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After Iraq, Troops Fill Base Towns

By ISOLDE RAFTERY and JAMES DAO

LAKESWOOD, Wash. — At Galloping Gerties Grill here, Sue Rothwell can spot the soldiers who have returned to nearby Joint Base Lewis-McChord by their tanned faces and the way their children cling to their necks.

Up the block at Plaza Cleaners and Laundry, a pile of dusty Army dress blues and greens await altering for a homecoming ball scheduled for this weekend. And three freeway exits north at Mina's Nails, a line of military wives and girlfriends wait to get their nails painted with extravagant designs that match their evening gowns.

"They all left in dribs and drabs, and all of sudden, this town was empty," said Ms. Rothwell. "Now, it's a sea of green here in the morning."

These are scenes that play out in military base towns whenever troops return from war — but rarely with the frequency and intensity that this town and others across the country are seeing now as the Pentagon draws down troops in Iraq.

This week the United States officially ended its combat mission in Iraq, leaving 50,000 troops — down from 140,000 a year before — to train and support Iraqi security forces.

Though the Pentagon has been pulling units out of the country for months, the process will continue into the fall as thousands more service members flow back to their home bases to reunite with families, enter life beyond the military — or prepare for new missions.

The returns are moments of celebration and relief, but tension and peril can lie ahead. Suicides, crime and marital problems often spike in the months after a deployment ends, military mental health experts say. And while the police in Lakewood said they have seen no problems yet, the base took the precaution of tripling its mental health staff, to 50, in preparation for the returning soldiers. Other bases around the country have also done so.

"I've been bracing for all the things that come with the return of troops," said Andrew VanDenBergh, a former Marine and a war critic who helped start Coffee Strong, a nonprofit cafe that helps soldiers find services. "I sound pessimistic when I say it's a matter of time."

Joint Base Lewis-McChord is experiencing among the largest influxes of returning troops. At the beginning of the year, nearly 18,000 of its servicemen and -women — almost half the base — were deployed, most to

Iraq. By late fall, nearly all will be back.

At Fort Bragg, in North Carolina, two brigades of the 82nd Airborne Division will return by fall, and the post expects to have most of its 55,000 soldiers home for Christmas for the first time in nine years, its garrison commander has said. A brigade has about 3,000 soldiers.

And the Third Infantry Division, based at Fort Stewart in Georgia, is scheduled to bring back nearly 14,000 soldiers by late fall from three combat brigades, a headquarters unit and a combat-aviation brigade.

Kevin Larson, a spokesman for Fort Stewart, said that by the end of the year, five of the division's six brigades will be home, only the second time that has happened since 2001.

Senior military officials say they hope that with fewer troops needed in Iraq, the Pentagon will be able to keep troops home longer, perhaps reducing some of the deployment stress that experts say has contributed to record high numbers of suicides in the military. But with the surge under way in Afghanistan, where there are now more than 100,000 American troops, many soldiers and [Marines](#) know that new deployments are inevitable.

"We all know he's going back to Afghanistan," said April Berry, 29, the wife of a Joint Base Lewis-McChord soldier just back from Iraq.

At Galloping Gerties, the waitresses — many of them military wives themselves — squeal when they see familiar faces come in. The cooks remember soldiers by their menu choices.

Michelle Barrett, 34, a bartender at Gerties, said seeing her husband, a staff sergeant, after a year was better than having a child. For him, it was a chance to meet his 8-month-old daughter, Ellie, whose premature birth he had watched via the Internet from Iraq. "She's so small," he said, cradling her in his arms.

But the staff at Gerties has also seen difficult reunions. Recently, they watched as a woman who had been deployed tried to reconnect with her infant child, only to be rejected. The mother, Ms. Rothwell said, sat through the meal with tears in her eyes.

Another time, a group of young mothers and babies came into the restaurant. Before they left, one took her child up to the wall where there are photos of Fort Lewis soldiers who were killed in combat. "That's your daddy," the woman said, pointing to one of the photos.

Ms. Rothwell said it was too hard to watch such scenes. "You have to turn and leave," she said. "Or soldiers come in and see their buddy there, and they didn't know that he had died."

At the dry cleaners, Maria Dibbens offers alterations with a listening ear. Ms. Dibbens knows precisely when units will return and when the homecoming balls take place. "These young kids, they need support," she said. "Sometimes I give out my number."

But for now, the mood is festive as soldiers march in parades, dance at the balls and zip down the highway

in new cars and motorcycles bought with combat pay.

At the nail salon, Wynn Nguyen, 18, said business spiked as Army wives spiffed up before their husbands return. Mr. Nguyen said he could tell when units had finally arrived when female soldiers came in, primping in ways that do not violate the Army's strict dress code. (Doing designs on fingernails is forbidden, but toenails are O.K.)

"When Army women come back, they do their toenails, which they hide in their boots," Mr. Nguyen said. "They tell me the colors they want, and I freestyle — yellow, white, pink, with silver and gold sparkles."

Isolde Raftery reported from Lakewood, Wash., and James Dao from New York.