

VFW National Commander Visits Iraq

Jun 24, 2009

WASHINGTON — The national commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. returned home after spending almost four days visiting American troops stationed in Iraq. His overall assessment: "This war is nearing its end, which has our troops pumped with anticipation and the Iraqi people increasingly hopeful for their future."

Glen M. Gardner Jr., a Vietnam veteran from Round Rock, Texas, entered Iraq on Sunday with the leaders of four other veterans' service organizations for a first-hand view of the progress that has occurred in Iraq. He is the fifth consecutive VFW national commander to visit Iraq.

"Iraq is a different country today because of the tremendous effort of our military to make the surge work," he said. "The assessment that everything is on target for the upcoming handover of the cities was made by everyone I met, from Multi-National Force-Iraq Commanding Gen. Raymond T. Odierno to his officers and enlisted soldiers, all of whom have served multiple tours in-country."

Gardner's trip comes a full year after the conclusion of a three-prong surge strategy that focused on security, the economy and political reconciliation. He said the changes on the ground were most noticeable in the eyes of six amputee veterans who returned to Iraq for the first time since being wounded. Their trip was sponsored by the Troops First Foundation, which has a program that allows wounded troops to return to where they were stationed to help close the loop on their wartime service. Gardner called the program "a great initiative, because departing a warzone strapped to a stretcher is not the last memory anyone should have to carry for a lifetime."

The VFW national commander also visited two 1st Cavalry Division outposts near Baghdad, as well as met with a senior British officer in charge of training Iraqi national police, and an Italian unit that has trained a good portion of those 5,000 police. MNF-I officials said their focus right now continues to be on the proper training of Iraq's military and police, because on Tuesday, U.S. forces are set to depart Iraq's major cities.

Gardner, who had just visited a California National Guard peacekeeping force in Kosovo before heading into Iraq, is very optimistic that all signs are pointing towards a successful ending of U.S. involvement in Iraq.

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"What helped to end the war in the Balkans was that the people grew tired of the violence and destruction. This same awakening is occurring in Iraq, too," he said. "Our forces are witnessing the rebirth of a nation because the surge worked. The Iraqi economy is rebounding, attitudes have changed, and with each election, the people are gaining more faith in their elected government.

"One message General Odierno wanted me to carry back was 'We will be successful,'" said Gardner. "I wholeheartedly agree, and hope all America joins the VFW in welcoming home a new generation of warriors — as well as their families — for their service, their sacrifice, and for their unwavering commitment to each other and to their mission."