge; nothing comes easy here,” said Tech. Sgt. James Lovelace, 732nd EMSG Regional Support Unit Habbaniyah senior enlisted advisor. “The country is moving forward, but (the Iraqi people) don’t know that out here. (The area surrounding the base) is pretty much lawless.”

The base is currently home to about 4,200 Iraqi soldiers and basic military trainees. The goal is for the base to hold approximately 9,500 soldiers and trainees.

Despite the present conditions and dangers, the Airmen at Camp Habbaniyah press forward each day, teaching Iraqi soldiers the fundamentals of operating as a professional



Photos by 1st Lt. Landon Derentz

Iraqi Army basic military trainees participate in a formation run Monday afternoon at Camp Habbaniyah. Approximately 20 Airmen assigned to the 732nd Expeditionary Mission Support Group are stationed at Camp Habbaniyah as advisors to the Iraqi Army.

military organization on a military installation. Airmen in the ranks of airman first class to lieutenant colonel work in their job specialties with their Iraqi counterparts, teaching them everything from how to effectively feed all their soldiers to power production to waste disposal.

“We don’t have any cool tools or heavy gear to work with,” said Lt. Col. Sharyn McWhorter, 732nd EMSG RSU Habbaniyah officer in charge. “Our task is to help (Iraq soldiers) develop and sustain processes so they can effectively solve their own problems.”

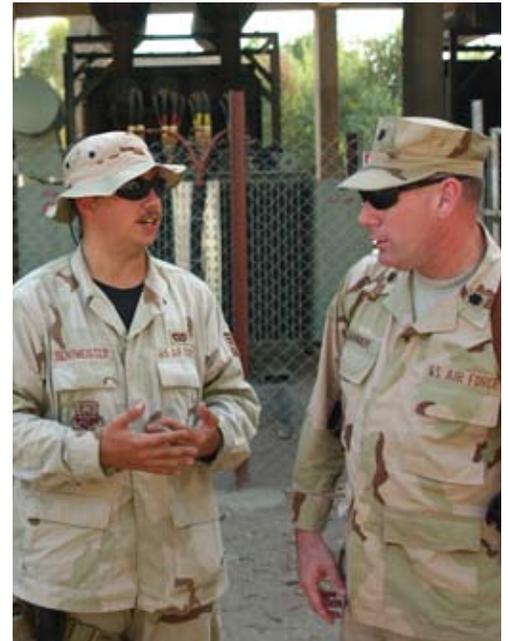
The biggest hurdle to that task is what Colonel McWhorter coined “life support” issues – providing services such as water, food, electricity, fuel and waste management, among others.

In fact, the colonel said one of her team’s most gratifying successes was helping the Iraqis implement a process for the disposal of garbage.

Other successes include implementing pre- and post-convoy searches and a fuel issue system log, both of which helped curb what RSU Habbaniyah leadership called a “considerable theft problem.”

While much work remains for the 732nd EMSG before it can exit Camp Habbaniyah for good, the general was pleased with the progress and sacrifices he witnessed.

“I’m impressed with the daunting task presented to you,” General Rand said to the



Senior Airman Timothy Rentmeister, 732nd EMSG RSU Habbaniyah civil engineer technician, describes the successes the unit has had with the Iraqi Army, such as the power generators in the background, to Lt. Col. Douglas Hammer, 732nd EMSG deputy commander.

unit. “You still have a long way to go, and you probably won’t recognize the successes you’ve had until you look back, but what you’re doing is vitally important to our mission of helping Iraq transition to democracy.”