

Iraq hosts first U.S. graduation ceremony

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CAMP VICTORY, Iraq - Cheers, applause and pride filled the room as 79 service members moved their tassels from left to right after graduating from college at Camp Victory, Baghdad, May 17.

Beneath a flag hanging from the ceiling of the Al Faw Palace in Baghdad, the students became the first service members to graduate in Iraq. The ceremony encompassed 21 different schools and various degrees.

Approaching the stage, Petty Officer 2nd Class Orlando Cepeda, a Houston, Texas, assistant non-commissioned officer in charge, Management Advisory Group Cell, was the first student to walk across the stage and accept his certificate.

"Iraq is a historical place and even to be a small part of its history is awesome," said Cepeda.

Many students hoped the historical moment would inspire other service members.

"We are in Iraq and we graduated," said Sgt. 1st Class Jennie Jones, a Memphis, Tenn., support operations officer, Headquarters and Headquarters Detachment, Forward Support Battalion. "So, it's possible for other Soldiers to do it. There's always something to learn." The Education Center enables Soldiers to take online courses and offers core classes such as English to take in a classroom setting.

"It's not like normal colleges, we have about 15 students per class," said Lisa Brooks a psychology instructor with the University Maryland University College in Iraq. "The one on one contact available to students provides personal interaction and builds camaraderie."

A firm believer in the Army's education opportunities Chief Warrant Officer Michael-Paul A. McKoy, a Miramar, Fla. native and human resource technician, Multi-National Corps - Iraq, plans to utilize the Education Center to further his education and begin his master's degree.

"Furthering your education can boost you in many different ways, whether it is to develop a job skill, score a promotion, or begin a new career, higher learning can provide a myriad of opportunities," said McKoy. "The hardest part is getting into classes and sticking to it."

After sticking to their studies and officially graduating, students congratulated one another and thanked the Education Center employees and teachers that helped them.

"Watching these students graduate is the greatest feeling ever," said Brooks. "I feel like a proud parent. So many have issues going on at home, but they push forward and finally they have achieved this monumental moment. "