

Crowd gathers to welcome Frankfort Square veteran home from war

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First Lt. Phillip Lee of Frankfort Square greets his mother, Angie Lee, last week at a surprise welcome home celebration. Lee was deployed to Afghanistan for nine months. (Ginger Brashinger)

First Lt. Phillip Lee, 33, wasn't expecting a large crowd to welcome him home last week, but the Bronze Star and Purple Heart recipient said he couldn't have been happier to see so many well-wishers.

"It (was) an absolute surprise," Lee said later. "It's wonderful. I got ambushed. That's the first time it's happened."

Lee was greeted by about 200 people in the parking lot of the Home Depot in Frankfort. He was returning home from Fort Campbell, Kentucky, where he was sent for "reintegration training" after his mid-July return stateside from a nine-month Army deployment to Afghanistan.

Beneath the hovering black helicopters of a local news station, members and alumnae of the Summit Hill Junior High band, directed by Kim Coughlin, played patriotic music as a flag line of members of Soldiers Guardian Angels and other veteran support groups, friends and family gave the young veteran a rousing "welcome home."

Lee was thanked for his service by State Sen. Mike Hastings (D-Tinley Park), as well as people who said they do not know Lee but were there to honor a veteran.

"How could you not?" said a woman who was just coming off a long, hot day at work giving horseback riding lessons but wanted to honor a soldier.

Back home, Frankfort Square resident and veteran Max Heumann said although he does not know the Lee family, he came out "to support our soldiers."

He waited with about 100 others to welcome Lee back to the neighborhood as an escort of veteran support groups on motorcycles, Chapter 252 Military Order of the Purple Hearts, the Veterans Garage and emergency services vehicles from Mokena, Manhattan and New Lenox wound along St. Francis Road and onto Pine Hill Road, sirens and horns blasting.

Cheers, applause and confetti bombs erupted as the procession turned towards the Lee home on Wintergreen, passing under an arch of extended ladders of Frankfort Fire Department vehicles, American flags flying.

As patriotic music filled a perfect summer evening, the crowd gathered around Lee as several organizations and individuals presented him with certificates of appreciation and memorabilia in honor of his service.

Lee said he served a term of service prior to earning a law degree in 2012 and a master's degree in communication theory in 2013. He began practicing law, but in 2015, he was called back to service. Lee said he knew he could decline to return, despite an eight-year reserve clause in the original commitment to the military.

But because Lee follows in the footsteps of his deceased father, Daniel Lee, also a Bronze Star and Purple Heart recipient from the Vietnam War era, and because giving

his word is "something I hold very sacred," he said, he signed on for another term of service.

"I decided that not going back would be a betrayal of the word that I gave to my country," he said.

His only stipulation was that he return to serve in the infantry and, if at all possible, be deployed to Afghanistan.

"If I was going back, I wasn't going to sit around stateside," he said.

Lee was deployed to Afghanistan in November, 2016, and during a mission fighting the Taliban in Helmand Province in 2017, a 120mm mortar round landed within five meters of his position, wounding Lee and three others in his platoon.

Lee was awarded the Bronze Star for his service and the Purple Heart for wounds received in action.

"The hearing loss, the shock, the immediate concussive effects were pretty jarring, and it was unlike anything I've felt before," he said.

Lee said it was "just grit" and the teamwork of his men that allowed him to continue as platoon leader until they could be safely evacuated.

Now almost completely recovered and eager for some downtime, Lee plans to spend time with his 7-month-old son Phillip Daniel Lee II, who was born while Lee was on in Afghanistan.

"It's what I'm going to try to do most while I'm home," he said.

Angie Lee also has some plans for her son's time at home. Visiting family for a few days in her home state of Wisconsin, where Lee can reunite with his 88-year-old grandmother Emilie Schmitz and do some fishing, are definitely on the agenda, she said.

Angie Lee can relax a bit, too, knowing her son is no longer in harm's way.

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