

# A hero's welcome

## Local group goes to BWI, thanks troops for service

By NICOLE YOUNG, Staff Writer – September 19, 2007

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It started with a simple e-mail among friends — head to the airport to welcome a group of soldiers returning home, and thank them for their service in the Middle East.

But, as some e-mails are, it was passed along to a friend of a friend hundreds of times. That idea bred Anne Arundel County-based Operation Welcome Home Maryland, a group of more than 300 people who stand in the international arrivals terminal at BWI Thurgood Marshall Airport to greet military personnel.

Capt. Kathy Thorp, an Arnold resident and Navy nurse in the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, sent out the first string of e-mails after she learned that a medic group stationed in Kuwait would arrive back in March.

Now the group holds two or three welcoming events per month.

“It’s a great thing that’s taken off and a lot of folks in the area have helped,” Capt. Thorp said. “It’s a great way for people to participate and thank our troops, and a great way to introduce our troops to the Baltimore and Annapolis areas.”

The first welcoming drew about 100 people who thanked the troops, waved flags and held signs such as “God Bless America.” Since then, the group has grown. There were more than 300 people at the most recent event in August.

The group hopes to have greeters for each flight someday, Ms. Thorp said. In July there were about 50 flights that came in with troops, she said.

“Communities and organizations can adopt a night to go out and greet,” she said.

John Flynn of Annapolis was introduced to the group through the first string of e-mails.

He knew he wouldn’t be able to welcome home his brother-in-law, an Air Force flight surgeon who was flying into another airport, but he still wanted to applaud the efforts of the men and women returning to the Annapolis area, whether they’re returning to the Annapolis area or simply stopping over en route to their home.

“You go once and you just get this great adrenaline rush,” Mr. Flynn said. “Being there and being part of the excitement and seeing their reactions — they are never expecting to see us there. For a lot of them, (Baltimore) is not their final destination. We want to make sure when they step foot on U.S. soil that we’re there welcoming them.”

As co-chairman for Operation Welcome Home, as well as executive director of the Maryland GOP, Mr. Flynn said the group's efforts are non-partisan. Anyone can be involved in welcoming the troops home.

"It's about our troops, not our politics," he said. "There are people from all different walks of life there."

To this point, they've worked solely on donations, but they're hoping to land more donations through the Web site they're developing.

Participants prepare snack bags to give to military personnel. They fill plastic shopping bags with thank-you letters and cards from children, bottled water, juice and packaged snacks like trail mix and cookies.

He compared the events to a "makeshift welcome-home parade." People line up along each side of the terminal and pat returning military personnel on the back, shake their hands and hug them. "They are always so surprised and so humble," he said of the troops. Retired Col. Chuck Thomann, a veteran of World War II, Korea and Vietnam, has attended nearly every one of the homecomings and said he's looking forward to the next one as well.

Along with his wife, Joyce, he travels from Annapolis to BWI armed with snack bags and thank-you notes. Often Mr. Thomann dresses in his full regalia.

"To have a full colonel saluting a private kind of throws them a little bit," he said, laughing.

The next welcoming event will be at 2 p.m. Saturday at the International Arrival Terminal at BWI. At the moment, the group isn't sure what branches of the military will be coming in Saturday.

The arrival times are subject to change, so Mr. Flynn asks those interested in helping to e-mail [operationwelcomehome@comcast.net](mailto:operationwelcomehome@comcast.net), to be added to the newsletter list and keep up with any last-minute changes.