

“THEY KNOW WHO KILLED THE LIEUTENANT”

MICHAEL MAXEY

Michael Maxey was a Peace Corps volunteer in Brazil, a USAID contractor in Guinea Bissau, and a Foreign Service officer for twenty-seven years, serving as an agriculture and private sector officer in the West Indies, Honduras, Costa Rica, Peru, Nicaragua, and Iraq. Mr. Maxey is currently a contractor serving in USAID West Bank and Gaza as a senior development advisor.

I retired from USAID in 2007 only to accept a reappointment assignment as a USAID representative on an Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team (ePRT) in North Babil, Iraq. This area was part of the so-called “triangle of death” around Baghdad in 2006 and 2007. At the height of the insurgency in 2007, some of our units were taking Civil War–level casualties, suffering hits almost every time they went off the base. I coordinated USAID activities with ePRT programs financed by the State Department, the USDA, and other U.S. government entities. We supported the stabilization of our battle space and built linkages to sustainable development programs for the future. In short, my job was to help give the local populace hope for a brighter future, with the promise of a better life for their children.

At the beginning of my international development career, I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Brazil in 1974–76, serving as an agriculture extension agent. Much of what I learned during that experience I could now apply in Iraq—working with a host of stakeholders, creatively finding win-win solutions, and proactively solving problems rather than waiting for others to do so. I was struck by how much the Coalition soldiers in Iraq reminded me of my own children. I was impressed by their intelligence, dedication, and resiliency. I had the opportunity to listen to them and to share with them. It struck me that in many ways I had been preparing for this opportunity all my life and that I was in the exact spot I was supposed to be in, doing the exact job I was supposed to be doing, conversing with these young soldiers.

We lost seventeen soldiers in my brigade during my time in ePRT North Babil and every loss was heartbreaking. Those losses, and the death of an outstanding Egyptian-American civilian colleague, Maged Hussein, bothered me more than anything. I think of him often; he left behind a wife and a five-

year-old daughter. Everywhere I go in Iraq, I make sure to visit the memorials for our fallen that are set up on every Forward Operating Base to remind myself of the price we have paid in our efforts there.



Peace Corps volunteers in Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil (1976). Left to right: Michael Maxey, Richard Goughnour, and Doug Nelms. Photo by Julia Goughnour and used with her permission.

Among the things I will take away from this experience is a much better understanding of issues related to the Muslim world and how our interaction with countries there are critical to our national interest. More connects than separates us. I remember receiving a letter from a tribal leader in North Babil who thanked us for helping his community. He said: “Our canals once ran with blood, but you have changed them into canals of living water.” His

message was meant for the thousands of people who were involved in changing North Babil from an Al Qaeda stronghold to a vibrant center of aquaculture production—with \$35 million in annual production estimated for 2010—and an area that is stable and safe for families to live in again.

As I left Iraq I remembered the call to duty that our soldiers obeyed and their fidelity to the mission and to working with those who had, in the past, potentially caused us harm. I remembered a conversation with a young soldier prior to a mission north of Baghdad in which he said, to anyone listening, “They know who killed the lieutenant.” We had been talking about engaging local sheiks to create what we hoped would be lasting peace in the area. I told him that I understood, but he shook his head; we both knew that I would never really understand. The losses weighed on him and others, and the memories of good men gone were often stronger than the mission at hand. I pray for understanding and for solace, and I pray that young soldier can come to terms with the losses he suffered. I pray for peace.