

39th Brigade project measures success by the gallon

~ Water filtration system provides Baghdad community with clean, healthy water

by Maj. Craig Heathscott

39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team Public Affairs Office

Baghdad, Iraq - In an ironic contradiction, sweat beads form on the forehead of a Soldier as he walks the dirt road with several Iraqi children in tow. He looks over at a fellow 'Top Gun' Soldier and says, "I'm dying of thirst." The dust continues to billow from their boots hitting the ground as they continue on their path towards the site of the water filtration system that they will officially open for the citizens of the small community of Radwaniya.

The contradiction results from the fact that this grand opening, designed to bring clean drinking water to over 150 homes, will prevent these citizens from possibly dying—'dying from quenching their thirst.' Prior to this day, their drinking water has been very unhealthy in this small community in Baghdad of approximately 5,000 Iraqi citizens.

Drinking unpurified water, or irrigation water in this case, has led to an increased amount of sickness in the area. Living in a rural area without the benefits of essential services found in larger cities, the future looked somewhat bleak for this agricultural community. Oftentimes, these rural communities are very poor, and the idea of building a well—much less a water purification system—is unheard of for them.

However, community leaders, working in conjunction with the Government of Iraqi and Coalition Forces worked hard to ensure disease doesn't destroy this community. And considering these people have survived the hardships of war, the war against disease was one fight they were not willing to lose either. They are very strong people.

Speaking in his native Arabic tongue to a gathering of about 100 people, Abu Mohammad, a local sheik, pauses and allows the interpreter to catch up with him, "This is going to feed 150 homes with clean drinking water. We get irrigation water and boil it and that is why everyone was getting sick, because it not a good water to drink."

With the newly constructed water filtration system with the red ribbon blocking the entrance as a backdrop, the sheik's words are much to the delight of the citizens of the community and the Coalition Forces—1/320th Field Artillery Regiment, of the 101st Airborne, commonly referred to as 'Top Gun'—that surround him and eagerly awaited his message.

"We thank the commander for being very serious about this project," the translator says following the Arabic version by the sheik. "Without your efforts and support we would never have this project."

The commander—Lt. Col. David Burwell—graciously bows to the sheik, recognizes several that were involved in the project and returns the compliment by saying, "This represents the good things that come with cooperation and security."

Burwell and his dedicated Soldiers continue to build positive relationships within their area of operation (AO) by focusing on bringing essential services—water, sewer, electricity—to the Iraqi people. Each completed project brings the community and Government of Iraq one step closer to realizing their ability to take control of their community, their country.

“Success of this project is defined by the fact that the Iraqi people were instrumental in bringing it to fruition,” said Col. Kendall Penn—commander of the 39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, Arkansas Army National Guard—who serves as the Base Defense commander for Victory Base Complex in Baghdad and has operational command over the 320th Field Artillery Regiment. “But take nothing away from Lt. Col. Burwell, and his team, as that is exactly how they should define their success. We’re here to help the Iraqi people, not to do everything for them. Truly, this project has been a model for success in Iraq.”

This project was a joint effort that used many Iraqi services in creating the final successful outcome.

“It had an Iraqi improvement face to it,” said Lt. Col. Clark Easter, civil military officer for the 39th Brigade, who has the responsibility for finding ways to develop the needs of the Iraqi people into positive outcomes such as the water filtration project. “The Government of Iraq did the water testing for the project, and the communities leaders were engaged throughout. Basically, they did it to their standards, which is a very positive thing for the community and the country.

“The positive thing is that the Government of Iraq will take over the maintenance of the system,” he said. “We’re more like partners to the Iraqi people and not looking to stand out in front and do everything for them. These are good people, and everyone—Iraqis and Coalition Forces—wants them to prosper. This is a step in that direction.”

Prior to the first drop of water coming from the system, the community was experiencing a high level of sickness that was directly attributed to bad drinking water. This will dramatically decrease the potential for disease in the area. The system is designed to draw water from 30 meters below the surface to get good well water and then purify it by extracting the impurities, such as salt, from it.

After congratulatory speeches and handshakes, Burwell and the community leaders turn to cut the red ribbon that separates them from clean drinking water.

Moments later, the roar of a diesel engine fills the air and the water purification system is up and running. Abu Mohammad grabs the garden hose and pulls it close to his lips. He takes the first drink as the line behind him forms by those ‘dying of thirst’ and hoping to quench it with fresh water and good health. Before handing off to the next in line, he indicates that the water is very good as a big smile crosses his face.

"This is a big success and brings happiness to everybody," he says to Burwell, who nods and shares a laugh with the Iraqi sheik.

He moves to the big water tank of the filtration system and turns a large red valve that allows clean water to flow from a four-inch PVC pipe—another sign of success. The view of rushing water flowing is a welcomed site to those in attendance and brings a sense of accomplishment to all. As a part of the project, many of the homes in the area will have the water piped directly into their homes—another sign of success.

Prior to the opening to the water filtration system, a feast was prepared in the home of one of the community leaders. The young adults brought in large metal plates measuring at least two foot in diameter piled high with rice and topped with lamb, which is a traditional Iraqi meal. It was served with numerous homegrown vegetables and amounted to a meal fit for a king, or at least four sheiks and several U.S. Army Soldiers, and then some, as much was left over.

Obviously not their first experience with a feast such as this, the Soldiers joined their hosts and one by one started reaching for the food with their fingers as opposed to using the utensils they are more familiar with on base. Nonetheless, the meal provided the opportunity to, once again, get to understand the Iraqi culture and continue to build on a relationship that continues to develop in a positive way.

Following the meal, the sheiks spent time having conversation with Burwell and his Soldiers about potential projects and concerns.

"If we want the Iraqi people to help themselves we need to simply listen to their needs," he said. "If ever there was a measure of success in Iraq it has to be strong relationships. I don't look at Abu Mohammad as just an Iraqi—he's a friend, and I value the partnership, and the relationship we've developed. He is a strong leader, and today's success story is tomorrow's future here in Iraq."

The future of Iraq—a young child—steps up to the American Soldier and accepts the invitation of a free flowing garden hose. He closes his eyes tightly as if nervous and takes a drink of the purified water and as it splashes all over his face he hands it back to the Soldier and bows his head with a grin—a true measure of success in Iraq.

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Photo Cutlines

Clean Water. Sheik Abu Mohammed turns the valve to release water to test the new water purification system in Radwaniya. Speaking in his native Arabic tongue to a gathering of about 100 people, Abu Mohammad, a local sheik, pauses and allows the interpreter to catch up with him, "This is going to feed 150 homes with clean drinking water. We get irrigation water and boil it and that is why everyone was getting sick, because it not a good water to drink." The system was made possible through the

efforts of the 1st Battalion, 320th Field Artillery Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division that is currently serving with the Arkansas National Guard's 39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team. (Photo by Maj. Craig Heathscott, 39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team Public Affairs Office)

Ribbon Cutting. Sheik Abu Mohammed (left) and Lt. Col. David Burwell join in on the cutting of the ribbon to mark the opening of the water purification system. "If we want the Iraqi people to help themselves we need to simply listen to their needs," said Burwell. "If ever there was a measure of success in Iraq it has to be strong relationships. I don't look at Abu Mohammad as just an Iraqi—he's a friend, and I value the partnership, and the relationship we've developed. He is a strong leader, and today's success story is tomorrow's future here in Iraq." (Photo by Maj. Craig Heathscott, 39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team Public Affairs Office)

Measure of success. A young boy takes a drink from the purified water coming from the new water purification system in Radwaniya. "Success of this project is defined by the fact that the Iraqi people were instrumental in bringing it to fruition," said Col. Kendall Penn—commander of the 39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, who serves as the Base Defense commander for Victory Base Complex in Baghdad and has operational command over the 320th Field Artillery Regiment. "But take nothing away from Lt. Col. Burwell, and his team, as that is exactly how they should define their success. We're here to help the Iraqi people, not to do everything for them. Truly, this project has been a model for success in Iraq." (Photo by Maj. Craig Heathscott, 39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team Public Affairs Office)

Building Relationships. Lt. Col. David Burwell, commander of 1st Battalion, 320th Field Artillery Regiment, 101st Airborne dines with local sheiks from Radwaniya prior to the opening of the water purification system. The meal provided the opportunity to, once again, get to understand the Iraqi culture and continue to build on a relationship that continues to develop in a positive way. (Photo by Maj. Craig Heathscott, 39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team Public Affairs Office)

Building Relationships (2). Soldiers with the 1st Battalion, 320th Field Artillery Regiment, 101st Airborne dine with local sheiks from Radwaniya prior to the opening of the water purification system. The meal provided the opportunity to, once again, get to understand the Iraqi culture and continue to build on a relationship that continues to develop in a positive way. (Photo by Maj. Craig Heathscott, 39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team Public Affairs Office)

Taste Test. Sheik Abu Mohammad takes the first drink of water that has passed through his community's new water filtration system that was constructed in coordination with the 101st Airborne's 1st Battalion, 320th Field Artillery Regiment which is currently serving with the 39th Brigade. "We thank the commander for being very serious about this project," the translator says following the Arabic version by the sheik. "Without your efforts and support we would never have this project." Prior to the addition of the system, the community saw an increasing rise of sickness in the area due to

drinking unpurified water. (Photo by Maj. Craig Heathscott, 39th Infantry Brigade Combat Team Public Affairs Office)