



NEWS YOU CAN USE

Weekly News for National Guard Families

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Websites:

National Guard Family Program Online Communities for families and youth:

<http://www.guardfamily.org/>

<http://www.guardfamilyyouth.org/>

TRICARE website for information on health benefits

<http://www.tricare.osd.mil/>

Civilian Employment Information (CEI) Program Registration for Army and Air National Guard, Air Force, and Coast Guard Reserve

<https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/esgr/index.jsp> (Note to those viewing this page in Word or PDF format: You may have to copy this address and paste it into your browser's address window.)

Cumulative roster of all National Guard and Reserve who are currently on active duty

<http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Mar2004/d20040331ngr1.pdf>

Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC) contains links and information about schooling, distance education, scholarships, and organizations devoted to the military family

<http://www.militarychild.org/index.cfm>

Militarystudent.org is a website that helps military children with transition and deployment issues. It has some great features for kids, parents, special needs families, school educators, and more—even safe chat rooms for kids.

<http://www.militarystudent.org>

Disabled Soldiers Initiative (DS3)

This website provides information on the new DS3 program. Through DS3, the Army provides its most severely disabled Soldiers and their families with a system of advocacy and follow-up.

<http://www.armyds3.org>

Have an article, announcement, or website that you'd like to share with the National Guard Family Program Community? Send your suggestions in an e-mail to Michelle.Bohlen@ngb.ang.af.mil.

READINESS

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Familiar Face Helps Troop Headed into Foreign Culture

The Idaho Statesman

The Associated Press State & Local Wire

November 8, 2004

By Roger Phillips

BOISE, Idaho - Pfc. Marc Armbruster of Meridian is used to seeing his fellow Idahoans serving in the **National Guard** at Fort Polk, La., as they trained for deployment to Iraq.

But seeing a civilian co-worker from Idaho caught him off guard.

Armbruster was working a traffic control checkpoint last month during his training at Fort Polk when he needed an interpreter to talk to one of the Iraqis on base.

Up walked Salah Mustafa of Boise.

"I was like, 'Hey, Salah, how you doing? Small world,'" Armbruster said. "It was a big surprise - someone in Meridian who worked with me at Wal-Mart being over here as an interpreter."

Armbruster is among 1,600 Idaho citizen soldiers in the 116th Brigade Combat Team. Along with 2,400 soldiers from six other states, the team is expected to be serving in northern Iraq by the end of the year.

The Fort Polk experience was even stranger for 38-year-old Mustafa. Not only was he meeting Idahoans he knows but also many people he knew from his native Iraq.

"I've got so many friends here from my old city," Mustafa said.

About seven years ago, Mustafa lived in Dohuk in northern Iraq near the Turkish border. He worked for the United Nations and the United States as an interpreter in both northern Iraq and Azerbaijan, a former Soviet country along the Caspian Sea between Russia and Iran.

He later emigrated to the United States because, after working for the United States and U.N., it would have been too dangerous for him to stay in Iraq when Saddam Hussein was still in power, he said.

In 2000, he moved to Boise from Dallas and has been in Idaho ever since. Boise, he said, looks a lot like Dohuk. He loves floating the Boise River and camping in Cascade.

When he heard from a friend that Iraqi interpreters were needed, he immediately signed up with the private contractor that supplies interpreters for Fort Polk.

"I said, 'I'm going to come and help,'" he said.

Mustafa took time off from his job at Wal-Mart in Meridian to interpret for the U.S. troops training in Louisiana. He speaks English, Kurdish, Arabic, Farsi and Azeri.

I want to help these soldiers to learn," Mustafa said.

In addition to serving as an interpreter, he teaches soldiers how to interact with Iraqis and understand their culture.

Mustafa said he is impressed with the training the soldiers received at Fort Polk, the home of the Joint Readiness Training Center and its demanding and realistic training regimen.

It is where many of the U.S. troops bound for Iraq are getting drilled on Iraq-specific tactics before they deploy. At Fort Polk, Iraqis play the roles of villagers in a mock-up of an Iraqi city. Soldiers must learn to tell friendly Iraqis from hostile ones. They can never make assumptions - a welcoming village leader one day may be portraying an enemy the next day.

Soldiers training at Fort Polk must deal with everything from Iraqi citizens who sell cigarettes outside the Army post to insurgents who shoot at soldiers and plant bombs in the villages.

"It's almost real, man, except you don't really get killed," Mustafa said. "It's kind of like a movie."

At Fort Polk, Mustafa lived a few tents down from the Idaho soldiers. Living conditions for both citizen-soldiers and citizen-trainers are a far cry from the local Hilton. There is no running water and no hot showers. Soldiers and interpreters eat precooked meals in the mess tents and ready-to-eat rations in the field.

"I knew what I was getting myself into," Mustafa said.

Mustafa will return to Boise in mid-November and resume his job at Wal-Mart. He remained at Fort Polk after the Idaho Guard members finished their training to continue interpreting for Army troops.

Armbruster said he appreciated seeing Mustafa in Louisiana.

"He's doing a great job, and I'm happy he came down here to help us," Armbruster said. "He didn't have to, but he did it anyway. He said he felt obligated to do it."

DEPLOYMENT

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Vermont Guard Readies for Deployment

TheChamplainChannel.com

November 16, 2004

COLCHESTER, Vt. -- Another 600 members of the **Vermont Army National Guard** are set to ship out to points unknown in the Middle East later this week.

The orders to mobilize came a month ago, NewsChannel 5 reported. The soldiers are now at Camp Johnson in Colchester, getting final briefings on their assignment.

The deployment will be the largest from Vermont related to Operation Iraqi Freedom, according to the Guard.

All 600 are scheduled to meet Friday morning in Northfield for a public send-off before their 18-month-long assignment.

Priest Deployed

Soldiers need priests, too. So said one parishioner at St. Ann's Catholic Church in Milton as the congregation said goodbye to its pastor. Rev. John Feltz will be among the deployed Vermont Guards. Feltz will serve as a chaplain during his time overseas, the same role he has filled in the Vermont Army National Guard.

Mom Heads to War

Many Guard members have been pulled away from their families. One is Mary Cerutti, of Montpelier, a 42-year-old wife, mother and teacher's aide in Northfield.

She said her husband, Charlie, will have a full plate for the next 12 to 18 months as he tries to hold down a job while caring for the couple's 8-year-old son and 5-year-old daughter.

National Guard Engineers Depart for Iraq

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Detroit Free Press

November 9, 2004

GRAYLING, Mich. (AP) -- Teardrops fell amid snowflakes as 40 members of the **Michigan National Guard** left Camp Grayling to prepare for deployment in Iraq.

"You're never ready to go through this," LaDonna Rockhold said Monday, joining other relatives bidding farewell to her brother-in-law, Sgt. 1st Class Albert Rockhold.

Many of his family members journeyed north from the Lansing area to Camp Grayling. They stood in the cold wind and snow to be with Rockhold before he leaves for Wisconsin, then heads to Iraq for more than a year.

"If every one of us could have gotten in, we'd have all gone," said Rockhold's brother, Roger Rockhold. "I believe what we're doing is the right thing."

Albert Rockhold told his family to keep busy while he's away and to avoid thoughts of him in harm's way.

The 507th Engineer Battalion of the Michigan Army National Guard departed for Fort McCoy, Wis., where they will prepare for their roles in Iraq.

Lt. Col. Tom Lamie said the soldiers would spend the next four to six weeks training before a 12-month tour.

"Depending on what the mission is, they may go through additional mission-specific training," Lamie said, adding that it could include additional weapons training.

In Iraq, they will direct other engineer battalions responsible for tasks such as water transportation, firefighting and both road and building construction.

REUNION

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Guard Troops to Return Home Monday Night

WISH-TV

November 15, 2004

They've been separated from family and friends since the beginning of the year, but late Monday, 160 **Indiana National Guard** members are expected home - just in time for Thanksgiving.

They are part of a larger Indiana-based guard contingent that has been keeping the peace in Bosnia. The 38th Infantry Division is scheduled back at 11:30pm at the Indianapolis airport's Eagle Hub.

Family, friends, fellow guard members and the public are encouraged to attend the homecoming.

While in Bosnia, some of the Indiana troops lived with local families as a way to get closer to the people and their concerns.

35 Guard Soldiers Officially Welcomed Back from Kosovo

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The Associated Press State & Local Wire

November 8, 2004

RAPID CITY, S.D. - Thirty-five **South Dakota National Guard** soldiers have been home since late August, but the members of the 1085th Medical Company were officially welcomed home Sunday at a ceremony in Rapid City.

They provided air ambulance support for 11 months as part of a peacekeeping mission to Kosovo.

The unit was activated Oct. 10, 2003.

South Dakota National Guard Adjutant General Maj. Gen. Michael Gorman said the unit flew 17 medical evacuation missions and 64 medical support missions.

The commander of the 1085th, Maj. Mike Snow, said seven members had seen duty in Bosnia in February 2002 and knew what to expect.

The 1085th also provided medical evacuation for several Norwegian and Swedish soldiers.

Snow said the biggest lesson from the war zone was that the unit must take training a step further.

250 GIs of 39th See Skies of Texas After Stint in Iraq, [Back to Table of Contents](#) **Home Is So Close**

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette (Little Rock)

November 7, 2004

By Jill Zeman, Arkansas Democrat-Gazette

FORT HOOD, Texas - As "God Bless Texas" blared from loudspeakers at the 1st Cavalry Division Headquarters, seven busloads of soldiers from Arkansas' 39th Infantry Brigade took one step closer to home Saturday.

More than 250 soldiers from the 2nd Battalion, 153rd Infantry touched down on U.S. soil after serving nearly eight months in Iraq. The soldiers traveled 20 hours, from Iraq to Kuwait to Frankfurt, Germany, to Bangor, Maine, finally landing at Fort Hood on Saturday afternoon.

The soldiers were greeted by about 100 people, mainly news media representatives, military personnel and well-wishers. The real homecoming, many soldiers said, will be in a week or two when they travel north to the Natural State.

"It's not home yet," said Spc. Adam Meier of Monticello. "Not till I'm holding my kid. It ain't the same."

The soldiers are in the first wave of 39th Infantry Brigade troops to return from Iraq. More than 3,000 **Arkansas National Guardsmen** were mobilized in October 2003 and were sent to Iraq with the 1st Cavalry Division this spring.

The returning soldiers all served in Egypt in 2002 as part of a Sinai Peninsula peacekeeping mission. With their Iraq service added in, the soldiers have met the military's 24-month limit on active duty for National Guard and Reserve soldiers.

The soldiers were given the option of staying in Iraq and receiving an additional \$1,000 a month or returning home. Fifty soldiers eligible to return chose to stay in Iraq, said Capt. Kristine Munn, spokesman for the Arkansas National Guard.

Most soldiers at Fort Hood on Saturday said that although they found it difficult to leave their fellow soldiers, they were ready to return home.

"It all boiled down to my daughter," said Staff Sgt. Stephen Norris of Monticello. "She

kept asking, `When are you coming home?'"

Because the soldiers need to stay at Fort Hood for up to 10 days to accommodate paperwork and have medical examinations, the Arkansas National Guard discouraged families from traveling to Texas to meet their loved ones Saturday.

"We know it was hard for soldiers and their families," Munn said, "but it didn't seem fair to have them make the trip if they'd only see each other for 10 minutes."

A small but enthusiastic crowd mostly of well-wishers the soldiers didn't know welcomed home the troops. Flanked by the 1st Cavalry Division's color guard, the soldiers fell into formation and marched toward rows of partially filled bleachers.

Bethany King of Searcy made the trip to Fort Hood to greet her husband, Daniel, and father-in-law, David, both members of the 39th.

As rows of soldiers lined up, King and members of her husband's family strained to see Daniel and David King.

"We're going to be biting at the bits to go and see them," she said.

Peggy King, Daniel's mother and David's wife, said having her family away in Iraq has been "awful."

"But we're excited," she said. "They're in America now."

Although a handful of soldiers had relatives greeting them, most hung back and spoke to one another during the homecoming ceremony.

"It was great as soon as I hit the states," said Command Sgt. Maj. Larry Nowlin of Jonesboro. "But it's going to feel a whole lot better once I get back home and to work."

As a civilian, 56-year-old Nowlin is superintendent of Riverside Schools in Jonesboro. In the past five years, he has been called up for duty three times.

"It's just something you have to do," he said.

The tour in Iraq has not been easy on soldiers in the 39th Infantry Brigade. Twenty soldiers from the brigade, including 10 Arkansans, have died in Iraq. The other 39th soldiers killed were: eight from Oregon, one from Rhode Island and one from Connecticut. About 1,000 troops from other states are attached to the 39th.

Spc. Joseph Allwood of Conway returned home from Iraq in October because he injured his knee. Since then, he has been at Fort Hood receiving medical treatment.

Wearing an "Iraqi Freedom Veteran" T-shirt, Allwood said he wanted to welcome the soldiers home, although he didn't know any of them.

"The first time you come home, your family's there, hugging and kissing you," Allwood said. "I was tempted to get on my knees and kiss the concrete and say, `Thank God, I'm back.'"

The more than 250 soldiers will return to Arkansas and their families within two weeks. No formal homecoming ceremony is planned, but Munn said a large, statewide celebration will be held once the entire 39th Brigade returns in March.

Most of the returning soldiers were eager to get home to Arkansas as soon as possible.

Sgt. Randall Hobbs looked forward to returning to school at the University of Arkansas at Monticello; others were eager to see their wives and children.

And for many soldiers, they made it home just in time.

"Deer hunting," Hobbs said, drawing enthusiastic nods from fellow soldiers. "It starts next week."

BENEFITS

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Advocates for Activated Guard, Reserve Troops Renewing Calls for Pay Relief

Washington Post

November 11, 2004

Federal Diary

By Stephen Barr

On this Veterans Day, about 180,000 members of the **National Guard** and reserves are serving on active military duty. Surveys show that 40 percent of them make less money while mobilized than they earn in their civilian jobs.

Congress has been wrangling over how to address the "pay gap" for 18 months, mostly without success. A number of proposals that would require the government and other employers to make up the difference between civilian and military pay have been blocked or stripped out of defense bills, apparently because of their cost.

But the compensation issue probably will come up again next week when Congress flies in for its lame-duck session. A coalition of 35 military and veterans organizations is pressing the House for prompt action on legislation that would permit Guard and reserve members to make penalty-free withdrawals from their employer-sponsored retirement plans to help them cope with any financial squeeze.

More than 410,000 members of the National Guard and reserves have been activated for duty in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere since Sept. 11, 2001, when terrorists slammed hijacked jetliners into the Pentagon and the World Trade Center.

Of the 120,000 federal employees in the reserves, about 21,000 will serve on active duty in fiscal 2005, according to a congressional estimate.

No data indicate how many federal employees called to active duty suffer a reduction in pay. Surveys of all Guard and reserve personnel found that among mobilized troops whose pay was cut, the average reduction was \$3,000, although some took pay cuts in the tens of thousands.

"These citizen-soldiers and their employers need and deserve some financial relief from the disruption of active military service," the Military Coalition, which represents more than 5.5 million current and former service members and families, said this week in a

letter to House leaders urging approval of the bill that would allow activated troops to avoid tax penalties if they tap their retirement funds.

The coalition urged House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) to schedule a quick vote on the legislation, sponsored by Rep. Bob Beauprez (R-Colo.) and amended by Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-La.).

In addition to allowing penalty-free withdrawals from retirement accounts, the legislation would give members of the Guard and reserves up to two years after leaving active duty to reimburse their retirement plans for any withdrawals. The bill also would let mobilized employees who work for companies that make up the difference in their pay to invest differential pay in their retirement plans.

Under the bill, small businesses would receive a 50 percent tax credit on any salary they provided to make up the difference between activated employees' military and civilian pay.

"This is a very practical benefit," said Bob Norton, deputy director for government relations at the Military Officers Association of America. "This is a very good bill and one that ought to be passed."

Critics, however, say the legislation falls short of providing the financial relief that numerous Guard and reserve members need. Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.), who has pushed legislation that would require federal agencies to make up the difference between civil service pay and military pay for activated employees, probably will speak out again next week on the financial woes facing many members of the Guard and reserves, an aide said.

The most recent attempt to address the pay gap fell apart last month, when House and Senate negotiators for the fiscal 2005 defense authorization bill removed provisions that would have replaced income for certain reservists and would have required federal agencies to pay any difference between military and civil service compensation for federal employees called to active duty.

The provisions were not included in the bill, which was signed Oct. 29 by President Bush, because "funding was not appropriated," according to a House-Senate report placed in the Congressional Record. The measure does provide some aid for activated federal employees. It allows agencies to continue paying health insurance benefits on behalf of employees mobilized for active military duty for 24 months, up from 18 months.

Although a survey by Bucks Consultants, a subsidiary of Mellon Financial Corp., found that two-thirds of employers are making salary adjustments to help mobilized employees, Pentagon officials privately contend that making up differences in pay for civil service employees would harm military morale. The officials said they fear that they could end up with a soldier and a reservist of the same rank in the same foxhole who are paid differently by the federal government.

Two Members of W.Va. Air National Guard Earn Purple Heart

The Associated Press State & Local Wire

November 8, 2004

MARTINSBURG, W.Va. - Two members of the **West Virginia Air National Guard** injured by an explosive device in Iraq in June have been awarded the Purple Heart for being wounded in combat.

Staff Sgt. Brad Runkles and Staff Sgt. Derek J. Brown, childhood friends who joined the Guard in 2000, received the medal Sunday during a ceremony at the Martinsburg base.

Runkles and Brown were injured when the vehicle in which they were riding came in contact with an improvised explosive device June 28, said Lt. Col. Roger Sencindiver. The explosive device detonated, leaving Runkles with lacerations on his face, neck and one hand, Sencindiver said. Runkles still is having problems with his hand, Sencindiver said.

Brown was treated at a hospital and allowed to return to duty, Sencindiver said.

"It's hard to believe we walked away from it," Brown said.

Also receiving recognition Sunday for outstanding service in Iraq were Tech Sgt. Mark K. Johnson, Staff Sgt. James J. Wood and Senior Airman David L. Grim II, Sencindiver said. Those three men, along with Runkles and Brown, received the Air Force Meritorious Service Medal and the Army Commendation Medal, Sencindiver said.

The five men started their mission in Iraq in February and returned last month.

Lovell Family Has Four Soldiers in Iraq

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The Associated Press State & Local Wire

November 11, 2004, Thursday

LOVELL, Wyo. - The Hiser family didn't need Veterans Day to remind them of those serving their country in the military. Of the family's 13 children, six are serving in the U.S. Armed Forces, including four in or en route to Iraq.

Brothers Steven, Stacey, and William Hiser left last week for training and eventual deployment to Iraq. Brian has been in Iraq since May.

"In a way, I like having my brothers out of the house," said Pamela Hiser, 17, fingering a pendant with the words "To Pamela, Love Brian" on the back. "But it's also really lonely and quiet here without them."

Pamela is the youngest of the Hiser children.

Brian, 19, is in Baghdad's Green Zone where he is a military police officer.

The 24-year old twins Stacey and Steven left Nov. 3 for training at Fort Lewis, Wash., with the **Wyoming National Guard's** 133rd Engineer Company. Their older brother William, a 28-year old new father, went with them.

The trio will likely go to Iraq this December, their father, Roger Hiser, said.

"It's going to be a quiet Christmas this year," he said. "We usually have most of the kids around."

There is also the possibility that his daughters - Natalie, a full-time **National Guard** member, and Teresa, a seven-year member of the U.S. Army - may also get called up. Neither woman has received any orders, he said.

A Marine Corps veteran himself, Roger said that his children's prevalent military interest stems from a "civic duty."

"None of us joined for the money," Natalie said.

"All the boys joined because they wanted to," chimed in her sister Linda.

"I told my kids that I didn't mind them joining the National Guard because it would give them some extra money, and they never get called up," Hiser matriarch, Janice, said.

"Boy, did I ever eat my words."

Having four sons gone to war at once makes her feel both proud and frightened, she said.

"It's scary as a parent," Janice said. "The situation is so volatile there. You never know what is going to happen."

A bazaar where Brian has bought trinkets to send home was a recent target of suicide bombers, she said.

But at least the boys will have each other. William, Stacey and Steven will likely stay together, and Janice hopes that they'll be posted near Brian.

In the meantime, she'll continue the daily practice of hanging the American flag from her porch above four yellow ribbons that take a beating the weather.

"We'll keep changing the ribbons until they come home," she said. "And when they do, the flag will be out front."

HOMEFRONT: DEALING WITH DEPLOYMENT

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Just Filling In; Arlington Kicker Branden Shaffer Subs for Soldier Father

Press Enterprise (Riverside, CA)

November 11, 2004, Thursday

By Diamond Leung; The Press-Enterprise

RIVERSIDE

Virginia Shaffer held it in for as long as she could, but the crescendoing airport goodbye scene ending with an embrace between her husband Bruce and son Branden only kicked up her emotions.

"When I heard my husband say that Branden had to be the man of the house, I just had to get in the car," said Virginia Shaffer, her voice cracking.

Then the two men dropped their arms to face an indefinite period of separation, their lives yet still intertwined by a sense of duty and a love for action.

Maj. Bruce Shaffer, 49, went to work at Fort Drum, N.Y., donning his U.S. Army battle fatigues for his first official mission in Operation Enduring Freedom.

Kicker Branden Shaffer, 16, soldiered on, strapping on his Riverside Arlington helmet and shoulder pads until dusk before heading off to man the home front.

Such has been life for the Shaffers since Bruce was deployed in late August to train tank battalions for peacekeeping missions in Iraq, Afghanistan and Europe's tinderboxes.

The shock of being called up to the Army's 91st Division with deployment orders initially reading "Afghanistan" has gradually subsided for Bruce, who had been waiting for retirement papers to be processed after almost 21 years as an Army **National Guard** reservist.

"It's an honor to touch these soldiers before they go off to their theaters of operation," Bruce said from Fort Lewis,

Wash., where he is now based. "I don't like being away from home, but I'm doing my part because there are others sacrificing much more."

But it hurt Branden, a 5-foot-9, 165-pound non-stereotypical kicker who performs wedge-breaking duties and also starts both ways on junior varsity - especially when he had the urge to play catch at home, watch a Green Bay Packer game, or look up in the stands before kicking.

"Every time they raise the flags for the national anthem, I'm always looking up in the sky praying for my dad," Branden said.

During summer workouts, Branden even kicked around the idea of quitting football to spend more time helping Virginia and older sister Megan with chores before thinking,

"What would that be to my dad?"

It would have meant disappointing a self-described quiet and humble man, who still regrets giving in to his own mother's wishes and leaving behind his high school quarterback position after his father suffered a skull fracture.

So Bruce, a former all-state soccer player in Nevada, taught his son to play from the time he coached Branden's sixth-grade Pop Warner team. The two went out with a bag of footballs on weekends to practice, and when Bruce wasn't holding the ball for Branden, he was videotaping the younger Shaffer's kicking motion.

Driving Branden to 5:30 a.m. workouts this past summer and watching almost every practice from the stands made an impression on Arlington coach Pat McCarthy, who considered adding Bruce onto his coaching staff before learning of his impending deployment.

"He has more experience leading men than I do," said McCarthy, whose own son plays for Arlington.

Bruce reunited with Branden a month later, fittingly for Arlington's homecoming day. Finding out he would be on leave just a day before, Bruce made it home to see Branden make three extra points in a 21-0 win over Riverside Ramona, the Lions' first win of the season.

He sat silently in the stands out of uniform, holding up that old JVC camcorder the entire game to document just how much his son had grown.

Two weeks ago, Bruce missed Branden's first field goal attempt, a successful 40-yard kick, and he'll miss tomorrow's home finale when Arlington tries to clinch its first playoff berth in three seasons with a win over Riverside King.

But Branden vows not do any of the missing - because he is still kicking.

"My dad's doing his thing, so I have to do mine," he said. "I've embraced it. Having him not here is hard because he was my backbone, but now it's football and my mom."

Said Virginia: "Football is a metaphor for life. This is hard for Branden, but he'll eventually look back on it and say, 'That was the day.'"

HOMEFRONT: DEALING WITH AFTERMATH

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Community Pulls Together to Help GI in a Jam

Denver Post

November 15, 2004

By Jeremy Meyer, Denver Post Staff Writer

Aurora - It was a typical fall Friday in the Pheasant Run neighborhood near Quincy Reservoir, except for what was going on at the end of a cul-de-sac on East Radcliff Place.

Four Broncos cheerleaders, the city's mayor and a half-dozen soldiers in battle fatigues huddled with about 100 other people in front of one home.

Inside, a soldier from the **Colorado Air National Guard** who also is a single mother, dabbed away tears, stunned at her home's transformation as television cameras recorded the moment for the A&E cable show, "At Home with the Brave," which premieres Dec. 17.

This isn't a typical home-makeover show. It was made possible entirely through donations of labor and supplies. Cameras were there merely to record the community's benevolence toward Staff Sgt. Liza Paiz, 27, and her 10-year-old son, Michael Ortega. Paiz has served 10 tours, including a recent one in Iraq.

The show's premise, said executive producer Paul Shavelson, is to document a community's effort to help GIs who have sacrificed so much over the past few years.

"It's a story of faith," Shavelson said. "It shows if you put people together with a common goal, a lot of good things can happen."

Shavelson heard about Paiz's problems through calls to area veteran groups. In February, Paiz had unknowingly bought a damaged house. The three-bedroom, tri-level had water damage and severe mold problems that hospitalized her asthmatic son.

Shavelson asked groups to help out Paiz and quickly found a legion of volunteers.

For three weeks, electricians, interior designers, framers, construction workers, students, veterans, firefighters, city officials and strangers stripped the house to its studs and rebuilt its insides.

Businesses donated supplies, appliances and furniture. General contractor Brian Dodd estimated the cost of the remodeling at \$100,000.

All the while, Paiz didn't know what was happening. She and her son were kept 40 miles away from the house and believed she was getting new carpet and paint.

When she opened the door Friday, Paiz found a totally rebuilt house with a new kitchen and living room layout, high-tech appliances, a new furnace, lighting, flooring and air conditioning, among other things. Her new freezer had even been filled. Best of all, the mold was gone.

While she toured her new home, an army of volunteers that included Mayor Ed Tauer, firefighters, family, friends and fellow soldiers surrounded the house to surprise her.

"It's amazing," Paiz said. "I can't believe all of the work. I can't believe this is my house. This is the best Christmas gift ever."

Her son also was dizzy about his new home, finding new video game systems, a trampoline outside and Broncos cheerleaders to show him his newly decorated room.

Ranya Kelly, director of the Redistribution Center, was key in organizing the help, Shavelson said. Her Wheat Ridge charitable group became the clearinghouse for donated items, allowing businesses to claim their gifts as deductions.

"If it wasn't being filmed, we still would have done it," Kelly said. "This was a young lady who served our country, and now it's our chance to give back to her."

HEALTH ISSUES

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VA Officials: Mental Health of Soldiers a Top Priority

November 16, 2004

BECKLEY, W.Va. - More must be done to address the mental strain placed on soldiers separated from their families for longer than expected and to help veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, veterans and health professionals have told Sen. Jay Rockefeller.

Rockefeller, D-W.Va., met with a panel of Veterans Affairs officials, veterans, doctors and counselors on Monday at the Beckley VA Medical Center for a roundtable discussion.

Jared Welker, a VA worker and Operation Iraqi Freedom veteran, expressed concern about the stop loss program, which forces volunteer service personnel to stay on active duty past their release dates.

"There's no set time, no set dates when you can come home," said Welker. "If you have no way to plan for your future, its nearly impossible."

Iraqi war veteran Jeremy Harrison, a VA readjustment counselor technician, agreed that the extensive separations can be difficult.

"If you're separated for a long period of time, you get used to a certain lifestyle," Harrison said. "So they come back, say, a year or two years later almost ... you're two different people, and there's really nothing you can do about that."

Soldiers returning with brain injuries and lost limbs may also need mental counseling, health experts said.

"We're in desperate need of more therapists right now," said counselor and Beckley VAMC team leader Melody Friend. Of the 21,550 veterans the Beckley VA center provides services for, 7,214 are being treated for post-traumatic stress disorder, including

many Vietanam-era veterans, Friend said.

"You can't erase memories," she said. "But we can help them readjust."

Recent budget cuts have made it difficult to fund veterans' health care, said Rockefeller, chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee.

"We're going to pay a greater and greater price for it in the few years to come if we don't do something about this," Rockefeller said.

Also Monday, Rockefeller went to Charleston to meet with wives of **West Virginia Army National Guard** soldiers.

"How come active duty units do six-month rotations while National Guard units are there for one to two years, then have to worry about being called up again?" asked Stacy Toler, whose husband, Staff Sgt. Anthony Toler, is a member of the Point Pleasant-based 3664th Maintenance Company, now in Iraq. The 3664th was called to active duty last December for an expected 18- to 24-month deployment.

"I'm not comfortable with that situation, either," Rockefeller said after the meeting.

"These are really strong West Virginia women who, if not totally at peace with the world, are proud of their husbands, and want to know when they will be home again."

About 1,500 of the approximately 4,000 West Virginia National Guard personnel are serving on active-duty deployments.

TRIBUTE TO OUR FALLEN HEROES

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Man Shared War Worries with Father

Chicago Tribune

November 9, 2004

By Maria Kantzavelos, Special to the Tribune

Before Justin W. Linden left for Iraq in March, he voiced the same concern his father had had as a soldier heading to the Vietnam War.

"He said he really didn't want to have to shoot anybody," said Linden's father, Wayne. "I told him that I had the same problem [in Vietnam]. He was worried about the same things I was worried about. I told him, `God knows what is in your heart.'"

Linden had talked about joining the military since he was in high school in Clinton, Wis., where he excelled at baseball and played trumpet in the school band. However, the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks moved him to enlist in the **Army National Guard**.

"When Sept. 11 happened, that pushed him over the edge. He felt it was his duty. After that happened, he was going to do something to serve his country," said Linden's mother, Donna Beckman.

Spc. Linden, 22, of Portland, Ore., was among five soldiers killed June 4 in Baghdad, when his convoy was attacked by improvised explosive devices and rocket-propelled

grenades. Assigned to 2nd Battalion, 162nd Infantry, from Cottage Grove, Ore., Linden was running to the aid of comrades whose Humvee had been bombed, his father said.

Linden, who was managing a KFC restaurant in Portland when he enlisted, wanted to be a police officer. He had also dreamed of becoming an actor.

"He was really good at practical jokes," his father said. "He was always fun to be around; he just lit up a room when he walked into it."

Linden also is survived by his wife, Sarah.

Sebelius Calls on Kansans to Help Families, Remembers Soldiers

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The Associated Press State & Local Wire

November 11, 2004, Thursday

TOPEKA, Kan. - Gov. Kathleen Sebelius used a Veterans Day ceremony Thursday to call on Kansans to help the families of soldiers serving overseas.

Sebelius also remembered two **Kansas Army National Guard** soldiers who died this week in Iraq. Staff Sgt. Clinton Lee Wisdom, 39, of Atchison, and Spc. Don Clary, 21, of Troy, were the first Kansas Guard soldiers to die in combat since the Vietnam War.

About 100 people attended the 45-minute ceremony in the Statehouse rotunda, which included choruses of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and "America the Beautiful."

Sebelius said this week's deaths are a reminder of the sacrifices soldiers make in defending freedom.

She said Kansans should honor soldiers by helping to care for their families. In May, Sebelius launched a program designed to match volunteers with military families through the National Guard and the Army Reserve.

"Perhaps the wife or husband of a deployed soldier needs occasional help juggling the demands of their job and children," Sebelius said. "Or maybe someone needs help with home repairs. Whatever the need is, we want Kansans to help."

Sebelius also presented medallions to representatives of seven companies she said do a good job of supporting employees who are Guard members. One, Overland Park-based Sprint Corp., recently received a national award because it continues company benefits for deployed soldiers and covers the difference between their military and Sprint pay.

**Daughter of Executed Bay of Pigs Pilot Testifies
Against Cuba**

The Associated Press

November 15, 2004

By Catherine Wilson, Associated Press Writer

MIAMI The daughter of a CIA pilot killed by the Cuban government during the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion testified Monday she held President Fidel Castro personally responsible for his execution and for displaying his frozen body in a glass case.

Janet Weininger is seeking \$112 million from the communist government in a lawsuit filed under a federal anti-terrorism law that allows the families of victims executed by state sponsors of terrorism to seek damages.

Weininger's 18-year quest to recover the body of her father, **Alabama National Guard** pilot Thomas "Pete" Ray, began when she was 6 years old. She said she wrote more than 200 letters and telegrams to Castro.

"You don't get an answer back, and you know this person has the keys to your life," Weininger said.

Ray's body was released in 1979.

Testimony took less than a day in the non-jury case, but the judge gave no indication when he would rule.

As in similar lawsuits, the Cuban government offered no defense, and there was no response to a message left Monday with the Cuban Interests Section in Washington.

Damages have been awarded in similar cases, but the potential for recovery is limited.

In the Bay of Pigs invasion, about 1,500 exiles trained by the CIA in Guatemala charged the island in April 1961 in an attempt to overthrow Castro's communist government. The failed three-day invasion ended with more than 1,000 invaders captured and about 100 killed.

Weininger's father trained six dozen pilots for invasion flights from Nicaragua to Cuba. His B-26 was shot down less than 48 hours after the first landing, and he died of a gunshot wound to the right temple.

From the time her father disappeared without an official explanation, Weininger quizzed relatives and tracked down the names of people who served with her father. By college, she was flying to Miami to look for Bay of Pigs veterans who might know what happened to him.

In 1985, two Cubans came forward to say her father had been executed in a sugar mill that served as Castro's military headquarters during the invasion.

National Guard Prepares to Build Schools in Nicaragua

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Nov. 8, 2004

By Sam Penrod Reporting

Help is on the way for some third world school students. The **Utah National Guard** is preparing to travel to Nicaragua to build four schools and two medical clinics.

Today the Alpine School district donated a truckload worth of surplus desks and chairs along with school supplies to the effort, which early next year will furnish the schools the guard will help to build.

Utah National Guard troops helped to load up the donated items from schools in the district this morning. The school furniture and supplies will be shipped to Nicaragua to an area that's being described as very rural and remote. And beginning in January, several Utah National Guard units will begin trips to Nicaragua to construct schools where these desks and chairs will be used.

Spc. Kelly Collett, Utah National Guard: "In Baghdad where we've seen children there and the lack they have just done have anything and I'm guessing the people of Nicaragua is similar to that situation, so it will be good for soldiers to have a chance and opportunity to go down there where it's not a war time environment, and actually be able to help."

The guard units will rotate to the different locations where the schools will be built. The project also includes building two medical clinics with medical units providing basic healthcare checkups to 20,000 people in Nicaragua.

It's all part of the National Guard's annual training, where they can train out of the country but at the same time provide humanitarian relief. About 1500 Utah guardsmen will be involved, along with reservists from all branches of the military in seven states.

Soldiers' Words Live On in HBO Television Documentary

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Belleville News-Democrat

November 11, 2004 Thursday

NEWS-DEMOCRAT EDITION

By Joanne Weintraub; Knight Ridder

Even before her daughter's death, Lori Witmer used to carry Michelle's letters around in her purse until they were curled at the edges and worn in the creases. They were that important, that eloquent, that evocative of a soldier's life in the heat and dust of Iraq.

After U.S. Army Spc. Michelle Witmer's convoy was ambushed on April 9, of course, the letters became even more precious.

So a few months later, when filmmaker Bill Couturie approached the Witmers about including some of Michelle's letters in a documentary, the surviving members of the New Berlin, Wis., family -- parents Lori and John, sisters Charity and Rachel and brothers

Mark and Timothy -- did not take the request lightly.

"We probably kicked it around for several weeks, all of us," John Witmer says in a phone interview. "We wanted to find a way to remember Michelle that would endure."

"Last Letters Home," Couturie's film, will premiere on HBO on Nov. 11. Like "Dear America," his Oscar-winning documentary on the soldiers of Vietnam, it is likely to endure for many Veterans Days to come.

Several of Michelle's letters and e-mails, read by members of her family at their New Berlin home, open the hourlong film. Her words and the family's pictures close a companion book of the same title published this month (Life Books, \$23.95).

Just 19 when her National Guard unit was deployed to Iraq and 20 when she became the first **Wisconsin National Guard** member to be killed in Iraq, Michelle wrote about her job helping to keep chaos at bay at a police station in a tough area of Baghdad.

"There is so much to tell you I'm not exactly sure where to begin," she opened one letter, going on to recount treating a man who'd been pistol-whipped, seeing her first dead body, experiencing a close call with a grenade and dodging sniper fire twice in one evening.

The letters gave her family a different perspective on a distant event.

"You can turn on the news, you can turn on CNN, but this was right from the heart of Baghdad -- uncensored, straight from the mouth of Michelle," Lori Witmer says in the film.

In a more reflective, almost dreamy mood, Spc. Witmer, who signed her letters with her nickname -- "Love, Shelly" -- wrote about herself in the third person:

"She pondered how this year had changed her perspective on life, culture, war and things worth dying for. She began to think about her many experiences.

"Some would call them adventures, some nightmares, but she preferred to think of them as spices that gave the story of her life richer flavors and saucier smells. Yes, her life had definitely gone from TV dinners to world cuisine.

"Maybe someday I'll write a book about this," she thought to herself."

The film includes letters from one other American servicewoman and eight men who died in Iraq, ranging in age from 19 to 51, with recollections from their wives and children, parents and siblings and others whose lives were changed forever by the war.

Both Charity, her twin, and Rachel, her older sister, served with the National Guard in Iraq at the same time Michelle was there. In a move reminiscent of "Saving Private Ryan," the Guard reassigned both sisters to jobs in the U.S. after Michelle's death.

Because of the national interest in the family's story, the Witmers were cautious about how they allowed it to be told.

As John Witmer puts it: "We weren't interested in getting on someone's political bandwagon."

Having seen the film, he is satisfied that Couturie kept his promise to honor the fallen without exploiting them for partisan purposes.

"If you agreed (that the U.S. military belongs in Iraq) before, seeing this will only strengthen that feeling," John Witmer says. "And if you believe we shouldn't be there, it will support that belief, too."

He hopes that others, seeing "Last Letters Home," will "be challenged to think more deeply about the war, whatever their opinions of it may be."

"I think that that's what Michelle would have wanted. To get people to appreciate the pain and suffering that's going on over there, not just on our side but on the other side, too."

End

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