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796th CES senior NCO earns Bronze Star

BY MASTER SGT. DAWN HART 96TH AIR BASE WING PUBLIC AFFAIRS

For one 796th Civil Engineer Squadron senior NCO, the honor of being awarded the Bronze Star was not an individual award, but one he felt honored his entire team.

Senior Master Sgt. John Dick Jr., electrical power production chief, was awarded the Bronze Star Sept. 21 by Col. Dennis Yates, 96th Civil Engineer Group commander, for his exemplary meritorious service in Tikrit, Iraq, from Sept. 28, 2005 to April 15, 2006.

"The Bronze Star is the highest decoration I have ever had the privilege of presenting," Colonel Yates said. "That we are seeing this decoration more frequently is but one indicator of our importance as Combat Airmen. Sergeant Dick should be very proud of his personal accomplishments that led to this decoration, just as our nation is fortunate and grateful to have Airmen like him who are willing to go beyond the call of duty."

Serving as the Regional Reconstruction Operations Center power sector coordinator with the 101st Airborne Division, Sergeant Dick monitored the status of 15 power plants, 41 percent of Iraq's generating capacity and 3,800 km of high voltage transmission lines.

The deployment had many challenges, but the biggest challenge was dealing with the insurgents, according to Sergeant Dick.

As he administered 45 active construction projects worth \$28.3 million to improve the Iraqi electrical power infrastructure, "it was a constant battle with the insurgents," said the sergeant. "We'd take three steps forward and they'd blow something up; and then we'd take one step backward."

Traveling 'outside the wire' on 48 convoys, his team inspected projects and upgraded operations at Iraqi power plants, coordinated repairs with the Ministry of Electricity and Ministry of Oil; and bought parts, transmission towers for power lines, pipe for oil and tools.

"We definitely made progress, but the insurgents were always trying to impede our progress," he said.

One incident in particular stands out for Sergeant Dick.

"We were in the power plant by the Tigris River inspecting a project when we heard a big explosion," he said. This power plant was in a critical area that was often targeted by insurgents. Sergeant Dick took charge of his team, ensured their accountability and quickly evacuated the area to prevent casualties and equipment damage.

Working at eight or nine different power plants, Sergeant Dick's team would routinely visit the plants to find out what the Iraqis needed to improve the power plant to make it more efficient and to better the lives of the workers.

"It wasn't just about making the power work," Sergeant Dick said. "It was building a dining facility for the workers, anything that could improve the quality of life for them and, of course, make the power more reliable. They were very appreciative of us."