

When Mommy comes marching home, hurrah!

An Army officer returns from Iraq and appears at her children's school

By William Cole
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The best part of Army Lt. Col. Jennifer Bager's completing a nearly six-month deployment to northern Iraq occurred just after 8 a.m. Wednesday — when she surprised her 7-year-old son, Ian, and 4-year-old daughter, Abby, at Navy Hale Keiki School.

Bager, a surgeon at Tripler Army Medical Center, even stayed at a hotel Tuesday night when she got in so she could surprise her kids.

The big moment came at an outdoor school assembly after Hale Keiki Director Shari Gullede told the group "we have a very special

mom this morning who's returned from deployment and we'd like to greet her."

Out stepped Bager, who got hugs and more hugs from her stunned son and daughter.

"I was like, is that Mom? And she gets a little closer and I realized, that was Mom!" Ian said later after the whole thing had sunk in.

April is designated the Month of the Military Child, according to the Department of Defense Education Activity.

Military-affiliated schools were encouraged to wear purple — the color that represents all branches



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Army Lt. Col. Jennifer Bager surprised her son, Ian, and daughter, Abby, at Navy Hale Keiki School on Wednesday after returning from a monthlong deployment to Iraq. Husband Scott Bager joined the Tripler Army Medical Center surgeon for the morning event.

of the military — on Wednesday to show support and thank military children for their strength and sacrifices.

The Bager family reunion — husband Scott, who watched the kids, was there as well — also was a reminder that while Iraq deployments are now far fewer, deployments of all kinds still regularly occur.

Lt. Col. Bager, an ears, nose and throat surgeon, was at Logistics

Support Area Danger, a base in the Kurdish regional capital of Erbil with coalition and U.S. soldiers with the 1st Infantry Division.

The U.S. military is waging a new fight against Islamic State group. House Speaker John Boehner said Tuesday 4,500 U.S. troops are in Iraq.

Bager, who was on her first deployment, said she had some second thoughts after she decided to go.

"I said to my husband, 'Hey, I think I just volunteered to go to Iraq' because they needed someone to deploy and I said, 'Yeah, I'll go.'"

The situation on the ground turned out to be reassuring, though.

"It was fine," Bager said. "It was actually very safe where we were. I

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RETURN: Soldier praises husband's 'great job' at home

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didn't feel threatened."

Bager said she was commander of the 207th head-and-neck team and was part of the 67th forward surgical team.

The surgical team was there to take care of casualties, but "fortunately, we were not very busy, so that was good for the Americans

and the coalition," she said.

While other elements interacted more with Iraqis, Bager ended up attending to some of the 1st Infantry Division medical needs, she said.

She said she did get to visit the Citadel in Erbil with U.S. Special Forces soldiers. UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, said

the mounded settlement is more than 8,000 years old and includes Assyrian, Akkadian, Babylonian, Persian and Greek influences.

"Erbil is actually quite lovely. It's very lush and green and flowers blooming everywhere," Bager said.

She said it was "super exciting" to see her kids again, who held hands with and hugged their mom as they updated her on life at home.

Her husband, who retired from the Army in October, "did a great job taking care of them," Bager said. She said they were able to

Skype a lot.

With 98.7 percent of its 233 children military-affiliated, Navy Hale Keiki School tries to be a support system for military families who continue to experience deployments.

Scott Bager — a recently retired Army soldier who was in Iraq in 2011 — said he was concerned about his wife being part of a new mission to the country while he tried to keep things steady at home.

"She's away from her kids for the first time, the kids are without their mom for

the first time, and by the way, I've got to figure out how to make this all work, starting a new job and I've got to take care of these guys," he said.

The school helped a lot, he added.

As far as Jennifer Bager was concerned, the rest of the day was up to her kids.

"What are we doing today, guys?" she asked.

Ian's plan included: "watching 'Star Wars' movie and another movie, which is 'Big Hero 6,' and we're going to like, have some ice cream at our house."