

A Right of Way Man at War

Notes from half-way around the world

BY TOM O'CONNOR, SR/WA



In 1991, I was working in Washington, DC conducting difficult negotiations for a rail rapid transit right of way through a large acreage tract of desert-like sand and gravel. I was also about to end my 28-year Army Reserve career, when I was suddenly activated, mobilized and rewarded with an “all-expenses paid” deployment to Dhahran, Saudi Arabia for Operation Desert Storm. As I told my reserve unit colleagues at the time, in the Middle East I was still participating in an effort to acquire desert-like territory under hostile conditions, just this time in Kuwait and southern Iraq. Not too different from what I was doing at home, really!

During my time in Saudi Arabia, I was called upon to perform the duties of a Transportation Officer. I often travelled via that country’s modern freeway system, which was apparently designed and built to U.S. interstate freeway standards, complete with iconic large overhead green signs (conveniently written in both English and Arabic). Along the way, I observed that most, if not all, civilian structures there were made of concrete. Also, diesel-powered freight trains ran from the very modern seaport at Dhahran on a perfectly straight corridor to Riyadh.

As a seasoned right of way manager, from time to time during my stay in Dhahran I wondered about private and public property rights and the process there for right of way acquisition and relocation assistance for public facilities such as government buildings,

highways, railroads and pipelines. I hastily concluded that there probably wasn’t any need for public alignment hearings or exhaustive environmental impact studies and hearings, relocation appeals and protracted legal proceedings. I figured that when you have a monarchy, if the King decides a public facility is needed and where it shall be located, that may be about all there is to right of way acquisition.

At the end of hostilities, and just in time for me to retire from the Army, I returned home and to my civilian position in the Office of Real Estate at the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA). I also returned to my aforementioned right of way negotiations at the sand and gravel operation with many new rapport-building stories from

my time in the service. I mentioned my observations to a couple of the engineers at WMATA, who informed me that the sand in that northeastern part of Saudi Arabia along the Persian Gulf was too fine to be used in making concrete. Consequently, in that sand-rich desert kingdom, they actually have to import sand from other countries. Further, they told me about the complicated effort involved with constructing concrete runways at the King Fahd International Airport. Because of very high atmospheric temperatures, which top out at over 120 degrees in the summer, and the fact that making concrete is a heat generating process, they first built large structures for making ice blocks to be added to the “recipe” for mixing sand and gravel for concrete. Of course that begs the question, how did they get the water to that arid land? More pipeline rights of way, no doubt.

Fast-forward to last year’s 60th Annual IRWA Educational Conference in Hartford, Connecticut, where I had the good fortune to meet an attendee from Saudi Arabia. After telling him my story about visiting his country in 1991, my new acquaintance honestly responded, “I really don’t know anything about that time, as I was only three years old in 1991.” So even though we are separated by a few generations, I know that if I ever return to Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, I will have an acquaintance there, who is hopefully still a right of way practitioner and an IRWA member. ☺



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