

## Journal from Iraq and Afghanistan – Kenny Marchant (TX-24), July 2005

Greetings residents of Texas District 24. I just returned from traveling in the Middle East with a delegation of Members of Congress. The purpose of the trip was to visit with troops, and tour Kuwait, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The other members traveling with me included Rep. Geoff Davis (Kentucky), Rep. Mike Conaway (Texas), Rep. Lynn Westmoreland (Georgia), Rep. Jim Cooper (Tennessee), and Rep. Madeleine Diaz-Bordallo (Guam). We were accompanied by two army escorts and two staff members from the House Armed Services Committee.

Although the trip got off to a rough start, it turned out to be an incredibly informative and eye-opening five days. We took off for the Middle East on a G-5 plane, but as it flew over Newfoundland, the plane was forced to turn around at 43,000 feet in the air and return to Andrews Air Force Base in Washington, D.C. because of engine problems. We were all a little discouraged to be back where we started after six hours on a plane, but pressed on with our plans and departed the following day. This time the plane made it all the way to our first destination: Kuwait City.

The next three and a half days were packed with meetings and visits to the troops, tours of military bases, briefings by generals from the coalition forces, and travel to and from Kuwait, Iraq, and Afghanistan. It was a rigorous journey, but well worth it. I was grateful for the opportunity to see the situation in the Middle East with my own eyes, instead of on TV or in the papers. I came away with several observations from the brief, but rewarding, time I was there.

First of all, morale of the troops is high. They are confident about the progress they have made in the mission to establish democracy and spread freedom in the Middle East. Not one serviceman or woman I interacted with displayed doubts about the reason and importance of his or her presence there. The troops seem positive; and very appreciative of the support they have received from folks like you back in the United States.

It is evident to me that U.S. forces cannot pull out now. We must get Iraq through the writing of the Constitution and their upcoming elections. Also, U.S. forces are training thousands of Iraqi troops every month. This must continue until the Iraqis can sufficiently defend themselves the democracy they are building. In Afghanistan the situation is a bit more complex. Multinational forces in the region are protecting the existing government, dealing with the extensive drug-trafficking problem, and searching for Al-Quada cells in the rough terrain.

The following are excerpts from the diary I kept throughout my trip. I hope to provide you with some insight about what we saw, experienced and felt while traveling through the Middle East and meeting with U.S. troops.

Thursday

Today we flew into Kuwait International Airport after a seven-hour flight from Shannon, Ireland. From the airport we ride in a motorcade into Kuwait City. At this point we were given two hours of much needed rest before heading to the air force base. This is when I first learned of the terrorist bombings in London. I was shocked and saddened by the events, and even more eager to meet with the troops and see how they responded to the latest terrorist attack.

That afternoon we arrived at Air Jan Air Force Base, it is about one hour south of Kuwait City. The base is massive: it spans about 50,000 acres across the desert. Air Jan is where all of the supplies, maintenance, vehicles, food, and troops arrive in Kuwait before entering Baghdad, and it is occupied by 11,000 personnel. It was 111 degrees outside.

We were taken into the war room and briefed by several generals and colonels on the operations of the air force base. One of my first observations was the presence of hundreds of computers that were used for surveillance purposes. The screens watched various places in Iraq, Afghanistan, roads between Kuwait and Baghdad, and the base in Kuwait.

They explained the complex process of getting goods, supplies, and troops in and out of Baghdad. Every day 890 loads of gas, food, water, ammunition, vehicles, tanks, etc., are on the highway from Kuwait to be used by troops in Iraq. All vehicles from Iraq are repaired on the base, and all troops must stay on the base at least two weeks before entering into duty in Iraq. We were also shown the garages where humvees and trucks are armored for battle. I got to sit in the driver's seat of one of the huge humvees.

The highlight in Kuwait was sharing dinner with service men and women from Texas on the base. It was humbling to hear their stories and talk about their experiences in the military. I was struck by how young most of them were; most soldiers were only about 21 years of age. I was inspired by their dedication to fighting for the United States. It was nice to be able to provide some comfort and encouragement from their home state, and I know they appreciated it.



*Marchant talks with troops from Texas in Kuwait.*

We then toured the base a bit more. Signs of American culture were everywhere. The shopping area had a Subway, Starbucks, Carl's Jr., and a gym. It was 109 degrees and the wind was blowing when we returned to our hotel in Kuwait city to rest before heading to Iraq the next day. I was reassured by this visit to the air force base in Kuwait – it is clear our troops have ample supplies and excellent conditions to perform to their fullest.

### Friday

We departed Kuwait for the Baghdad Airport at 6:00 am. Before loading the C-130 plane we each suited up in helmets and almost 30 lbs worth of body armor, as well as earplugs. We were joined on the two-hour flight to Baghdad by 30 other soldiers. These men and women were primarily in their late teens and early 20's, they donned complete artillery gear and backpacks with supplies. They seemed very serious and focused on the task ahead and the situation they were about to enter in Iraq.



*Marchant meets with a young member of the U.S. Air Force.*

I was quite struck upon landing in Baghdad: everything looked like a war zone. We were met and surrounded by special agents, and then loaded into helicopters. It was 113 degrees outside and we were still wearing armor and helmets.

The first helicopter took us to Al Faw Palace, Saddam Hussein's water palace, which now offices high ranking United States military officials. It is a spectacular palace along the Tigris River – beautiful but old, with a mansion that occupies at least 20,000 square feet. It was eye-opening to witness the contrast between Hussein's luxurious palace and the surrounding residences of the poverty-stricken people of Baghdad.

Here I was met with my personal armed escort, Col. Stephen G. Sanders from Coppell, Texas. It was a treat for me to be accompanied by someone from my own district, and Col. Sanders was more than helpful and informative. We met General Casey, head of all troops in Iraq, and he briefed us on the number and situation of troops.

Our group then moved by helicopter to Phoenix Base in the Green Zone, which is near the American embassy. We were briefed by Lt. Gen. Petraeus, Commanding General of the Multi-National Security Transition Command. The Green Zone is highly secure, everything was barricaded and two guards were assigned to protect each traveler.

After this briefing we were taken by motorcade in an armored car to the embassy. It is another of Hussein's palaces. In 1953 the King of Iraq and his family were taken from this palace and killed in a military coup. It now headquarters the 2,000 people who work at the American embassy. We toured the building and met with ambassadors. Visibility in the area was so low due to the dust that our departure was delayed two hours.



*Marchant (4<sup>th</sup> from left) and other members of the delegation in Baghdad.*

Finally we were able to leave the embassy, and we were escorted in armored Suburbans and vans back through the Green Zone. Eight foot high barricades lined the route. We were warned that suicide bombers are a problem in the region. Thankfully we arrived safely and boarded back into the C-130 plane for our return to Kuwait City. We landed there, ridded of our body armor and the delegation reloaded on a G-5 plane, ready for an all night flight to Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

### Saturday

We flew all night to Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan and landed at Manas Airport around 5:45 a.m. This is where all troops going into Afghanistan are based; the staff was very friendly gave us a tour of the air force base. We ate breakfast with the troops there and I gave away Texas flags.

After two hours at the air force base we loaded up on a C-130J plane with 40 combat troops and headed for Kabul. These soldiers were mostly reservists in their 30's and 40's; they adorned full body armor and helmets.

Security at Kabul airport was incredibly tight. Our delegation was followed by armed Bradleys and we were warned that snipers are a problem in the area. We were escorted through the tent cities of England, Belgium, France, Russian, and Germany. Unlike Iraq, there is an international presence in Afghanistan, and the mission is somewhat different. Troops are focused on locating members of Al-Qaeda and helping with drug trafficking and border issues.

On our drive to the Embassy of Afghanistan we were escorted by two security vehicles – a tail and a lead – that dropped beside us at intersections. This was to protect us from suicide bombers. Besides the sense of danger I felt while traveling through the city, I was struck by the poor living conditions. There were water pumps in front of the houses and open sewers.



*Marchant hands out “Don’t Mess with Texas” stickers to soldiers.*

After a briefing at the headquarters, we proceeded to board a helicopter, along with about 30 other troops, and head to an outpost in the southern part of Afghanistan. We flew over the desert terrain about 100 feet above the ground. Kutchie tents made of sheep skin, along with many camel and sheep, were visible from the helicopter.

This particular outpost is a typical frontier outpost; it looks much like a fort in the days of the old west. It also houses several Texans, with whom I enjoyed visiting over lunch. I also had the chance to talk with soldiers in the Sharana Program and hand out Texas flags.

We then re-boarded the helicopters to return to Kabul. Here the delegation received a top secret briefing on a recent Seal operation in the mountains near the city. They had

located an Al Qaeda cell by tracking cell phone conversations. After seeing the tough terrain and harsh environment of Afghanistan for myself, I realized how difficult it is for our troops to locate and successfully seize members of Al Qaeda.

After dinner and more meetings with troops, the group departed Kabul and ended the last of our journey. We were all physically, emotionally, and mentally exhausted, but thankful to come away with a better understanding and appreciate of America's mission and progress in the Middle East, and for the opportunity to provide encouragement and hope for the brave members of our troops.