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Top Stories

Community welcomes home a military hero

By: KELLY DEVINE, Times Herald Staff 07/25/2005

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WEST NORRITON - A lot happens over the course of a year while a soldier is overseas fighting for freedom.

For Army Staff Sgt. Barry Belles, the birth of his daughter was just one of the many things he missed while serving his country in Iraq. Since his return on Father's Day to the United States, the 31-year-old soldier has had a lot of catching up to do. Belles was greeted in his mother's West Norriton home Sunday by family, friends and those who sent care packages to his unit during his yearlong tour.

As an extra special surprise, members of the bike gang Rolling Thunder roared into the bash to welcome back the veteran and present him with a POW/MIA flag as the group does for local returning forces. "That was really special. Talking to them, you realize that veterans from Vietnam had to wait years before being welcomed home. It touches me deep down. I'm glad to see people are behind the soldiers. Supporting the troops is the most important thing," said Belles. Barbara Kershner, Belles's mother, said she started planning the Welcome Home bash the day her son left - June 15, 2004. "I'm elated. It's the best I slept in 365 days. I marked every day on my calendar," Kershner said. The Army man was stationed in Baghdad, where he described the atmosphere as "organized chaos." "It's still a shock to be back. It's like going from zero to 60 in one second.

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"You're living off adrenaline over there, and here the pace is slowed down," Belles said. "It's nothing you can ever experience here in the states."

Belles said that he and his unit provided security for the elections and discovered the Egyptian hostages in February.

"We just happened to pull a suspect over, and there were two Egyptians in the trunk. That was a pretty special feeling. My guys found them," said Belles, who also discussed the positive feedback he received from the Iraqi communities. "Ninety-nine-percent of the people over there want us there."

Belles's wife, Raegan, said she picked her husband out of 500 soldiers when he first arrived home at his New York base to greet his three daughters Sofia, 7, Olivia, 5, and Isabella, 5 months.

"I was all reserved, but when I saw him I ran and kissed him and hugged him and hugged him. It was amazing," Raegan Belles said. "That was the best Father's Day in a long time."

Raegan, who was awarded the Molly Pitcher Award for her work in the artillery community while Belles was away, said the time apart was hard on the family.

"She's been supporting me the past eight years and making sure the single soldiers are taken care of as much as the married soldiers," Belles said. "It takes a super woman to be an Army wife."

"I knew this was a possibility when I joined the Army and decided to have a family," Belles said. "If I had to do it again, I'd do it again."

"We're better people for it. Our marriage is 100 times stronger. Nothing will ever shake us," Raegan Belles said.

Also glad to see the soldier home were representatives from Maxwell Services Inc., Century 21 Alliance, Myers Drug Store and the Norristown Hockey Team. Each group sent letters and care packages to Belles and other members of the Bravo Battery 2nd Battalion, 15th Field Infantry, 10th Mountain Division.

"The main idea was to tell our guys that we're here behind them and supporting them no matter what the circumstances," said Josephine Amoroso, who sent weekly personal correspondence to Belles and his battalion.

"We kept them in our minds and hearts while they were away," said Michelle Iacovino, of Maxwell Services Inc.

Belles's godmother Barbara Daddario, of Century 21 Alliance, said she was proud of Belles, who she described as a great husband, dad and all-around guy.

In addition to invited guests, a passer-by and a veteran stopped by the gathering. They were attracted by the "Welcome Home Soldier" signs lining the front yards of Kershner and her neighbors.

Kershner said that, even in planning the party, the community showed an outpouring of support in donations and discounts. The family said they appreciate seeing everybody pulling together and backing the troops.

Belles said anyone interested in sending care packages to soldiers in need should visit www.ansoldier.com.

Contact Kelly Devine at kdevine@timesherald.com or 610-272-2500 ext. 204.

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