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Blackhawk Brigade's rendezvous builds esprit among unit's Soldiers, Families prior to Iraq deployment

By Dave Melancon

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SCHWEINFURT, Germany -- The 172nd Infantry Brigade's last unit formation here before its departure for Iraq combined ancient Greek history, Native American lore, military tradition, some sports and family fun.



DAVE MELANCON

Col. Jeffrey A. Sinclair, commander of the 172nd Infantry Brigade (left) joins brigade Command Sgt. Maj. Steven W. McClafinlin casing the unit's colors for its upcoming deployment during the 'Blackhawk Rendezvous' in Schweinfurt, Germany, Nov. 13.

The Nov. 12 and 13 event, the 172nd Infantry Brigade "Blackhawk Rendezvous," also borrowed heavily on the early American fur trapper tradition of an annual mass gathering where frontiersmen met to sell their wares, compete, share news and renew friendships.

The brigade will begin deploying for its third mission to Iraq this month and next. The unit is expected to serve in combat a year and then return to its home stations in Grafenwoehr and Schweinfurt.

"A rendezvous is a traditional event," said Col. Jeffrey A. Sinclair, the "Blackhawk" Brigade's commander, as he explained the sequence of events to Soldiers, Family

members and guests packed into bleachers on U.S. Garrison Schweinfurt's inactive airstrip on Conn Barracks. "We're doing this because it is fun. It is warrior stuff," he said.

Sporting and frontier skills events opened the rendezvous Nov. 12 at the unit's two home bases.

During their seven-month train-up for deployment, Schweinfurt-based Soldiers frequently traveled to Grafenwoehr, but the rendezvous marked the first time the brigade's Grafenwoehr-based Soldiers traveled to Schweinfurt.

The daylong series of events included competitions in hand-to-hand combatives, caber toss (the traditional Scottish sport of throwing a long, heavy pole), archery, stone and axe throwing, relay races, soccer and pugil stick battles. While their Soldiers battled for bragging rights and unit pride, Family members took part in activities such as games, face painting and bounce houses.

Schweinfurt members of the unit listened to the Donny Vox Band perform at the Finney Fitness Center on Conn Barracks that evening.

The following morning the 4,300-Soldier-strong brigade gathered in mass formation on Conn for the finals of the previous day's sports competition and the rendezvous' remaining events.

Before casing the unit colors, the brigade recognized 166 graduates of the Blackhawk First Responders' Course and honored the winners of the rendezvous competitions. The big winners, the Soldiers of the 2nd Battalion, 28th Infantry, earned the right to carry the unit's shield with them into Iraq. The Greek-style shield emblazoned with an American Indian emblem is a symbol of the Blackhawks' pride.



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Col. Jeffrey A. Sinclair, 172nd Infantry Brigade commander, addresses brigade Soldiers and Families during the bonfire finale of the 'Blackhawk Rendezvous' in Schweinfurt, Germany, Nov. 13.

For the grand finale of the rendezvous the unit's Soldiers and Families gathered before a blazing bonfire, where Sinclair spoke with them about the upcoming deployment.

“Instead of just casing the colors, we chose to hold a ceremony that communicates to Soldiers and their Families. We chose a bonfire as a way to bring everybody together,” Sinclair said.

“We use fire as a symbol, as it relates to us the chaos of combat, but it also bonds people together. It is a place where humans come together and be with each other to experience family.”

The colonel said every member of the unit is vital to its success in Iraq and at home station, and pledged the brigade will support them during the deployment.

“We will take care of each other. There is no one Soldier more important than another Soldier in this formation. There is not one Family that is more important than any other Family in this formation,” he said. “We are all in this together, immaterial of rank. The youngest private who showed up in this formation is just as important as the brigade commander.”

Soldiers and their Families can use the yearlong deployment period to taking advantage of opportunities offered to them and improve themselves personally and professionally, he said.

“In the next few weeks we will go, but we will thrive in combat, not just survive,” Sinclair said.



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