



**Gilbert Jordan**  
Kuwait, September 11, 2005



# WE CHOSE TO SERVE

By Rick Rutherford

**A**s employees for the State of Texas we all know the value of the services provided to the general public, and many challenges Texas must face to continue providing those valued services. It is truly a calling to serve the citizens of Texas.

Public service is often associated with a social consensus (usually expressed through democratic elections) that certain services should be available to all, regardless of income. This sentiment is at the base of what the United States is trying to bring to the people of Iraq and Afghanistan. To provide the infrastructure and services that will allow these people to create a society that values and provides services and opportunity to its people. A daunting task, especially considering what we all view in the media on a daily basis.

This story is about two public servants, both located in West Texas. One, a member of the House of Representatives; and the other, a maintenance supervisor for TxDOT. The common thread between these men is their unwavering commitment to public service in Texas and the nation via their military service.

Carl Isett is the Representative for District 84 serving Lubbock. First elected in 1996, he has served in the House with distinction. Married for 25 years and a father of seven, Carl has served as a Commissioned Officer in the United States Naval Reserve for over 16 years. He is currently a Commander, attached to Command Logistics Western Pacific. In October of 2006 Rep. Isett returned home safely from an extended deployment in Kuwait and Iraq.

Gilbert Jordan is the District Maintenance Supervisor of TxDOT in El Paso, and has been with them for 30 years. Gilbert has served in the U.S. Navy Seabees Reserves for 31 years. He is currently a Command Master Chief and last served in Iraq in 2006.

## The Missions

Carl Isett is a Commander in Naval Reserves. He commands a unit out of Denver that supports a large fleet industrial center out of Pearl Harbor. Carl spent almost all of 2006 in Kuwait and Iraq. He was the XO of a battalion of nearly 400 servicemen.

"We performed a customs mission, which was the back end of the logistics chain," Isett explained. "When you send things into theatre you have to bring them out of theatre, to the extent that they are going back to the continental United States. They have to clear customs just like anything coming back on a commercial flight."

"The Army has their own ability to (customs) inspect their gear and people coming out of theatre, and the Navy has taken over that mission for them. So we help expedite bringing equipment and soldiers home. Some of this means making sure contraband, or souvenirs, are not being brought back to the U.S. This includes agricultural items like the desert sand."

Gilbert Jordan is a Commander Master Chief for the Navy Seabees, and spent 2005-2006 stationed in the Al Anbar Province. This is the largest province in Iraq by area, but has the lowest population density.

"We oversaw construction operations and tactical convoys at a base named Alasad," Jordan said. "We were also in Ramadi, Fallujah, Al Qa'im, Al Taqaddum, Combat Outpost South, and Combat Outpost North."

"One of our big projects was building a base for Iraq forces along the Syrian border. The next biggest thing we did was repair runways at the Al Asad Air Base. When I was stationed in Al Taqaddum we built a military hospital for our troops. We repaired water infrastructure and built water wells for the Iraq people. When we were out there we were attached to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Marines Expeditionary Forces."

## The Danger Factor

As might be expected, both men were subject to the dangers associated with war. Jordan more so than Isett. What is remarkable is the matter-of-fact approach both men took to being in a live combat zone.

"Most of the bases we operated from were benign environments," Isett remarked. "In Iraq, your bases get mortared or rockets launched at you pretty much every day, but we were not in imminent or direct danger. You are under fire. The base our company was on north of Baghdad was nicknamed *Mortar-ritaville*. We were just mortared all of the time. We used a gun that was kept on our ship to shoot down incoming missiles, and it was never thought to deploy that gun on a ground base; but they have found them pretty successful at shooting down rockets coming into our bases."

"I am an accountant in real life and logistics guy," he added. "Generally when you are dealing with logistics you are not going to be outside of the wire. The guys who are the real heroes are the ones who go outside of the wire. They are the

## Who is Serving

It is nearly impossible to determine exactly how many state employees are currently serving as guardsmen or reservists. The Department of Public Safety lists 140 employees currently serving in some capacity.

It is worth noting that as an employer the state reaches out to those serving. As Representative Isett said, "Generally, 99 percent of the time we do a good job as an employer. In conversations I have had with the Governor (Rick Perry), he is absolutely committed to being a model employer. I know he has made it clear to the heads of the executive branch agencies that we should give every accommodation we can to our patriots who also wear the uniform."

As of September 21, 2007, 390 Texans have died serving in Operation Iraq Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. This represents 10 percent of the total U.S. casualties.

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ones who are really subject to the IEDs (improvised explosive device) and sniper fire.”

Gilbert Jordan would often find himself in dangerous environments while performing his duties.

“We would periodically receive indirect fire from rocket attacks or mortar attacks,” Jordan said, “and every now and then when we were flying we would find out after we landed that we had obviously taken rounds in our helicopter.”

“It took a bit getting used to. It was definitely different. I guess the long, long workdays were tough,” he added. “Fourteen hours would be a minimum,

and there would be days when we would go continuously depending if we were moving base to base. Sleep was a luxury. I guess the big thing I got out of it was best described as hope. I saw good stuff and bad stuff that even my wildest imagination could not come up with.”

## From Public Service to Military Service

When asked how he saw his role as a legislator influencing his time as a reservist, Isett found an interesting parallel.

“If you ever read the oath that is taken when you enlist or accept a commission in the military,” Isett observed, “it is almost identical to the oath we take as public servants, and that is to protect and defend the Constitution. Every person who has ever worn the uniform has sworn substantially the same oath, to protect a piece of paper. Not land, not people, not apple pie, but we have pledged our lives in support of a document...but man, what a document.”

“It is in some ways to me the same level of honor to be able to wear the uniform and represent my country, he said, “as it is to come to Austin and represent the great folks of the 84<sup>th</sup> House District of West Texas. In addition to that, it has made me acutely aware of the political disconnect between what is really happening over there and how what we are accomplishing is being described.”

“In our time over there we helped bring home almost 250,000 servicemen and women who came through our facilities,” Isett said. “Many of those coming through had been out of Iraq for a day or two. We were the last people to see them before they went home. You could see that many of them looked tired and had lost friends, but they still held their heads high knowing that they had acquitted themselves well. And when you talked to them they would all tell you that they believed what they were doing was important and they made a difference.”

“They are giving people in Iraq an opportunity to breath liberty,” he added. “And for the first time in all of their lives the ability to self govern and self determine - something that we who live in this country have been blessed with for 230 years. I think they (soldiers) sense they are



making a difference in peoples' lives over there and that it is important. On a personal level I would rather engage them over there than leave them free to come back over here and attack us again on our own soil.”

For Jordan it was taking his TxDOT experience to the military and people of Iraq. Some of the Seabees' job was to support all of the needs of the Marines. Not that different from his regular job with TxDOT.

“Our big thing was dealing with inferior quality material for the concrete for the runways,” Jordan said. “We had to use a lot of creative ingenuity on getting the concrete to meet 5000 psi (standards). We just couldn't get good materials. We were having to import a lot of our aggregates we used from Kuwait or from Turkey. The cement had the same issues. It was a lack of good resources with our expectations of providing a quality product and make sure the big planes could land.”

“One of the big things that we as reservists bring is the technical expertise that we carry with us,” he commented. “We heard this from admirals and Marine Corps generals that the reservist component brings in the technical expertise that the active duty personnel do not have. Active duty personnel are not privy to laying down miles and miles of reinforced concrete paving. They are not exposed to placing hot mix, or building (permanent) bridges. They are all sent to school but in reality you don't see the military building bridges in the U.S. They don't have that technical expertise.”

“Active duty battalions were good, no doubt about it,” Jordan added. “But when a reserve battalion came the productivity and quality of work was considerably better. On the flip side of that, the active duty personnel were far more proficient in military tactics and things of that nature. So there was give and take. Marines would take care of Sea Bees and Sea Bees would take care of Marines. That was our philosophy out there. They were our customers. They were our first protectors except when we were in remote locations. But the Marines were just a call away. We built a base for the Iraq forces in a third of the time that was forecasted.”

## Bringing the Experience Back Home

When asked what he brought back from his time in Iraq and Kuwait, Jordan focused on the simplicity of life.

“The big thing I brought back from Iraq was how much I appreciate the little things in life,” he said. “The ability to drink out of a drinking



*Representative Carl Isett*

fountain. To take a shower. To brush your teeth without having to use bottled water. Just the everyday stuff we take for granted. The freedom that we have. There is a lot of good going on over there, but when there is bad I am just glad that our people here aren't exposed to the suicide bombers...things of that nature. It is better that it is being done over there. In general, the Iraq people are very good people."

"In relation to TxDOT," he said, "what I got out of being over there is my appreciation of being a state employee. The State of Texas took good care of my family and me. TxDOT kept me on the payroll, and kept my longevity going. The state makes up the difference in pay when you are on active duty. I am at the top of the military food chain so it doesn't affect me as much. But a couple of my co-workers from El Paso were there with me and the state made up the difference in their salaries. We were flying a Texas flag over our base camp in Iraq, and we always got visitors from Texas. I met several who were DPS troopers. It was pretty neat to have that Texas connection."

Representative Isett noted that while guardsmen and reservists are making huge sacrifices for their country, it is a sacrifice they readily make.

"It is important to remember this is a volunteer force," he shared. "The men and women who work for the state and are also guardsmen and reservists volunteered for this because they want to serve. The ones that I know are still absolutely committed to our state and our nation. I am very proud of the way our folks step up and want to serve."

"One thing about having our guardsmen and reservists serve at the level they have participated in this war is that it has touched every Texas family at some level," Isett added. "All of us know people who have been over there that have served with honor and distinction and

I think that has increased the public sentiment in support for our troops. Because they really are our brothers and cousins, aunts and uncles, mothers and fathers."

"Because of Fort Hood and Fort Bliss and the other military bases in the state, there are a lot of people from Texas that are currently serving," he said. "It is great to live in a state where there is still a desire among the people of Texas to serve our country. It just makes you proud. Every drop of patriot blood is precious, and we always want to remember the families of those who have sacrificed."

## The Future

Where do these men feel our country should be in the future in relation to our commitment to Iraq and Afghanistan? They both have very similar views based on their experiences in the war.

"We are doing a lot of good," Jordan said. "We know that it is going to take a generation to get to where we need to be. The Iraq people were brainwashed under a dictator that did everything for them. From providing them fuel to deciding whether or not they were going to have a house. The simplest decisions are difficult for them to make on their own. Like if we went into a village to build a school and asked them what color do you want the school to be? They were hesitant to make a decision like that because they did not have the privilege to make those decisions in the past for fear of some kind of retaliation from the government. It is going to take a while, but I think there is hope."

Isett's thoughts on the future relate to our past military involvement and the lessons the country should have learned from those experiences.

"As an American that grew up during the Vietnam and post Vietnam eras, you don't walk out on your enemies," Isett stressed. "I personally believe you don't leave a fight until the fight is over. It is important to remember that we are still in South Korea 50 years later. We still have bases in Japan and Germany 60 years later."

"As a rule, we don't have occupying forces," he said, "but we have always been committed to long-term stabilization. I would hope as an American that we do not disgrace ourselves by leaving our allies and our friends prematurely, and subjecting them to a slaughter. If they are killing 50 to 100 people a day in their own country with us there, I think the number that would be slaughtered if we leave too soon would be unimaginable."

"My family is supportive," Isett added. "My children want their daddy home like anyone who wears the uniform. As a reservist it is a choice I made. I have a great family and I think we all want to have our kids grow up loving our country as much as our generation does."

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