



Watching history unfold: Éric Mercier took this picture in late 2003 as one of the giant busts of Saddam Hussein was removed from the Republican Palace.

Mike Elliott, 34, who left his wife and baby daughter in Tel Aviv, where he was posted, when he went to Iraq for two months in early 2004, says that Baghdad is “a tough assignment—though not as tough in some ways as people might think.” The Americans especially see to creature comforts, for example offering grits, ice cream and a salad bar at meals.

Special amenities and social activities provide momentary relief amid the constant danger and restrictions, says Williams. “Everybody is aware of the risk of something happening.”

Inside the Green Zone, “you feel more or less safe,” says Rowswell. “The problem is that you feel suffocated.” He coped by writing, keeping physically active, and maintaining contact with family and friends by phone and email. “In some ways you feel as if you’re at the centre of the world, because you open a newspaper every single day and it’s about where you live.”

Ambassador Holmes says the risks in Baghdad are real. In late February while he was stationed there, a rocket landed in the compound where Canada’s diplomats live and work, falling metres from the main building. Luckily, it failed to explode and no one was injured.

Still, he adds, the situation is slowly improving. “Although there is a tremendous amount yet to do, I remain always optimistic.” The Canadians who have served in Baghdad “are outstanding, dedicated and brave representatives of their country. I am proud to have worked with them all.”

For those who have left Baghdad, making the transition has not been easy, Rowswell says, although many have gone on to other exacting assignments in places such as Kandahar, Damascus and Algeria. “There’s a real sense of meaning to your life when you are out there making a difference.” 🍁

First impressions

Canadian diplomat Erin Dorgan was posted to Baghdad from July to September 2005. These were among her first impressions recorded in the days following her arrival in Iraq:

Landing in Baghdad

The corkscrew landing was very steep and somewhat dizzying, but it gave a great view of Baghdad. My first impression was of barbed wire, blast-walls and Blackhawk helicopters flying low. Iraq is clearly and unambiguously a conflict zone.

The airport

I arrived in the civilian terminal, which was packed with heavily armed western security guards. The electricity went off as the baggage was coming off the conveyer belt, plunging us into darkness and spurring passengers to tussle and scavenge for bags in the pitch black.

Transport into the city

We took British Puma helicopters to the International Zone. The helicopter bridge gives an incredibly close, intrusive view of Baghdad and people’s lives. We were flying so close that we could see what people were eating for dinner and what they were watching on television. When they looked up at the loud helicopters right above them, we would make eye contact.

Working at the Republican Palace

Saddam Hussein’s old palace is, not surprisingly, huge and grand, with high ceilings and airy halls, marble and chandeliers. The mess hall where I eat is a remarkable sight, with hundreds of heavily armed soldiers eating cheap processed food on plastic plates (no recycling here!) in a grand, high-ceilinged ballroom. There are ubiquitous signs reminding us to clear our guns before sitting down to eat.

The social scene

Social status here is based on badges. Generally the more you have, the more important you are. Guns also help. Some of the foreigners here are deeply committed to trying to make Iraq a better place. Others are drawn to the promise of danger pay. All of the long-timers talk matter-of-factly about having lost civilian colleagues.

Serving in Iraq was “an incomparable experience” for Canadian diplomat Erin Dorgan.



photo: courtesy of Erin Dorgan, FIC