## Here's Where the money

## O'Steen: Good to be back home

County finance director returns from year-long deployment in Iraq

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After 16 months of active duty, Doil O'Steen, Kings County finance director, is safely back home.

O'Steen, a lieutenant colonel in the Army Reserve, spent 10 months in Iraq working

with the provincial reconstruction team there to build schools, public health infrastructure and facilitate economic development in the Babil region near the ancient city of Babylon.



It's been a sweet homecoming, said O'Steen, 57, who returned to work at the O'Steen county on Oct. 5. At least, he's returned just in time for the holiday season.

"I'm really glad to be back ... I enjoy every day just to be able to drive down the street and see green things and blue skies," O'Steen said. "In the desert, you really don't see blue skies. You see white and a lot of dirt. It's too dry and too hot."

As a member of the 413th Civil Affairs Battalion, O'Steen was called to duty last summer and was subsequently deployed to Iraq on a civil mission. O'Steen was commanding a 33-man unit, which was split up in Baghdad, Najaf, Karbala and Al-Hillah.

For the reservist of 26 years, it was the fifth overseas mission. Twenty years ago, he was sent to Panama. Then, during the Gulf War in 1990 and 1991, he was in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. In 1996 and 1997, he was in Bosnia. And in 2003, he was in Iraq.

"Each one of them is different, because you don't know who you're going to work with and you don't know exactly what the situation is going to be like," O'Steen said. "You can't be too anxious about it. You can't be too relaxed about it. You just need to be realistic about it."

O'Steen has many stories from his recent tour in Iraq, but the one he likes to tell is how he witnessed glimpses of Iraqis' resilience to years of bloodshed and their unyielding desire for freedom.

One of these moments came this past Fourth of July, he said.

More than 100 Iraqi citizens and government leaders joined the Americans for quintessential hot dogs and hamburgers at the Regional Embassy Office in Al-Hillah, a city 62 miles south of Baghdad, where O'Steen was stationed.

"What struck me is that they have a keen sense of what it is to have freedom and liberty. These are people who lived under a crushing dictatorship," O'Steen said. "We had local Iraqi staff who worked with us carrying out different tasks. They do these things day in and day out even though a lot of them have been targeted and told they would

be killed if they work for the Americans. That's an unbelievable amount of courage for someone who is not a soldier and just trying to take care of his family."

O'Steen described Iraqi people as "well educated and ambitious people with a strong sense of national identity" - an aspect, which he said gives one hope for the country's future.

Still, he said Iraq - being repuilt after years of neglect under Saddam Hussein's brutal dictatorship - has a long way to go.

Because of the dominance of oil, other sectors of the economy are still weak. For example, O'Steen said local growers in the Babil province, where he served, were undersold because of cheaper, better produce coming in from Iran.

"They still have a lot of challenges. It's a still fragile situation," he said.

O'Steen, who came home unhurt, said he was "lucky." By the time he was deployed, the insurgency had lost its steam. But hazards were still there, he said. A rocket was fired into the embassy office where he was staying, although no one was hurt, he said.

O'Steen said the significance of the mission he helped facilitate was marked by some \$16 billion spent on the Babil region alone to improve its political and social infrastructure, setting up new market places, working with a rehabilitation hospital that makes prosthetics and a non-governmental operation (NGQ) that donates wheelchairs and building a courthouse.

All his hard work didn't go unrecognized.

O'Steen was awarded the Bronze Star for completing his duty, which the Army described in the narrative as "one of the most challenging company commands in theater."

Meanwhile, O'Steen intends to stay in the Army Reserve for another three years. although he hopes the recent tour will be his last mission before retirement. But it is possible he can get called back by his country to serve once more, he said.

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