

When we landed on the ground in Baghdad, we received a briefing from Ambassador Ryan Crocker and General Raymond Odierno, Commander, Multi-National Force, Iraq. While in Iraq, we also received briefings from the 2nd Brigade of the 1st Armored Division Brigade Combat Team; Lieutenant General Helmick, Commander Multi-National Security Transition Command, Iraq; and the 890th Engineering Battalion. I came away from these briefings very encouraged about the situation there.

Since my first trip to Iraq last January, the improvement in the security of the region is remarkable. Our troops are continuing the transfer of power to Iraq Security Forces, Armed Forces and the Iraqi government. The Status of Forces Agreement will go into effect at the beginning of 2009, and although U.S. combat forces will be removed from Iraq under this agreement, we will still have Americans on the ground there in an advisory role. The timeline of these advisory troops will be based on input from American Commanders on the ground.

While in Iraq, I was able to visit with the 180th Horizontal Construction Company, which is an engineering unit out of Richmond and a number of other men and women in field units throughout Bagdad and Al Anbar Province. Thanks to the generous folks of the First Congressional District, I was able to take them several duffle bags of homemade cookies, and they were grateful, especially during this time of year. I am so proud of the Virginians there, from all over the Commonwealth, who have dedicated their lives to serving our country. I can assure you, the American men and women serving in the Middle East truly believe in the mission they are performing. They are some of the finest and most dedicated people you will ever find.

I had the privilege each day at meal time to sit down with our men and women in uniform from Virginia to take their questions and comments and to ask them what we needed to be doing in Washington to help them. As you can imagine, the number one question from the troops was about the economy. They were anxious and curious to hear how the economic downturn is affecting the average American and what the future looks like. I told them I am cautiously optimistic about the situation our country faces. Although things are difficult now, I believe it is important to remember the tremendous obstacles our country has survived in the past. With hard work, determination, patriotism, and a little thriftiness, I believe that our country can survive the current challenges we face.

I've said before that the First District of Virginia is blessed to have so many military families. I had the opportunity to call many of the families of the men and women I met in Iraq when I returned home to thank them for their sacrifice for our nation. This time of year is tough for many because moms, dads, sons and daughters are abroad, wearing our country's uniform and defending her flag. It was an honor to spend time with our heroes the week before Christmas. To them, and to their families whose sacrifice is felt more than ever this time of year, I extend my most heartfelt thanks.

Next week, I look forward to sharing with you more about my trip to Afghanistan, where I visited the busiest forensics lab in the world.

If my office can be assistance or if you have questions please feel free to contact us at <http://www.wittman.house.gov/> or 202-225-4261.