



Better times: Éric Mercier stands in 2002 in the Hay al-Mansour neighbourhood where Canadian diplomats stayed. The area is now considered unsafe for foreigners.



A photo taken in October 2003 from a bombed-out building shows the Republican Palace topped by busts of Saddam Hussein in the distance.

months than I had in my whole five years in the foreign service before that.” Dorgan found herself serving, for example, at a meeting with top Iraqi officials, ambassadors from the United States and Britain, and a high-level UN representative.

The lessons of Baghdad were not limited to world politics, however. “I learned more about generators than I ever thought possible,” Dorgan says, explaining that she had to repair and then replace the generator for the building that will house Canada’s embassy.

Elizabeth Williams, 33, who has served since last August as Canada’s head of aid for Iraq, says young diplomats find that with so much autonomy, “it’s a bit of an addictive environment.” Day-to-day life is a surreal mix of hardship and comfort, flak jackets, helmets and elaborate social events. “We do make fun,” says Williams, who celebrated last Canada Day at a party in the new embassy property. There have been two balls hosted by the British, she adds. “Who would have thought you’d need a fancy dress in Baghdad?”

Daniel Maksymiuk, 29, spent the first week of his five-month posting in mid-2004 as an advisor to the Iraqi Ministry of Planning sleeping on a cot in a ballroom of Saddam Hussein’s Republican Palace. Then he moved to a shared trailer in what had been its orchard.

Those posted in the early days lived in relative comfort in trailers with windows; by the time Rowswell arrived for his second tour of duty, he found himself doubling up in a windowless container tucked inside a covered parking garage surrounded by blast walls and sandbags. “We had concrete all around us in every single direction.”

It was probably just as well: Éric Mercier, 46, who served in Baghdad from September 2003 to February 2004, recalls that some 19 trailers were punctured by

bullets in the early days he was there. When he arrived the Coalition Provisional Authority was busy planning the country’s reconstruction, but within three weeks, “the shelling—and the serious insurrection—began and never stopped.”

After that, much effort focused on counter-insurgency and moving to safer ground, he says. “Working to establish Canada’s presence in postwar Iraq meant getting used, so to speak, to having missiles and mortar shells thrown in your general direction at dusk and dawn, three to four times a week.”

Concerns about security have increased over time, says Ambassador Holmes. “Security affects everything Iraq wants to do, it affects everything we want to do, it affects the daily lives of ordinary Iraqis.”

Working in such an environment can be frustrating—but also humorous at times. When Maksymiuk wanted to meet with an Iraqi government minister in the so-called Red Zone beyond the international quarter, it required making arrangements with a private security firm. “They would provide two armoured trucks and five or six fellows with weapons and they would plan the route and so forth.”

The security detail ended up taking him to the wrong minister, but, having just arrived in Baghdad, Maksymiuk didn’t realize it. He argued his way into the official’s office and had spent half an hour making his case when his phone rang. “The incoming call was from the minister I was supposed to be seeing. I had a horrible feeling come over me: Who am I talking to?”

Maksymiuk quickly concluded the meeting without letting on that he was with the wrong person. “The bodyguards thought it was tremendously funny and later that day we were able to find the correct minister, who also thought it was funny.”