



W. Windsor company rewards patriotism with employment

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By Lisa Coryell/The Times



Martin Griff/The Times

Sgt. First Class David Wessels, a soldier returning from active duty overseas, is welcomed back to his job at Princeton Air in West Windsor by company President Scott Needham (left) and fellow employees on Thursday.

WEST WINDSOR – Sgt. 1st Class David Wessels had a lot on his mind during his third tour of duty in Iraq this year.

The Army reservist, who hails from Burlington Township, was charged with planning the convoys that moved leftover military equipment out of Iraq. There was timing and logistics to worry about and, more importantly, the safety of the 18 soldiers under his command.

But as the clock ticked toward the end of his tour this month, there was one thing the 36-year-old married father of seven did not have to fret about – a job when he returned home.

His employer, Princeton Air Conditioning in West Windsor, was patiently holding his HVAC installation mechanic's job open for him.

"They assured me before I left that when I got back my job would be here," Wessels said of his deployment in November 2009. "I was ecstatic."

For Wessels' bosses, keeping a job for him was a no-brainer.

"He's a good guy and an excellent mechanic and customers love him," said Scott Needham, company president. "We couldn't wait for him to come back."

Yesterday was Wessels' first day back on the job – just in time for a company holiday celebration that doubled as a welcome home party – and his co-workers were thrilled to have him back.

"All of us worried about him every day," said Matt Dyer, a company salesman. "He's a good guy. Salt of the earth."

"We missed his expertise when he wasn't here," added Dennis Paquette, who also works in sales.

With the unemployment rate among Iraq- and Afghanistan-era veterans higher than the national average and rising, Wessels was among the lucky soldiers with a job waiting for him after his military service.

Among all recently separated veterans, the unemployment rate now stands at 14.7 percent, well above the national unemployment rate of 9.7, the Stars & Stripes military paper reported this week. Among veterans under 24 the situation is even worse; labor officials estimate that more than one in five could not find work last year, the paper reported.

Unemployment and the prospect of job hunting is a distraction to many soldiers serving in war zones, Wessels said.

"Toward the end of their tours, soldiers start to talk about what they're going to do when they get home. When you don't have to worry about finding a job when you come back, it definitely clears your mind and you can do your job better."

Wessels, a former enlisted soldier, did 12-month tours in Iraq in 2002 and 2004. The 1993 Bristol High School graduate has worked for Princeton Air Conditioning since leaving active duty in 2005.

When Wessel was deployed as a reservist last year, Needham and his father Joe, founder of Princeton Air, felt holding his job was the right thing to do.

"We're proud to be able to hold a job open for a returning veteran," he said. "For all they do to keep us safe, the least we can do is keep their jobs for them and welcome them back."

As he enjoyed his party yesterday Wessels said he was looking forward to a quiet Christmas reintegrating with his family after a 13-month absence.

Part of that is getting back into the swing of being dad to a brood ranging from 20 months old to 8 years old. "They have to readapt to my rules and regulations," he said. "It's a slow process."

Wessels had strong praise for his wife, an active duty soldier who held down the fort while he was deployed.

"I applaud her for standing strong and being the mother and father while I was away."

He also gave thanks for the Needhams' generosity in keeping his job for him.

"This is one of the best places in New Jersey to work," he said. "They treat you like part of the family."

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