

# THEIR MISSION: Spending

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*Soldiers returning from Iraq often celebrate by shopping*

By CAROL MCGRAW THE GAZETTE

It's early afternoon, and so far today he has purchased a home theater system with a 57-inch screen, is moments away from making a decision on a doeverything cell phone, and expects to land a truck before many hours pass.

"I want new toys," declared Army Spc. Christopher Smith. It's barely two days after he deplaned in Colorado Springs from Iraq, and he, his wife Deana and baby son Blake are on a frenetic reconnaissance mission to accomplish just that.

The urge to shop hit almost as soon as he got off the plane.

"I'm used to working 12 hours on and 12 off. It's weird. I can't relax yet. I just want to keep on the move," he said.

As the 3,700 soldiers from Fort Carson's 2nd Brigade Combat Team arrive on home soil after months of deprivation overseas, they are crowding stores all over the city in search of electronics, new cars and other accoutrements.

"I've seen the uniforms in stores all over town," said local economist David Bamberger of David Bamberger & Associates.

There are some items that are instant musthaves: cars or trucks, cell phones, motorcycles and electronics of all types.

At SoundTrack, 7207 N. Academy Blvd., manager Neil Erickson said merchandise is flying out the store. "We're getting a lot of television sales. And they're also buying lots of MP3 players and in-car videos," Erickson said. "They say they are celebrating. Coming home, a new year for them, if you will."

Some auto dealerships have been so crammed in recent days with soldiers that they've looked more like military commissaries than local businesses.

"It's been crazy, an incredible two weeks. Our parking lot has been full," said Todd Flannigan, sales manager at Phil Long Ford.

Malls, big-box stores and furniture stores are experiencing buying bursts as well.

"The troops are beginning to create a wave of spending," Bamberger said. "It is a real shot in the arm to the economy."

Over the next three to four years, the Army plans to add an estimated 12,000 troops, as bases close elsewhere and assignments are changed.

The expansion almost will double military personnel from 15,000 to about 27,000 by 2008. And that boom eventually is expected to add \$748.8 million a year in gross business income to the local economy, which now stands at about \$1 billion, Bamberger said.

How much sales tax the buying is generating is not known. July and August figures are not available for at least two months.

Charae Sachanandani, city budget analyst, said the city did not include any troop-induced swell in sales-tax projections this year because there is so much military deployment, which makes it both rise and fall.

But those arriving now are flush with cash and spending it.

Having money, of course, drives much of the soldiers' demand for goods, but there is also a feeling of "treating oneself after a hard existence," said Thomas Beresford, a psychiatrist at the Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Denver and a University of Colorado professor. "When you live sparsely like they did, shopping is

one way to say 'I did a good job.'"

"We don't worry about them unless they exceed their funds," Beresford added.

Smith saved about \$500 every two weeks while in Iraq because combat pay about doubled his salary.

He also received \$15,000 tax-free for re-enlisting for six years while he was in the combat zone. And Deana tucked away her \$700 monthly housing allowance because she lived with her parents in Ohio while she was pregnant. They aren't spending it all. They plan to save to eventually buy a house.

Other soldiers have similar stories, and most are eager to collect some possessions.

Spc. E4 David Ketter, who was in Iraq 12 months and arrived in town a week and a half ago, researched possibilities through a military auto-connection service and ended his search at Phil Long auto complex at Chapel Hills.

The 21-year-old Wisconsin native slipped into the seat of his bright red Dodge Stratus, turned over the key and grinned. "I like it."

Sgt. William Cepeda, who arrived in town about two weeks ago, purchased a 2005 brown Ford Taurus. The family van is still en route from Guam, where his wife and five kids had been staying.

"I've been gone more than two years. Korea. Iraq. We need everything," Cepeda said.

At the Bob Penkhus dealership at 1331 S. Tejon St., near Fort Carson, used cars were in high demand. In just a few hours on a recent day, three cars were sold to soldiers.

Motorcycles also are on the must-buy list. In recent days, "we've seen a lot of guys in uniform, and we've sold quite a few already," said Rob Brooks, general manager at Pikes Peak Harley-Davidson. Twenty-five percent of their sales are always military, and they expect even more traffic during the next few weeks, he said.

At the Rent-A-Center on South Nevada, salespersons were cramming more furniture into the showroom in anticipation of a big rush.

Soldiers moving to Colorado Springs for the first time after stints in Iraq were collecting all kinds of furnishings for their new digs, said Don Smith, collections supervisor.

Popular items right now are washers and dryers, bedroom sets and big-screen TVs, including a 50-inch LCD model, renting for \$49.99 a week.

The trend is different from what it was when the soldiers were deploying, the supervisor said. Then, the hot items were laptop computers so families could keep in contact with their soldiers by e-mail.

But now that they're home, shopping for things most people regard as everyday necessities is foremost for most of them.

Rena Thacker, 22, who said she was breathing a sigh of relief because her husband, Spc. Matthew Thacker, an Army scout, is safe at home, embarked on a mission to make as homey an environment as possible.

"Our apartment is completely bare. We need everything. Phone, furniture, car."

It was her first day in town, having just arrived from North Carolina, and she and Matthew, who had arrived from Iraq two days before that, were picking out cell phones at the Sprint Store at Broadmoor Towne Center.

Even soldiers who are on short R & R stopovers are out there in the store aisles.

Capt. Fred Adams and his wife, Danijela, whom he met and married in Germany, were looking at digital cameras at SoundTrack. He has two weeks of vacation before returning to duty.

"We're doing research. We have a heavy camera, but we want one of the new

lightweight ones," the soldier said. "I'll be back to buy a new car, maybe a Chrysler 300, in six months."



**PHOTOS BY DAVID BITTON, THE GAZETTE** - Kelly Lilley waits as her husband, Spc. Raymond Lilley, makes a call on his cell phone to transfer money into a checking account so they can buy a flat-screen TV at Best Buy on Powers Boulevard on Wednesday. Lilley arrived in Colorado Springs on July 26 after a yearlong tour of duty in Iraq with the 2nd Brigade Combat Team. His wife said he works hard and deserves to spoil himself with a few gifts.



Spc. Robert Perkins inspects the interior of a Mazda RX-8 as salesman Tim Ridgley answers questions at Bob Penkhus Volvo/Mazda on Wednesday. Perkins recently arrived in town after a year in Iraq with the 2nd Brigade Combat Team.