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Community, families welcome members of 1st Armored Division home from Iraq

By Dave Melancon

U.S. Army Europe Public Affairs Office

WIESBADEN, Germany -- The 1st Armored Division and the Wiesbaden military community welcomed the division commander and his staff home during a ceremony here, Dec. 10.



DAVE MELANCON

Maj. Gen. Mark Hertling, 1st Armored Division commanding general, shows reporters an Iraqi political handbill during a press conference in the Wiesbaden Army Airfield (Germany) fitness center shortly before ceremonies welcoming several of the division's "Iron Soldiers" home from Iraq, Dec. 10. About 1,100 Wiesbaden-based Soldiers of the division's Special Troops Battalion deployed for 15 months.

Maj. Gen. Mark Hertling, accompanied by about 25 members of the division staff and its senior noncommissioned officer, Command Sgt. Maj. Roger Blackwood, arrived at Wiesbaden Army Airfield on a U.S. Air Force C-17 transport aircraft shortly after 10 a.m.

About 1,100 Wiesbaden-based Soldiers of the division's Special Troops Battalion who deployed for 15 months to lead "Task Force Iron" are also now returning home here.

The task force's area of responsibility, known as Multi-National Division-North, headquartered in Tikrit, covered an area of northern Iraq measuring about the size of Connecticut, New Jersey, Maryland and Vermont combined with a population of about 11 million, Hertling told reporters during a press conference shortly before the ceremony.

Enemy attacks, which numbered about 1,800 per month when the task force

arrived, have been drastically reduced, he said. The Iraqi people are beginning to gain trust in their government and democracy, Iraqi security forces are becoming stronger and more professional and the local economy is improving.

“It does not compare to a western country; it is slowly improving,” he said. “Over the year we saw some significant advances.”

Those improvements can be measured in the story of a young Iraqi Soldier from Mosul, the general continued.



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Gen. Carter Ham, U.S. Army Europe commanding general (right), welcomes 1st Armored Division Command Sgt. Maj. Roger Blackwood during homecoming ceremonies for members of the division staff at Wiesbaden Army Airfield, Germany, Dec. 10. About 1,100 Wiesbaden-based Soldiers of the division Special Troops Battalion deployed for 15 months.

Hertling said the Iraqi told him, “Over the last year the blood of Iraqis and the blood of Americans has come together and fertilized the soil of Iraq, and from the fertilization liberty will grow.”

Task Force Iron’s 22,000 Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines and members of U.S. State Department provincial reconstruction teams gave the Iraqi people the ability to live secure lives and get their children back into school, start working again and get the country running again, Hertling said.

The task force met its goals of improving security and helping provincial governors establish working political systems, including strengthening their ties to the Iraqi central government, but there is still more work to be done, Hertling said. He noted that Iraqi security and democratic institutions are improving, but the country’s infrastructure and industry is still “abysmal,” and there are still elements of al-Qaida and other extremist groups that must be defeated.

Hertling said his Soldiers, each with a story to tell about the deployment, are happy to be back in Germany with their friends and families.

“There is a real sense of being happy about being back,” he said, but admitted that there is also “a gnawing piece in each one of us that feels like we have accomplished a lot, but we want to continue to help.”

“At the ‘boots on the ground’ level there is a feeling of accomplishment,” Blackwood said. “Any time you can help the people of another nation is pretty significant. What (the task force members) did had such an impact. They helped a people establish their nation.”

The task force's success did not come without cost, Hertling said. While there were no casualties from Wiesbaden, Task Force Iron lost 104 U.S. servicemembers and suffered 896 wounded. There were substantial Iraqi losses as well.

“(Command Sgt. Maj. Blackwell) and I carry pictures of every single Soldier who was killed in action,” Hertling told reporters as he reached into his top left uniform pocket. “We carry them next to our hearts. Each one sacrificed their lives for a nation they did not know and a people they never met. That is what American Soldiers do.”

Task Force Iron handed its mission to the 25th Infantry Division headquarters, based at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, during a transfer of authority ceremony in Iraq, Dec. 9.



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