

Guard troops return from deployment

Agribusiness team also made contribution to Afghanistan combat effort

By AL HACKLE
Herald Writer

METTER — Today is Jack Neal's birthday. He's 4. But he received his best present yesterday, when his father came home to Statesboro after a yearlong deployment, including 10 months in Afghanistan.

"Daddy's Home — Happy

Birthday to Me!!!" proclaimed Jack's sign as nearly 50 men and women of the 265th Regional Support Group Agribusiness Development Team 2, or ADT 2, including Sgt. 1st Class Bryan Neal, marched into the Georgia Army National Guard Armory in

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Soldiers return home



SCOTT BRYANT/staff

While holding son Jack, 4, Statesboro native Sgt. First Class Bryan Neal of the Georgia National Guard 265th Regional Support Group Agribusiness Development Team 2 (ADT II) is welcomed home with a kiss from wife Stephanie Saturday at the National Guard Armory in Metter after his 12-month deployment to Afghanistan.

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Metter for their welcoming ceremony. Beside Jack was his mother, Stephanie, with his baby brother, Luke, and grandparents June and Rick Neal.

Elated to see her husband again, Stephanie Neal joshed to reporters that she would no longer have to mow the lawn for herself. But she gave a more somber reason when asked if she had worried.

"When you wake up every day knowing that your husband and the father of your children is in a combat area and he might not make it home, of course it's worrisome — every day," she said.

The unit's main mission was working to improve farming economy and erosion control in Afghanistan's Logar and Wardak provinces.

But attacks on their base, plus duties escorting civilian officials and calls to aid other units, brought the team into dangerous situations, and Sgt. 1st Class Neal led the security detail as its platoon sergeant.

With 24 soldiers, the security detail constituted almost half the team.

Neal, 28, is a full-time soldier. His regular job is at Fort Stewart, where he trains other Georgia National Guard soldiers for deployment. Like others in the team, he volunteered for this most recent tour of duty.

He did get to come home for two weeks on emergency leave, seven months ago, when Luke was born, just as he had come home briefly from a deployment four years ago when Jack was born. The 2009-10 deployment, also to Afghanistan, was with Statesboro's unit of the 48th Infantry Brigade.

"It's an important mission, what we're doing there, and what I always tell my soldiers when we try to legitimize what we're doing is that the United States has not been attacked since Sept. 11, 2001, so we're doing something right," Neal said after hugging his family.

Commitment fulfilled

Col. Craig McCallard, the commander of the 265th Regional Support Group, returned with his troops — all of them — from Afghanistan. Speaking to those welcoming the soldiers home, McCallard summarized the agricultural and environmental projects completed, reviewed dangers met with bravery, and shared notes of praise from other commanders.

Then his voice strained with emotion and tears appeared.

"I made a commitment to

you a year ago to bring them all home safely, and I'm pleased to tell you that I've kept that commitment," McCallard concluded.

At that, the crowd clapped and cheered nearly as loudly as they had when the soldiers entered the room.

After a month of leave, McCallard, 53, expects to return to his civilian work as Savannah-based regional operations director of Atlanta Gas Light and his weekend work commanding the unit at its regular post, the Metter Armory. McCallard has served more than 35 years and this was his third deployment, including once on security duty in Iraq and now to Afghanistan.

"We're a 50-person team but this is easily the best unit I've been associated with, all professionals," he said. "Most all of them were volunteers for this mission."

The team included 46 Army National Guard Soldiers, two Air National Guard personnel and two Department of the Army civilian employees. One of those who deployed is a veterinarian, and 10 or 12 had some agricultural or agribusiness background, McCallard said.

Called to predeployment training at Fort Stewart on Jan. 4, 2012, the team trained for two months before arriving in Afghanistan on March 25. The last phase of the training took place in Indiana, but Lt. Lt. Michael Thompson, the public affairs officer for the 78th Homeland Response Force, the 265th's parent unit, said that the University of Georgia and Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College played a part in the team's agribusiness training.

While posted at Forward Operating Base Shank in Logar Province, the team applied more than \$3.7 million to agribusiness-related projects, McCallard reported. These included eight large watershed projects, building and managing reservoirs for erosion control in mountain areas. Much of the actual construction was done by Afghan contractors, with the U.S. force providing administration, guidance and security.

The 265th Regional Support Group ADT 2 also spent \$250,000 on more than 50 small projects, mostly training Afghans in leadership and technical skills. Soldiers worked with Afghan farmers and officials to establish a greenhouse association, which builds and operates greenhouses, and a wheat seed association, which grows improved wheat seed for use

in the next year's harvest. The improved seed should double wheat yields, according to numbers McCallard included in his remarks.

Initiatives to help Afghan women with farm projects, including canning food and raising chickens, were also part of the mission. Given Afghan society's often reactionary views on women's rights, this was sensitive work.

"Some things that we accept as social norms are very, very different over there," said Staff Sgt. Robert Person, another security detail member. "Something that we did a hundred years ago as far as women's rights is just breaking with them."

'Force multiplier'

Meanwhile, the team became a "force multiplier" for more combat-oriented units at the base, McCallard said. On several occasions, he noted, the security detail helped recover vehicles and soldiers after vehicles from Task Force Sabre struck improvised explosive devices while on missions. He read notes from a platoon leader and company commander of the 101st Air Assault Pathfinders praising the ADT for assistance during a mission called Operation Battering Ram.

On four or five occasions, members of ADT 2 also were the first to render aid to wounded civilians and soldiers after "indirect fire" rocket attacks on the base, McCallard said.

"I can guarantee you, their quick actions in the face of danger, at the risk of their own lives, saved lives multiple times at FOB Shank," he said.

Col. Michael Schwes, the brigade commander of the 78th Homeland Response Force, also took part in the ceremony. The officers returned, to Metter Mayor Billy Trapnell, a U.S. flag that Metter and Candler County officials had given the unit.

Now accompanied by a plaque commemorating that it flew over the Afghan base last July Fourth, the flag will be shared by city and county offices, Trapnell said. Soldiers in ADT 2 came from 31 Georgia communities, but the 265th Regional Support Group is headquartered in Metter. Trapnell was included in the unit's closed Facebook group and stayed in toach

during the deployment.

"They're not all from Metter, but they're our troops," he said. "Were it not for them, we would be in dire straits in this world."

The latest mission, he added, made him think of the adage, "If you teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime."

"That's in essence what I feel like they have done over in Afghanistan," Trapnell said.