

Postcards from Iraq

An Air Force Engineer's Adventure in Professional and Personal Growth



1st Lt. Jennifer Alecci checks a job site at Taji, Iraq.



Hailing from a small town, Twig, Minnesota, I never dreamed the Air Force would take me on such an adventure! Last November I deployed to Iraq and was tasked to be the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Officer In Charge of the Iraq National Depot Resident Office, north of Baghdad. Very quickly, from my office in Taji, I was overseeing 48 projects worth more than \$122 million. The mission is to help rebuild the Iraqis' military capability through reconstruction. As supervisor, it was amazing to see the pace of reconstruction through projects ranging from barracks to tracked vehicle disassembly facilities. Since I arrived, buildings that were in rubble and dilapidated were turned into usable facilities. We met weekly with the Iraqi Army and Coalition advisors to bring in their ideas about the reconstruction and the interaction worked well for all concerned.

This was my first experience with construction, but also my first experience to lend a helping hand through a humanitarian project supporting the

Taji Girls' School. On a trip with Taji Area Office staff, school supplies, soccer balls and shoes were welcomed by the headmistress of the USACE constructed school for Taji area girls, ages 12-15.

I was nervous before the visit because I wanted to make this experience memorable for the girls. To aid in this end, I learned in Arabic to introduce myself, say I was from the Army Corps of Engineers and I was really happy to be here today. After introductions, we started to hand out supplies and, at first, the girls were reserved and quiet.

When we began to give them things, they relaxed, but one classroom was extremely reserved. I thought maybe they didn't want the things and, perhaps, we had offended them. Then I peeked back into the classroom as we were about to leave and caught the girls smiling, talking and enjoying the supplies we had given them! I smiled and waved and they did the same. That told me they were appreciative and broke the cultural ice. It really made me feel good about the event, really good. It is something I'll never forget.

I am very thankful for the opportunity to serve my country. Thank you to my husband, Anthony Alecci, my mother and father, Valerie and Clayton Kusch, and my mother-in-law and father-in-law, Jill and James Alecci, for their love and support. Thank you to my grandparents Joanne and Marvin Kusch and Grandmother Muriel Wallgren. Your encouragement and positive outlook enabled me to trek the journey and grow both professionally and personally.

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Gifts to Taji Girls' School students are a personal highlight for 1st Lt. Jennifer Alecci.