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By B.J. Weiner

HUNTSVILLE, Ala.--In less than 10 months, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has destroyed 110,000 tons of captured enemy arms and ammunition in Iraq that could have been used as improvised explosive devices (IED), and has stored 139,000 tons for potential defensive use by an Iraq government.

Getting the IEDs off the streets and “out of the hands of the bad guys,” has been the focus of the CEA mission since it began, said Glenn Earhart, chief of international operations and CEA program manager for the Corps.

He said that on July 28 of last year, Combined Joint Task Force-7 selected the Engineering and Support Center, Huntsville in Alabama, to conduct the captured enemy ammunition mission (CEA). Mobilizing rapidly, the first teams on the ground in Iraq destroyed the first ton of CEA on Sept. 11, 2003.

The program also blasted through its biggest challenge – transitioning from military control to a civilian-managed working environment faster than anyone expected, said Glenn Earhart, chief of international operations and CEA program manager. In less than four months, the military-to-civilian transition freed hundreds of Soldiers to return to

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their war-fighting duties and reduced the amount of military resources required to support CEA.

“When the program first began, we were facing quality of life issues, security difficulties and how best to use the available local national workforce,” Earhart said. “Now, all that has changed. We have installed base camps at each of our six sites that have air conditioning, hot meals, showers and laundry facilities. We employ over 1,700 local nationals as ammunition handlers, laborers and as security forces. Contractors also employ professional security companies from the United States and we control our site and convoy security.”

Things have progressed so well, Earhart said, that he anticipates all the captured enemy ammunition now within the boundaries of the six sites will either be secured or destroyed by Sept. 30. He also said the total collection and demolition work through the summer at all sites will be an additional 30,000 tons per month.

All contract workers, both U.S. and local national, serve as force multipliers and are one of the reasons the program has accelerated so rapidly, said Curt Murdock, chief of Iraqi CEA operations.

“Without the contract workers, the mission would have taken up to two years the quicker the insurgents get organized,” he said. “Now we will be able to finish 30 percent faster.”

“Our challenge from now until September 30 will be to clear remote caches scattered throughout Iraq,” Earhart said. “Teams will be assigned regions. Each contractor will schedule assets and time to accomplish that mission, which is more efficient and less dangerous than transporting via convoys CEA to the main sites.”

The CEA program has also reached another milestone; to ensure a quality local national work force is maintained and keeps pace with the demands of an improving economy in Iraq. Earhart noted that the previously unskilled labor force is now in a position to conduct its own CEA cleanup of the country.

“We have always aimed at returning a safer Iraq to its people,” he said. “Now, we have a skilled workforce, not only as UXO handlers, but as security forces as well. The local nationals enjoy their freedom to earn a living, and they seem more willing to take the risks associated with working for the coalition. They want to be able to feed their families and carve out new lives for themselves as they look to the future”

Although the CEA program has been funded through September 2004, the Corps’ Huntsville Center recently received an additional \$525 million to perform worldwide Munitions Response Services and Other Munitions Related Services. The Center awarded contracts to seven businesses to do the work.

“About 75 percent of the work awarded under the contracts is expected to be performed as part of the U.S. Army’s Captured Enemy Ammunition mission in Iraq and possibly in other areas outside the United States,” said Dan Coberly, the Huntsville Center public affairs officer.

Huntsville Center employees are committed to providing quality services and products in the most cost-efficient way possible, said Col. John Rivenburgh, Huntsville Center commander, and added that the mission in Iraq is no different.

“The bottom line,” he said, “is that the safety of our contractors, employees and government civilians takes priority over all other considerations.”

“Our soldiers, contracted workers and DA civilians serving in Iraq are magnificent,” he said. “They are diligent in their execution and professional in all they do. Their sacrifice is no less than it is for our soldiers, and we should never lose touch with that.”