

United States Institute of Peace
Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Iraq Experience Project

JOHN D. VAN GORP*
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Interviewed by: Haven North
Initial interview date: September 28, 2004
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Van Gorp, 38, is a Lieutenant Commander in the U.S. Navy with an MF in Management and a BA in Administration. He was stationed in Basrah from February – August 2004 with the CPA as a Contracting Officer. He reported to the CPA Contract Office in Baghdad. [Note CPA had contract officers in many locations throughout Iraq.]

Van Gorp notes that the situation in Basrah was somewhat comparable to a third world country. Roads were decent and the security situation seemed decent. There were shortages of electricity, largely because of Iraqis purchasing new appliances such as air conditioners. There were shortages of gasoline as well, which Van Gorp largely attributes to Iraqis buying new cars.

Van Gorp had several reconstruction contract assignments, including; (1) hospital rehabilitation; (2) school rehab; (3) purchasing fire trucks; (4) road construction; (5) power plant renovations; (6) sewage system renovations; and (7) mine awareness training. All were DFI (Development Fund for Iraq) funded.

The largest program Van Gorp worked on was \$25 million, the largest single contract he awarded was \$7 million. The smallest contracts were still sizable: in the tens of thousands. Van Gorp wrote an average of one contract a day at about \$200 to \$300 thousand per contract. Over all he wrote more than \$30 million. His office was initially staffed by three contracting officers in his office and two interpreters. The ratio had shifted to two and four by the time he left.

The projects Van Gorp found most satisfying were smaller projects. For example, one contract built a road into a neglected slum and had a huge effect on the slum's 50,000 residents.

The major contracting problem Van Gorp encountered was the difficulty of working with incremental funding. For example, there was a contract to rehabilitate the central courthouse but the coalition didn't commit enough money (up front) to rehabilitate the entire facility.

Van Gorp notes that his office operated very independently. While he worked for the CPA Regional Coordinator, he didn't technically report to him like a contract officer anywhere else would. Instead, the Baghdad Contract Office gave his office the direction they needed but were not involved in day-to-day business. He was satisfied with the support (the contracting instructions were good).

The office issued contracts in accordance with assessed needs. Needs were determined by monthly meetings of all local project officers (who essentially provided the leadership). Various projects and project areas would be discussed and prioritized. As

* Note: this phone interview was arranged and monitored by Van Gorp's public affairs office.

projects were approved, the contract would scope out the details on the ground and get estimates. Van Gorp notes that the Iraqi officials – whom he highly regards – in Basrah had input into all phases of this processes.

Van Gorp notes several lessons learned: (1) adequate staffing was essential: many provincial contracts officers contracting were unfamiliar with contracting and finance procedures and more time was needed to train them; (2) regional coordinators and others managing programs should have been familiarized with government contracting procedures; (3) Patience was needed as government money moves slowly and major infrastructure projects take time to implement and finance.

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Q: What was the period of time you were in Iraq and for how long?

VAN GORP: It was from late February until early August, 2004. It was just over five months.

Q: What was your position?

VAN GORP: I was a contracting officer for the Coalition Provisional Authority.

Q: To whom did you report in that position?

VAN GORP: We had a chief of the contracting office who was responsible for contracts in the Southern region and we reported to the contracting office in Baghdad [CPA].

Q: When you first went out there what was the situation like? What did you expect to find?

VAN GORP: I don't know, I watched the news like anybody else. I actually expected to go to Baghdad first and I ended up going to Basrah. I found out about that two days beforehand, so I really didn't know what to expect at all in going to Basrah.

Q: You were in the ORHA group?

VAN GORP: Well, technically I think they changed the name. I think originally the name was ORHA, then they went by CPA.

Q: Why did you go to Basrah instead of Baghdad?

VAN GORP: They had contracting officers all over the country.

Q: I didn't realize that.

VAN GORP: Basrah is where they needed one the most.

Q: Were you in Basrah for a while?

VAN GORP: I was there the whole time.

Situation in Basrah

Q: What was the situation in Basrah then: the economic situation, the security situation, the general environment you were working in?

VAN GORP: Somewhat compared to a third world country, but, I think, if you were there, it depends on what third world country you're talking about really because the roads were decent, the security situation seemed decent.

Q: Was the infrastructure badly damaged; what was the situation with the infrastructure?

My understanding of the infrastructure was basically similar to before the war.

Q: So, it hadn't changed very much.

VAN GORP: They had shortages of electricity, for example. I think a lot of that was because everybody was buying air conditioners. They had shortages of gasoline, but, I think, a lot of that was because everybody was buying cars.

Contract assignments

Q: What kind of work did you do as the contractor or what kind of contracts were you working on?

VAN GORP: They were all reconstruction. Most of them weren't like what you might consider major reconstruction.

Q: For example?

VAN GORP: They were everything from hospital rehabilitation, school rehab, roads, generators. We built a power plant or we had a contract for a power plant. It wasn't done when I left. Fire trucks. Mine awareness training.

Q: What does that mean?

VAN GORP: That's where you hire a company to come into a train a trainer program where they train people to train people in awareness training and what to do if they encounter a mine.

Q: They were hiring Iraqis to do this or Americans?

VAN GORP: Both. It was a foreign firm that came in to do it and they hired Iraqis. Almost their entire staff was Iraqis.

Q: Where was the funding coming from for these contracts?

VAN GORP: All the programs that I worked on, what we call DFI (Development Fund for Iraq) funding; it was all Iraqi funding.

Q: What scale of contracts were these; what size are we talking about?

VAN GORP: The largest one I did and I didn't even write the contract, but the largest one I managed was \$25 million. The largest contract I wrote was \$7 million and the smallest were in the tens of thousands, I suppose.

Q: Who were some of the major contractors?

VAN GORP: Almost all of them went to Iraqi companies.

Q: It wasn't Bechtel or some of those other American firms?

VAN GORP: No, I didn't do any of those. Any ones you hear on the news, I didn't do any of those.

Q: How did you find working with Iraqi firms and contracting with them? Did they understand the contracting procedures, the bid procedure and all that?

VAN GORP: Yes, mostly. I actually preferred working with Iraqis because the Europeans tend to throw in a lot of last minute terms.

Q: I see.

VAN GORP: The only thing that the Iraqis probably needed training in was preparing a proposal.

Q: But they understood the bidding process and all that?

VAN GORP: For example, I did a dredging contract, dredging and wreck removal contract. There were a few companies that would put in, mostly only, was a price. I don't think they understand that they need to demonstrate their ability to do the work as well.

Q: Right. Did you have training sessions with the contractors?

VAN GORP: We didn't have time to do that. What I would try to do was in the solicitation; I would state the type of information needed in the solicitation by saying that the contractor must demonstrate their abilities to do the work by using this system.

Q: How did you find these contractors?

VAN GORP: We advertised for them on the Internet, as jobs on the Internet.

Q: These were local firms that had access to the Internet?

VAN GORP: Yes.

Q: You had the dredging contract. That was a major one for getting the port open or was this after that?

VAN GORP: It was a small part of the port, the other one.

Q: The opening of the port was a major issue in the beginning, I believe.

VAN GORP: I had no visibility of that one.

Q: How did you follow the implementation of these contracts?

VAN GORP: What do you mean?

Q: I mean, after the contract was let; did you follow up on them?

VAN GORP: Yes, we were also the contract managers.

Q: You were not involved on the implementation side?

VAN GORP: It depends on when and it depends on the question. There were project officers and project action officers responsible for things. It depends on what problem came up.

Q: They were all in Basrah?

VAN GORP: Yes.

Contract problems

Q: What kind of problems came up?

VAN GORP: Well, for example, there was a contract to rehabilitate the central courthouse and they didn't, the Coalition didn't commit enough money up front to rehabilitate the entire courthouse. What they did was committed a certain amount of money and, for example, what they did they'd say, well, let's rehabilitate the first floor so we could get it done; it's probably just like any other construction contract. You get a quote to rehabilitate the first floor then more money, it's not necessarily a problem, but then we get more money and somebody says, okay the electricity on the first floor that wasn't part of the original bid process. We need to do that, too. Somebody will say, okay, well, we need to expand this courtyard because there's no room for anybody to stand in the shade outside. Let's build this. What I mean by problems is really....

Q: It was a very incremental process then.

VAN GORP: Yes, sometimes.

Q: As funds became available.

VAN GORP: Yes. Not every contract was like that. Sometimes they were just buying a fire truck, for example. You know that the company wants the fire truck. You get the specifications and the specifications are so large that you don't get enough bids. So, I had a fireman review the specifications and then solicit a fire truck based on the fireman's specifications. You get the fire truck and you deliver the fire truck and the company says, oh, well, I wanted chemical fighting ability or something. It's a fire truck, but, with chemical ability or something. Just problems like that: project actions that contracting officers can't be in the middle of.

Q: But you had to amend the contract then, I guess?

VAN GORP: It depended on the situation. Yes.

Satisfying projects

Q: Which one of the projects did you have the most satisfaction with in terms of what you were trying to get accomplished in the Basrah area?

VAN GORP: I think it's the smaller projects, like one of the projects was to build some roads in a ghetto area that didn't have any roads. If you're familiar with Southern Iraq, it's kind of a marshy area.

Q: That's right.

VAN GORP: You had so much money and at first they said, okay, well, let's just build the sub-base for the roads because we can't afford to pave it. So, we did quotes for the

sub-base. The road project: we ended up paving the whole thing with asphalt. It wasn't even all that expensive, but it's something that had a huge effect on the 50,000 people that lived in that area.

Q: How would you describe its effect on the people there?

VAN GORP: It was great. I mean I only went out to visit it a couple times, but there was another trip where the mayor came out and there were kids all over the place. The people that lived there were really grateful for what we did.

Q: You really opened up the area for them?

VAN GORP: Yes.

Q: This was in Basrah itself or on the outskirts?

VAN GORP: It was in Basrah.

Q: It sounds again like the money came in small amounts, so you had to amend the contract as you went along. Is that right?

VAN GORP: That wasn't necessarily the plan. The particular one was the road; we had enough money to begin with. Nobody had any idea how much it would cost. They asked for sub-base originally and then found out that the contractor could lay asphalt for a very reasonable amount. A sub-base lasts six months and asphalt lasts five years for an extra 25% and put some asphalt down.

Q: Good. Did you have an engineering staff you worked with?

VAN GORP: Sort of, yes. There were engineers in the utility department.

Q: These were Iraqi engineers or Americans?

VAN GORP: Both. Most of the people there were not American.

Q: That's right, this is a British area.

VAN GORP: Yes.

Q: So they did the design work for you? It was a public works type of department or something else?

VAN GORP: I wouldn't say that they designed things necessarily. It was more of a kind

of common sense approach; somebody to bounce things off of. Like in sewage, for example, you need to lay sewage lines. In the U.S. or Great Britain, the real thing would be to send out an engineer who calculates whether it needs to be six and a half inch pipe or seven inch pipe or something like that. We just had a guy who had common sense who would say, let's just say lay seven inch pipe and be safe or something like that. They didn't plan it out to the minute detail like we would here. We didn't design necessarily.

Q: Things were in a hurry I guess. There was a lot of pressure to get things done, was that right?

VAN GORP: Yes. Everything we did was urgent.

Q: You mentioned you worked on the sewer system. Did that work fix up the sewer system for Basrah?

VAN GORP: I never really saw the end effect. It's a huge sewer system. I know that they had dug the lines for all the pipes and I knew that they had laid a lot of the pipe. I don't honestly know how much it improved the system. I mean obviously it had to if you could see the amount of pipes that they laid; it had to have been an improvement, but I don't know.

Q: There wasn't a system there before?

VAN GORP: I think it was all completely clogged.

Q: I see, so they had to start over.

VAN GORP: It was a combination of efforts. There was laying new sewage pipes. There was cleaning out the existing sewage pipes.

Q: You mentioned schools and hospitals I think among the small contracts?

VAN GORP: Yes.

Q: Did you do quite a lot of those?

VAN GORP: I don't know if they did a whole lot before I did it. I think what happened while I was there is that the local government wanted to get involved in rehabbing schools after a while. I think a lot of the major school rehabs were done before I got there.

Q: I see. Did you visit any of them?

VAN GORP: No.

Q: Was the work in your area affected by security issues?

VAN GORP: Very little. I stayed on the compound most of the time. There were only a few days there that there was a lock down, meaning nobody could go anywhere. Contractors would still come to the compound, if necessary.

Q: There wasn't any continuing looting of the work that was done and things like that?

VAN GORP: There were problems here and there. I don't remember, but there were occasional problems, but I don't remember anything that was so big that it ruined the project. There were minor looting problems, of course. We always made the contractor responsible for security at the location.

Q: Right.

VAN GORP: It was his responsibility to make sure it was done. There was one situation; I don't remember the details. It was a prison and the prison was done, but we weren't ready to move into the prison and then somebody did a lot of damage to the prison. So, that ended up delaying moving into the prison even more.

Links with CPA

Q: Was there a regional coordinator, a CPA regional coordinator?

VAN GORP: Yes.

Q: You were working for him or her?

VAN GORP: I, more or less, worked for him, but we didn't report to him technically just like contracting anywhere else. Technically, we don't report to the person we're providing the service for.

Q: I see. You were reporting to people in Baghdad, too?

VAN GORP: Technically, yes. We operated very independently. They gave us the direction that we needed; they had a really good instructions on how to do contracts there, but they weren't involved in our day-to-day business.

Q: So, the regional coordinator wasn't setting priorities for things that you should work on?

VAN GORP: Occasionally, but you just really know based on what the program was and who was involved what was important.

Q: Who set the program?

VAN GORP: What they would do is all of the project officers, basically the leadership there, they would have a meeting about once a month and talk about all the projects and decide which ones were the priorities. Those would get approved and then we'd go out and scope the projects better and get estimates and things like that.

Q: Were the Iraqi officials in Basrah involved in the selection of the projects?

VAN GORP: I know they were involved in everything because, for example, we set up what we called waste transfer stations and a landfill; any time we did anything the local government, the local Iraqis had approved it. They knew exactly what we were doing.

Working with Iraqis

Q: How did you find the Iraqis to work with?

VAN GORP: They were great. They were really nice people.

Q: Did they have professional skills and competence?

VAN GORP: Oh, yes. I mean there was varying skill levels in English, varying skill levels on computers, but I'd say more than any other group that I've worked with, they were very trustworthy.

Q: The engineering talent and construction management and all that was pretty high level?

VAN GORP: Well, it depends on what you were doing. You get what you pay for. Like once I tried to go with one of the low bidders and it ended up being a mistake. The guy was a good engineer, but not necessarily a good construction manager.

Q: So, you didn't necessarily select the low bidder. You had to determine who had the competence to do it?

VAN GORP: Yes, it depended on the project. Like we did two fire stations. The first one we narrowed it down to about three or four and then we asked the local firemen which one he preferred and that worked well. Then, there was somebody who made an accusation about him and so we didn't pick him on the next one. It turns out being, we didn't use him on the next one and there ended up being problems. It worked better to use the opinions of the local people, the local officials.

Q: Right. Get them involved in the selection process?

VAN GORP: Yes. That was just one example. It was too hard to use them in the selection process. It just took too much time.

Q: Sure. Did you find that their construction skills were reasonably up- to-date?

VAN GORP: I'm not an engineer. I couldn't tell you. I'm pretty sure that their skills are as good or better than any of the others. I mean they do their work, unlike some of the other countries in the neighborhood .

Q: Compared to people in the United States, the firms in the United States, how did you find them to work with? Any big difference?

VAN GORP: Different projects, it's different projects. It's really apples and oranges . What I buy here is high tech equipment for aircraft and what I was buying there was something totally different. Not much of a comparison.

Other aspects of the work

Q: That's a very different kind of situation. Were there any other aspects of your work that we ought to touch on?

VAN GORP: I don't know, you had some really good questions.

Q: You were there what, six months, quite a bit must have happened. I guess you were working around the clock most of the time?

VAN GORP: Yes, we were working 14 hour days probably, that was the average. Minimum 13 hour days.

Q: How many people were there, in this compound; it was a compound of what, the CPA military people or what?

VAN GORP: The compound was a former regime palace compound; it was kind of shaped like a pea, and we were in the small section of it.

Q: Who else was in the compound?

VAN GORP: CPA people were in a small section and there was a British, not army, but a British brigade or battalion, I think it was a battalion in another section.

Q: Was there much interchange with any of those; were they doing some of the same things?

VAN GORP: Similar things. They also were doing local projects. Their emphasis was more on quick projects that needed to get done. They used the same funding, but they just had people out there that could see something that needed to be done sometimes faster than we could and they could react faster.

Q: Did you have any connection with the USAID projects in that area?

VAN GORP: I did not.

Q: Are there any other areas that we haven't touched on in terms of your work and what you thought about it and the circumstances that you worked in? You found Iraqis pleasant to work with.

VAN GORP: Yes.

Q: Well, one of the last things I wanted to touch on in these interviews is to have some lessons learned. Are there any three, four or five lessons, if you reflect over that whole period that might have been done differently or went well? These are lessons that can be useful to people in the future as they relate in your case to the contracting workxs?

Lessons learned

VAN GORP: My lessons learned that I've given any thought to relate specifically to contracting.

Q: Okay, what were some of those?

VAN GORP: Things we didn't have time to do train the provincial contracting representatives.

Q: Good, that's a good one, important.

VAN GORP: Both in contracting and in finance.

Q: You worked with that person I guess or that office.

VAN GORP: Yes, we would work with them, but everybody was just so busy, you just didn't feel like you had time to do that. If we went to war again and I had to go out there, that's one of the things I would do is to make sure... If it was all the same again, go out there and train the provincial people. We had regional coordinators, and they had governance coordinators in the four governorates.

Q: I'm talking about the contracting.

VAN GORP: Yes. It's just the matter of letting them know exactly what proper contracting procedures are. How to ask for bids, how to evaluate bids.

Q: Good.

VAN GORP: How to make bids and things like that.

Q: That's an important thought. Any other lessons that come to mind? How about the funding process that you dealt with? You indicated that was some problem about that.

VAN GORP: I'm not familiar enough with it. I think basically you can't just say, "Here's \$50 million. Spend it however you like." You have to have some kind of a plan on how you are to spend it and that's really the reason for what someone might say was the slow movement of money. I mean the money moved as quickly as it could, you just, like I said, you have to have a project identified in order to provide the funding for it.

Q: True. So, the planning process was a little slow, is that what you're suggesting?

VAN GORP: No. This is the function of how that kind of situation is where it's, like I was saying the military, they're out there everyday and they can identify things and can fix them quickly; whereas it seemed like in our situation, you get other government people involved in the project and to talk about whether it's a priority or not; it is going to take time. It just takes time really.

Q: Any other areas in particular in the contracting area that might have worked better? How many people were contracting officers were there?

VAN GORP: There were three contracting officers and we had two interpreters. By the time I left we had four interpreters and two contracting officers.

Q: What would you say was the total volume dollar-wise of the contracts that you were working with roughly?

VAN GORP: We all did very similar amounts. I did about a contract a day and averaged about \$200 to \$300 thousand per contract. I know I did over \$30 million worth of contracts.

Q: You did one a day for six months. That's a lot of contracts, right?

VAN GORP: Yes. To me that's a lot of contracts. I've got a friend that's...; in I've forgotten where he is. He's supporting the military and he's doing two a day.

Q: Can you really do good contracting that fast?

VAN GORP: It depends on the amount of work that the people require. I'm very methodical. I want to write a contract that I think is going to be completed and completed properly.

Q: Right, absolutely.

VAN GORP: Along with the training, all the people that came out there weren't necessarily contracting officers; they were just motivated people, so to speak. They didn't understand, I don't think, the business process. They came and they said they want to rehabilitate something and they haven't really thought it through exactly how it's going to be rehabilitated. If they need electricity and things like that, it just depends on the amount of legwork that was done in advance.

Q: The people you work with, how did you find their experience or their ability to do this kind of specialized work?

VAN GORP: It varied a lot. It's like anywhere you work. You can over-engineer something or you can under-engineer something.

Q: Did you have any preparation before you went out? Did your colleagues have any preparation for what you were going to be doing?

VAN GORP: I took a class in contingency contracting. I honestly don't know what kind of training most of the staff had other than that; actually a third to a half of them had done stuff like this before so they had some experience. The rest of them at least had experience in what they're doing. Like the guy responsible for the education, he's had experience in being I don't know what you call it, but being responsible for facilities for schools.

Q: So, you had subject area people as well to work with in this. You mentioned education. Was there somebody in health or in other sectors?

VAN GORP: Yes, in the health, they were all either doctors or nurses.

Q: Are you talking about Americans or Iraqis?

VAN GORP: The whole team was British.

Q: Were there teams in other sectors?

VAN GORP: Yes, there were about ten major sectors. I might be hard pressed to name all ten of them.

Q: What were some of them?

VAN GORP: Industry, Health, Law and Order, Education, Governance.

Q: Were you involved in the port administration side, I mean the contracting for that?

VAN GORP: Probably not to the extent you're asking about. I mean one of the contracts we did was to get a company to come in and train the Iraqis on how to meet the new United Nations security requirements. Everybody in the world has to do that.

Q: Are there other areas in your experience in the contracting work that you would recommend to others; we could have done this better if, or we did this pretty well in spite of?

VAN GORP: My only recommendation would be to make sure that everybody is staffed properly.

Q: You felt that you needed more staffing than you had for the work that you were doing.

VAN GORP: I thought we had enough staff to get by. We could have done more with more staff probably.

Q: Sounds like you had a huge volume.

VAN GORP: We had a pretty big staff, too. It depends on what your goal is.

Q: What do you mean by that?

VAN GORP: Your goal is to go in and, I can only draw conclusions based on my experience there.

Q: That's what we want.

VAN GORP: I'm sure the initial goals of the Coalition were to get basic services going like electricity and water and that's what they got. They got that done and they worked on the next basic things like more electricity and plumbing. Then after that they started working on schools, it's just a matter of the priorities.

Q: Right. Were they able to get the electricity and the water up to satisfactory levels while you were there?

VAN GORP: Unfortunately, those kind of projects take a long time.

Q: That's another lesson, I guess.

VAN GORP: Electricity power plants take a long time to build. I think it takes even longer to build some kind of a water filtration or reverse osmosis type plant.

Q: This wasn't just a matter of repairing facilities; it was rebuilding?

VAN GORP: Some of them were repaired. Some of them brought in new systems.

Q: Well, are there any other areas you touched on over that six months you were there?

VAN GORP: Not off hand.

Q: Okay, I think that we've covered it pretty well then. If something comes to mind, let me know. I appreciate your taking the time to have the interview. It will be very useful to the USIP exercise. So, anything else?

VAN GORP: Not that I can think of. If you have any more questions, I'll be happy to entertain them.

Q: Thank you very much. I appreciate your time.

VAN GORP: All right, Haven, thank you.

Q: You're welcome.

[Note: this phone interview was arranged and monitored by the public affairs office]