

20th Engineers prepare to return

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By **Amanda Kim Stairrett**
Killeen Daily Herald

FORT HOOD — Covert planning for Operation Upgrade began in June. Troops across the country mobilized, and supplies flowed to Fort Hood.

Task Force Barracks Readiness was deployed Saturday to carry out its mission: making sure every single soldier or geographic bachelor who returned to Fort Hood with the 20th Engineer Battalion in the next week had a comfortable place to live.

Each soldier's barracks room — most of which are in Rugged Hall, the 36th Engineer Brigade's newest barracks complex — was stocked with razors, shaving cream, a toothbrush, toothpaste, dental floss, mouthwash, cotton swabs, soap or body wash, deodorant, shampoo, hand soap, sheets, a pillow, a pillowcase, a blanket, a pen, paper, a welcome-home card, a towel, a washcloth, a USO amenities bag, a shower mat, a bathroom rug, a trash can, toilet paper, snacks, drinks and a dish cloth.

Items were sorted, boxed, distributed and arranged for 140 single soldiers and 60 geographic bachelors, said Aida Pence, the 510th Clearance Company's family readiness group leader.

She and Audra Evans, the 584th Mobility Augmentation Company's family readiness group leader, helped put final touches on the rooms Wednesday. They also stocked Spc. Steven Heberlein's new room.

Heberlein returned to Fort Hood in October after he was injured while serving with the 584th in Afghanistan. He moved into Rugged Hall on Tuesday.

Heberlein's grandmother was just one of the many out-of-state family members who sent donations to the battalion for Operation Upgrade, Evans said.

Providing soldiers with a room ready to live in was good, Heberlein said, because it will be less stressful for them.

The soldiers are returning and recovering from a lengthy and difficult and dangerous mission, said Casey Andrysiak, wife of the battalion's commander. She coordinated Operation Upgrade and tracked its progress for the last seven months.

The first flight of 20th Engineer soldiers is set to return Saturday.

According to information from the battalion, family members will receive an eArmy Notification System message when soldiers depart from a base in Kyrgyzstan, which is just across the border from Afghanistan.

The system is an Army tool used to get information to a large number of people. Registration is available through each unit's family readiness group leader.

Another notification will go out when the soldiers arrive in Maine, their first American stop. The flight from Maine to Robert Gray Army Airfield at Fort Hood takes about four hours, according to information from the battalion.

Loved ones and supporters who want to welcome the battalion home are invited to Fort Hood two to three hours before the soldiers' arrival, according to information from the battalion.

Those who don't have post access decals on their vehicles must enter through the Fort Hood Main Gate, located on T.J. Mills Boulevard. Visitors are asked to tell the gate guards they are attending the battalion's homecoming ceremony. For more information on how to get to Fort Hood, go to www.hood.army.mil/traveling.aspx.

The battalion's welcome-home ceremonies will be at Cameron Field, which is on Battalion Avenue by First Army Division West headquarters. The parade field is near 24th and 27th streets.



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Those interested in attending can wait in tents at the 36th Engineer Brigade Family Readiness Center, which is across the street from Cameron Field. Parking is available west of the readiness center.

Supporters can watch a live video feed of the soldiers arriving at the airfield in a tent at the readiness center's waiting area, according to information from the battalion. Those in attendance are then encouraged to move to Cameron Field.

The soldiers will go through an hour-long return process during which they will check in their weapons before boarding buses bound for Cameron Field. The bus ride takes about 30 minutes, according to information from the battalion.

The returning soldiers will march in formation onto the parade field after arriving and will be released to their loved ones after a short ceremony.

Married soldiers can depart with their families and single soldiers or geographic bachelors can go to their barracks. The returning soldiers have four-day passes, but can't go more than 150 miles from Fort Hood during that time. Soldiers are not allowed to drive a vehicle within 24 hours of returning, according to information from the battalion.

To read more about the 20th Engineer Battalion's route-clearance mission in Afghanistan, go to www.kdhnews.com/news/story.aspx?s=49035&q.

Help welcome them home

The public is invited to help welcome home from Afghanistan soldiers from the 36th Engineer Brigade's 20th Engineer Battalion.

A group is set to return Saturday, and a welcome-home ceremony is scheduled for 11 a.m. Ceremonies are also planned for 5:20 p.m. Monday and 11 a.m. Tuesday.

Battalion officials request family members and friends gather at the brigade's family readiness center 1½ hours before the scheduled ceremony time. The center is located in Building 10040, 25th Street and Battalion Avenue.

Times are subject to change. To get the most up-to-date information, call (254) 618-8144.

Contact Amanda Kim Stairrett at astair@kdhnews.com or (254) 501-7547. Follow her on Twitter at KDHmilitary or www.facebook.com/astairrett.

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