185th Homecoming: 'I can't wait to see you'

Staff Sgt. Patrick Kirby of Meridian has been a CH-47D Chinook helicopter mechanic since 1998. A former member of the Mississippi Army National Guard's 185th Aviation Unit, Company G, Kirby returned from serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom in March 2004.

His new unit, the 1108th Aviation Classification Repair Activity Depot — or "AVCRAD" — is currently standing by for orders to return to Iraq.

Kirby wrote this letter to Sgt. 1st Class Larry Burrage, a friend in the 185th scheduled to return to Mississippi in March.

Kirby began his military career in 1981, when he joined the U.S. Marine Corps. He served on active duty until his honorable discharge in 1989. Kirby began his law enforcement career as a Meridian police officer in 1993 and is currently a DeKalb police officer.

Kirby is married to Alisha Kirby. He has a son, Patrick, and a daughter, Amanda, who live with their mother in North Carolina. Patrick also has two step-sons, Christopher and Joshua Walker. He is an employee of Mr. Discount Drugs.

PHOTO BY PAULA MERRITT / THE MERIDIAN STAR

WAITING FOR ORDERS

Patrick Kirby checks the stock at Mr. Discount Drugs on 14th Street in Meridian. Kirby served in Iraq as a member of the Mississippi Army National Guard's 185th Aviation Group, Company G. He is now awaiting new orders as a member of the 1108th Aviation Classification Repair Activity Depot.

19 January 2005

Hey Larry,

Big Sarge, I hope this letter finds you and the rest of Company G 185th Aviation in good spirits there in Iraq. Please relay to them that they are in my prayers for a safe return.

Last time I heard from you, you related to me how the PX had been mortared. I am glad no one was hurt. As I sit here writing this letter in my living room, I am thinking of how your tour of duty has been different from mine.

You have told me of the constant shelling at your camp and how, after a short period of time, you become a bit insensitive. I hope that you will still take cover during these periods of harassment. I was fortunate; there were no shellings in Kuwait where I was stationed. I did not have to seek shelter several times a day ...

I know that you miss your family as much as I missed mine. I surrounded the small living space I had in our tent with photographs to keep me thinking of home. Like you, I had my laptop to keep me in contact with my wife and kids by e-mail. I am glad to say that it is a miracle of some kind to be living in this day and age ...

I was lucky to have a superb support group tending to my needs. Daily I was asked, usually via e-mail, if there was anything I needed. I received packages from family and friends and even from folks from around the country I have yet to meet.

I enjoyed receiving letters and cards from children whose teachers had prompted them to write to unknown soldiers. It was great to read of their support even when they were not sure of why America was in a war. I can only hope that you have had just the same such support ...

You and I know that until someone has walked where we have walked and seen what we have seen, they will never really fully comprehend what "freedom" is.

I read every day of what the insurgents are doing to try to stop the processes of a free election in their country. I know that the Iraqi people are hesitant to try out this new concept of self-governing ...

Our democratic way of life, however, does ensure a more reasonable chance at a happy life for all than any other way of government I have seen. Sure, we Americans hurt ourselves every day, but we still live with the reasonable assurance that we will not be dragged from a bus and beheaded simply because we hired on to do a job.

Eighteen young men between the ages of 18 and 20 were done that way in Iraq. They were on their way to a base in Mosul, in two buses, to start a job with the American contractors. Al-Qaeda-supported insurgents stopped the buses and massacred the men. These young men were killed because they contracted to work with Americans just so they could put food on the table for their families ...

It is no wonder the Iraqis are hesitant to adopt our way of life. I wish that we, as a nation of displaced foreigners, could get past the differences of our nation's past and start living for today as the Americans we are supposed to be — "One nation under God."

Well, Larry, I guess I have written enough. I know you don't have to be reminded of why we are at war against terrorism. I know that you are seeing the reason every day.

I also know that I really don't want to have to go back into a war theatre — but as an American soldier, it is my duty and my responsibility to help those who can't fight for themselves. I have always felt this way and I always will. I am an American and damn proud of it, too!

I can't wait to see you and the rest of the guys back here safe and sound. Watch your six! HOOAH!

Staff Sgt. Patrick Kirby

SUBMITTED PHOTO

IN MEMORY OF HIS COUSIN

Austin Jordan, a fourth-grade student at Newton County Elementary School, draws a picture in honor of his cousin, Chief Petty Officer Joel Baldwin of Gulfport, a highly decorated U.S. Navy Seabee combat warfare specialist and master training specialist. He was killed in action in Mosul, Iraq, on Dec. 24. Austin's parents are Frankie and Angela Jordan and he has a brother, Lincoln. The family attends Hudson Chapel Church of God in Union. Austin is a member of Cub Scout Pack 78 in Sebastopol; he enjoys music, art, being outdoors and playing with his friends.

'Come home safe to a free land'

Michelle Smith of Meridian submitted this "Bragging Rights" story about her husband, Spc. Joseph W. Smith of the Mississippi Army National Guard's 150th Combat Engineer Battalion. She wrote this story in January ... when Joseph still didn't know when he would be deployed.

Joseph left Meridian Jan. 14 and is not expected to return home before February 2006.

By Michelle Smith

special to The Star

Like many others, my husband Joseph ran to the recruiter's office right after 9/11 happened. With a little paperwork, and off to a school, he was signed up with the Army Guard. We got the news he was to be deployed and he was ready to go.

We are waiting to hear when he will leave for Iraq, which should be by the end of this week.

When I ask him if he is scared, he just gets a solemn look on his face and tells me he is not scared, he is "ready to go." Sometimes I stand beside him and look at him. I see a strong man, proud to serve his country. I see a man who is not afraid to shed a tear when his 7-year-old daughter stands up in a school production and sings, "God Bless the USA." I see my husband.

We have become closer during the time he has been at Camp Shelby waiting to leave for Iraq. It is hard to imagine that, in the blink of an eye, he will be taken to Iraq and I and my three children will not know when we will see him again.

He is a father and a husband and we love him for protecting us. For keeping the terrorist on their grounds, and not coming onto our grounds, so that our children can grow up in a free land. We love you, honey. Come home safe to a free land.