

Elayne Jude, Great North News Services, reports on the return of 4 Mechanised Brigade from service in Iraq

December 1648: The English Civil War. The New Model Army marches at dawn on Parliament. Her usual guard companies find Whitehall blocked by a thousand soldiers, and are persuaded by their own commander to retire.

Colonel Pride's men station themselves in Palace Yard, Westminster Hall and the stairs leading to the old Commons chamber. Two more regiments patrol the neighbouring streets. Their aim is to purge those Members of Parliament in conflict with the Grandees, senior officers of the New Model.

Forty-odd unfortunate Members are detained that day, guarded by soldiers whose officers have passed the word that these are the wretches responsible for withholding their pay.

21 July 2008: Relations between Army and State are rather more cordial as uniformed soldiers once again march on the Commons.

4 Mechanised Brigade, returned from Telic 11, with the band of the Coldstream Guards at their head, sweep in bright sunlight through Carriage Gates and into New Palace Yard, to be welcomed home by the mother of parliaments.

And Parliament turned out to cheer.

120 Servicemen and women travelled from all over the country and from Germany to march from Wellington Barracks to the Palace of Westminster.

They were greeted by the Speaker of the Commons, Black Rod, MPs, Peers and staff from every part of the Houses.

Speeches were short but the welcome was warm. These modern grandees, conscious of the debt owed and the honour being done, took a back seat to 4MB. It was the Black Rats' day; as one MP put it, "It's all about giving the guys a beer".

The quantity of beer, cake and sandwiches consumed has already passed into legend. 4MB were entertained on the riverside Terrace and given tours of the Palace between mouthfuls.

This Welcome Home is a first - the first for Op Telic, the first in modern times to make that historic march - but it's not a one-off.(see postings Welcome Home for 52 Infantry Brigade 23 March 2008 and Welcome Home for 12 Brigade 23 November 2007, both home from Op Herrick in Afghanistan)

There is a lot more to the Army All Party Group's work than cream teas and carnival atmosphere.

Parliament is not the same as Government.

Governments come and go; Parliament endures. Governments make policy and formulate laws; Parliament considers its proposals, debates them, sometimes fiercely; can modify, transform or overturn them. And in order to do so, it is vital that Parliament is kept informed of the realities going on outside her walls by the people whose lives she is responsible for.

The Army APPG acts as a conduit to allow the Army to talk directly to Parliament.

Senior Forces personnel regularly meet with the Group to discuss developments which impact on defence policy and planning, and on the welfare of Service people and their families.

The agenda for these discussions, which are entirely confidential, are set, not by the parliamentarians, but by their guests.

The APPG presents a formidable military pedigree. Active in the group are former colonel, BBC defence correspondent and historian Patrick Mercer MP, and former Shadow Defence Secretary Bernard Jenkin MP. Ex-Grenadier Guard Mike Penning served in Kenya, Northern Ireland and Germany; former Life Guard Lord Astor is a President of the Royal British Legion. Several serve in the TA.

Bob Russell MP is proud to represent 16 Air Assault Brigade at Colchester Barracks; Frank Cook MP campaigns for peace and disarmament, and for landmine eradication.

Whatever their background, these men and women have joined the Group out of a deep commitment to the Forces and to Servicepeople's interests.

Last things: To those who didn't come back from Telic 11:

Guardsmen Stephen Ferguson, from Motherwell. B Company, 3rd Regiment of Foot, Scots Guards. Drowned in an accident in Basra.

Guardsmen Craig Ray, from Jedburgh. B Company, 3rd Regiment of Foot, Scots Guards. Died in a pre-deployment training exercise.

RAF Sergeant Duane Barwood, from Carterton in Oxfordshire, 903 Expeditionary Air Wing. Killed in a rocket attack on Basra airport.

You were not forgotten today.

A gallery of photographs of the welcome home can be found on Facebook - U K Defence Forum (c) 17dragons Photography