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## Convoy welcomes Iraq war veterans

By Drew Brooks

Staff writer

A string of nearly 100 vehicles convoyed across Fayetteville on Saturday as a way for locals to welcome home veterans of the Iraq war.

The convoy, dubbed the "Ride to Freedom" by organizers, left the John D. Fuller Recreation Center on Old Bunce Road after noon and arrived at the Airborne & Special Operations Museum eight miles later.

The ride was organized by the Fayetteville nonprofit organization GOTDAD, after local celebrations of Iraq war veterans failed to materialize once the conflict ended in December.

Car dealerships, biker groups, veterans and everyday residents participated in the event, which was tied into a Black History Month quiz bowl.

Some of the vehicles were decorated with "Welcome Home" or other messages to troops. Others carried American flags, and Cumberland County deputies provided an escort.

Joe McGee, director of GOTDAD, Giving Opportunities Through Dedication and Devotion, said the convoy was symbolic of the last convoys out of Iraq.

Joe Brazzle, of the Wounded Warrior Project, said the event was a perfect example of how a community could honor troops.

"There are some service members who did not make it home," Brazzle said, before leading the crowd in a moment of silence.

The celebration was the first for Iraq veterans in Fayetteville and one of the few in cities across the nation.

St. Louis is the only major U.S. city to have hosted a welcome-home parade for Iraq veterans.

Its organizers told The Associated Press the event drew an estimated 100,000 observers and 20,000 participants Jan. 28.

Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, a 200,000-member nonprofit for veterans of the two wars, has been pushing for parades in America's largest cities to recognize veterans. Several cities have since planned parades, including Richmond, Va., and San Antonio.

The Pentagon has opposed such plans, preferring to wait until the war in Afghanistan has ended.

Before the Ride to Freedom, an IAVA official called the event an interesting idea and applauded the effort as part of a "groundswell of support" for Iraq War veterans rising across the nation.

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