

Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing
“Contractor Misconduct and the Electrocution Deaths
of American Soldiers in Iraq”

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My name is Jefferey Bliss. I live in Clyde, Ohio and work at Davis-Besse Nuclear Power Station in Oak Harbor, Ohio for First Energy Corporation. In 1985, I joined the Navy as an Electrician and have been one ever since. I worked on Amphibious Assault ships and taught electronics at an ASW base in San Diego. I had extensive training in many schools during the eight years I served in the military.

In 2003, in a weakening economy, I was laid off from my job in Toledo. While laid off, I heard that Halliburton/KBR was hiring for work they were doing for in Iraq & Afghanistan under the LOGCAP contract. I researched KBR on the Internet, made some calls, and signed up with a recruiter. Looking back now it seems crazy I did it, but like I said previously, it was a tough economy, and layoffs were prevalent everywhere.

I started with KBR in January 2005 as an electrician assigned to Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan. Two fellow electricians from Toledo also went with me to Afghanistan. We were all told we would work at Bagram together. Once we arrived there, we were split up immediately. One was sent to a base near the border with Pakistan, and the other electrician and I were sent to the Combined Joint Operating Areas or CJOA.

The unit I was assigned to traveled the country by airplane, helicopter, or road convoy to support Forward Operating Bases and Provincial Reconstruction Teams. This assignment brought with it an increased risk to us for no additional pay. Working for CJOA gave me the chance to see much more of the country than I would have at Bagram Air Force Base. I saw much in my experience with KBR that shocked and amazed me.

The carelessness and disregard for quality work at KBR was pervasive. For one thing, the company did not provide electricians with the tools they needed to do the job properly. On my first assignment, I was given a pair of lineman’s pliers and a screwdriver. No meter, no other tools. I would have been happy to bring tools myself, but was specifically told not to. I was told I would find what I needed in the field from other KBR workers or U.S. soldiers.

I was also surprised to discover how many KBR electricians did not have the right experience and training. KBR hired many third country nationals who weren’t familiar with our electrical standards. Many of them also did not speak English, which made it difficult for them to communicate with us as we tried to correct problems.

These shortcomings were made worse by the fact that KBR failed to provide adequate supervision of the work done by its electricians at almost every base I went to in Afghanistan. This lack of supervision was part of a good old boy network at KBR, where communication was poor and professionalism was non-existent.

Even though we were there to make money as electricians, I felt we had a responsibility for the safety of others, not just to make the lights come on or the motors turn. That's why we have a National Electric Code (NEC). However, this sense of responsibility was rarely on display. The attitude of the KBR supervisors was usually, "This is a war zone, what are you gonna do?"

I saw first hand how KBR's carelessness unnecessarily put people's lives in danger. In Qalat, we went to an outpost at the Castle of Alexander the Great. I was working on a generator and its distribution panel. I observed the panel was not properly grounded: the electrode was not "bonded" to the grounded wire as required by the NEC.

After making notes and a materials list to correct this, I was told there was also a problem with a branch wire feeding a "Conex box" next to that panel. The Conex box was used as a Tactical Operations Center, or TOC, by the soldiers there. The soldier showed me the wire (which was the wrong kind to be using anyway) and told me it went up on top of the box and entered under some sand bags. We had to climb on top of the Conex box to access and inspect this wire.

Next to the other side of the Tactical Operations Center was a line of HESCOs, or portable bunkers, and on the other side of that, another Conex box that was used for storage. As we climbed up onto the HESCOs to reach the wire, the soldier placed one of his hands on each box and screamed and shook for about 2 seconds. His knees buckled. He fell and shouted that he had been shocked. I immediately took a meter and measured between the boxes and found there were 400 volts A.C. present. Luckily, the soldier was not injured.

Upon asking questions about the installation, I found out that a KBR plumber and KBR security officer had wired that panel. I wasn't sure why an electrician hadn't wired it, but I eventually made the repairs and reported the incident to my foreman, who was also an electrician. He said nothing more of the incident to me after that. That is just one of the many instances I could tell you about today, but I assure you, that was not an isolated incident.

KBR also showed rather strange judgment in some of the assignments it gave to its qualified electricians. At another base where I was stationed, I was told I would be there for eight days, but I ended up staying 2 and ½ months with no assignments. I was expressly told not to do any electrical maintenance. I was told I could work only on new construction, but there wasn't any of that to do until much later – when I was assigned the task of building a dog house.

Throughout my time in Afghanistan, whenever I brought up safety concerns, I was accused of “big dealing” things by KBR supervisors. I even tried to start a simple field training program, which was shot down quickly, as no one in KBR management or supervision seemed to care or want to put forth the effort. I was glad and honored to have helped the soldiers in Afghanistan, but ashamed and embarrassed to work for KBR because of the way they served the soldiers there. Our soldiers deserve better. Thank you for letting me speak today.