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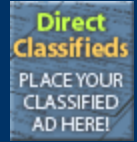
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Friends and family celebrate return

By **DANIELLE CAMILLI**

Burlington County Times

DELRAN — After a 15-month tour in Iraq, Army Spec. Christopher Lambersky received a welcome fit for a hometown hero last night.

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Lambersky, who turns 24 today, was the guest of honor at a party attended by about 85 friends and family at Castle Caterers. State and local officials also turned out to thank him for his service.

Lambersky's family said the celebration was a small way they could thank the soldier who helped plan and execute many missions overseas, including the rescue of Iraqi villagers from a house where they were being starved and tortured by insurgents.

Lambersky returned from the Middle East last month.

His mom, Jennie McAllister of Delran, said she wanted her oldest son to know how much everyone supports him and how grateful they are for his commitment, bravery and dedication.

"It was a difficult and intense 15 months," she said yesterday before the party. "It's awesome to have him home. I went to Fort Hood (Texas) to meet him and it felt like a weight was lifted when I knew he was safe."

Like many military moms, McAllister had a longer wait than expected away from her soldier. He was scheduled to be home in October, but his tour was extended to December.

Lambersky said he knew he had support, but it was great to so many friends and family members last night.

"The whole time you're over there all you think about is coming home and what you're going to do. I'm home for 30 days and all 30 are full," he said.

"It's a little overwhelming to see everyone here."

He plans to go to Atlantic City, a Flyers game and get a cheesesteak from Jim's Steaks on South Street before reporting back to work.

"You really look forward to the things you used to take for granted," he said.

Lambersky enlisted in 2005 after completing his sophomore year at Fairleigh Dickinson University. He enlisted with childhood friends Richard Opoku and Jami Stirtz, both graduates of Delran High School who are currently serving in Iraq.

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Lambersky completed basic training at Fort Knox and was deployed to Iraq in October, 2006.

There, he was stationed about 30 miles northeast of Baghdad in the town of Baquba.

"When we got there it was a real hot spot with insurgents running rampant," he said.



"By the time we left you could actually walk around and we went to a sheik's house and we could even take our gear off."

While he was a calvary scout, his commander had him work in the planning office. As part of his job, Lambersky helped plan missions, determining what kind of support troop, including air or artillery, would be needed.

After his unit learned of a "torture house," Lambersky and his commander spent weeks planning a rescue that would ensure the safety of both the soldiers and the Iraqis.

"We worked on that for a long time because we knew it would be really, really dangerous," he said, noting the unit found a book that had drawings and instructions on how to torture the prisoners.

The mission was a success. The unit freed 42 Iraqis without any casualties.

However, his unit did lose soldiers while he was deployed.

Lambersky urged his worried family to stop watching news reports of the unrest and trust that he would be OK. While he rarely could phone them, he would update them with regular e-mails when on base.

Lambersky's family was also busy on the homefront.

They collected items and sent hundreds of care packages and letters to Lambersky and other soldiers through a military support effort run by www.anysoldier.com.

"That's really how my kids and I got through this. We did a lot of troop support," McAllister said. "We made sure soldiers would get care packages in time for their birthdays and holidays."

Lambersky said knowing he had support at home helped him and his unit get through difficult times.

His family, including siblings, Meghan, Corey and Rebecca McAllister, are trying to prepare themselves for his next tour of duty.

The soldier will return to Fort Hood later this month. He is scheduled to be redeployed at the end of the year.

"They say your first time is the worst because you don't know what to expect. Now, I know what to expect so it's a little less stressful," Lambersky said.

"But I'm still not looking forward to going back."

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