

CONTINGENCY CONTRACTING CORNER

Voices From the Theater: Insiders' Perspectives of Deployment

By Carolina M. Woods, Staff Writer

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For most people, making the decision of going on a voluntary deployment to Iraq, Afghanistan or any other hot spot in the world is not easy. Sometimes family matters or concerns about the dangers associated with deploying can prevent one from “taking the plunge” and making the commitment to go. Additionally, the extreme desert climate and the long work days are not for the fainthearted. However, those who have embraced the opportunity of being deployed with the Defense Contract Management Agency — whether voluntarily or not — describe it as one of the most fulfilling experiences of their lives.

In work or play, from observing troop support up close and watching corny movies purchased at the local market at a Friday night barbecue, to the

relationships formed while working side-by-side for countless hours, deploying is a unique bonding experience. We caught up with two DCMA employees who have gone through the experience to get their thoughts and perspectives on being deployed. These are their stories.

Michael McLaughlin, DCMA Combat Support Center deputy director and former DCMA Iraq administrative contracting officer

C: How many times have you been deployed?

Michael McLaughlin: One and a half; I was there for six months and chose to extend for three months.

C: Why did you choose to deploy to Iraq?

MM: One of my primary motivations for going over there was that I had two classmates from high school, one of [whom] I also went to college with, who were killed on 9/11. I wanted to do something to honor their memory, and I had an opportunity to do that through my

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service. I was able to have some flags flown in their memory in Iraq, which I was then able to send to their families.

C: What is your most memorable experience from Iraq?

MM: I had been in-country for about three months when [Air Force Maj.] Gen. [Darryl A.] Scott joined us in a new capacity. He went from [being] the director of DCMA to [being] the commanding general and the head of the contracting activity for the Joint Contracting Command Iraq/Afghanistan. So we briefed him on performance-based improvements we had put in place for his organization, [which] saved him about \$1.8 million. We had done other things, too, like making over \$250 million available for obligation through contract closeouts. He was so impressed by what we did that he told us, “Get out of my office before I hug you all.” So one of the most memorable experiences that I have was Gen. Scott telling us that. ... In another instance, a soldier thanked us for saving his life. And that was probably typical of the customer sentiment there — they really loved the work that we were doing and appreciated our contributions.



C: What was it like dealing with other cultures?

MM: It was an interesting opportunity to learn about other cultures, and the West owes much to Arab learning. When we were in the former presidential palace we got quite a bit of exposure to local Iraqi people coming to work. We exchanged greetings in Arabic — I learned enough Arabic to ask them how they were doing, wish them a good day, hope their families were well, and they would respond back. ... About a week after I left they noticed I was gone and started pointing to my desk and asking, “... Where’s the old man?” [laughter], which in their culture is a term of respect. [The locals] were very nice — they were just trying to make a living and provide for their own families. They were very gracious and polite and welcomed the opportunity to work.

Army Col. Jake Hansen, DCMA Combat Support Center director and former DCMA Iraq commander

Communicator: What was the nature of your deployment with DCMA?

Col. Hansen: I was the first one-year commander for DCMA Iraq. I started out working in Saddam [Hussein]’s palace located in the International Zone or Green Zone [in



(Top) The Perfume Palace in Baghdad, Iraq, at sunset. (Photo courtesy of Michael McLaughlin, DCMA Headquarters) **(Above)** Army Col. Jacob “Jake” Hansen, former DCMA Iraq commander, right, and El Salvadorian Army Col. Ruben Rubio, left, standing in front of a replica of the Ishtar Gate in the ancient city of Babylon, which is in present-day southern Iraq. (Photo courtesy of Army Col. Jake Hansen, DCMA Headquarters)

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Baghdad, Iraq]. I worked there for the first seven months, and then for the next five months I moved the O-6 headquarters to the Camp Victory complex, located near Baghdad's International Airport. It is important to note that ... most people from DCMA deploy to Iraq on six-month tours. One interesting indicator of my folks having rewarding tours was that 23 of them extended their tours past the normal six months. That's pretty amazing and speaks volumes about how our DCMA employees felt about their contributions to the mission.

C: What was it like being deployed?

CH: There are a lot of things that occur that are really unusual in a war zone like Iraq. I had never before worked 14- to 16-hour days. You put all of your waking energy into your work. You are very focused, and there are no distractions. Time moves very quickly in a war zone. That means that projects get completed in a very short time frame, [and] it's especially rewarding when you see the soldiers using a project that you worked on. There are no eight-hour days, days off, holidays or weekends. It's all about mission accomplishment, and DCMA plays a huge role. That's why [it was] the most professionally rewarding year of my career.

C: What about the living conditions?

CH: We take very good care of our people. Quite frankly, our soldiers are living in the highest

standards of any war, ever. There are a lot of reasons why that is a good thing. The primary reason is that the warrior is our nation's number one asset. We have to take good care of our kids when they are deployed to a dangerous place like Iraq. The second reason it's critical to take care of our warriors [is] because it's directly related to retention rates. The warriors are pleasantly surprised at the quality of life in a place like Iraq. They find that, in most cases, at the end of the day they are going to have a good meal, and they are going to have a decent place to sleep, work and eat. You're going to hear rumors that we ate very well ... and we did! We had lobster, steaks, crabs and scallops at least once a week; and there were six flavors [of Baskin Robbins™]. When you watch a young warrior coming in after being out all day in a Humvee, sweating through his uniform from the 120-degree temperatures, and he is sipping on an ice-cold drink or licking an ice cream cone, you [know] we are doing the right thing. We are taking good care of these warriors, and that's the right thing to do.

C: Do you have any words of advice for DCMA civilians who might be considering a voluntary deployment?

CH: Look deep inside of yourself, think about your career and think about the things that you can bring to the table for our great deployed warriors. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, [and] I highly recommend taking it. You will have a feeling of professional satisfaction that you have never had before. If you can do a deployment with DCMA ... do it! **C**

(Left) Michael McLaughlin, left, former DCMA Iraq administrative contracting officer, and Army Col. Jacob “Jake” Hansen, right, former DCMA Iraq commander. (Photo courtesy of Army Col. Jake Hansen, DCMA Headquarters)

