

...16 U.S. soldiers have died from electrocution in Iraq

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Northwest Labor Press. "It was the only way I could be patriotic and support the troops and my family."

It wasn't until Crawford had returned to the United States that she learned soldiers had been killed in Iraq — not in the war zone, but by electrocution due to improperly grounded wiring while taking showers, washing Humvees, and swimming in pools.

"I was watching the news and saw a story on the electrocutions," she told the Labor Press. "I was dumbfounded. I was shocked, but I wasn't shocked. It was like my worst fears had been realized. I knew how things were done over there. I knew that ... I just cried. I was sick that this was going on. And I was angry because I was over there for two years and we were never notified that this was happening — to heighten our awareness to grounding issues, to shock hazards, to raise the priority on shock reports ... nothing. It was totally kept quiet."

Encouraged by her family and friends to start writing about her experiences, in April 2008 Crawford started a Web site: mssparky.com and began blogging.

"I knew why it had happened and I blogged about it," she said.

Soon after launching the Web site she was contacted by staff of U.S. Sen. Byron Dorgan (D-ND). After several phone conversations, she agreed to testify about her experiences.

"I'm not political. I wanted to know what their agenda was first," she said. "I'm not going to be anyone's tool to push someone's political agenda. But this is a bipartisan issue about our soldiers. Both Democrats and Republicans are part of this investigation."

A native Washingtonian, Crawford grew up in Benton City, located a few miles west of Richland, and graduated from Ki-Be High School.



Debbie Crawford, a member of IBEW Local 48, worked at Saddam Hussein's Republican Palace in Baghdad. She is seen here holding a brick of \$1.6 million in \$100 bills that was stored in one of the vaults inside the palace. They wouldn't let her keep it.

She joined IBEW Local 112 in Kennewick, Wash., as an apprentice, turning out in 1984. She worked primarily at the Hanford Nuclear Reservation, where she moved into maintenance, management and engineering, thus letting her electrical license expire and her union membership drop.

In 1994 she left the Tri-Cities for the beaches of Oregon. She ran a small business in Seaside while homeschooling her daughter.

Crawford returned to the trade in 2000, re-testing for her electrical license in Oregon and joining IBEW Local 48.

She got the "traveling bug," and took union jobs wherever they could be found in the United States. A friend told her about a job in Antarctica building a lab for the National Science

Foundation. She took it.

Crawford returned to the U.S., traveled some more, then heard about work in Iraq. She told the Labor Press she was amazed at how easy it was to get hired. She applied online and two weeks later was flown to Houston for

orientation. "It was like a big cattle call," she recounted. "They didn't check my references. There had to be 500 or more people who had been hired by KBR on the same flight to Baghdad as me."

More than 21,000 people work for KBR in Iraq.

Crawford is looking for some of those former KBR employees who are willing to share their experiences with faulty electrical and other unsafe conditions in their camps. Electricians, soldiers and other civilian contractors are encouraged to e-mail her at: MsSparky@ms-sparky.com

Crawford has been sharing her information with the mothers of two soldiers who were electrocuted. They all testified before the Senate investigation committee on July 11. The mothers are suing KBR.

KBR has denied any responsibility. "There is no incentive over there to do it safely or to do it right," Crawford said. "There are no ramifications for KBR if they kill someone in Iraq. They still get paid."

Following her testimony before the Senate Democratic Policy Committee, Crawford met for three hours with the State Department's Office of Inspector General over concerns she raised while working in China.

After returning from Iraq, Crawford

took some time off, then headed to China in 2007 to work on the new American Embassy in Beijing — a job that required top secret security clearance. After four months, she quit.

"The safety conditions were worse in China than in Iraq," she said.

Her complaints in China also were ignored.

Crawford is on a mission to change the laws protecting U.S. workers at U.S. projects overseas.

"We need the union's help — the union's strength — to change the laws that protect U.S. workers that work on U.S. jobs outside the country," she said. "Personally, I think unions should try to organize the world."

Crawford is appalled that U.S. citizens employed by an American company working on an overseas project funded by the United States have no recourse when labor laws, job safety laws, human rights laws, are violated.

"Billions of U.S. dollars spent all over the world by Americans who have to have top secret security clearance," she said. "It's important enough that we have a top secret clearance ... but it's not important enough for OSHA to apply, or for labor laws to apply. They can make you work seven days a week, 16 hours a day and not pay overtime."

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