

• Military •

Finding something to drink

Missouri National Guard engineer colonel comes out of retirement at age 55 to rebuild wrecked Iraqi waterworks

Darrell Todd Maurina
Daily Guide

After 30 years on active duty and in the National Guard, Col. Brett Hanke was forced by Army rules to retire about the same time America began its war on terror, but he wasn't happy to be out of uniform when his country needed him.

When Hanke — in civilian life, an engineer for Science Applications International Corporation — told his company and his future wife that he wanted to go to Iraq on active duty, neither expected it.

"My boss said, 'I can't imagine why you would want to go over there and do something so stupid, but I can see that you really do, so it's okay with me and you have your job when you get back,'" Hanke said.

Members of the Society of American Military Engineers understood more of Hanke's motives, and listened carefully on Tuesday afternoon at Fort Leonard Wood as Hanke explained how he took charge of a \$3 billion budget to rebuild Iraq's water infrastructure.

Hanke recently returned from a tour of duty working in Baghdad as program manager for the water projects sector of the United States Project Contracting Office — a special agency created to administer an \$18 billion budget to fix Iraq's infrastructure.

Hanke said he loved the work in Iraq — often working 14 hour days, seven days a week — but not everything moved with military efficiency.

"I would liken the reconstruction effort in Iraq to one of those round life rafts you get off in the ocean," Hanke said. "Everybody's paddling, and they're not all paddling in the same direction, but somehow, miraculously, it goes in the right direction."

Pointing to a flowchart of overlapping agencies and authority structures in Iraq, Hanke said engineers trying to rebuild Iraq haven't had the benefit of a unified com-

mand structure even though the military is in charge.

"Nobody actually answers to anybody, and that's a clear violation of the unity of command principle," said Hanke, who is in the process of writing a paper on the reconstruction effort for the U.S. Army War College and hopes the military can learn from its experiences in Iraq.

One lesson reconstruction officials learned quickly, Hanke said, was to put Iraqis in charge on the ground level of projects.

"You've heard the criticism, I'm sure, that all the money is going to big American contractors," Hanke said. "That's not true — the money is going through big American contractors to little Iraqi contractors."

Operating that way is the only choice, Hanke said: if Americans were working on a construction project they would be attacked and the project would become a target of insurgents, but due to Iraq's socialist economy, the country didn't have a group of major contractors who could coordinate the smaller construction operations.

Hanke said rebuilding Iraq infrastructure is a military necessity even though most of the damage wasn't caused by American bombs.

"Iraq was broke before we got there, but to project a positive American image, the president and the Congress wanted to do this to satisfy the international community," Hanke said. "The main reason we are rebuilding Iraq is we need Iraq to succeed."

Sometimes that meant doing things that wouldn't make sense in an American context. Contracts were based on "cost-plus" accounting rather than fixed price contracts, and sometimes getting more people working was determined to be more important than getting projects done quickly or cheaply.

"We parked the construction equipment and gave everybody

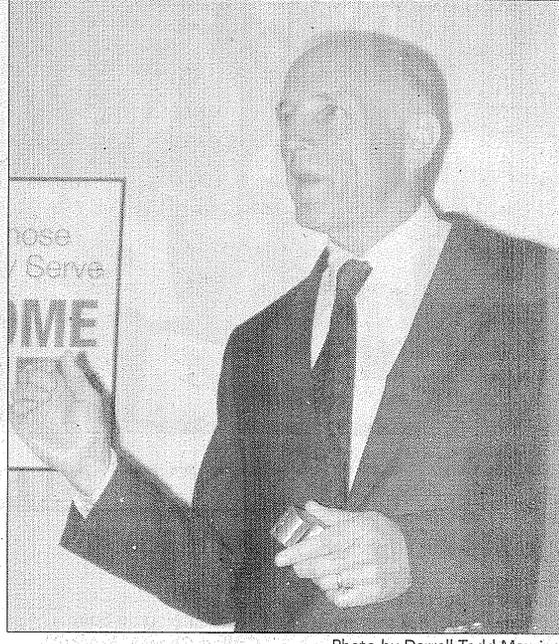


Photo by Darrell Todd Maurina

Col. Brett Hanke speaks Tuesday afternoon to members of Fort Leonard Wood's Society of American Military Engineers regarding Iraqi water reconstruction projects.

shovels," Hanke said. "Some people would say it was a waste of money but I think it was a wise decision. If we put all the insurgents to work, they'll all have jobs and won't have time to be insurgents."

Centuries of tribalism and two generations of socialism didn't help either, and called for creative solutions.

"You have these tribes that for 4,000 years have made their living through thuggery," Hanke said. "So how did we provide security for our site? We went out and hired the biggest, baddest tribe in the area, trained them, and turned them into a legitimate government security contractor."

Other problems required direct action, such as an order from the central government to a cement plant that the manager had to sell cement to the American contractors even though they

wouldn't pay him a bribe.

Inflation caused by an influx of American dollars was also a major problem, along with rapid turnover of military personnel. Hanke said he helped start trade schools to train Iraqi water plant operators who will work in their own country over the long term, but believed the project would have been better served by repairing existing plants rather than building new plants.

Steve Tupper, the University of Missouri at Rolla liaison to Fort Leonard Wood, asked whether the organizational structure would be a good model for the future — receiving a definite "no" answer.

"I think the whole structure has been a nightmare," Hanke said. "There needs to be one guy in charge so when there is a tiff, someone can say, 'This is how it is going to be done.'"