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## At Army Base, Stork Landed With the Airborne

By [JULIE SCELFO](#)

FAYETTEVILLE, N.C. — Joanne Chavonne saw pregnant women everywhere in town, shopping at Target for diapers or dining at a Mexican restaurant.

Then she heard that so many families were calling the medical clinic at nearby Fort Bragg for the results of pregnancy tests that the Army had to install an extra telephone line.

And finally, over the summer, an administrator told her that the hospital on base was overrun with women in labor, and was delivering nearly 300 babies a month. “I was shocked,” said Ms. Chavonne, whose husband, Anthony, is the mayor here. “That’s 10 a day.”

For the first time since the Gulf war, the entire 82nd Airborne division was deployed during the surge in 2007. Nearly 22,000 soldiers joyously reunited with their families when they began returning last October. The base is also host to 29,000 soldiers from other units, which all contributed to what by August was an estimated 50 percent surge in births at Womack Army Medical Center, the base hospital, compared with the previous year.

The community has turned this into a celebration. On Saturday, about 1,000 recent mothers and mothers-to-be gathered as guests of honor at Boots & Booties, billed as the largest military shower ever.

Under billboards with fuchsia butterflies, at the Crown Exposition Center, pregnant women in stretchy pants and flip-flops drank red punch and helped themselves to deviled eggs and cupcakes spread out along a buffet table. Sarah Deady arrived at the extravaganza right from her recovery bed — she had had a Caesarian section on Thursday and walked gingerly.

Catherine Robinson, 35 and pregnant with her third child, was experiencing contractions. “I have long labors,” she said, explaining why she decided to come anyway.

The impact of the baby surge is being felt all across Fayetteville, a city of 210,000, from the registries at Fleishman’s Tiny Town to the civilian hospital, Cape Fear Valley Medical Center, where the overflow of military patients sometimes has to labor in the waiting room until beds become available. Dr. David A. Schutzer, who runs the Highland Ob-Gyn Clinic in town, said that last month his practice delivered 50 percent more babies than usual, most of them military.

It is impossible to walk through the produce sections of the commissaries on base without seeing bellies or newborns in car seats. “Overseas, our soldiers concentrate on their mission,” said Tom McCollum, the public affairs officer for Fort Bragg, which occupies the north and west sides of Fayetteville. “But they can’t wait to get back home.”

At Dads 101, a class for new and soon-to-be fathers that helps ease the transition from soldier to caretaker, attendance has doubled. Maternity-size Army combat uniforms in the digitized, sand-patterned camouflage used in Iraq and Afghanistan are on backorder at the base clothing sales store. And in anticipation of growing demand for home visits and other family services, the base's New Parents Support Program has increased its staff from 5 to 19.

Baby furniture is selling so quickly at the Target on Skibo Road, a few miles southeast of the base, that pregnant women are despairing when they cannot find matching cribs, dressers and changing tables. "They'll be, like, 'I just called and y'all said you had it,'" said Tyneisha McRae, a clerk working the night shift, when the infant department gets restocked. The store opens at 8 a.m., she said, "and most of the time, we're sold out by 8:30 or 9."

Lisa Olivares, a manager at CCE Headgear Plus, a kiosk at the mall that offers custom embroidery, has been inundated with requests to stitch unit crests and nicknames onto baby onesies, polka-dot bonnets and camouflage diaper bags. "It's all I do," she said.

Soldiers have noticed the boom among their ranks. "Four females in my unit have had babies," said Staff Sgt. Bill McSwain, as he held his own new daughter, Gabrielle, in his lap in the waiting room of the Ob-Gyn clinic at Womack.

Doctors, nurses and midwives at the clinic were among the first to feel the impact of the surge, as demand for prenatal appointments began to overwhelm the staff members at the beginning of the summer. As women poured in to the facility, which now has pastel streamers with hearts dangling from its windows, the medicine cabinets began running low on progesterone, used to treat early labor.

With only 11 beds, Womack's labor and delivery unit quickly filled up and administrators capped the patient load at 260 deliveries a month — but soon exceeded that number. Nearly 300 babies were born in August, and 261 in September.

Col. Flavia Diaz-Hays, chief of maternal child health services at Womack, estimates that one-fifth of expectant mothers are active-duty soldiers who get nondeployment status for the birth of their child. On Aug. 1, in response to requests from mothers and military health care providers, the Army extended nondeployment status for mothers from three to six months.

Fathers can still be deployed at any time, and the impact of a missing parent is felt by the entire family.

Sue O'Brien, who coordinates the New Parents Support Program at Fort Bragg, helps new mothers and their toddlers struggling to make sense of a parent's absence by giving out a book called "Over There," which matches pictures of a child's activities at home — sleeping or brushing his teeth — next to pictures of a soldier parent doing the same activity.

Katheryn Smith, who is due with her fourth child on Dec. 10, said that after her 2-year-old daughter was born, her husband, home from Iraq after three tours, was reluctant to leave. "He didn't really want to leave her," Ms. Smith said. "He never likes being away from family."

Reflecting on that time, 1st Sgt. Stephen Smith, of the 82nd Airborne, said: “You miss their first words, their first steps, and the bonding that you’re supposed to have.” He added, “That’s the hardest part, to get to know them all over again. In some cases, they don’t even remember you when you come home.”

No one from the 82nd has been redeployed yet, but that will change in the next few months, when one of the brigades is scheduled to go overseas to Iraq or Afghanistan, Mr. McCollum said.

Until then, families and the Fayetteville community are focusing on the excitement of its budding population. On Saturday, 125 tables at the shower were decorated with pale yellow, lavender, green and polka-dot tablecloths and a pallet-load of goodie bags containing donated diapers, wipes and baby clothes were waiting to be distributed.

Rachel Hall, 26, who gave birth to her fifth baby, a daughter, Makenna, on Sept. 2, was excited for days about the shower. “I never got to have a shower with my family for any of my other kids,” she said, explaining that her own parents were too far away, in New York, and with her husband deployed four times in the last six years, she was too busy.

Lt. Col. Paul Whitecar, chief of Womack’s Ob-Gyn Department, said that during the surge of births, which he expects to continue for the next few months, until the next round of deployments, he and his staff have no choice but to continue cutting back on their lunch breaks.

But Wanda McCants, a nurse on the labor and delivery unit, said she did not mind the extra work, especially considering the high rates of injured veterans that she sees around the hospital. “I think it’s the nature of war to come back and to want to create something,” she said. Seeing all the new life after so much tragedy, she added, “is uplifting for me, too.”

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