

U.S. Air Force Photo/Courtesy of the 557th ERHS



Army and Air Force Engineers Provide Bed-Down for Surge Troops

By Captain Ken Hall

Earlier this year, only dirt and desert tumbleweeds could be found 1½ miles southeast of Besmaya Range, where Iraqi soldiers train. But then a United States Army unit—the 3d Brigade Combat Team (BCT), 3d Infantry

Division—conducted missions in Operation Enforcing the Law, known to the media as the *Fardh al-Qanoon*, or “Baghdad Security Plan.” That plan began when General David Petraeus, commander of Multinational Forces–Iraq (MNF–I), directed new combat brigades to deploy in and around the Iraqi capital. On 18 February, orders flowed from MNF–I to the Army’s 411th Engineer Brigade to build a base at Besmaya to accommodate troops by 26 March. The Besmaya project was just one of many the 411th was tasked to accomplish as part of its main missions, which included—

- Route clearance and sanitation.
- Rapid crater repair.
- Engineer support to the 3d Infantry Division and other combat units.
- Planning, design, and construction of contingency operating bases.
- Command and control of tactical bridging assets.

The 411th was organized to accomplish those missions, with assistance from subordinate units that included the Arkansas Army National Guard’s 875th Engineer Battalion, the Active Army’s 92d Engineer Battalion, and the United States Air Force’s 557th Expeditionary RED HORSE Squadron (ERHS). The 557th ERHS, performing an “in-lieu-of” mission for the Army in Iraq, built the base 30 kilometers east of Baghdad. Approximately a month later, Soldiers had a place to hang their hats at night “inside the wire.” RED HORSE, which stands for “rapid

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Soldiers from the 92d Engineer Battalion complete guard towers along FOB Hammer’s perimeter berm in Iraq. Airmen from the 557th Expeditionary RED HORSE Squadron and Soldiers from the 92d Engineer Battalion’s “Black Diamonds” were tasked to bed-down the Army’s 3d BCT, 3d Infantry Division, in support of the Baghdad Security Plan.

engineer deployable heavy operational repair squadron, engineers,” provides the Air Force with a highly mobile civil engineering response force to support contingency operations worldwide. With Airmen from Active, National Guard, and Reserve Component assets, the 557th is engaged in engineering projects throughout Southwest Asia. The unit is part of the 732d Air Expeditionary Group, under the 332d Air Expeditionary Wing headquartered at Balad Air Base northwest of Baghdad.

A bed-down tasking is a two-step process for the engineer force. First, the force itself needs facilities to work, sleep, and eat. Then the main engineer force can move in and begin construction on the tasked project. As part of step one, engineers from the 557th ERHS and the 411th Engineer Brigade formed a survey team and deployed to the site to work out detailed plans for the new base. What they found was spartan. A bombed-out structure remained, with only three walls intact and a roof that was caving in. Other buildings had been reduced to rubble that would need to be cleared for new facilities. Surrounding it all was a 3½-foot berm, traversed by goat trails, that formed a protective perimeter barely substantial enough to trip over. They had their work cut out for them. The 411th’s construction maintenance section (CMS) completed a site reconnaissance with members of the MNC-I logistics and engineering sections, walking the site and taking photographs. Then the CMS and members of the 557th conducted a site survey to collect topographic information and overhead photographs to drop into the computer-aided drawing software to plan and build Forward Operating Base (FOB) Hammer (see article, page 12).

While the five-day survey was being conducted, RED HORSE engineers back at Balad Air Base were planning how to bed-down the engineer force. They determined that the force would need a tailored Harvest Falcon kit (a prepackaged,



Photo by Rob Curtis/Air Force Times

RED HORSE engineers install roof trusses as they build up FOB Hammer for the 3d BCT in Besmaya, Iraq.

transportable base camp) to sustain them while they built the rest of the base for the troops of the incoming 3d BCT. A full Harvest Falcon kit includes tents, hard-wall shelters, area lighting systems, basic water and electrical systems, latrines



U.S. Air Force Photo/Courtesy of the 557th EHRS

Soldiers from the 92d Engineer Battalion fill HESCO Bastion Concertainers® for force protection at FOB Hammer.



U.S. Air Force Photo/Courtesy of the 557th EHRB

More than 33,000 cubic meters of debris were removed from land at FOB Hammer.

and showers, a kitchen facility, environmental control units, and other basic equipment. The first five days of actual construction saw huge amounts of Harvest Falcon assets moving from outside Iraq to Balad by numerous aircraft, then convoyed by tractor-trailer and helicopters to Besmaya to build the facilities for the engineers. In addition, heavy equipment (loaders, bulldozers, graders, and excavators) and supplies (food, water, fuel, hand tools, and lumber for tent flooring) were transported to the site in the continuous stream of convoys and helicopter loads.

While they were building the engineer facilities, materials for the main camp were being moved in, including—

- Three Army Force Provider kits.
- Two life support area kits.
- Reverse osmosis water purification units (ROWPU) to produce fresh water.
- Lumber, plywood, and nails to construct Southwest Asia huts.
- Concertina wire and pickets.
- Prefabricated guard towers.
- Bottled water; meals, ready-to-eat; and 50-person unitized group rations to sustain the construction force.

As materials came in to Besmaya, the construction force already there began erecting the tent city and fortifying the perimeter berm. The RED HORSE Airmen focused on vertical construction while Soldiers from the 92d performed the horizontal construction. The camp was designed to provide the 3d BCT with dining facilities and a headquarters made by

refurbishing the bombed-out structure. Each battalion was to get a tactical operations center and maintenance building. Prefabricated guard towers, elevated fighting positions, and perimeter berms would provide force protection. Morale, welfare, and recreation facilities would complete the project.

Water for the camp comes from the Tigris River, which makes its way toward the camp through an old canal system. To make it usable for the brigade, engineers had to undam several points on the canal to get the water to within 2½ miles of the camp. It is first pumped to a new holding pond, then pumped to two ROWPUs where it is made potable and pumped to water storage bladders. The potable water stored in the bladder farm provides drinking water for the brigade, and the pond provides nonpotable water for showers and laundry facilities.

For the 3d BCT Soldier, all that really matters is that he and his fellow “Sledgehammer” Warriors now have a place to call home after each day’s patrols in Baghdad—a place where it is safe to take off battle armor and get a hot meal. 

Captain Hall served as deputy chief of public affairs for the 332d Air Expeditionary Wing while in Iraq and has now returned to duties as chief of public affairs for the 47th Flying Training Wing, Laughlin Air Force Base, Texas.

