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South Florida Sun-Sentinel.com

South Florida soldiers arrive home from Afghanistan

By Heather Carney, Sun Sentinel

12:33 PM EDT, September 17, 2012

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

It was pitch black in the parking lot of the Williams Reserve Center in Miami as 11-year-old Abigail Castro unraveled a welcome home banner for her dad, Spc. Michael Castro of North Lauderdale.

She wore a T-shirt that said "daddy's little girl" and anxiously waited with hundreds of whistling and cheering family members greeting the servicemen and women early Monday morning.

Castro and the other 92 soldiers from the 841st Engineer Battalion touched down in Miami around 4:30 a.m. Monday after a six month tour in Afghanistan. They arrived at the armory at the north campus of Miami-Dade College about an hour later – 16 hours after their expected arrival time due to a handful of delayed flights.

When Castro stepped off the bus, he said he felt like home.

"You feel the humidity – it's not like that in Afghanistan, it's just heat there," said Castro. He planned to spend the whole day with his daughter.

A few feet away in the crowd of family and friends, Fabiola Montfort bounced her six-month-old baby Justin in her arms and waited to see her husband and new dad, Sgt. Joel Montfort, walk off one of the three buses packed with South Florida soldiers.

"We were waiting and the flight kept changing all the time," said Montfort, who's from Miami. "We never knew if they were going to make it."

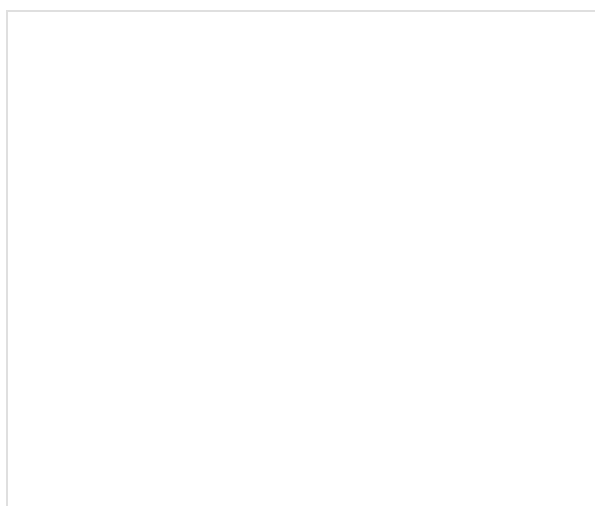
When Montfort scooped Justin into his arms, the six-month-old smiled and laughed.

"Joel was so concerned that the baby wouldn't recognize him," said Montfort's wife.

The sergeant hadn't seen his baby boy since he took emergency leave in early April, a few days after Justin was born.

"It was real sad to leave him," he said. "I'm just so excited to be back with him – he's so big, so much

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heavier."

The South Florida soldiers weren't expected home for another three months but their tour was cut short thanks to a successful mission and an Obama Administration policy to hasten the drawdown of troops from Afghanistan.

But a 6-month deployment in the Middle East still felt too long for the soldiers to be away from their loved ones.

Sgt. Janice Rowe of Miami said she couldn't wait to eat one of her mom's home-cooked meals, especially her mom's oxtail dish.

"She's my only daughter," Jacqueline Rowe said. "It's a great feeling knowing that she came back in one piece."

But some parents who greeted the soldiers Monday morning still have a few more months to wait before their son or daughter makes it home safely

Susan Chelioudakis said her son's tour was extended until January. Nikos Chelioudakis of Coral Springs is one of 33 soldiers from the 841st battalion who will stay a few extra months in Afghanistan.

"I told him I would come support his buddies," she said. "We've all become like family."

Many of the soldiers still have more time to serve in the military, but that was far from their minds Monday.

As day was breaking and the rain started to pour down at the armory, the soldiers headed home to catch up with their families, have a warm breakfast and sleep off their exhaustion.

"It feels so fantastic to be back," Joel Montfort said. "I'm excited to just stay home."

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