

BY JASON WINDERS, MES'10

# ON THE GROUND

## Rebuilding Canada's diplomatic presence in Iraq

**T**here were a lot of checked boxes that day. Only one, however, opened the world to Stephanie Duhaime.

"Like any recent graduate, I just wanted anything to get that first foot in the door," she said of career possibilities via the Canadian government's postgraduate recruiting program. "I knew I wanted to be out there – not in a lab, in the world. I was applying for everything.

"There was an engineering job on there, so I checked that box. Then, oh, there was the foreign service, and that sounded really interesting, so I checked that box, too."

That choice seemed odd for the Sudbury native who didn't own a passport at the time.

"But I am really glad I checked that box."

Flash forward to today, Duhaime, BA'03 (Economics), BESC'03 (Chemical/Biochemical Engineering), recently returned home after serving as charge d'affaires of Canada's newly created diplomatic mission in Iraq, where she spent two years reconstructing Canada's presence in the country. The Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development post was a monumental task, and she credits Western, and her residence training, with setting the groundwork for her success.

"At Western, I learned to handle any situation," said the former Saugeen-Maitland Hall resident assistant. "Every weekend was something unexpected. But I was taught the ability to walk in, take in the initial problem and work my way through it.

"Western has its own culture, and within that, it has various different cultures. The exposure to that was great," she continued. "Western has a great residence program, where they teach you active listening, trying to influence through discussion, awareness of different cultures and how to adapt to them, how people work from different value sets. Those are all the techniques of a foreign service officer. Those skills form the foundation for the work I am doing now."

In 2005, Duhaime joined the Foreign Affairs as an operations officer in Afghanistan, where she was one of two officers tasked with rebuilding areas within Kandahar. In 2012, she was named charge d'affaires in Iraq. The semi-ambassadorial post, operating out of the British embassy in Baghdad, was designed to expand Canadian engagement with the country.

"At first, it was just to try and say, 'Yes, Canada is here.'" Duhaime said.

Canada has not had an ambassador formally accredited to Iraq since 1991, although the Canadian embassy in Amman, Jordan, assumed responsibility for Iraq in 2005.

"We took a gradual, incremental approach at first. Given the environment in Iraq, as well as our own bureaucracy, it went as well – and as quickly – as it can," she said. "Canada has such a wonderful, unique brand there. We are seen as neutral, as having no particular agenda, our style being a pluralistic, federalist society with our own unique culture. They see so many areas of potential cooperation. Canada is warmly welcomed."

Duhaime speaks carefully – diplomatically, if you will – of her time in Iraq. She knows much of her work remains ongoing – and precarious. While admitting the challenges ahead, her carefully measured words keep the conversation positive, hopeful even, and belie no sense of pessimism about the country's future.

"We have the ability to adapt. Don't self-limit," she said, speaking of her experiences, but seemingly of the people of the country she recently left as well. "If I had been told 'this is what you have to do' or 'this is how you have to live,' I wouldn't be doing what I am doing. From the onset of some of these experiences, I thought I was incapable. But in the end, you get the job done, you adapt, you find a way to live your life, make a few friends and succeed. You just never know."

She remembers every moment of her stint, even the first piece of mail she received – a congratulatory note from Western's president that arrived via regular mail from London to Baghdad. "I am amazed, just amazed it made it," she laughed. "It really meant a lot to me."

Her two-year term ended last summer. Last fall, she started at the Canadian Forces College in Toronto where the ministry nominated her for the institution's national security masters program.

On the ground, much has changed in Iraq since she has been gone.

In recent months, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has advanced and seized territory in Iraq and Syria, over-running much of Anbar province in Western Iraq. In response, a U.S.-led coalition launched a sustained bombing campaign against the Islamic State.

Unlike the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, Canada has been actively engaged in recent activity. In October 2014, Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced Canada's military engagement in Iraq, including the participation of up to 600 Canadian Armed Forces personnel, along with aircraft and other equipment for a mission of up to six months.

With no end in sight to the conflict, Duhaime holds out hope for the country and its people.

"The road to democracy has never been easy," she said. "Iraq is a complex, difficult environment. Having the opportunity to, day-in-day-out, meet with the Iraqis – be it government officials, community activists or our civilian staff – they are so committed to seeing their country through these hard times.

"Iraq has a wonderful, rich culture. They are heartbroken to see what has happened to their social fabric. It won't happen overnight, but with the help of the international community, and with the strength of their civil society, they will emerge from this stronger."



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