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Wiesbaden ceremony marks 1st Armored Division return from 15-month combat tour in Iraq

By Dave Melancon

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WIESBADEN, Germany -- The uncasing of the “Old Ironsides” colors at Wiesbaden Army Airfield Dec. 18 officially marked 1st Armored Division’s return home from deployment in Iraq.

A formation of about 1,100 Soldiers of the division’s Special Troops Battalion was welcomed by family members, friends and colleagues from the Wiesbaden military and civilian communities during an afternoon ceremony on the airfield’s Minue Parade Field.

The ceremony marked the official conclusion of “Task Force Iron’s” 15-month mission in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

After replacing the Iraqi flag with the flag of the Republic of Germany in the color guard formation and uncasing the division standard, Maj. Gen. Mark Hertling, 1st Armored Division and Task Force Iron commanding general, said he was happy to be home and praised the 22,000 servicemembers and civilians who made up the task force in Iraq for



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Maj. Gen. Mark Hertling, commander of U.S. Army Europe’s 1st Armored Division (left), and division Command Sgt. Maj. Roger Blackwood uncasing the 'Old Ironsides' colors during a welcome ceremony at Wiesbaden Army Airfield, Germany, Dec. 18. The uncasing marked the official end of the division’s 15-month combat tour in Iraq.

their dedication, service and sacrifice.

Using the division band as an example, Hertling described task force members' ability to adapt to changing and sometimes dangerous situations, and their willingness help the Iraqi people.

"They are diplomats in ACUs (Army combat uniforms)," he said. "They played for the first lady of Iraq," he said, adding, "They were attacked on their way to a concert and shot at during a concert in Tikrit."

The band members' missions, which included serving as scouts as well as musicians, are examples of the broad range of the task force's responsibilities, Hertling said.

"What the band did in those concerts is just a small example of the thousands of bizarre types of missions all of the Soldiers (standing) before you performed while they were in Iraq," he said.

The Soldiers of the division headquarters and the 17 brigade combat teams assigned to the task force and their achievements in Iraq "were truly miraculous and historic," he said.

"But no matter their accomplishments -- and there were many, all of which will be linked with superlatives as the history of the conflict is recorded -- pale in significance to what their families did," the general added.

"You have fought against rebellion, terror and violence far away from home and family," Karlheinz Weimar, Minister of Finance for the German state of Hessen, told the assembled troops. "You have taken risks for life, liberty and law in the past 15 months."

While the division headquarters suffered no casualties during its combat tour, 104 servicemembers serving in units attached to Task Force Iron died in Iraq and must be remembered, he said.

The citizens of Germany will always be grateful and indebted to U.S. servicemembers for their sacrifices for freedom and peace during World Wars I and II, the Cold War and the Berlin Airlift, and the same spirit that fueled those sacrifices makes Germany and the United States partners in today's war on terror, Weimar said.

"You can be justly proud of what you have done in the service of your country and the people of Iraq," he said. "You can be proud of your contributions to peace."

"I am very glad that you completed your mission just in time for the Christmas holiday," said Dr. Helmut Mueller, Wiesbaden's lord mayor. "Welcome back to your home station."

Mueller said the task force helped bring peace, security and prosperity to the people of Iraq just as American forces did during the Berlin Airlift 60 years ago.

“The United States changed not only the minds of the people, but most of all, the hearts of the German people,” he said. “I believe through your mission in Iraq you performed in ways to win the hearts of the people of Iraq – especially the children.”

Mueller’s city honored the division once more in a gathering later that evening, presenting the unit with a large cake bearing the Old Ironsides and city crests and 1,200 vouchers for the town’s famed thermal bath.

“It is great to see Task Force Iron back in Wiesbaden where you belong,” said Gen. Carter Ham, U.S. Army Europe commanding general.

“Task Force Iron’s 15 months was nothing short of historic, heroic and monumental, and I think those three words best characterize what these Soldiers before you have accomplished,” Ham said, quoting a speech given by Lt. Gen. Lloyd Austin, commander of Multi-National Corps – Iraq, during the Dec. 9 ceremony in which Hertling passed the task force’s mission on to the Army’s 25th Infantry Division.

“It is a battle-hardened outfit that has done all that our nation and all that the nation of Iraq have asked of them,” he continued. “They are all back home and that is a good thing.”

Following the ceremony, Hertling, division Command Sgt. Maj. Roger Blackwood and members of the audience stood in silence as a lone bagpiper played “Amazing Grace” in remembrance of the task force members killed in Iraq.



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