

# Postcards from Iraq

## A Personal Story

by Jim McCoy  
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**B**efore committing to volunteer duty in Iraq, I had a spirited debate with two of my closest friends. In short they thought I was nuts. "Why do you think you have to do this?" they asked. My reply was that it was a 'personal thing.' I think everyone should contribute something to their country and I had a debt to fulfill.

I suppose to understand, one would have to go back about 30 years. Unlike my close friends, I did not serve in the armed forces. They saw fierce combat during the Vietnam War. When I reported for induction after graduation from maritime school, I was deferred due to a back injury. It was late 1972, and the war in Vietnam was soon to draw to a close.

At the time, I had mixed emotions. Part of me was a happy. I had just graduated from a maritime institution with para-military traditions and a heavy academic load. I was looking forward to something less regimented. Still, another side of me felt something incomplete. I had grown up in a military home with a sense of service to one's country. My father, a veteran of World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War, had been a Chief Petty Officer in the Navy with a distinguished career.

I had been to Vietnam during my sea time as a cadet, assigned to a ship sailing between DaNang and Saigon in 1970 and 1971. I recall all too clearly looking through the binoculars at the Hospital Ship Mercy anchored in DaNang harbor not far from my ship. I remember seeing the wounded, most in very bad shape, being unloaded by the choppers. I have never forgotten those images. It was very surreal. I remember thinking at the time that we were all about the same age. I wondered how it was I was here and they were there. The young men I saw through my binoculars were contributing much, some all. My service seemed insignificant and paled in comparison to theirs.

When the opportunity came to serve in Iraq with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, I didn't immediately volunteer but I felt an immediate tug within. Soon after, I decided to come and do my bit.

Having spent many years away from home, it was no easy task getting my wife's support, but after nearly twenty-four years she knew me. She finally supported the idea saying, "I think part of you has always felt incomplete because you never served in the military." This work is not in the armed forces but it is service rebuilding Iraq and supporting our troops. I'm glad I came. For me, between my maritime service in Vietnam and my tour with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Iraq I now feel better about my contribution.

I'm not sure how one measures their contribution. However, as my service here draws to a close, I find that it's no longer important to try and measure contribution. What's important is to say that I was part of something really big, serving a worthy cause. I also think it will prove to be the most profitable experience of my many trips abroad.

**(Left) Happy Iraqi kids on the way to the K1 project. The K1 project is a large scale, \$100 million construction project that involves 120 new buildings. It is one of the few New Iraqi Army military bases being built from the ground up.**



**Quality assurance team at K1: (Kneeling left to right) Larry Chamberlain and McCoy. (Standing, left to right) Wayne Elliott, two Iraqi engineers and Mike Gilchrist. Insert: Jim McCoy at K1. (Photos provided by Jim McCoy)**

