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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

129th MPAD returns, welcome home ceremony scheduled

RAPID CITY, S.D. – After spending the past year telling the Army’s story, seven Soldiers from Rapid City’s 129th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment will be honored at a welcome home ceremony at 1 p.m. MDT on Sunday, June 17, at the Range Road Armory.

“The whole year has been a great experience because of the places our Soldiers traveled to and the people they met and had a chance to work with,” said Maj. Jocelyn Baker, commander of the 129th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment.

The National Guard unit mobilized April 14, 2006, to support the public affairs operation of U.S. Central Command headquartered in Tampa, Fla. Its mission included facilitating more than 1,200 interviews between activated service members and reporters from print, radio and television markets from all over the world.

The 129th MPAD is a single unit made up of National Guard Soldiers from North Dakota and South Dakota. Its headquarters is in Rapid City with a detachment located in Bismarck. During the deployment, the unit was split into three different locations: Camp As Sayliyah (Doha, Qatar), Tampa, and Atlanta.

“It was pretty unique to get 20 individuals that did not know each other that well and make such a cohesive team,” said Baker. “They did a wonderful job!”

Baker said the overall goal for the unit was to get the individual service member’s story back to the American media.

Unit members also set up the Digital Video Imagery Distribution System (DVIDS) within the CENTCOM area of responsibility to facilitate interviews between coalition partners and their home country media.

Its members were also sent to cover stories throughout the CENTCOM area of responsibility that covers 27 countries and includes Iraq, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Kyrgyzstan, Djibouti, Qatar and Bahrain. Soldiers wrote feature stories, provided video and photographic support for events and escorted media.

Some of the major events the unit covered include President George Bush's visit to address the Coalition Partners and the Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai's visit to CENTCOM.

The 129th pioneered efforts within the military by continuing to establish dialog and relationships with on-line bloggers.

"We worked with the bloggers to provide command information and news in an effort to reach out to this new social media. Nearly 800 blogs are now a part of CENTCOM's news distribution list," said Capt. Tony Deiss of Rapid City, who served as the electronic media engagement officer for U.S. CENTCOM Public Affairs.

Deiss said he's most proud of the work and initiative set forth by the members within the 129th MPAD. He said that many junior enlisted Soldiers led missions into Iraq and Afghanistan and were responsible for their own successes.

"When you work for an organization like U.S. CENTCOM, you are working at a level two and three times your pay grade, and these specialists and non-commissioned officers proved they could do that," Deiss said.

"The most rewarding experience for me was the reaction I got from all the bloggers," said Deiss.

Since he headed up the CENTCOM Blogging Outreach Program, Deiss said he developed many relationships with bloggers and they all were appreciative and supportive of the efforts to provide them with news and information about the success stories in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Deiss said the most challenging task was communicating to the American public all the great achievements of U.S. service members in Iraq, Afghanistan and other parts of the CENTCOM area of responsibility.

"This is an information war, just as much as it is about capturing insurgents and establishing security," he said. "It's become a war about public perception."

Deiss said that everyday he sees dozens and dozens of positive news stories about reconstruction, humanitarian and security force transition efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"I see how we are making progress over there, what the challenges are, and I understand how it is going to take time to establish enough security to give this democracy a chance to grow," he said.

He added that he doesn't see this aspect of the war being covered by the main stream media.

“And that is frustrating,” said Deiss. “But that is our challenge, to help show others what we see.”