

BAGHDAD DAYS

For Canadian diplomats posted to Iraq, work and life are tough but “addictive.”

They work in a conflict zone, spending gruelling hours on the job and living for months in cramped quarters away from home and family. Yet for the Canadian diplomats who have served in Baghdad over the last three years, the posting comes with challenging work opportunities, intense personal experiences, a curious social scene and a sense of meaning far beyond what most diplomatic positions offer.

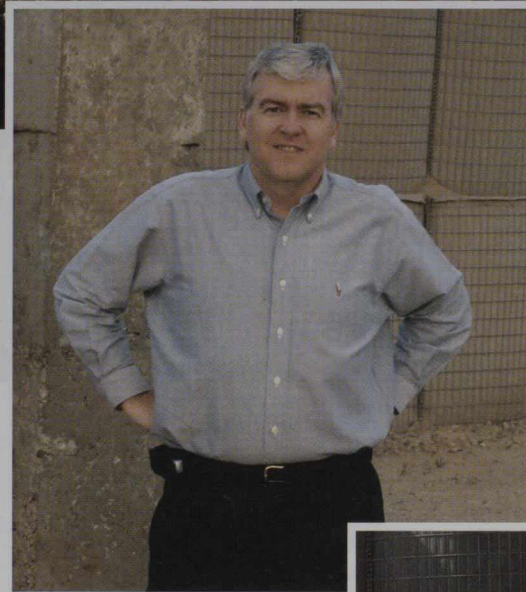
“It was the best job I’ve had in the foreign service,” says Ben Rowswell, 35, who has been posted twice to Baghdad since 2003. “I felt as though I was watching the history of the 21st century unfold before my very eyes.”

Canada’s diplomatic presence in Iraq was cut to a minimum during the last decade of Saddam Hussein’s regime, with officials based in neighbouring Amman, Jordan, travelling to the country as the situation and needs warranted.

Following the coalition-led invasion of Iraq, Canada undertook a slow return, with at least one Canadian representative on duty in Baghdad, sharing office and living space inside the International or Green Zone and acting as liaison officer, carrying out Canada’s mandate to promote good governance, democratic reform, the rule of law and human rights.

“It’s in our longer-term interests to see a stable and prosperous and free Iraq,” says John Holmes, the Canadian Ambassador to Jordan who last summer was appointed “non-resident” Ambassador to Iraq, re-establishing a Canadian embassy there and overseeing the delivery of Canada’s \$300-million program to support Iraq’s reconstruction and transition to democracy. “The instability of Iraq, including its increasing use by terrorist networks, threatens not only Iraq itself, but the immediate region and the whole world.”

Rowswell, the first Canadian posted to Baghdad after the formal end of hostilities in August 2003, learned to improvise from the moment his plane landed and there was no one to meet him. “I basically had to hitch a ride from Baghdad airport,” he remembers. When he returned for a second stint from August 2004 to June 2005, things had changed significantly: Security requirements today



▲ Canadian diplomats lived in 2003 and 2004 in trailers outside of Saddam Hussein’s Republican Palace, now home to the U.S. Embassy.

◀ Canadian Ambassador John Holmes: “It’s in our longer-term interests to see a stable and prosperous and free Iraq.”

mean flying from the airport terminal to the Green Zone in military helicopters.

The work of successive Canadian diplomats in Baghdad has required ambition, dedication and creativity. “Other than the fact I had an office waiting for me and a trailer to live in, there was no set of rules I had to follow,” Rowswell says.

His most rewarding experience was watching the first Iraqi election of January 30, 2005, unfold. Rowswell’s job was to assist the International Mission for Iraqi Elections, an organization chaired by Elections Canada that oversaw the vote and certified its validity. “It was astonishing, given the fear and the very palpable atmosphere of violence, to see 8.5 million people come out to vote in an election that was credible, free and fair,” says Rowswell, who has a framed copy of a ballot from that day on his wall at Foreign Affairs Canada in Ottawa, where he is now a policy advisor on global issues. “I felt proud that Canada contributed to that.”

Indeed, many of the Canadian envoys sent to Iraq have been young officers taking on senior duties they might not otherwise have expected so early in their careers.

“Professionally, it was an incomparable experience,” says Erin Dorgan, 28, who was in Iraq from June to September last year to witness the drafting of the country’s new constitution. “I learned more in those few short



▲ Elizabeth Williams, Canada’s head of aid for Iraq, wearing a flak jacket.