



- [Domestic Politics](#)
- [Economy](#)
- [Foreign Policy](#)
- [Justice](#)
- [Military](#)
- [Society & Culture](#)

Also see:  
[Iraq in Transition](#)  
[Living > Religion & Ethics](#)

**[Monitor Breakfast](#)**

Bacon, eggs, and policy: Fill your plate with excerpts from discussions between reporters and Washington newsmakers.

USA Stories:  
 for 10/16/2003  
[Bush's new California connection](#)

[In heartland, and US, mixed view of Bush](#)  
[More workers strike over healthcare benefits](#)  
[From war to Wal-Mart](#)  
[Tool to keep kids in school - other kids' parents](#)

[XML](#) [What is this?](#)

**SPECIAL PROJECTS**

[USA](#) > [Military](#)

from the October 16, 2003 edition

From war to Wal-Mart

By [Ann Scott Tyson](#) | Special Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor

BALTIMORE – They came to see the babies. The children, too, like the red-haired boys clamoring for pitches in a Kentucky backyard, or the toddler in flowered overalls who clung to her father's knees. But the babies were special. Their babies. The ones they'd never held before.

The tiny beings seemed galaxies apart from the dust, heat, and danger of Iraq. So far away, that when the soldiers first heard they were getting furlough, they dismissed it as a bad joke.

"I was in a broken-down gun truck in downtown Mosul, trying to fix it," recalls Sgt. Matt Loring of the 101st Airborne Division. "They radioed and asked me, 'You want to go on R & R?' I said, 'Yeah, right.' "

Sergeant Loring left the next morning. He still couldn't believe it when he arrived in Baltimore Sept. 26 with a planeload of 200 US soldiers, many of them young fathers. It was the first flight of the Army's new two-week leave program, the largest since Vietnam, aimed at breaking up a year in the war zone.

Little things made the GIs anxious, like a welcome banner announcing: "This Van is Carrying Soldiers Coming Home from Iraq." Later, a clap of thunder sent Loring's comrades ducking for cover. "It sounded just like an incoming 60-mm mortar," says his buddy, Sgt. Richard Carpenter.



MOMENTS, MOMENTOS: Pfc. Chris Oldham holds a photo of himself, his wife, and his 6-week-old baby.  
 ANN SCOTT TYSON

**SUPPORT THE MONITOR**

→ [Make a donation](#)

**MONITOR ARCHIVE**



**Trying War Crimes: Iraq in Context**

If Saddam Hussein is captured, then what? Essential background in stories from the Monitor's archive.

17 articles - \$4.95

Purchase articles from the [Monitor Archive](#) for as little as 15 cents each.

**TREELESS EDITION™**

**New!** [Subscribe](#) to the Treeless Edition!



**SUBSCRIBE**

**[Free sample issue](#)**



[Empire Builders](#)



[September 11 One year later](#)



[Defining Terrorism](#)



[Amtrak: All Aboard?](#)



[My Fellow Americans...](#)



[The Heart of a High School](#)

[more projects...](#)

Most-viewed stories:

(for 10/15/03)

10/16/03

[Gaza bomb attack: strategy shift?](#)

10/15/03

[Iraqi Shiite split widens](#)

10/15/03

[The power of 1](#)

10/14/03

[Put the Patriot Act to good use - on the White House leak](#)

10/16/03

[After 25 years, a changed papacy](#)

Who could blame them? Overnight, they were going from war to Wal-Mart, from fighting guerrillas to family reunions, from bachelor soldiering to married life, from low-intensity conflict to high-intensity diaper changing.

For all this, they had just over a fortnight. Fifteen days with loved ones. Fifteen days to be fathers before heading back, across the universe.

R & R?

According to military psychologists, "Rest and Relaxation" is supposed to be just that. "It's a big mistake to try to use this time to take care of a lot of family business," says Shelley MacDermid, co-director of the Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University. "This is a vacation from war. It's spring break from war."

Try telling that to Sgt. Rusty Bray. The freckled infantryman from Chicago has three redheaded sons - ages 4, 2, and 1 - and a newborn daughter. "We tried one more time for a girl," he says with a smile.

When Sergeant Bray got home, the first thing his wife had him do was buy a new sofa. "She doesn't sleep on the bed, it's too lonely," he says. "So I bought this king-sized couch. It cost \$1,300. It's camel color."

"Your wife had you buy a sand-colored couch?!" said his friend, Sergeant Carpenter, feigning shock.

But Carpenter admits that his wife's "to-do" list back in Cincinnati, Ohio, was even longer. They shopped for cars, furniture, houses, and, he says, "new jobs." Carpenter wanted food. "Steaks. Pizza. I went to McDonald's ten times. I wanted anything that wasn't military and everything we usually take for granted."

With a toddler and a 5-month-old girl, Carpenter's real rest came only at night. But for him, that was enough. "It's the best sleep in the world, in your own bed with your kids asleep in the next room."

Turkey and tinsel

Pfc. Chris Oldham of the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment knows all the Texas stereotypes: sprawling houses, thick BBQ ribs, and all-out celebrations. But even the tall Houston native was surprised by the extent of the holiday awaiting him back home.

"Both of our families did Thanksgiving and Christmas, with big turkey dinners back-to-back," he says. His family put up stockings, pine boughs, and a Christmas tree trimmed with snowmen in Uncle Sam

**Related stories:**

08/05/03

[Portrait of a US combat casualty](#)

07/22/03

[US assembles new Iraqi army](#)

**monitor**talk

Weigh in on issues of the day in our [forums](#).



[Write a letter to the Editor](#)



[Printer-friendly version](#)



[Permission to reprint/republish](#)

**E-mail Headlines**

Enter your address to receive news alerts.

**SCHOOL PROGRAMS**  
[Programs for teachers and students](#)

 The Great Books Foundation  
**Readings in American Democracy**

**2004 CALENDAR**  
  
**Company Store**

  
**Buy Monitor Photos online!**

suits.

It was all a bit overwhelming for Private Oldham, who's only spent one month with his wife during their 14-month marriage.

That's not to mention Emily Lynn, his infant daughter born Aug. 31. "I spent a lot of sleepless nights with the baby," says Oldham, pulling out a photo of him lying on a bed feeding Emily a bottle. The lack of sleep, he says, "was worse than Iraq."

Psychologist Howard Weiss, who studies the military, says family hoopla can redouble the stress of a short homecoming. "[Soldiers] need to retreat and replenish. They don't have the resources to turn a switch and all of a sudden become a full-bodied member of the family."

Oldham's eyes bore dark circles as he headed back on Sunday to rejoin his unit, based in the western part of Iraq's violent Sunni Triangle. "It's rough," he says. "Some days are good. Some are bad. It will be easier when I get back into the swing of things, into the battle rhythm."

#### Labor and leaving

A jet-lagged Spc. Gary Yoakam made it to his wife's side in Dayton, Ohio, six hours before she went into labor to deliver their first child, a girl. "I spent R & R sitting on the couch with my wife and holding the baby on my chest," he says.

The timing was almost as good for Pfc. Ernesto Serrano of Los Angeles. His first child, Jacob, was born while Private Serrano was on the plane home.

But Spc. Andre Watson of the 10th Mountain Division never met little Brandon, his third son, due a day after Specialist Watson's arrival. On Sunday, Brandon was still in the womb. "It was too short," Watson said as he walked to the departure gate in Baltimore. "That's the downside," agreed his wife, Melissa, absentmindedly rubbing her abdomen.

Bittersweet but better than nothing is how Watson and many other soldiers sum up R & R. After all, the alternatives are sticking it out for a year in Iraq, or taking a four-day pass to a local destination like Qatar, Kuwait, or Bahrain.

So far, about 4,000 service members have come through Baltimore; each day, another 240 arrive in the first program to bring troops home to the continental US on this scale. New fathers have priority.

Some Army researchers, however, believe the abrupt comings and goings are too emotionally disruptive for all involved. "It's a replay of the initial send-off" with all the angst and depression of a soldier's departure, says Bruce Bell of the Army Research Institute. In a 1997 paper on R & R from Bosnia, Dr. Bell found that "the near-term effects of home leave ... are uniformly negative" for families and soldiers still deployed.

As for many couples, the Watsons' unspoken fears overshadowed their reunion. "We'd just go to the park with the kids, and take the camcorder to make sure they have memories," says Melissa Watson, as 1-year-old Jermaine races around the airport concourse in a camouflage T-shirt.

Children too young to have a clear sense of time were distraught by a parent's disappearance, as Bray learned when he called home one last time. "My kids were all crying. My 1-year-old was walking around the house looking for me, saying, 'Daddy, Daddy!' "

Soldiers like Loring stuffed baby pictures into their bags, taking a token of tenderness back to the combat zone.

"Of the greatest feelings I've ever had, that's probably it right there," he says, recalling hugging his wife and infant at the Nashville, Ky., airport. "My wife introduced me to the baby. She said 'Lexis, this is your Daddy.' Your heart just melts."

He packed a teddy bear. It's holding an American flag and has the scent of his 6-week-old daughter's lotion.



[Write a letter  
to the Editor](#)



[Printer-  
friendly  
version](#)



[Permission to  
reprint/republish](#)

---

[back to top](#)

---

[Home](#) | [About Us/Help](#) | [Feedback](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Archive](#) | [Print Edition](#) | [Site Map](#) | [MonitorTalk](#) | [Special Projects](#)  
[Contact Us](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Rights & Permissions](#) | [Advertise With Us](#) | [Today's Article on Christian Science](#) | [Web Directory](#)

---

www.csmonitor.com | Copyright © 2003 The Christian Science Monitor. All rights reserved.