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## Las Vegas Rally Honors Troops, Families

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Story by Mr. John Valceanu

**LAS VEGAS, Nev. (Dec. 12, 2004)** -- There were tears, but there was also cheering and even smiles, as thousands of people turned out to take part in "Operation Holiday Cheer," a rally in support of troops and their families, held in Las Vegas, Nev., Dec. 11.

In the crowd were family members of troops killed in the war on terror, as well as families of those deployed in support of the war. Also in attendance were a number of elected officials and a number of people who just wanted to come out and show support for America's troops.

"We wanted to have this rally around the holidays because there are many troops who cannot be with their families at this time of year," said Phil Randazzo, who organized the rally. "This was our way of showing the troops and the families that we appreciate what they are doing."

Kimberly Irenze, a family-support-group leader for the Nevada Army National Guard's 1864th Motor Transportation Company, which is deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, said the rally was performing a great service to the families of the deployed soldiers.

"This is exactly what the families need. For many of them, this is their first holiday without members of their families, and they are struggling to find cheer," said Irenze, whose husband, Sgt. Marco Irenze, is deployed with the company. "Phil is great for putting this together. You're talking about a person with no ties to the government, and who has nothing to gain, who put this together. He's really inspired, a true patriot."

One of the events' main features was recognition of family members and comrades of slain soldiers, who had an opportunity to address the crowd. As parents spoke of the children they had lost, emotion swept across the crowd and made itself visible in the form of tears rolling down hundreds of cheeks.

Cindy Cline-Fulton, mother of U.S. Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Donald Cline, spoke about her son, who was killed March 2003 in Iraq.

"I want to thank everybody for coming out to show support to our military. It means a lot to me, and I think we need more of it," Cline-Fulton said. "My son, John, was based out of Camp Lejeune. He died while securing a bridge in An Nasyriah. They asked for volunteers to help a mortar company that was pinned down, wounded and hurt. My son was one of the first to jump up to go help his brothers. ... He went across a bridge, which is now known as 'Ambush Alley.' He did (help) rescue all of them.

"When you think of a Marine, you think of this giant. My son was (5 feet, 5 inches tall). Wet, he was 135 (pounds). He was carrying men twice his size. Once he had rescued everyone and they were in a track on the way back, that's when he died. He was hit with (a rocket-propelled grenade). He left a beautiful wife and two great boys, Dakota and Dillon. I think my grandson said it best when he looked up the day we buried his dad and said, 'My daddy died, but he died so we can all have freedom.'"

"My son, Corporal Matthew Commons, was an Airborne Ranger, and he joined the Army in the summer of 2000," said Gregory Commons. "When we were attacked on Sept. 11, I got together with

him, and I knew that he would soon be deployed. He said, 'Dad, I've got to do this. This is what we need to do. These men are evil, and we need to take care of this.' ... I love my son, and I can't tell you how proud I am of him. ... It's been a little over two and a half years, and there's not a day that doesn't go by that I don't tell him I love him."

Local elected leaders all took time to praise the families of the fallen sacrifices made by the troops and their families. U.S. Senator John Ensign said he was amazed by the spirit of self-sacrifice evident on the part of not only the troops, but also their families.

"I was speaking with Mrs. Salazar, whose son (U.S. Marine Cpl. William Salazar) was killed, and I got a typical response that I've heard over and over again from military families. She said she's here to support the other families," Ensign said. "That's what the military is all about, helping others. Our society is so self-centered, it is wonderful to be around people who are so selfless and so concerned about the well-being of others."

U.S. Rep. Shelly Berkley, who represents Nevada's District 1, said she felt the rally was of great importance, and she was proud of the people who turned out to support the troops.

"This event is so important, I just had to be here," Berkley said. "This is the real Las Vegas. These are real people who make up a great community, and they all support the troops. This is great."

Las Vegas Mayor Oscar Goodman agreed with the congresswoman that the city stood behind America's troops in this time of war.

"This is a very special occasion. I don't think there is another city in the U.S. that is more committed to supporting the troops," Goodman said. "This event does an awful lot of good. I had an opportunity to speak with parents of those who gave their lives. It's a very healthy thing to have an opportunity to know what people are experiencing."

To balance the sadness of lost loved ones and holidays spent while members of the family are in harm's way, the rally also included an event that drew cheers and applause from the crowd. Two A-10 Thunderbird jets of the 422nd Test and Evaluation Squadron from nearby Nellis Air Force Base conducted a spectacular flyover of the crowd.

U.S. Air Force Maj. Brad Bradshaw, who flew in one of the jets, said he was very pleased to be able to take part in the rally.

"It's a huge honor, a tremendous honor," said Bradshaw. "It is an overwhelming feeling to be able to honor families that have given so much and are making such sacrifices."

The man on the ground who controlled the aircraft also said he thought the rally was a great thing.

"This is a great deal. It's helping to show our community what we're capable of, and it's also helping to honor the troops," said Air Force Staff Sgt. Erik Roberts, an enlisted tactical attack controller. "It's a good deal for us and also for the guys who are over there, in combat. The guys who served in Vietnam never had this, and I'm glad we've gotten better at supporting our troops."

Emma Benjamin, a 10 year old who turned out for the rally with her parents and older brothers, agreed with Roberts that the rally serves an important purpose.

"It's good to come out here for our troops," Benjamin said. "So they can keep fighting for us and protecting our freedoms."

On a lighter note, Benjamin and children of all ages had the opportunity to enjoy a variety of other events put on during the rally. A number of musical entertainers performed in honor of the troops and their families, including a Neil Diamond impersonator. There was also a magic act, a slam-dunk competition conducted by members of the semi-professional Las Vegas Rattler basketball team, and a world-class performance by a human beat-box artist and a trio of local break dancers.

"I actually saw some of the family members who lost loved ones smile. For some of them, especially the ones whose loss was recent, this might have been the first time they smiled in a long time," Randazzo said. "That makes it all worth it to me."

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**Photos included with story:**



A Neil Diamond impersonator performs for a cheering crowd during "Operation Holiday Cheer," a rally honoring troops and their families held Dec. 11 in Las Vegas, Nev. Thousands turned out for the event, which thanked servicemembers and their families