

Backfill

On Assignment in Iraq

Contractor Rob O'Brien is an active-duty Marine. In August 2005, when he learned he was to be deployed to Iraq, he fully expected to participate in some of the riskier support operations his unit would be performing from its base in Al Anbar Province. But during training, his commanding officer found out he was a builder, and Staff Sgt. O'Brien received a single assignment: Build housing for the senior staff members on the base so that they could move out of the aircraft hangars serving as their home.

O'Brien knew that finding supplies and tools would be a challenge. Only a few basic materials — 1-inch, $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch, and $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch plywood; 2x6x16s and 2x12x16s —

are shipped from the States and stored on base. Before departing, he contacted a number of tool manufacturers for contributions; DeWalt responded with some saws and cordless tools, and Paslode sent a pallet of nails (though no nailers).

Once in Iraq, he salvaged 4x6 and 6x10 dunnage from shipping containers found around the base. He borrowed other supplies — or bartered for them — from nearby Army and Navy units and from civilian contractors who worked on the base. Sometimes he had to improvise; for example, since no roofing or asphalt felt paper was available, he caulked the roof sheathing joints, applied the thickest paint he could find, and hoped for the best.

O'Brien was in Iraq for six months. During that time, he and his helper, Lance Cpl. Brad Kucksdorf, a framer from Wisconsin, built an 11-bedroom house, a workshop, several outbuildings, and various pieces of furniture for barter. Not a bad tour of duty for a builder, considering the desert's 120°F heat and subfreezing cold, the occasional mortar round, and the IEDs (improvised explosive devices) and hidden mines that periodically detonated on the main road just outside the gate. — *Andrew Wormer*

