



Special to the Sentinel-Voice

Families of soldiers at Nellis Air Force Base welcomed relatives and loved ones home from combat zones this week.

## Nellis

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in civilian clothes and khaki, as parents carrying infants, children running and others broke ranks enveloping the single-file line, hugging and embracing their loved ones.

The security guards did not interfere. Quickly, the returning personnel and their entourages surged into the waiting room and then left the building.

In the joyful excitement, a few airmen took a brief moment to comment.

There is always the possibility that the returning military personnel could be re-deployed back to Iraq. They answered questions on what it feels like to be home for the holidays, others still in Iraq, and the future.

Airman David Rucker said, "It feels good to be home for the holidays, and I'm looking forward to spending the holidays with my family. It's good to see my family. I'd like to spend more Christmases with them."

"My heart goes out to them, my buddies I left in Iraq. But they are strong. We have to do what has to be done in 2007," said Rucker, as he was suddenly joined by his family and walked away mingling in the crowd.

"Nice to be here," said

Airman Ray Colhouer. "I have two children and I can't wait to see them," he continued.

"It's not what I wanted to do [leave my buddies], but it's good to be home."

As far as what should be done in 2007, Colhouer said, "No comment," and walked away, disappearing into the crowd.

Some of the civilians and airman spoke briefly with the Sentinel-Voice but did not give their full names.

"I'd rather be here than there," said Airman Wright. "You know, it's hard, but we are friends, and we have to do what we have to do." Wright had "no comment" when asked about her views on Iraq in 2007. And when asked about the Iraq Study Group, she said, "I don't know," indicating she was not familiar with it and turned to a conversation with a security guard.

A woman, who gave her first name only, was in the crowd trailing behind a returnee when she stopped to comment: "He's my brother-in-law," Rita said.

"His name is Airman Brad Wilhoth, and I'm so happy to have him home for the holidays. In general," said Rita, "all should come home. Not just my brother-in-law."

# New Orleans tourism surging

RENO, Nev. (AP)- You can party hearty again in the Big Easy.

New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin said his city's tourism-based economy is starting to rebound, more than 15 months after Hurricane Katrina blew through.

Nagin, in a speech Saturday at the National League of Cities annual convention in Reno, said a string of major conventions has been held without a hitch this year. The latest, held by the National Association of Realtors in November, drew 30,000 people.

The city's general sales tax revenues are at 80 percent of pre-Katrina levels, and all utilities have been restored, he said. Ninety-eight percent of restaurants that attract convention goers are back, and 97 percent of medium and large businesses are open.

For next year, about 70 percent of the convention business expected before Katrina is in place. Officials expect

convention business to be at 90 percent of pre-Katrina levels in 2008, Nagin said.

He praised the league for recommitting to hold its 2007 convention in New Orleans next Nov. 13 through Nov. 17. The league took the action six weeks after Katrina, becoming the first group to do so.

"We plan to put on a good show for you," Nagin said. "Our city has gone through a lot and your statement is one of confidence that we truly appreciate. "Bring lots of money, eat lots of food and don't forget to pay your 'taxes' at Harrah's New Orleans' casino," he added.

At a news conference afterward, Nagin acknowledged the city still has a long way to go to rebuild — at a cost of \$60 billion over the next five to seven years.

Large areas of the city outside of downtown remain virtually uninhabitable, and New Orleans has only about half of its pre-Katrina population level of 455,000, he said.

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