

# Postcards from Iraq

I came to help them —  
turns out they helped me!

**By Shawn Castro**  
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My reason for coming to Iraq was simple — I just wanted to say I did my part when they asked for volunteers. But, my 6-months in Iraq turned out to be worth more than I expected.

I'm a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Construction Representative for southern Iraq's Maysan Province and there's no question, the best thing I've seen during this tour is the spread of freedom — courageous Iraqis stepping forward to provide a brighter future for the children and grandchildren. Every day there is something new — a music shop has opened in town, you see children on their way to school, hear about a man who stood up to a militia member, or a local pointing out an IED. I have visibly seen a change here for the better and am proud to be part of this effort.

There's a well-known saying, "Freedom is not free," and since coming here I've since learned first-hand that Freedom IS addictive! I think we, as Americans, sometimes lose sight of what it is we enjoy every day — being part of this historic mission really puts things in perspective. I came to help them ... turns out they helped me.

This deployment has given me an opportunity to see things first hand, not what the news stations choose to report, but what is actually happening on the ground. The things that are being done here are at a breakneck speed, and this experience has given me a whole new appreciation of what the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is all about.

I have seen the Corps Tug boats and breakwater repair, then watershed and river operations, recreational area improvements, and now disaster/reconstruction in a war zone. I don't think many people know how diverse the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is.

If you want to meet some very good people, you'll find them here as members of our USACE team. Because of the nature of our work and how we depend on each other on and off the job, close friendships develop. There's no doubt that although SSgt Ralph Prive and Ryan Hartwig in Basrah got a lot of good laughs at my expense, those are just two of the people I'll continue to pester long after we are all gone. There are a lot of folks up in Tallil as well that I'll stay in touch with through emails and phone calls after I leave. I came here as a construction representative and it became very clear on my second day the open mindset one needs — I was handed a bunch of folders and told "you are now the acting Resident Engineer until he returns from R&R." He had an extended leave and I had to learn fast. I would never have been able to do it without the help and support of the entire staff. The genuine camaraderie and numerous offers of assistance were amazing. Many times I heard, "We've all been in your shoes — just let us know how we can help."

Would I like to deploy again? Absolutely! With 8 years in the Navy and 4 years as a Merchant Marine, I'm just wondering if I can get stationed near the water next time. A sailor in the desert just defies logic! After some downtime stateside, we'll see what my options are.

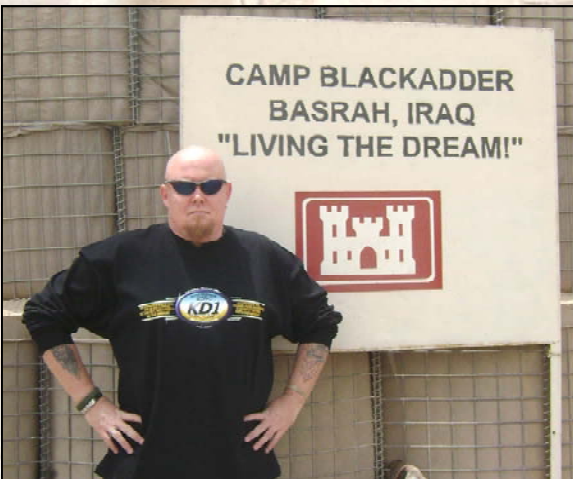
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**Shawn Castro speaks with Iraqi Gen. Habib.**



**Shawn Castro (right) on a mission with Major Dan George (Basrah Provincial Reconstruction Team Engineer)**



**Construction Rep Shawn Castro**