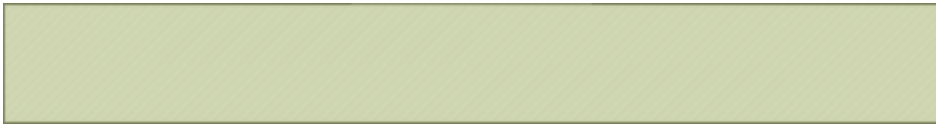


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## Wounded Warriors receive a hero's welcome to Locust Grove



Students at Locust Grove Elementary School wave handmade American flags as they greet soldiers from the Wounded Warriors Battalion from Ft. Benning. This is the second year the troops have stopped to meet the children on their way to Noah's Ark.

Photo by Larry Stanford

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Residents of Locust Grove and Henry County came out Thursday to honor members of the Georgia Wounded Warriors Transition Battalion from Ft. Benning as they traveled to Noah's Ark Animal Rehabilitation Center and Children's Care Home. It was the second annual trip to Noah's Ark for the soldiers, who brought donated supplies to the facility.

The Wounded Warriors Transition Battalion assists soldiers who have been wounded transition back into civilian life or back into the military.

People lined Highway 42 in Locust Grove, waving American flags and holding signs welcoming the procession led by city and county police, and containing two bus loads of soldiers, a truckload of supplies, and more soldiers and their families in private vehicles.

One of those waving a flag and saluting as the convoy passed was Tom Morfoot of Locust Grove, a disabled American veteran. Morfoot was injured in an accident in 1958 while serving with the Army Security Agency in Japan. He spent 115 days in the hospital, finished his remaining tour of duty, and came home in 1959.

Morfoot said he wanted to both show his support for the wounded troops and send a message to Washington.

"I want to honor these men and women who were wounded fighting for our country and to keep America free," said Morfoot. "That's my main concern, because that number is increasing drastically. We want to remain one nation under God, and hopefully, with every-thing that is going in Washington, they will finally get the message. Maybe this will be one way we can send this message to Washington - by standing out here, waiting for these wounded veterans, and realizing how much our country

appreciates all their efforts and their injuries.”

The procession also went past Locust Grove Elementary School where, for the second year in a row, school children stood outside cheering. As they did last year, the soldiers stopped and shook hands and spoke to the children for several minutes.

Leslie Flath, the School Counselor at LGES, said the most important thing the children get out of the occasion is a sense of pride.

“They are chanting, ‘USA, USA,’ as the soldiers arrive and it really gets them pumped up,” said Flath. “What also stands out to them is the soldiers shaking their hands and talking to them. They feel they are shaking the hands of heroes, and they come back in afterwards saying that they are not going to wash their hands.”

The procession ended at Noah’s Ark, where founder Jama Hedgecoth, her mother Louella Connor, and others greeted and hugged the soldiers as they got off the buses. The troops took a group photo, then were then treated to lunch and a tour of the facilities.

For one soldier, Mike Johnson of Fayette County, the visit to Noah’s Ark was like a homecoming. Johnson worked as a volunteer at Noah’s Ark in the early 1990’s.

“It feels really nice to come back,” said Johnson. “We had an injured animal and someone recommended we bring it out here. We found out about the volunteer program and volunteered for two years, doing the tours. I haven’t been out here since 1995. I joined the Army in 1996.

A member of Bravo Company, 2nd Battalion, 121st Infantry, of the 48th Brigade Combat Team of the Georgia Army National Guard, Johnson served two tours in Iraq, and was wounded on his second tour. He was also injured in training, and is recuperating while his unit is now in Afghanistan.

Johnson said seeing everyone out cheering for them is quite emotional for the soldiers.

“It brings a tear to your eye,” Johnson said. “It felt really good to shake hands with all the little kids, and seeing the shop owners out there waving at us, and the police escort, it feels really good. I wish some of other veterans could have experienced that back years ago.”

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