

The New York Times

## REPORT

**On Furlough, Soldier Savors Every Moment**

**A 15-day furlough from the occupation of Iraq is hard to enjoy when you know war is back there waiting for you. By JEFFREY GETTLEMAN**

AYTONA BEACH, Fla., Oct. 14 - Juan Castillo just came home from war. Now he is going back.

For the last 14 days, Specialist Castillo, a 21-year-old artilleryman, has been trying to savor each kiss from his wife, each minute with the baby, each inch of his bed and each sip of Mountain Dew.

But it has not been easy. Happiness is endless happiness, and it is hard to really enjoy 15 days off from the occupation of Iraq when you know war is back there waiting for you and your vacation is basically a bittersweet countdown.

**Cooperative agreement between SPIEGEL ONLINE and the "New York Times"**

SPIEGEL ONLINE and the online version of the "New York Times" offer their readers a new service. Approximately twice a week, you can read selected analyses and commentary from the "New York Times" on SPIEGEL ONLINE. In return, our colleagues in New York will publish selected and translated articles from DER SPIEGEL on their website each week.

"My strategy," Specialist Castillo explained one night, "is don't sleep too much, because you can sleep all you want back there. Eat a lot - my mom's trying to get me to gain 10 pounds. And try not to think about the madness back there."

The Army's new furlough program is an experiment, and Specialist Castillo, who is deployed with the Third Armored Cavalry Regiment, based at Fort Carson, Colo., is one

of its guinea pigs. Begun in September, the program is meant to give a "sanity check" to soldiers whose tours of duty in Iraq have been extended to a year, by splitting 365 days into two manageable halves.

"Our intent was that if we can give these men and women a chance to see their families and sort out what they've been through, they'll come back stronger," said Lt. Col. Bob Hagen, an Army spokesman.

More than 3,600 soldiers have come home so far. The reunions have been joyous, of course. One Baltimore specialist got married. But some people, including some veterans, are warning that plucking soldiers out of combat zones to go back home for mere days, which has rarely been done before, is a bad idea. They say such sudden re-entries into family life may cause more stress, not less. The respite is too brief, they say, the disorientation too extreme. And the goodbyes bring twice the pain.

Some soldiers, stoically, have refused the chance to go home.

## Exklusiv

► **Türkischer Irak-Einsatz:** Misstrauen gegen die Halbmondtruppe



► **Bayerns Super-Huber:** Stoiber kürt seinen Kronprinzen

► **Bundeswehr in Kunduz:** Einsatz mit Scheuklappen

► **EU-Gipfel:** Chirac springt für den Kanzler ein

► **Geberkonferenz Irak:** Fischer und Wiczorek-Zeul rangeln um Kompetenzen

► **Hartz-Abstimmungen:** Unionsabgeordnete zur Teilnahme vergattert

► **The New York Times**  
The Bush Curse: Bewitched, Bothered, Billy-Goated

## SPIEGEL-Dossiers ►►

► **Schröder/Lafontaine:** Das Duell unter Freunden



► **Arbeitslosigkeit:** Wer arbeitet ist der Dumme

► **Sozialhilfe:** Viagra vom Sozialamt

## Aktuell ►►

► **Uno-Sicherheitsrat:** Irak-Resolution einstimmig angenommen

► **Bush bei Schwarzenegger:** Die Alpha-Männchen beschnuppern sich

► **Neue Aufregung bei Rot-Grün:** Auf Krücken ins Ziel

► **Indien:** Zehntausende Festnahmen vor Hindu-Demonstration

## Kolumne

Specialist Castillo, one of those instinctively sunny types, was not about to miss this furlough. But even his mood could quickly darken when someone asked about the unfinished business only a duffel bag away.

## Day 1

As the plane banked over Cincinnati on its way to Florida, Specialist Castillo crunched an ice cube in his teeth, scanned the twinkling lights below and proclaimed: "I can't wait to go to Wendy's. I mean, you can't go wrong with Wendy's."

Two full weeks lay in front of him like a red carpet. He had plans, big plans: a National Football League game, Universal Studios, a swig of tequila with his boys, quality time with the wife and kid, maybe even sky diving. Why not? He had always wanted to go sky diving.

His family lives in DeLand, a town in central Florida between Daytona Beach and Orlando. As the doors whooshed open at the Orlando airport, a shout rang out: "There he is!"

And then: "Johnnniee!"

His mother, Yomara, was bouncing up and down with all the pent-up energy of a shaken bottle of Champagne. She burst toward her son and smothered him with hugs, kisses, squeezes and pinches.

"Mom, Mom, stop, stop," he said.

"I ain't stopping nothing."

Specialist Castillo turned to his wife, April, 19. Her expectant face glowed with fresh makeup. They kissed. His mother-in-law then handed him his newborn son.

Specialist Castillo's eyes blazed with tenderness and awe as he looked down at Juan Castillo Jr. for the first time.

"Hold his head up, John, hold his head up," April said.

"Oh my God," was all he could mutter.

Little Juan was three weeks old. Like his father, the family calls him John. The leave program gives preference to soldiers with young children, especially newborns.

That first night, Specialist Castillo paced his mother's spotless living room in his combat boots, eating toasted ham sandwiches, marveling at the running water, telling everybody how great it was in Cincinnati, where the plane stopped, to see the first rain he had seen in months.

His mother could not take her eyes off him.

"I was so worried about you," she said. "I gained a lot of weight, then I lost a lot of weight, and then I gained it back. I was a mess. I even thought of joining the Red Cross so I could go over to Iraq and see you."

Specialist Castillo barely slept that night.

‣ **Frisch aus dem Notebook:**  
SPIEGEL-Reporter berichten aus allen Teilen der Welt

## Forum

- **CDU/CSU:**  
Wie sozial soll die Union sein?
- **Kanzlerkurs:**  
Wie viel Streit verträgt die SPD?
- **Autobahngelände:**  
Eine faire Regelung für alle?

## Themen

- **Bayern:**  
Landtagswahl 2003
- **Ein Land, zwei Völker:**  
Die Nahostkrise
- **Nordkorea:**  
Amerikas zweite Front
- **Irak-Krieg:**  
Ringieren um den Frieden
- **Rückblick:**  
Die Bremen-Wahl
- **11.9. - Zwei Jahre danach:**  
Bushs endloser Krieg gegen den Terror

## Day 2

The first stop the next morning was his old high school.

"Man, you look good," said the school police officer, Greg Roberts, as the two hugged. Specialist Castillo said, "Got you an Iraqi police patch."

The police officer was almost embarrassed by the thoughtfulness. He collects police patches and Specialist Castillo had remembered that.

"So, how you doing over there?" the deputy asked.

"It's madness," Specialist Castillo said. That is his favorite word to describe Iraq. "Madness."

Specialist Castillo, who works the radio for his artillery battery at the Asad air base west of Baghdad, started telling stories about fainting from heat exhaustion and getting pelted with rocks and running patrols in dark desert towns where his unit invariably gets shot at. A few weeks ago, a sergeant in his squadron was torn apart by a road bomb.

"In the beginning I was into this; we all were," he said. But now, he feels the war is a waste.

"We haven't found anything, no weapons of mass destruction, no Saddam, no nothing. And the people there hate us. If we were rolling through a town and they were cheering, hell yeah, it would make us feel better. But when they're not cooperating and throwing rocks and giving us evil looks, we don't want to be there. We're conquerors to them. It wasn't supposed to be like that."

Sometimes, the biggest enemy is boredom. When Specialist Castillo finishes his shift on the radio, he seems to have acres of time to do nothing but think of home.

Now that he is home, he cannot stop thinking of going back.

"I can't stay long," he told the police officer. "Only got 14 days."

The police officer shook his head.

"Fourteen days ain't much, is it?"

Specialist Castillo then dropped in on his old guidance counselor, Teresa Snyder, whom he showed pictures of himself strolling through palaces and posing with bricks of confiscated Iraqi gold. In many photos, it looked as if Specialist Castillo were playing war rather than fighting it.

"What are you exactly doing over there?" Ms. Snyder said.

He replied: "Ever seen the show `Cops'? That's basically it: kicking in doors, searching things, looking for weapons and gold and stuff like that."

Her eyes studied his face.

"Is it getting better?" she asked.

"No," he said.

#### **Day 4**

Specialist Castillo was learning to be a dad. He changed his first diaper.

"Little John peed all over me," he said. "It was awesome."

April Castillo said her husband was adjusting well, considering.

"But he still needs a little help with the car seat," she said.

Some military psychologists say the two-week furlough should be used as a vacation, not a time to play house.

"It's not a time to make big decisions or take care of business," said Shelley MacDermid, co-director of Purdue University's Military Family Research Institute.

#### **Day 6**

Specialist Castillo confessed that he did not want to go back to the dust and heat and the kids with dirty little hands always touching him, pleading, "water, water."

He said he was not a mean guy. But he has had to coarsen. He has had to kick kids away, he said.

"Over there, man, something happens; something inside me snaps."

Then he added, "If I didn't have a wife and baby, I might seriously not go back."

According to Colonel Hagen, all soldiers who have been granted leave have reported for duty when their two weeks were up. "No AWOLs so far," Colonel Hagen said. "They know the consequences."

In Vietnam, soldiers got a week of rest and relaxation in Saigon, Bangkok or Honolulu. The current leave program is the first that sends soldiers to the continental United States, though some people have suggested that someplace like Europe might be easier on families.

E. C. Hurley, executive director of the Marriage and Family Institute, which counsels many military families, said "coming home and saying goodbye is not as acute if it's on neutral territory."

He also said a few spouses had told him that they did not want their soldiers to come home, though nearly all the families he works with support the program.

Nichelle Jordan-Brown, a supply sergeant who arrived on the same flight as Specialist Castillo, said some soldiers in her unit had turned down the leave.

"They said it would be too hard to go back," Sergeant Jordan-Brown

said.

As for herself, she planned a surprise and did not tell her children a word. When she went to pick up her 7-year-old daughter at school, the girl thought her mother was a mirage.

### **Day 9**

Specialist Castillo and his older brother Luis went to visit their father's grave. The father, Miguel Castillo, an immigrant from Puerto Rico and a Marine sergeant, died of cancer at 41. The brothers put fresh roses on his grave and brushed away dead leaves.

Time was beginning to wear down Specialist Castillo. At first, the 15-day furlough felt endless. Now it felt fleeting.

### Advertisement **Day 10**

Specialist Castillo went sky diving.

Right before he jumped out of the plane, he looked into a video camera and mouthed "I love you."

Some of his friends joked that he was acting as if he had a terminal disease. Sometimes that is what it felt like. That night on the news, there was another report: Two more American soldiers had been ambushed and killed in Baghdad.

"Nobody's safe over there," Specialist Castillo said. When he first got to Iraq, he said, he wanted to win a Purple Heart. "Now, I'm like, 'You take the mission, guy.' I just want to come home."

### **Day 12**

The techno music blasted, the blender whirled and the tequila flowed from glass to mouth.

It was send-off time, and Specialist Castillo's mother was giving a party.

"Everything's been great so far, Mom," Specialist Castillo told her as he cut through a crowd salsa dancing by the pool. "And it ain't over yet."

He flashed a smile. It slid right off his face.

Now, more than ever, Specialist Castillo looked like a man distracted. His eyes darted around the room; his shoulders were tight.

"I'm a little bit worried, because he's distant," said an uncle, Larry Quinones.

Joe Rosario, a friend of the Castillos and an Army veteran, said the leave program was a bad idea. "It's going to be really hard to reprogram this guy for combat," Mr. Rosario said. "And you know what's going to happen to his morale when he gets back? Straight down. Rock bottom."

As the night petered out and the guests hugged Specialist Castillo

goodbye, the chain of emotions came to an end: anticipation, celebration, contemplation and now just dread.

"I hate it over there, I hate it," Specialist Castillo said.

But then he caught himself.

"I shouldn't be complaining," Specialist Castillo said. "The Army can't keep me there forever."

**DRUCKVERSION** ▶▶  
**ARTIKEL VERSENDEN** ▶▶  
**LESERBRIEF SCHREIBEN** ▶▶

© SPIEGEL ONLINE 2003  
Alle Rechte vorbehalten  
Vervielfältigung nur mit Genehmigung der SPIEGELnet GmbH



---

◀◀ REISE | POLITIK | WIRTSCHAFT ▶▶

[ [Home](#) | [Politik](#) | [Wirtschaft](#) | [Netzwelt](#) | [Panorama](#) | [Kultur](#) | [Wissenschaft](#) | [UniSPIEGEL](#) | [Sport](#) | [Auto](#) | [Reise](#) ]  
[ [Wetter](#) | [Marktplatz](#) | [Schlagzeilen](#) | [Forum](#) | [Leserbriefe](#) | [Newsletter](#) | [Archiv](#) | [Shop](#) ]  
[ [DER SPIEGEL](#) | [SPIEGEL TV](#) | [SPIEGEL-Jahrbuch](#) | [KulturSPIEGEL](#) | [SCHULE@SPIEGEL](#) ]  
[ [Impressum](#) | [Hilfe](#) | [Kontakt](#) | [SPIEGEL-Gruppe](#) | [Mediadaten](#) ]