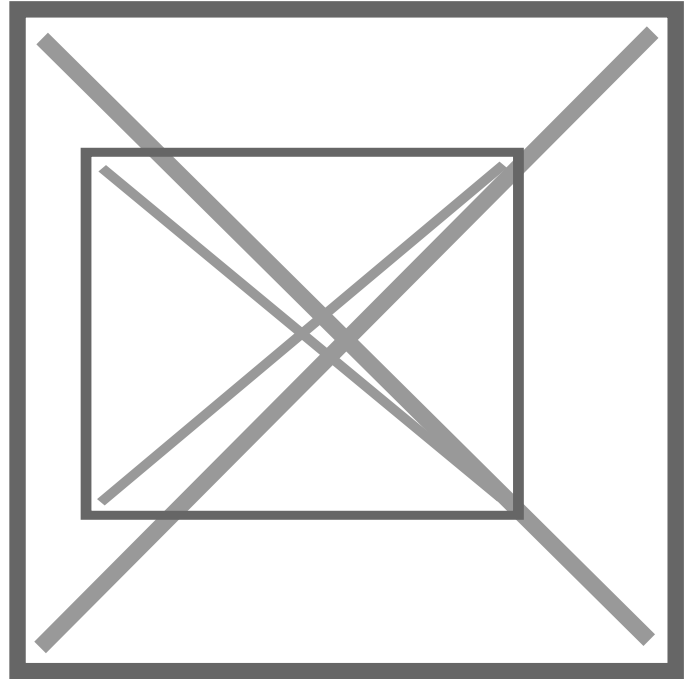


## Salvation Army teams with Marines to supply Iraqis with propane

*by Army Master Sgt. Robert Cargie –*



**Maj. Donald Penny (left), Major Mike Olsen and Capt. Peter Tabash, walk the grounds of Al-Kut's propane storage and distribution plant.**

AL-KUT, Iraq – “People here can’t live without propane,” Mike Olsen said calmly as he stood on the runway at an airfield in Al-Kut. Olsen, a major with The Salvation Army, is the Senior Disaster Relief Coordinator for Iraq. He was in Al-Kut to assess current propane gas availability in Iraq. Iraqis use propane as a fuel source for cooking their food.

Olsen is a burly man who has had many occupations in his life including firefighter and police officer. He looks at ease in the midst of armed Marines and battle-damaged buildings.

He and other members of The Salvation Army have been in Kuwait since early January. They were originally sent to the region to establish refugee camps along the Iraq-Iran border.

He tried for over a month to obtain an entry visa from Iran so he could start construction. He never received the required cooperation so the camp was never established. The refugee crisis never materialized so Olsen attempted to offer any productive assistance.

“The bottom line is that we were sent here for a reason and that reason was to assist the Iraqi people,” Olsen said. As it turned out, the assistance came in the form of providing propane to the people of southern Iraq.

During a visit to the Coalition Forces Land Component Command’s Humanitarian Operation Center in Kuwait City, Olsen met Lt. Col. Fritz Bystrom, an action officer with the I Marine Expeditionary Force Humanitarian Assistance Coordination Center. His job is to match identified need within Iraq with organizations that can provide the required product or service.

“I am basically a middleman,” Bystrom said. “We were on the lookout for an [non-governmental] organization to assist us with this need – some group that could help us solve this propane problem. Propane had always been identified as a priority within the 1st MEF area of operation.”

Soon after that meeting and after many phone conversations Olsen and Bystrom flew from Kuwait to Iraq and met with Capt. Peter Tabash, a Marine Corps reserve civil affairs officer. It was Tabash’s job to assess the amount of propane required to meet the needs of the Iraqi people in and around Al-Kut.

Prior to Operation Iraqi Freedom, Al-Kut was a major distribution point for propane in southern Iraq. Tabash’s assignment was to re-establish the plant’s operation and restart the distribution system.

“I come out here every day,” Tabash said, walking with Olsen and Bystrom around the now deserted plant. The sun was beginning to set and the large, round propane storage tank cast a long shadow over the plant yard.

He had set up his office in the propane plant on the outskirts of Al-Kut. Vandals and looters damaged the plant but according to Tabash it is still “operational.”

Tabash speaks Arabic fluently. He says that with that ability he was able to create a positive relationship with many of the people who have the knowledge to help solve the problem.

“People call me the ‘propane man’,” Tabash said with a smile. “They know what I’m trying to do and they come up to me and thank me.”

As a self-proclaimed “religious man” working for a religious organization Olsen said he saw “God’s hand” at work.

“I believe we don’t do things by accident,” Olsen said.

“That was confirmed tonight as we stood in that gas plant. I find a young Marine officer who is knowledgeable, extremely caring and speaks Arabic,” Olsen said, referring to Tabash. “I am convinced he is here because God wants him to be here.”

After assessing the plant Olsen said he could begin the process that would put cooking fuel back in the homes of the Iraqis.

“You don’t want to begin a program like this,” Olsen said. “It’s kind of like trying to build a ship at sea.”

Olsen explained that ideally he would research the issue, find the appropriate people to staff the operation, make a plan and implement the plan. He said when you start the process in the middle “you have to be prepared to make mistakes.”

Olsen has \$300,000 of The Salvation Army’s money available for this project. With that money he said he would be able to move over 30 trucks filled with propane “almost immediately.”

After that he hoped to help re-establish propane production and distribution in Iraq.

“We never thought we would be in the propane business,” Olsen said. “We had no idea of the depth of the problem. We’ve been running to play catch-up.”

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