



JUST BACK FROM IRAQ, and a bus ride from the airport, a planeload of soldiers (above) from the 4th Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, filed into a gym at Fort Riley for a "redeployment" ceremony. Century-old buildings (left below) and equestrian statues decorate the old cavalry post.

Bringing them home

Troops get a joyous reception

It's quiet in the gym at Fort Riley as the 350 soldiers march, single file, to form ranks in front of their loved ones.

A recording plays "Kryptonite" by 3 Doors Down:

*If I go crazy then will you still Call me Superman
If I'm alive and well, will you be There holding my hand*

Stern-faced, the men and women file across the hard oak floor, filling up the basketball floor under a huge American flag. As each one reaches his or her place, they turn at attention to face the general there to welcome them.

It wouldn't take long. First, the national anthem. Brig. Gen. Keith Walker, deputy commander of the 1st Infantry Division, knows the men, just off a plane from more than a year in Iraq, haven't come to hear him. Those stands are packed with families, relatives, friends, politicians and the press, just waiting.

Kids stand on tiptoes, holding signs made by mom: "He's not just my Dad. He's my hero." "Welcome home, Jim."

Wives lean forward, some wearing baby packs, carrying diaper bags, others sporting low-cut, clingy tops.

Gen. Walker talks about how



union. Fathers meet babies for the first time. Wives unload 15 months of loneliness.

The troops, from the 4th Brigade of the 1st Infantry, have a lot of catching up to do. Many of the families have not yet settled into this Kansas post, where construction runs constant on new barracks, housing and day care facilities, among other buildings.

The 4th. Gen. Walker explained earlier at a briefing for Kansas Press Association editors, "stood up" for the first time just two years ago when the division expanded, then shipped out to Iraq. Many families had no time to move before the deployment. Now the Army hopes they'll come here to make a new life.

He says he wants this old cavalry post to be the best place in the Army to do that.

On the floor, Lt. Michael Costillo stands, hugging his family for a long time. His wife, Lt. Tracy Costillo, brought dark-haired little Ella Marie to meet her daddy. Nothing is said for the longest time.

Her mother and grandmother watch as a television crew films the whole thing, interviewing the San Antonio couple.

And then they hug again, mom, dad, baby.

America idolizes sport stars, calling them "heroes."

"They are not heroes," he says. "They are entertainers. You are heroes."

Turning to the families, he tells them, "You are the backbone of the Army."

Then he turns again to the troops:

"I seem to be the last thing standing between you and your families."

"Thank you. Well done. Welcome home."

The sergeant major shouts, "Dismissed."

And the place goes nuts.

Families stream down out of the bleachers, swarming into the ranks on the floor. Wives and girlfriends fly into open arms. Tears flow.

For many, it is more than a re-



LT. MICHAEL COSTILLO hugged his wife, Lt. Tracy Costillo, (above) and their daughter, Ella Marie. Wives, parents, kids, friends, reporters and politicians (left) waited in the stands, waving flags, as the men marched in.



Story and photos by Steve Haynes