

# Constructing Living Quarters in Iraq

*By Second Lieutenant Anne C. Hsieh*



**A**s the Multinational Corps–Iraq (MNC–I) continues to turn over military control to the Iraqis, small forward operating bases (FOBs) and combat outposts all over the country are shutting down and consolidating at a few main FOBs, one of which happens to be Al Asad Air Base. As a result, Al Asad needs to grow and develop to support the influx of personnel and units on base.

Soldiers from Alpha Company, 84th Engineer Battalion (Combat), worked on construction projects all over the base. Most recently, 1st Platoon was assigned to build living facilities called Southwest Asia (SWA) huts—based on the Southeast Asia (SEA) huts originally developed in Vietnam—for incoming personnel. From the start of the project in mid-April, the platoon met with a variety of challenges characteristic of any construction project in-theater: poor quality of materials, resource constraints, equipment breakdowns, and changes in plans. In addition, other missions sometimes took priority, pulling all personnel away from the project for weeks at a time. Nevertheless, the platoon has still managed to remain flexible and complete the project to standard. The platoon adapted to new issues as they arose, working late to compensate.

Prior to this project, 1st Platoon—also known as the “Rough Riders”—spent three months building the Iraqi army camp at Combat Outpost Rawah. Working with Navy construction battalions (Seabees), the platoon finished the project four weeks ahead of schedule. Upon its return to Al Asad, the platoon was assigned to various construction missions across post. The platoon transitioned away from the Navy Seabee construction system under which it had learned and worked during the first three months of deployment. Through the Al Asad project, the platoon discovered and refined the various strengths of its members and became a more cohesive unit.

More than 25 percent of the platoon is composed of combat engineers, most of whom never worked on construction projects before the deployment, much less directed construction crews. Their incorporation into the unit and performance in carpentry and electrical work was phenomenal. The platoon’s combat engineers were given more construction responsibility at Al Asad, as opposed to the first project in Rawah, where they were an asset in tactics and force protection measures, and carpenters provided the technical skill and knowledge on the construction site. Combat engineer sergeants in the platoon even served as construction squad





**Opposite page:** The frame of an exterior wall of a SWA hut awaits completion of the floor.

**Top:** Soldiers from 1st Platoon work together to sheath the floor of a SWA hut.

**Lower left:** The completed SWA huts will provide comfortable living quarters for personnel at Al Asad Air Base, Iraq.

leaders for weeks at a time, manning their squads and leading by example on the jobsite every day. For the most recent living area construction project, two combat engineers directed and emplaced the entire roofing system for several of the large buildings. The experience of “carpenters and combat engineers joining forces” has been a challenging and worthwhile one. They learned to work together as one engineer unit despite different backgrounds.

They were indeed an incredible team. Even when there was only a few months left of deployment and dozens of construction missions looming on the horizon, the Soldiers of 1st Platoon, Alpha Company, 84th Engineer Battalion, continued to make a difference at Al Asad and Iraq—one SWA hut at a time.



*Second Lieutenant Hsieh is the vertical construction platoon leader for 1st Platoon, Alpha Company, 84th Engineer Battalion (Combat). She is currently stationed at Al Asad Air Base, Iraq. She graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point in 2005 with a double major in comparative politics and arts, philosophy, and literature.*