

Families welcome home soldiers

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[Diane Turbyfill](#)

LINCOLN — A mixture of tears and rain fell as National Guard troops marched down Main Street Sunday into the arms of loved ones.

A bus load of soldiers from Lincoln-based Battery A, 1st Battalion, 113th Field Artillery arrived back home from Iraq about noon.

Jessica Waters joined a crowd gathered outside of Lincoln High School. The boisterous group screamed, clapped and cheered when the unit marched down Aspen Street.

Waters watched as couples and families were reunited. She searched the crowd for her fiancé, Pfc. Chris Bost. Despite all her preparation, Waters screamed, shook and jumped into Bost's arms as soon as she spotted him.

Waters and Bost got engaged when Bost was on leave in July. They're getting married Aug. 14.

Bost put Waters' face in his hands, looked her in the eyes and repeated, "I'm home. I'm home."

Erica Beach of Lowell waited for her husband, Spc. Bobby Beach, with others at the armory in Lincoln Sunday morning. Ready with a banner, a hug and a kiss, Beach was anxious to enjoy the honeymoon phase of her marriage. The Beaches exchanged vows just six days before deployment.

Main Street in Lincoln was decorated with American flags and yellow ribbons for the homecoming. Patriot music played and small crowds cheered as the soldiers marched past.

The group of soldiers left for training 13 months ago and headed to Iraq in April 2009.

Jennifer Neese of Dallas awaited her husband's arrival Sunday morning with their two children, Hunter Neese and Madi Neese.

Deployment meant missing important family events for Sfc. Mark Neese, Jennifer Neese said.

"They have missed dance recitals, birthdays and anniversaries," she said.

Families found out earlier this week that their loved ones were coming home, but even the day of arrival held some surprises.

Families originally waited for the buses at the National Guard Armory. Groups later were rerouted to the high school where the parade procession would come to a close.

"When you're in the military, you live hour by hour. You're always on call," said Jennifer Neese.

Some of the unit's soldiers didn't return with the unit Sunday.

About half of the 95 soldiers from Lincoln-ton-based battalion were held up because of paperwork and processing, according to Staff Sgt. Ronald Rhodes.

Soldiers whose return was delayed won't miss out on an official welcome home, according to Dale Punch with American Legion Post 30.

"This is homecoming part one," Punch said. "If we have to give them three homecomings we will."

More than 55 troops arrived Sunday. About 40 soldiers will get back to Lincoln-ton later this week and 20 unit members are still in Iraq, said Rhodes.

Rhodes welcomed soldiers home Sunday morning as planes arrived at Fort Stewart in Georgia.

He happily greeted the men and women returning from overseas.

"It's a good day," he said. "It's a good day for the National Guard."

You can reach Diane Turbyfill at 704-869-1817.

<http://www.gastongazette.com/news/families-42901-home-lincolnton.html>