

More than just a shopping experience

The Navy's new Installation Service Support Center in Bahrain improves the quality of life and work for the 5th Fleet

By Andrew Stamer, Transatlantic Programs Center

In Arabic a souq is a marketplace or bazaar, and that's exactly what the 188,000-square-foot facility is – done American style. This two-story building has the appeal and feel of a typical shopping mall found in the United States.

Vice Adm. Patrick M. Walsh, commander, U.S. Naval Forces Central Command/5th Fleet, gave the facility his seal of approval by cutting the ribbon, recognizing the official opening on June 15. Col. Lawrence Sansone, Gulf Regional Engineer, and Michael Good, director of Navy Exchange operations, also helped cut the ribbon – all hands were on the oversized novelty scissors used in the ceremony.

"This new facility helps us achieve our personal goals," Walsh said. "So whether it's working out in the state-of-the-art fitness facility, purchasing a gift for a family member back home, or just grabbing a quick bite to eat, the Freedom Souq will go a long way toward improving the quality of our lives, as well as the quality of our work."

How this facility finally came to open its doors is a story that reaches back 10 years, according to Muhammad Khan, a project engineer with the Bahrain Resident Office. Large spans of time are common with construction, especially from concept through actual construction, and especially for a project of this magnitude.

"It's probably one of the biggest force protected (projects) I've ever worked on," said Khan of the \$24 million facility.

A New Trend

A common trend in the military has been to consolidate larger operations, such as the navy, post or base exchanges and commissaries, under one roof. This project takes the trend a step further.

"This building consolidates more than 20 functions into one large facility that provides Sailors, Soldiers and others with a safe area to shop and recreate," said Roger Thomas, director of Engineering and Construction Management Directorate.

The four main tenants of the souq are Morale, Welfare and Recreation (MWR), the Navy Exchange, a post office, and the Navy Federal Credit Union.

Before Freedom Souq was constructed, basic facilities were scattered throughout the naval base. The shops were small, located in trailers, and weren't adequate to support the influx of troops when a large ship would pull into port, said Khan.

Typical ship stores carry between 200 and 300 essential items for troops on board, according to Dan Cougevan, general manager, Naval Support Activity Bahrain Navy Exchange.

The Navy Exchange located within Freedom Souq has expanded from a small store to a 30,000 square-foot store that spans two floors.

"We'll have more than 7,000 line items in this store," Cougevan said.

"The first floor has food and consumables; the top deck carries shoes, clothing, jewelry and an outstanding assortment of technology-based products. This store is an absolute knockout," he continued.

But it is more than just a place to shop. It is the heart of the base and the focal point of a tree-lined pedestrian mall – the base's main artery.

Whether Sailors work the early or late shift, they will be able to grab a bite to eat at the 24-hour food court. Other amenities include laundry and dry cleaning services, barber shop, beauty salon, video store, Internet café, photo shop, two movie theaters and three clubs (one for officers, chiefs and enlisted personnel).

The MWR fitness center is located on the other wing of the building and boasts the latest in cardio and weight rooms. Its design also encompasses basketball and racquetball courts encircled by a full-size running track.

This track was designed to provide avid runners with the chance to maintain aerobic fitness indoors due to the extreme heat in Bahrain.

Troops can even relax after a work out in the sauna and steam room equipped locker rooms.

Protecting the Force

This facility was designed to meet the latest in standards, and one of those is force protection guidelines.

“The need for a force protected community service support center became apparent as early as 1996,” said Maj. Saiprasad Srinivasan, assistant resident engineer, Bahrain Resident Office.

In 1996, 16 U.S. service members were killed when the Khobar Towers complex in Saudi Arabia was bombed, which spurred a military construction boom in Bahrain and other areas in 1997. Since then, the Navy has invested more than \$100 million in construction projects.

The planning for Freedom Souq included these force protection requirements. These requirements were one of the most critical aspects the design needed to comply with, said Crawford Horne, senior architect who was involved with this project.

“One of the aspects of designing the building to meet force protection considerations is to keep exterior openings – doors and windows – to a minimum, yet keeping enough windows to allow some natural light into the building,” said Horne.

The Logistics of it All

Finding solutions to logistical problems is a common issue during construction, Khan said.

“It can be a challenge because most of the materials come from outside Bahrain,” he said. These items range from ceiling systems to specialized force-protection equipment shipped in from the United States.

“Procurement is a challenge because you have to think what you will need six months out,” Khan said. “These items can be hard to get one month out; it can be very expensive or even impossible.

“The success or failure of a project can depend on one item,” said Khan. With 30 years of experience in the field, he has seen projects that didn’t come through on time or within budget because of this lack of logistical planning. This aspect is important during the initial planning and throughout construction. And with a project as large as Freedom Souq, having the thousands of items where they are needed when they are needed was tough.

“It was challenging, but when I look back, it is something I can be proud to have been a part of,” he said.

Although many materials had to be brought into the country, this project had an impact outside of its secured fence line. The construction contractor in this case, Contrack International Inc., hired a local firm as a major subcontractor. These types of arrangements work out well because the local contractor knows the local laws and has connections with subcontractors that a firm from outside the country may not have, Khan said.

“At least half of the contract value goes back into the local economy,” said Khan.

This contract employed over 650 employees from 10 nationalities to include Bahraini, Bangladeshi, Egyptian, Filipino, Indian, Jordanian, Nepali, Pakistani, Sri-Lankan and American.

Construction was managed by the Bahrain Resident Office and completed in March. The project was completed in 30 months on budget with more than 1.8 million man-hours with no lost time accidents, said Srinivasan.

From March until the ribbon-cutting, the tenants were moving into the facility and getting set up.

It took coordination of players from the Naval Facilities Engineering Command, the public works department on the Bahrain base, TAC elements in Bahrain and Winchester, and the contractor, to make this project come together. Throughout the design process, the Navy, and tenants who would be occupying the facility, played an instrumental role in presenting their requirements to the TAC design team, said Keith Evers, project manager.

“There has always been a strong presence of teamwork and pride in the Bahrain program from all the participants: the Navy, Army Corps of Engineers and the contractors,” said Evers. “The success of Freedom Souq pays testament to these qualities, and when you thought the bar was on that last rung, it was raised higher.”

“We have opened a world-class facility for our world-class service members,” Srinivasan said. “It’s a one-stop shop for all their recreation, leisure and shopping needs.”

And the reaction to the facility since its opening “has been extremely positive,” Evers said. “You know your team has done well when you see the expression on the patrons’ faces when they entered the facility for the first time – they were in awe.”