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Hostility in Iraq greets Iowan's patriotic gesture

In a background of war and destruction, a Norwalk man helped turn Iraq's barren desert into a land with agricultural potential.

By JERRY PERKINS
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Randy Frescoln left his family in Norwalk and job with the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Iowa to help rebuild Iraq's fractured agricultural industry.

Frescoln, 51, worked in Tikrit, the hometown of former Iraqi strong man Saddam Hussein and a hotbed of the Sunni insurgency. He said he volunteered for Iraq out of a sense of patriotism and for a chance to apply overseas what he had learned in graduate school and in his job working on renewable energy projects in Iowa.

What he found: A lot of hostility from many Sunnis.

"You meet with people and try to help them, then they'll try to kill you on the way home," he said.

After 98 days in the war-torn country, Frescoln decided not to finish the remaining nine months of his one-year tour of duty.

"My 9-year-old daughter, Rachel, asked me why I was going to go back," Frescoln said. "I stewed on that for two days and I didn't have an answer. I had a family and a job in Iowa and I wasn't willing to go back and work with hostile clients in a hostile environment."

Grant Pettrie, assistant division director of the USDA's Foreign Agriculture Service's development resources and disaster assistance division, acknowledged that it's difficult to do rural and agricultural developments programs in a war zone.

"We'll look at every assignment and see if it's just too tough because of local hostility and violence," Pettrie said. "The Iraqis want the technical advice, but this can't be a cookie-cutter approach. We need to be flexible."

There are two U.S. rural development specialists working in Iraq, Pettrie said, and there have been 80 applicants for 30 positions that the USDA wants to fill there.

"Agriculture is important in Iraq," said Pettrie, who is leaving July 5 for a three-month tour there. "It's the second-largest employer in Iraq, trailing only the oil sector."

It wasn't the first time Frescoln had worked overseas. He did a similar agricultural development job in Afghanistan from August 2004 to January 2005 and has been to Ukraine and Moldova in the former Soviet Union and to Honduras.

Frescoln found the Afghans he worked with to be receptive to U.S. assistance, but Iraq was different.

He was housed at Camp Speicher, the U.S. military base near Tikrit. He never left the base without a flak jacket, helmet, gloves and goggles.

"I was there the day they hung Saddam," said Frescoln. "They were pretty interesting

times."

The purpose of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams that Frescoln worked with was to show the smiling face of the U.S. occupation.

"The whole idea of reconstruction is to win the hearts and minds of the people," Frescoln said. "You want to reward good behavior so they will be with us."

Frescoln realized that, because of the negative attitude of many Sunni Iraqis, he had to rely on a large group of local leaders to set priorities for projects.

He met with top elected officials, the head federal agricultural official, tribal sheiks, leaders of the local farmers association, the dean of the college of agriculture and Extension agents.

"They'd never worked together, but they were the opinion leaders," Frescoln said. "We came up with the idea of building 10 nurseries for vegetables that were really just simple hoop buildings, and putting them where the five best Extension people were located."

The farmers association picked five farms using the advice of the tribal sheiks.

"I feel very good that I established a model that could be followed in other areas," Frescoln said. "I felt like, in my first three months there, I hit a home run helping the military see how to do the development model. If I would have gone back, I just would have replicated that model in different areas."

Frescoln's experiences and advice have been invaluable.

"We adopted every one of his suggestions," Pettrie said.

Frescoln's biggest frustration, he said, was the hostility of the Sunnis.

"I want to help people who want to be helped and will at least say thank you," he said. "I never heard thank you or received any warm fuzzies. The active insurgents, the Sunnis, are not our friends."

Ultimately, family members called him home: He would have missed his son Alex's graduation from Norwalk High School.

Carolyn, his wife of 23 years, was supportive of his decision to go to Iraq, but told Frescoln she had a difficult time understanding why someone would volunteer to leave his family to work in a war zone.

And working for the USDA's Rural Development agency in Iowa gives Frescoln a lot of satisfaction. "I felt like I was doing more good here, in Iowa, working on biodiesel, ethanol, wind turbines and other projects," he said.

Frescoln said he recently talked with one of the people he met in Iraq who is still there, working on a reconstruction team.

"I asked him, 'Are things better?' and he thought about it and said, 'Yes, however, the speed of that change is much slower than Americans want since Americans are characteristically result-oriented and look for immediate change like we experience in the USA.' "

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