

# Postcards from Iraq

## Anbar— ‘Our tomorrow begins today’

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When I first found out I was coming to Iraq, I had mixed emotions. On one hand, I would be leaving my wife and newborn son halfway across the world for seven months. At the same time, I was given the unique opportunity to see firsthand the struggles, both Coalition and Iraqi, that are faced everyday in this war-torn country. I knew for certain that watching TV and reading the newspapers did not even partially represent the “ground truth” of what was really happening here. Being assigned to the Al Anbar Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) has allowed me to gain considerable insight into how far things have progressed since the fall of Saddam’s regime in 2003.

The Al Anbar PRT operates out of Camp Blue Diamond in northern Ramadi, the provincial capital. When I first arrived at the end of April, the PRT only had about 10 people. Now we’re up to about 35, with a projected end strength of 44. We are organized into five primary teams: Governance, Economic Development, Infrastructure, Agriculture, and Rule of Law. I am the Infrastructure Team Leader and Engineer. My team includes our Provincial Program Manager (a State Department Contractor), a Municipal Planner, and a local Iraqi engineer. Over the past few months, we’ve significantly increased our engagement with the Provincial Government as many of them become more accessible to us. One of the most significant developments in my purview has been the reinstatement of the Provincial Reconstruction Development Committee (PRDC), which had not met for over a year. The PRDC is responsible for coordinating and prioritizing infrastructure projects across the various sectors (water, electricity, roads, etc.) and recommending a capital execution plan to the Provincial Council. I have to admit, one of the key factors bringing this group back together was the approval of \$50 million in State Department funding to help the Provincial Government deliver essential services to its constituents.

There have been numerous indicators of success during my brief tenure in Iraq. When I first got here, we used to run between buildings at the Provincial Government Center in Ramadi for fear of a sniper attack. Now, we walk the compound without body armor. Last year, Ramadi was one of the most dangerous cities in Iraq. Now, it is held up as a model of progress and we average fewer incidents in a month than on many single days in the not-so-distant past. Most important, though, when I arrived, many of the Provincial Government officials were in Baghdad or hiding. The Provincial Council only met sporadically, either in Baghdad or on a Coalition base. The Governor was the only one who came to work (albeit only one or two days per week) at the Provincial Government Center and basically “ran” the province singlehandedly. Today, the Provincial Government Center is a hub of activity, with Government officials filling its corridors. The Provincial Council has its meeting facility restored and convenes regularly. Finally, for the second consecutive year, Anbar Province has passed and executed a capital budget, something that would have been unthinkable not long ago.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the efforts of our Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, and Airmen who literally put their lives on the line every day working in situations most of us would shudder at. Many of these brave Americans are right out of high school and saddled with responsibilities of those twice their age and compensation. These are the people who make it possible for us to do what we do. I couldn’t leave the gates of Blue Diamond or accomplish even the most basic tasks without their support. For that, I am eternally grateful.

During a recent visit by President Bush to Anbar Province, Governor Ma’moon commented to him: “Our tomorrow begins today.” I think this phrase best captures how I will remember my tour. In the next few weeks, I look forward to rejoining my family back in Japan, but will never forget the experiences and understanding I have gained here.



*LCDR Joshua Malkin chats with a local Iraqi during a site assessment of the Provincial Veterinary Hospital in Ramadi.*



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