



Register-Star

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Soldiers welcomed home in time for holiday

By John Mason

Hudson Valley Newspapers



John Mason/Hudson Valley Newspapers

U.S. Army Sgt. Andrew Behrens poses with his mother, Abby Behrens, at a party in his honor Saturday at the Ghent VFW.

Local soldiers returning from Iraq continued to find a welcoming place at the Ghent VFW post Saturday when a four-hour party was held there for Sgt. Andrew J. Behrens and Staff Sgt. Chris Kelly, both of Chatham. Behrens and Kelly are members of the HSC 854th Combat Engineers out of Kingston. They returned April 23 from Kirkuk, Iraq.

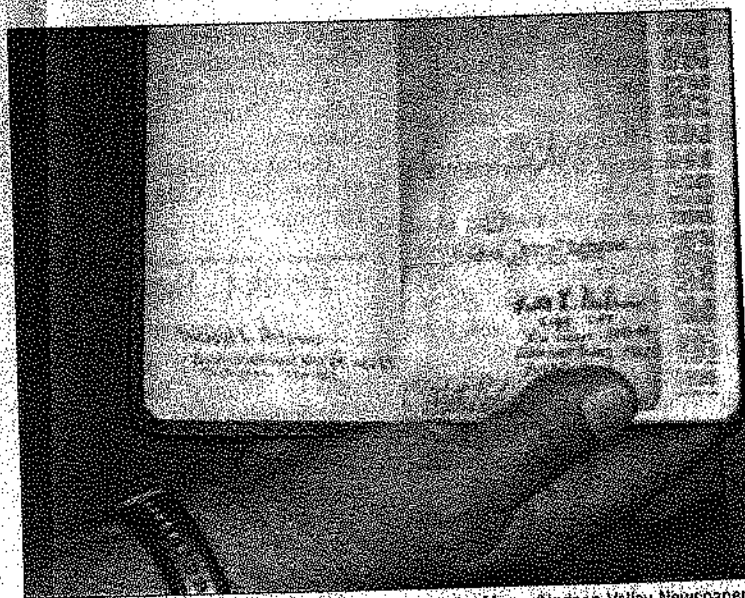
Behrens' parents, Abby and Mike Behrens, organized the affair. A similar party was thrown by Kelly's parents earlier.

Kelly, a 1993 Chatham High graduate, said their detachment provided force protection for American and Iraqi troops in northern Iraq.

"It's a very ethnically diverse area," he said. "Shiites, Kurds, Sunnis. It's oil-rich, so it could be a trouble spot at any point."

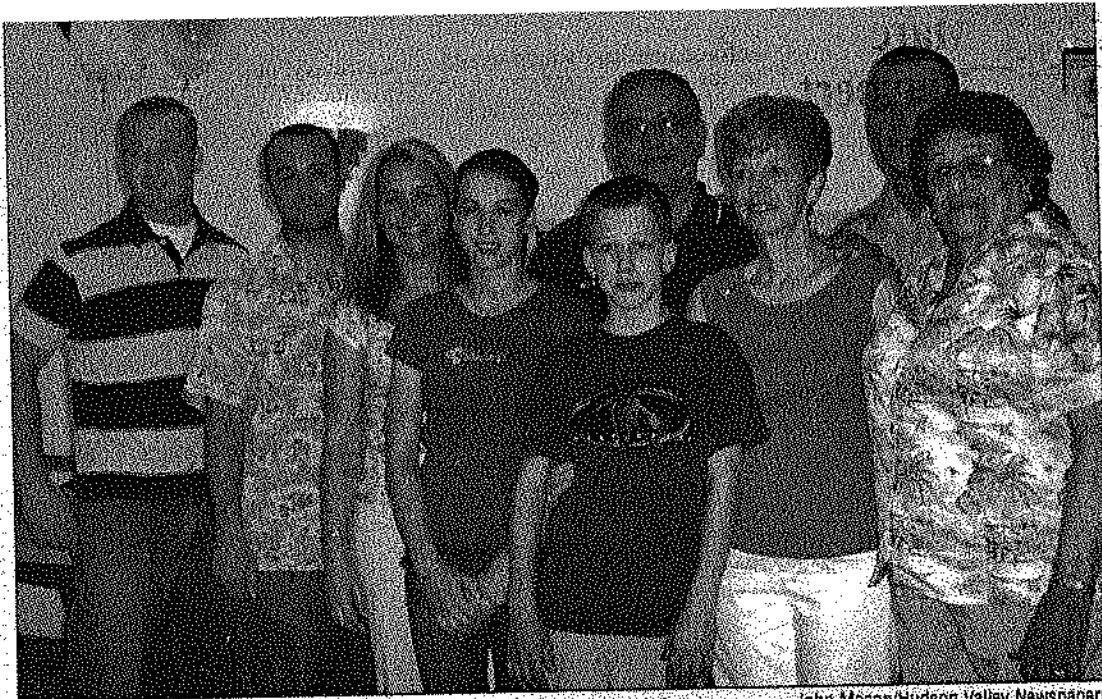
But it was fairly quiet for the 12½ months the 854th was there.

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The 1898 Bible Andrew Behrens took with him to Iraq shows on its flyleaf the records of his ancestors who also took it to war. His great-grandfather, Gustav "Otto" Behrens, got it in the Spanish-American War in the Philippines in 1898, after its owner, Jack Niles, died. His grandfather, Walter Behrens, took it to New Guinea, Dutch East India and the Philippines in World War II, and his father, Michael L. Behrens, took it to the South Vietnam and the Philippines when he fought in the Vietnam War in 1969.



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U.S. Army Sgt. Andrew Behrens, second from right, poses with his family at a party in his honor Saturday at the Ghent VFW. From left are brothers Stephen and Mike, sisters Allison and Katherine, brother Ryan, father Mike, mother Abby, and his grandmother, Katherine Behrens.

Soldiers

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he said.

Behrens, of White Mills Road, said any friction in Kirkuk was between the three Iraqi sects rather than between the Iraqi people and the Americans. He found the majority of the Iraqi people "receptive to our support."

Living conditions weren't bad, he said. Their home was an old airplane bunker.

Kelly said he hopes at this point he is back for good — he and his wife Tracy, who live in Old Chatham, have a two-year-old daughter. But he said there was a chance he'd be going again — "I love the job, so I re-enlisted. I love the people. They're like a second family. It's something beyond the normal 9-to-5."

But he's conflicted. "I'd miss my family," Kelly said.

Behrens, a 2001 graduate of Chatham High, still has more than a year left on his enlistment; he's serving on a "six by two," which means six years active and two years inactive. In September, he will have five completed.

But he has other plans than the military. This summer he hopes to finish his associate's degree in criminal justice at Hudson Valley Community College, and has been accepted at Syracuse University for the fall as an international studies major.

As a member of the reserves for the next three years, he will



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U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Chris Kelly, left, and Sgt. Andrew Behrens, who returned from 13 months in northern Iraq in late April, enjoy the party in their honor Saturday.

months during which he can't be recalled.

On display at the celebration were Behrens' awards from his stint in Kirkuk, including the Army Commendation medal, the Armed Forces Reserve medal, the War on Terror Expeditionary and Service medals, the National Defense Service medal and certificates of recognition and appreciation.

Kelly received similar awards and citations.

Behrens' whole family was on hand, including his parents, his grandmother, his three brothers and two sisters.

"The community has been phenomenal," Abby Behrens

weekend," said Mike Behrens. Four other Iraqi vets were on hand in addition to Kelly and Behrens, he said, all of whom served with them in Kirkuk.

Andrew Behrens carried a Bible with him to Kirkuk that was published in 1898. On the flyleaf are the names of his great-grandfather, Gustav "Otto" Behrens, who served in the Philippines in the Spanish-American War in 1899; his grandfather, Walter Behrens, who served in the Pacific in World War II; and his father, who served in Vietnam. The Philippines was a stop for all three.

Andrew Behrens was cited for his "extraordinary service," "dedication to duty," "selfless