

## **Celebration to honor soldiers Dec. 10 in Leesville**

7:44 AM, Nov. 24, 2011 |

### **Town Talk staff**

The Vernon Parish Chamber of Commerce, area businesses and individuals will honor thousands of soldiers returning from combat in Afghanistan during the Chamber's annual Christmas Parade on Dec. 10 in Leesville.

Before the parade, a Welcome Home Honor Party, hosted by the Chamber from noon to 3 p.m., will be held at the field west of Leesville High School's Wampus Cat Stadium. A variety of foods -- brisket, gumbo, chicken, pulled pork, dirty rice, boudin, hot dogs and a cake to feed 4,000 -- will be served and activities offered to more than 6,000 family members and soldiers who recently returned to Fort Polk from Afghanistan.

At 3:30 p.m., an invitation-only change-of-command ceremony for the 4th Brigade, 10th Mountain Division, will be held at Wampus Cat Stadium.

The parade will begin at 5:30 p.m., led by 4,000 marching soldiers and the Purple Heart Float. Merchants along the parade route will be honoring soldiers with flags and confetti. Local participants will follow with bands and floats with Santa arriving on a fire engine.

The parade sponsor is Barksdale Federal Credit Union, and the theme is "I'll be home for Christmas." Special honors will be given to the family members of fallen soldiers.

The grand marshal for this year's parade will be retired Col. William "Bill" Howerton of Leesville.

At the parade's conclusion, there will be cash door prizes and awards for best float in each category. All parade-goers and participants are encouraged to follow Santa at the end of the parade to the judge's stage, which will be in front of the Vernon Parish Police Jury office.

"Leesville owes much of its identity to Fort Polk and the Army," said Leesville Mayor Robert Rose. "This is an unparalleled honor to walk in a parade with the 10th Mountain soldiers. My hope and goal is to celebrate not only the great spirit of the season, but the enduring spirit of American freedom these men and women help to preserve."

Fort Polk and Vernon Parish have a long and rich tradition together, beginning in the 1940s during the Louisiana Maneuvers. Once a basic training post during the Vietnam era, the post encompasses approximately 198,000 acres.

Of this, 100,000 acres are owned by the Department of the Army and 98,125 acres by the U.S. Forest Service, mostly in the Kisatchie National Forest. Fort Polk is the only Combat Training Center that also trains and deploys combat units.

Fort Polk is now home to the Joint Readiness Training Center, the 4th Brigade, 10th Mountain Division, 115th Combat Support Hospital, 1st Maneuver Enhancement Brigade, the 162nd Infantry Brigade, U.S. Army Garrison and Bayne-Jones Army Community Hospital.

Merchants, churches, civic organizations, clubs and individuals interested in making donations for food or volunteering to help serve soldiers and their families during the pre-parade activities should call Lee Birmingham at (337) 208-4125 or Mark Koury at (337) 397-0501.

Merchants and individuals interested in making donations to help offset the cost and to help provide transportation for surviving family members can contact the Vernon Parish Chamber of Commerce at (337) 238-0349.