FIRST ‘SKY SOLDIERS’ OF 173RD AIRBORNE BRIGADE RETURN FROM DEPLOYMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

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VICENZA, Italy -- Advance elements from the six battalions of U.S. Army Europe’s 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team began the unit's return home from a 14-month deployment to Afghanistan this month.

That trickle of “Sky Soldiers” began to grow into a torrent as about 250 Soldiers from the 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment (Airborne) and the 173rd Special Troops Battalion arrived here July 5 to the cheers, hugs and kisses of friends, families and colleagues at their home stations here and in Bamberg, Germany.

The remainder of the brigade is scheduled to return throughout July and August.

Brig. Gen. William B. Garrett III, Southern European Task Force commanding general, and 173rd Command Sgt. Maj. Isaia T. Vimoto were first to greet the Soldiers who stepped off their return flight to Aviano Air Base, Italy.
“This is very impressive and great to see the team coming back home,” Garrett said. “They achieved amazing things over there and we are all very proud of them.”

“It feels really good to be back,” said Sgt. Louis Levesque, C Company, 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry. “Getting back never gets old. I plan to get my bike tuned up and go out for a nice long ride the first chance I get.”

Relaxing topped Spc. Jason Leehan’s agenda.

“It’s just an unbelievable feeling to have, being back,” the Company D, 1-503rd Soldier said. “This wraps up my first deployment. Now that it is done, I just want to relax awhile.”

While the Soldiers made the two-hour bus ride from Aviano to Vicenza, about 250 spouses, children and friends anxiously waited for their approximately 150 1-503rd Soldiers to return.

Fifteen-month old Ariel Roy met her dad, Spc. Adama Roy, for the first time. She and her sister, Jasmine, waited patiently for this day for several months, said their mother, Angela. Dad was on hand for his daughter’s birth but had never seen her at home.

“He is going to meet her for the first time tonight,” Angela said.

While the majority of those waiting here were wives and husbands of the returning troops, there were a few in-laws in the gathering as well.

Gail Nelson festooned her family van with flags and a banner welcoming home Spc. Brandon Gruenberg, her son in-law. She said she is also planning a second homecoming in August for Chaplain (Maj.) Lee Nelson, the 173rd’s chaplain.

After taking July 6 off, the returning Soldiers began seven days of reintegration, during which they will undergo a series of health screenings, safety briefings, record checks and administrative tasks designed to fully return them to their home stations and families.

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