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Sailors home, but not without a few hitches

By Alex Lyda July 27, 2003

Despite big flags and bright smiles, no Navy homecoming is perfect.

Just ask Chris Ronberg, 19, a computer technician aboard the Boxer, who searched for his parents yesterday at the 32nd Street Naval Station as 1,100 sailors poured out of the amphibious assault ship, home after six months at sea.

Ronberg paced the pier in his best Navy whites, clutching a single rose.

"My father is a tall guy," he said, peering over couples kissing and whispering after nearly 200 days apart. "They are supposed to be here." Ronberg tried calling them on a borrowed cell phone. He got a busy signal. There was no telling where they were among the 3,500 sailors from the Boxer, Pearl Harbor, Cleveland, Dubuque and the Bonhomme Richard who constitute the Amphibious Task Force West.

The ships arrived at their home port of San Diego yesterday after leaving Jan. 17 for the Persian Gulf as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The Boxer played a special role there. The ship's helicopters were used in the celebrated rescue of Army Pfc. Jessica Lynch from a hospital in Nasiriyah, and more than 30 aircraft and a dozen landing craft based aboard the ship conducted daily and nightly combat missions in and around Iraq.

On Thursday and Friday, the flotilla off-loaded 3,500 Marines and their tanks, helicopters, armored personnel carriers, Humvees, Harrier jump jets and artillery at Camp Pendleton.

Shortly after sunrise yesterday, the Boxer's fog-shrouded bow crested the horizon as scores of family members cheered. Minutes later, each sailor standing ramrod straight on the Boxer's flattop deck came into view.

Parents wept with joy and relief, scanning each face for their loved ones.

"I've got goose bumps," said Chris Chinn, the father of Boatswain's Mate 2nd Class Corey Chinn, 26.

Life moved on while the sailors were away. Cars and homes were bought and sold, children were born and relatives died.

Donna Foronda, a medical lab technician, bought a three-bedroom house while her husband, Jayner, was away.

"I did everything all by myself," she said. "He's just going to come (home) with the house ready, and all he has to do is relax."

It was the little things that often proved more challenging, Debbie Dugan said.

The registration tags on her son's car expired while he was away. She and her husband, Rod, fought a minor bureaucratic battle to keep it from getting towed.

They e-mailed their son to secure power of attorney. The process took four weeks, but they got the car registered.

For some, the joy had to be put on hold.

Pedro and Angelita Garcia's daughter briefly greeted them, then had to get back on the ship for a 24-hour watch before she could enjoy any time off.

It was barely enough time for her mother to hand her a bag of chili-powdered mango slices, something she had been missing since she left.

Unlike a commercial airplane, a fully loaded Navy ship can take more than an hour to disembark its crew. The government cliché "hurry up and wait" seemed fitting when Chinn still hadn't seen his son.

"The goose bumps are starting to fade," he said.

Ronberg finally reached his parents after two hours. They were driving in from Las Vegas.

"They didn't get my last e-mail that said the ship was getting in earlier, and the hotline didn't give the exact time for security reasons," he said.

His parents were on the road near Temecula, about 60 miles from the base.

"They are kind of bummed," Ronberg said. "My dad made a flag and everything."

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1. Army Pfc. Eduardo Jauregui hugged cousin Cynthia Gonzalez yesterday after she and the other sailors of the amphibious assault ship Boxer arrived home after six months at sea. 2.

Annette Bush gave the once-over to her husband, Chief Petty Officer Eric Bush, after dropping her welcome-home sign on the pier at the 32nd Street Naval Station yesterday as the Boxer's crew disembarked. (B-6) 1,2. Nelvin Cepeda / Union-Tribune

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