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Navy Lt. Ryan Harvey gets a welcome home hug from his father, Danny Harvey, Friday afternoon after arriving at Liberal Municipal airport. Lt. Harvey is home on leave until Monday, when he returns to duty.

Mother's Day a surprise bonus for Navy man

By Rachel Coleman

Not much was happening at Liberal Municipal Airport Friday afternoon. Even so, the air crackled with emotion, thanks to the family of United States Navy Lt. Ryan Tyson Harvey. The serviceman from Liberal was headed home for Mother's Day weekend, after more than six months in the Persian Gulf.



Outside the airport, his grandmother, Carol Brown, waited to catch sight of the plane. This was her grandson's first deployment. The last few moments of waiting for him were difficult, she acknowledged with a teary nod, because she felt so relieved that he had made it back to the

States safe and sound. Inside the airport, Harvey's family gathered in the front lobby with a patriotic balloon bouquet propped on a table. His father, Danny Harvey, wearing a Navy-emblem baseball cap, stood near the hangar door, while stepmother Katie Harvey stood quietly to the side. Aunt Rena Cross checked her camera, ready to snap pictures once the reunion began.

"It's been tough," said Ryan Harvey's mother, Jan Schilens, as her husband George paced through the lobby.

Though she's had plenty of time to get used to the idea of her son serving in the military, knowing he was deployed required some adjustments.

"When your son goes into the military, you have a general sense about what that could involve," she said. "Over the years, he had so many opportunities in the Navy. He went to nuclear power school, he went to officer training, he became a flight officer ... but when you're actually told that your son is going to be deployed and will be flying to Bahrain, that's when you realize 'This is real.'"

Because she had a general idea of what he was doing, Schilens said she sometimes felt reassured by the advanced technology, and sometimes terribly worried about the ever-present danger. Harvey performed missions in the Navy's Prowler, a type of electronic warfare aircraft, often flying by night over Afghanistan, his mother said. The work itself — and the location — meant that she kept a close eye on the news.

"I try to keep up anyway, but I paid more attention, knowing he was there," she said. "I'm so glad that there's Skype (video-calls via the Internet) so that we can see each other and e-mail, at least when the ship was in port."

During the long "quiet" periods when she could not get word, Schilens said, "I prayed. Thank goodness for prayer."

As Schilens waited for the plane to arrive, she chatted with another visitor at the airport— Patsy Fischer, whose three sons serve in three different branches of the U.S. military.

"God bless you," Fischer said. "I know exactly how you're feeling." Conversation came to a stop as Ryan Harvey and his girlfriend, Jenna Yambor, stepped into the airport. He was not in uniform, his aunt whispered, because the military now encourages servicemen to travel in civilian clothing as a safety and security measure.

His father hugged him. His mother hugged him. Various family members wiped away tears, as the round of hugs began again.

Harvey hadn't been back to Liberal for nearly nine months, he said — he is normally stationed

at Whidbey Island in Washington — and it felt like he'd been away a long time.

“It may be a little tougher to connect,” he said, “but I just want to be here, to sit down and visit with family and catch up.”

Being home on Mother's Day weekend was the luck of the draw, he said:

“You don't get to pick when you'll have leave. It just turned out that way.”

“I've got to get you fattened up,” a relative exclaimed. “You've gotten thin!”

“Is this all your bags?” another asked. “Let's get you home.”

With that, the Harveys left the airport to celebrate Mother's Day as a family.

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