

Your Local

NEWS

Veterans return to hero's welcome

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STAFF WRITER

Members of the U.S. Army's 244th Aviation "Wings of the Hawk" Brigade arrived at Fort Sheridan from Kuwait Sunday to warm greetings from family, friends and local officials.

The group of nearly 90 soldiers maintained aviation equipment in Kuwait during the war with Iraq. Dressed in desert camouflage and black berets at Fort Sheridan, they stood at attention in five ranks, surrounded by waiting children, spouses and large homemade posters attached to the wall welcoming them home as heroes. Bunting, hand-held flags, two large cakes and balloons provided a festive atmosphere during speeches by their commander and elected officials.

Commander Col. Tom Caples described the brigade as "patriots and warriors of the highest caliber." He said their families were "our 12th man on the field."

The 244th Aviation Brigade, the only such brigade in the U.S. Army, returned home after several month of service in Kuwait. From Fort Sheridan, members were set to disperse to their homes ranging from



Kenneth L. R. Patchen/For Pioneer Press

Soldiers of the 244th Aviation Brigade who supported Operation Iraqi Freedom from airfields in Kuwait stride into a building at Fort Sheridan Sunday, where they are welcomed home by their commanding officer, Col. Tom Caples.

the Chicago suburbs to California.

Lin E. Smith of Highland Park was waiting for husband, Warrant Officer Andrew Smith, with their children Edward, 4,

and Samuel, 2. She said her husband is a civilian working for the reserve unit.

"Very glad," she said of her emotions. "Relieved. Very happy. We plan to have lots of

family time the first two weeks he's home."

She said a few long weekends were on the schedule, destinations yet unknown.

Sgt. 1st Class Thomas Alder-

son served in Bosnia, Desert Storm and the Iraq War. His wife was present to greet him along with their children Samantha, 14, and Robyn, 11. His brother, Patrick J. Alderson, also was there.

"I'm very happy about him coming back," said Patrick Alderson. "Maybe I'll get a good night's sleep tonight."

Patrick Alderson said another brother is serving in the U.S. Navy on an aircraft carrier, and he is on his way home also.

Tom Alderson works in Highland Park at Dick Blick, Inc., an arts and crafts materials company.

"It's a big relief" to have him home, said wife Karen Alderson, a Schaumburg school teacher. She said she kept in touch with her husband with e-mail, but "it's a lot easier making decisions in a family" if he is home.

Barbara Motz, of Buffalo Grove, was waiting for husband William Motz.

"They've been gone since February," she said of the brigade. "I'm just looking forward to being with him. He will be here for awhile."

Amber E. Schey had taped a poster to the wall of the room welcoming her "hero" father

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home. She drove from St. Louis to meet her dad who also has served in the Gulf War and Vietnam War.

"It's great," she said of their large family reunion. "We haven't see him in six months."

For anyone sitting there in the room the size of a McDonald's restaurant, it was easy to see posters with personal welcomes in vivid colors and letters from an opposite wall. "We love you" was the predominant sentiment for, at least, Cpt. Tyler Hemmerich, Spec. Dexter Johnson, Mistah Wadgah, Sgt. Dan Garcia, Maj. Kathy Bun and David Rivera.

Some soldiers did not have family to greet them in Highland. Allen Gosse, from Utah, had been with the brigade in Kuwait. He was looking forward to time with his wife and readjusting to being home.

"It's nice to be back," he said.

Sgt. Charles M. Rambo had been in Kuwait five months. He was leaving soon on a jet plane for California. He liked being in Kuwait "other than the desert. Sandstorms aren't fun," he said. "(Sand) does get into everything."

Despite the sand, Rambo said he was ready for more.

"I did volunteer to go back if

they need me," he said.

Public officials welcome the troops with warm remarks intended to be short to permit soldiers to join their families sooner.

"What you see before you," U.S. Rep. Mark S. Kirk, R-10th, of Highland Park, said, "You are victorious warriors. These soldiers are the lucky ones to come home first."

He gave a personal welcome to Jerry Clark, a congressional staff member, who remained in contact with elected officials in Washington by e-mail.

"The good news is: We want you to take the whole day off today," Kirk said. "The bad news is: We want you at work tomorrow morning."

Representing Highland Park were council members Scott Levenfeld and Marjorie Barnes. Mayor Michael D. Belsky told the returning troop they had been in everyone's thoughts while serving in Kuwait.

"We're 'here to represent the people of Highland Park Belsky said. "We're very proud to be the home of the 244th God Bless you."