



## Coming Home

By Wendy Crooks

WITH INFLATED GAS prices and a slumping economy, you may be wondering how you can make your Thanksgiving one to remember without breaking the bank. The truth is, you don't have to travel far to have a memorable turkey day. How about traveling to DFW Airport? You don't even have to get on a plane or pick up a friend or relative to share your scrumptious turkey dinner with. You may be wondering, "What's the point in going then?" In a word, patriotism. Every day, men and women serving our country in the military arrive at DFW Airport. What if you and your family decided to make that homecoming a very special one just by showing up to greet them?

On June 16, 2004 a program called "Welcome Home a Hero" began at DFW Airport. There have been volunteers at the airport greeting soldiers every day since. The program is now called the "R&R" program because most of the troops are coming to or through DFW on their way to their two week rest and

recuperation. The program is intended to show appreciation to the troops for their hard work and dedication to our country. According to the group's On-site Volunteer Coordinator, Donna Cranston, "It is just a great way to show them that we care."

More than 150 to 250 troops come through DFW each day. For some of the service men and women, DFW is where they will meet their family and start enjoying their well-deserved time off. For others, however, DFW is just a stopping point to connect with another flight to their final destination.

The group has approximately 30 regular volunteers who welcome and encourage others to join their efforts. It's a great opportunity for those who feel gratitude for the sacrifices the troops make to express that gratitude. No special skills are needed to make a service man or woman feel welcome. Ms. Cranston explains, "Anyone can come; a family of one or two, a larger family, organizations



*Locals welcome home the troops (top)*

*photo by Donna Cranston*

*Welcome home hug for a returning soldier (inset)*

*photo by Chris Frichie*

or schools."

The program has been very well received. Often volunteers get feedback on their efforts. "We have been told by phone calls and letters on many occasions that the greeting of the troops is one of the biggest morale boosters. We've gotten plenty of notes from parents saying, 'Our son came home and couldn't stop talking about the reception they received.'" Ms. Cranston added, "I am honored to be part of it."

### A SOLDIER'S PERSPECTIVE:

Recounting his airport greeting experience upon his return from service in Iraq, Army Captain Tim Nelson said:

"The flight from Iraq back to the United States via government-sponsored



*All smiles upon return (left) photo by Donna Cranston  
Sgt. Jason Terry is welcomed home from Afghanistan by wife, Kimberly, son, Jacob and daughter, Mikayla. (right) photo by Chris Fritchie*

commercial air is a long one. Typically the flight is in excess of 18-20 hours depending on the number of layovers. For example, when I returned from Iraq we stopped in Turkey, Bulgaria, and Iceland before first touching down in the United States. For me, touching ground back in the U.S. was an incredible experience. Just to know I was back on our soil was such an overwhelming feeling of both joy and relief. As we stepped off the plane and into the terminal, people were clapping and providing hugs and thanks to us. I was amazed and touched that residents of a community I did not reside in, would take the time to care for us and be there to thank us. They wanted to make sure that we received a hero's welcome home. Unless you've been away from family and friends serving in less than ideal, austere conditions of war in Iraq, you cannot truly understand the appreciation that is felt by a soldier coming home to citizens taking time out of their lives to say thank you. I often think of that experience and of those people, Americans that are willing to touch a soldier's heart by sacrificing their conveniences to say thanks.

"Although most of the soldiers traveling through DFW are on their way to or from home on R&R leave, it is their first and last memories of the States after serving overseas or on their way back. Many soldiers don't show their emotions upon

their arrival at DFW, there is, however, a lot going on in their minds. The first thing is typically a bit of being overwhelmed at the situation as most feel like all they have done is their job and don't know how to respond to the cheers or thanks expressed by those at the airport to greet them. Even today when I travel in uniform I feel a bit uncomfortable and don't know what to say when someone walks up to me and says thank you. I am always touched but don't know how to say that it is my pleasure to serve and do it for me, my family and my country."

#### **A VOLUNTEER'S PERSPECTIVE:**

While it is obvious by the looks on the soldiers' faces as they are greeted how much it means to them, it is also rewarding for the volunteers. Plano residents John and Jennifer Day took their two sons, Matthew and Jack, to greet the troops on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July this past summer. Matthew, who is ten says, "It was fun. It was fun being there to see the soldiers, that have been fighting for us, come home."

Matthew's mother, shared even deeper sentiments, "The emotion of being there is such an overwhelming experience. It is so great to welcome home these troops; though, for so many this was just the first of several stops to get home. It was hard to fight back tears--not knowing what experiences they have endured and

what they have given up to fight for our country. We cannot begin to understand what they have gone through. We can only be grateful that they are home."

To date the patriotic group has greeted 247,290 service men and women coming home and has extended good wishes to another 240,146 who were traveling back to their military duties.

Many people have heard of, or thought of, greeting the troops but think they might have to wait for long periods of time in order to catch a flight coming in with some of our military personnel aboard. That conundrum has been solved. There is a regular schedule of incoming flights to ensure that all volunteers are there at the right times. Organizers, however, encourage everyone who plans to volunteer to call the hotline number and confirm their plans the night before since schedules sometimes change. Generally speaking, the odd-numbered days greeters will be in Terminal B at 8 a.m. and the even-numbered days they'll gather at 11:30 a.m. in Terminal D. The hotline number to call to confirm is 972-574-0392.

This holiday save money and make lasting memories – welcome home a hero! You'll be glad you did.

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