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173RD AIRBORNE BRIGADE SOLDIERS TACKLE REINTEGRATION, 'RESET' UPON RETURN FROM DEPLOYMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

By Dave Melancon

U.S. Army Europe Public Affairs Office

VICENZA, Italy -- Soldiers of the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team who began returning this month from a 15-month deployment to Afghanistan, are learning there is more to coming home than just dropping off their gear and heading to Fort Living Room.



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Members of the U.S. Army Garrison Vicenza (Italy) housing office staff help Soldiers of the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team just returned from deployment in Afghanistan find places to live, during the unit's reintegration process, July 15. Garrison legal and finance officials worked alongside the housing office team to help ease the troops' transition back into the Vicenza community.

There are friends and Family members to get reacquainted with; room keys, household goods and vehicles to sign for; money to collect from finance; medical check-ups and records to update; and identification cards to verify.

Before Soldiers depart for a hard-earned 30-day leave, they must devote the first seven mornings of their return to Italy to reintegration.

While most reintegration activities take place in the unit's home garrison, 173rd Soldiers began the process minutes after they turned in their weapons and received their welcome documents on the Aviano Air Base flight line.

Company first sergeants and senior NCOs gathered their troops into small groups and told them about changes in Italian laws, warned of the dangers of alcohol abuse and reminded them to look out for one another just as they did in Afghanistan.

From there on, U.S. Army Garrison Vicenza takes over, said Lawrence Kilgore, USAG Vicenza director of Plans, Training, Mobilization and Security and coordinator for the brigade's reintegration program.

"Everyone is more organized now. They know what to look for with the returning Soldiers," he said, explaining that this summer's reintegration is the third for the unit and community. "We know what the Soldiers' and the Families' needs are."

"When a Soldier comes back, he can start going through a station a day for one half-day," Kilgore said. "This gives the Soldier time not only to go ahead and reintegrate as far as in-processing into the community, it gives the community time to assist the Soldier with reintegration."

Reintegration: by the numbers

After a day off, the returning Soldiers will spend the next seven mornings at one of seven stations:

- * Station A, Luna Bubble: finance, legal services and housing.
- * Station B, Hoekstra parade field: brigade- and battalion-level personnel matters.
- * Station C: Luna Bubble: Installation Transportation Office, Installation Access and Control System, vehicle pick-up, drivers' licenses, identification cards and vehicle registration.
- * Station D, health clinic: medical
- * Station E, post theater: Soldier and Family member support
- * Station F, Hoekstra parade field: dental records check and Battlemind, a program teaches Soldiers to adapt the mental skills they used in Afghanistan to home and garrison situations.
- * Station G, company areas: unit-level administration issues including meal cards, barracks room assignments, ration card issue and leave paperwork.

Soldiers have time to complete integration at a less hectic pace to ease the culture shock between living in a combat environment and living in garrison, Kilgore explained. They can reacquaint themselves with the community and the community also gets reintroduced to the Soldier, he said.

USAG Vicenza's reintegration for the 173rd is being used as a test bed and model for reintegration programs Armywide as part of its RESET program, Kilgore said. Procedures and lessons learned during the Vicenza pilot program will be passed on to Army planners.

Army Chief of Staff Gen. George W. Casey Jr., who introduced the program in October 2007, said RESET includes repairing and replacing equipment, training for future missions and "revitalizing our Soldiers and Families by providing them the time and opportunity to recover from the cumulative effects of sustained operations."

Using the 173rd's redeployment as a test case, Installation Management Command-Europe leaders and subject-matter experts met in Schweinfurt, Germany in May to map out key reintegration tasks.

Additionally, since the 173rd has units stationed both here in Vicenza and in Schweinfurt and Bamberg, Germany, USAG officials wanted to ensure that the standards of service were equally effective for all of the brigade's Soldiers and Families, said Renee Citron, USAG Vicenza deputy commander.



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Staff Sgt. Marcus Williams of the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team's personnel section helps his fellow Soldiers returning from Afghanistan update their life insurance forms during the returnees' reintegration to the Vicenza (Italy) community following a 15-month combat deployment.

"We shared ideas from all three communities and took the best of the best," she said.

Reintegration is a "small but very important piece" of the RESET process, she explained.

"It goes on for over a year," she said. "It involves getting ready for Soldiers to return, reintegrating Soldiers while they are back at home station, resetting all the equipment and getting ready to go again."

The garrison team spent the 173rd's 15-month deployment preparing for its Soldiers' return, she said.

"We want them to have the best that we can offer," Citron said. "Our other message is that while you are away at war fighting for our freedom we were ... back here working for your well-being."

To ensure day-to-day success and to correct problems as they are discovered, the USAG Vicenza team conducts daily after-action reviews, taking into consideration their observations and Soldiers' and family members' comments, Kilgore said.

"If you can make it better, then make it better. Every day we change something," he said. "We do not wait. We change it right away."

As part of the RESET pilot program and in preparation for future deployments, the teams, garrison and unit leaders will meet at a conference to compare lessons learned once all Soldiers have returned and completed reintegration.

“From the (Southern European Task Force) headquarters through the garrison, all of the leaders from top to bottom have worked hard to make this RESET program happen, and hopefully made it better than it was the last time,” Kilgore said. “And, it will be better the next time,” he added.

The human dimension

While the many stations passed out forms and clipboards, Station E, called the “Soldier Support” station, covered several Soldier and Family quality-of-life issues, said Jolly Miller, Army Community Service Vicenza relocation readiness program manager.

It is the only station with a motto and a message: “Tell your story, watch out for your buddy and do not hurt people you love,” she said.



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Jolly Miller, relocation readiness program manager and Army Community Service Vicenza (Italy) assistant director, quizzes 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team Soldiers just returned from deployment in Afghanistan about their knowledge of Italian cuisine and Vicenza landmarks during the troops' reintegration to the Vicenza community July 15.

spouses receive briefings on alcohol and drug abuse and sexual assault prevention, Miller continued.

“It is a different kind of station -- not a ‘check the block’ station,” she said. “We cover all the services to help out with Soldiers’ well-being and quality of life.”

Station E sessions start with a large group meeting that includes single and married Soldiers and several spouses.

A chaplain kicks off discussion about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, brain injuries, and spiritual, financial and relationship issues. Afterward, Soldiers and

Soldiers' memories of Italian sites, cuisine and language are tested at the start of Miller's ACS briefings. The informal quiz perks up their interest and gets them involved in discussions on family advocacy and other ACS programs, she said.

"I welcome them back to our beautiful country and town and help relocate them to Vicenza," she said.

Later, the group is divided into three parts -- single, married and parents -- for small-group discussions, led by staff members whose specialties focus on issues of interest to the group.

"The majority of our people are single. They are an important segment of our population," she said. "Some of their issues are (leisure time) activities, depression and loneliness."

Parents frequently want to talk about child discipline and post-deployment family challenges, while couples without children typically want to discuss their relationships and how to make the most of their time together, she said.

Soldiers can discuss issues related to their time in Afghanistan or local matters, Miller said.

Counselors and subject-matter experts answer questions or address concerns within their areas of expertise on the spot if possible. Other questions are forwarded to unit leaders, the garrison chain of command or the appropriate staff agencies.

Sessions are successful if the Soldiers remember and take to heart the station's motto, and leave knowing the community is ready to support them, Miller said.

On the money

While some stations prepare Soldiers for life at home and in the community, Station A, located in the "Luna Bubble," is one place where Soldiers are almost guaranteed to make a profit.

"We always make money (for Soldiers) because Soldiers never lose their entitlements," said the station's manager, Sgt. 1st Class Melvin Williamson of Detachment B, 208th Finance Battalion.

"We screen their pay to make sure they get everything they are entitled to."

The 18-Soldier finance team processes travel vouchers and per diem payments and helps Soldiers correct any other pay problems, he said.

“Mainly it has been entitlements that may not have received while they were ‘downrange’,” Williamson said. “We’ll screen their pay and if we see a situation, we’ll correct it.”



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Sgt. Jon Owens of Detachment B, 208th Finance Battalion, directs Spc. Aaron Trieschman of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry, to the next processing station after completing the specialist's finance paperwork during reintegration in the 'Luna Bubble' at Caserma Ederle in Vicenza, Italy. The 1-503rd and other units of the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team completed the reintegration process following their return from deployment in Afghanistan.

community is ready to welcome and assist the returning 173rd, said Miller.

“We are here for them not only during a period of peace, but when they come back and are reintegrating back into society and the installation and when they are regaining their strength,” she said.

All finance transactions are electronically submitted to the Defense Finance and Accounting Service with a three- to five-day turnaround, he said.

Other payments may show up in Soldiers' bank accounts sooner.

“Most Soldiers receive their per diem pay by the time they finish reintegration, so it's been working out,” Williamson said.

Whether it's a Soldier helping a fellow Soldier or a garrison team member lending aid, the entire Vicenza



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