



Maine Troop Greeters



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## the Maine Troop Greeters A Short History...

It all began on a winter morning in 1991, after a large and spirited group of citizens drove to Bangor International Airport to welcome home plane loads of returning Troops from Operation Desert Storm. On that first of many days to follow, Kevin Tillman, an Army Sergeant with the 82nd Airborne Division, borrowed a John Bapst Memorial High School student's saxophone during a refueling stop and delivered a spine-tingling rendition of "The Star Spangled Banner" for the thousands gathered at the airport. By nightfall on March 8, 1991 Tillman's performance had been broadcast around the globe, thrusting Bangor, Maine and the volunteers later known as the Maine Troop Greeters into the limelight.

Another war and more than a million and a half Troops later, the airport greetings continue. No matter the hour, members of all branches of the U.S. military and our allies are assured of a handshake, use of a free cell phone and a cookie as they pass through the city's airport. Many are headed to and from Iraq and Afghanistan as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom/Enduring Freedom, as well as other hot spots around the globe.

The Maine Troop Greeters organization was officially incorporated as a registered non-profit in 2008. The group agreed on this guiding principle: "The mission of the Maine Troop Greeters is to express the Nation's (and our) gratitude and appreciation to the Troops, for those going overseas for a safe return and for those returning for a joyful homecoming and to make their (hopefully brief) stay in Bangor as comfortable and pleasant as possible. Additionally we will honor the trust placed in us by these troops by preserving and perpetuating the donations entrusted to our care, through display, education and sharing of these collections."

The Bangor Troop greetings can be divided into four sections:

**1) Operation Desert Storm: March 8, 1991 through August, 1991.**

Troop welcomes grew throughout the spring and summer, at one time topping 1,500 persons to meet a single flight. The Bangor Chamber of Commerce, Bangor Daily News and Bangor International Airport publicized flight arrival times and along with the Bangor chapter of the American Red Cross, the Chamber and the Airport organized volunteer food tables and answered service members' families concerns.

VFW and American Legion posts along with the City of Bangor's leadership, met the more than 200 flights. Area High School Bands met many of the flights and area businesses and civilians alike provided food and items for the Troops along with their greetings. This major outpouring of affection and thanks for our Troops was commemorated in two published novels by local authors.

## **2) Post Operation Desert Storm: August 1991 through to the summer of 1992.**

In an effort to provide some closure to an intense five months of Troop greetings, airport management ended the official Troop Welcomes at the airport with a public ceremony in August 1991. However, the airport agreed to extend the welcomes into the summer of 1992 in response to greeters' concerns that many military flights were not being met.

## **3) Interim Greetings: 1992-1996.**

This is the bridge between Operations Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom. Keeping the flame alive at Bangor International Airport were four dedicated troop greeters, led by Korean War veteran Everett Steele. During the lull between the two Gulf Wars, the foursome met nearly every military flight that passed through Bangor. After 1996, the group disbanded but the surviving members reunited in 2003 during the second Gulf War greetings.

## **4) Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom: December 12, 2002 through the present.**

As a show of support for the nation's Troops, flag-waving citizens, both former and future Maine Troop Greeters, rallied along Hogan Road in Bangor, Maine in December of 2002. On April 19, 2003 the second Gulf War began and at 2:00PM on May 3, 2003 the first official greeting of Iraqi Freedom Troop flights at Bangor International Airport began as Troops went into rotation from the Persian Gulf.

Just as with the Desert Storm welcomes a decade earlier, the greeters included veterans' groups and ordinary citizens alike, who were alerted to Troop flight arrivals through a volunteer telephone tree. Interest built in the troop greeter network throughout the summer of 2003 due to the increase in the almost daily Troop flights.

The local Unicef Company began donating cell phones and free minutes for use by the Troops and the local U.S. Cellular and Verizon companies followed suit in 2004. The local Sam's Club donated thousands of cookies to the greeters for our Troops and our local Wal-Mart, Hannaford, Shaw's and the American Legion have also provided food and items such as "Build-A-Bears" for new moms and dads.

In 2008, greeters began using Call-Em-All, an automated telephone system based in Texas, to improve the volunteer troop greeting telephone tree network. This was made possible by the company's donation of 10,000 free call units for the greeters.

Local and national media have covered special anniversaries such as the half-millionth Troop arrival at Bangor International Airport and the meeting of the 3000th Troop flight. They've also covered more heartwarming stories, such as the story of a soldier from Maine whose family had driven 3 ½ hours to spend 90 minutes to welcome him home. An independent film, "The Way We Get By", based on the lives of three Maine Troop Greeters was released in 2009.

Currently, the Maine Troop Greeters volunteers number over 300 strong with a corps group of 40 to 100 members who devote themselves to the troops by providing greetings and services. The organization was officially incorporated as a registered non-profit organization in 2008 and are a designated 501-C3 non-profit entity.

History written by Richard Shaw