

Postcards from Iraq

We're making a difference

**By Navy Chief Petty Officer Silas King
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I wanted to serve in Iraq, submitted the request, and my unit wholeheartedly supported the idea. That was six months ago and as I complete my tour I can tell you it's been one of the most personally rewarding experiences of my 21 years in uniform. Although my background is helicopter repair, this assignment was something totally new ...working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) helping rebuild this country.

I was assigned as the Non-Commissioned Officer in Charge of USACE's Taji office in northern Baghdad. That office is overseeing a variety of projects including getting water and sewer service to neighborhoods that never had it, electrical distribution, primary healthcare centers, road repairs, police and fire stations. I personally was responsible for such projects as the construction of a new girls school and a courthouse.

I've got two daughters and was proud to help a community get a new two-story 1350-square-meter school that will benefit 700 girls. They're all living in poverty, typical third-world conditions. This school is a signal to residents that their government is working. It provides some normalcy to the daily lives of the students who will be attending that facility offering a bright, clean, and safe environment – a stark contrast to what they face every day. It's a high point in my service here and I know we're making a difference.

I managed the daily work schedule of eight Iraqi engineers who are part of our staff. These are tremendous individuals. The Navy has taken me all over the world and there's no question these engineers are some of the bravest people I've ever worked with. They go outside the wire every day checking on projects. They face intimidation, illegal check points, death threats and they keep coming to work day after day with the goal of making Iraq a better place. We all know about the sectarian violence in Iraq, one tribe battling another. But for me, our engineers serve as a model of what Iraq can become. They set aside their religious allegiances interacting with local leaders, negotiating with ministry officials, trying to reach a common consensus so projects can move ahead for the common good of this country.

I plan to stay in touch with our Iraqi staff. They represent the best of what this country has to offer. I've invited them to visit my home in Prescott, AZ, anytime. They give me hope Iraq can successfully transition to a more stable country.

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