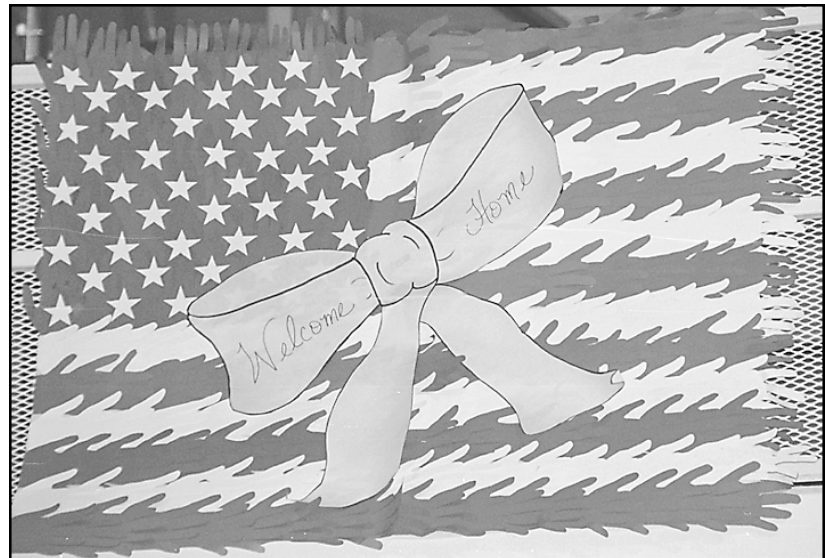




Lt. j.g. Jeff Vignery (above), who graduated from Goodland High School in 1992, hugged a former classmate after the ceremony at the Max Jones Fieldhouse Saturday. Vignery said he would give a hug to anyone who wanted one, and he handed out a bunch. Rev. Loren Strait (right) lead the invocation at the welcome home ceremony. Those on the dais were Coach Mike Johnson, Dr. Travis Daise, Lt. j.g. Jeff Vignery, Julie Vignery, Dale Schields, Rep. Jerry Moran and Jason Showalter.



Tracy and John McCoy of Goodland (above) clapped along with others Saturday afternoon after Jason Showalter's speech at the welcome celebration for Lt. j.g. Jeff Vignery at Max Jones Fieldhouse. Vignery (right) accepted a key to the City of Goodland from Mayor Tom Rohr at the special ceremony. Rohr also read a proclamation declaring Saturday as Jeff Vignery Day.



A unique American Flag made out of the handprints of Tara Mull's special education class at Central Elementary hung on the east end of Max Jones Fieldhouse Saturday with a big bow saying "welcome home."

Pilot called 'extraordinary'

SPEAKERS, from Page 1

he said. "Bless you."

Jason Showalter, a senior at Goodland High School and eighth-place national winner in the Veterans of Foreign Wars Voice of Democracy contest, gave his speech, "What Price Freedom."

Showalter, son of Scott and Shelly Showalter, said he felt honored to represent Kansas in the contest and more honored to be speaking at the celebration.

In his speech, he said freedom is a gift from God — not a right, but a privilege — and that paying for taxes is part of the price we give for freedom, but the cost goes deeper.

He told of a mother burying her son after he was killed while serving his country and how the son paid the ultimate price. He said as the mother received a folded American flag, she developed a sense of what she had given for her freedom.

"As Americans, we say thank you..." Showalter said.

Rep. Jerry Moran said he was humbled to represent Kansas at the nation's capitol when George Bush became president a few months ago. But he said his heart was beating fast Saturday as it was a greater honor "to pay tribute to one of our own."

"Our heroes come unexpectedly," Moran said, quoting the poet Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Moran said his children know Vignery's name because they prayed for him when saying grace at the supper table each night after the China incident.

"I thank God that those prayers were answered," he said.

He presented one of two American flags that were flown over the nation's capitol when he took office on Jan. 7, 1997, to Ron and Judi Vignery. Moran asked the men and women who served in the military to stand so that the community could pay tribute to them.

"God was with you and your effort was enough," Moran told Vignery in closing. "Today, I offer you my admiration and respect. God bless you and God bless America."

Jeff Mason, law partner of Vignery's father, Ron, read a letter from Kansas Gov. Bill Graves.

In the letter, addressed to Vignery and his family, Graves said he thought the Vignerys knew their son was a credit to their family, Goodland and the state of Kansas.

Mason read a resolution from the state Senate, and presented a state flag to Jeff Vignery.

Perry Warren, a Goodland lawyer and alumnus of the University of Kansas, read a letter from the university's president, Robert Hemenway, to Vignery who also graduated from the university. He also presented gifts to Vignery from the university.

Dennis Mesa of Garden City, representing Sen. Sam Brownback, told the audience that the price of freedom is paid by the sacrifice of the men and women who serve their country.

Mayor Tom Rohr proclaimed Saturday as "Jeff Vignery Day" and presented a key to the city of Goodland to the pilot.

Ken Baum, vice commander of the Goodland American Legion, made Vignery the newest member of the post, and also asked veterans in the audience to stand. Baum and his wife Carol had made the yellow ribbons which were handed out to people before the celebration.

Mike Johnson of Waverly, Neb., former Goodland High football coach, said that after his wife sent him word at school about Jeff being on the U.S. Navy plane that had collided with a Chinese plane, he went to the school library and found out that the crew was all right.

"I hadn't been that relieved in a long time," he said. "I'm so glad this is a celebration, Jeff."

Johnson said when Vignery was a freshman, it was his first year as a coach at Goodland High. He said he has fond memories of Vignery's class of 1992.

Johnson presented a card to Vignery, which was a huge piece of white cloth, signed by Goodland people.

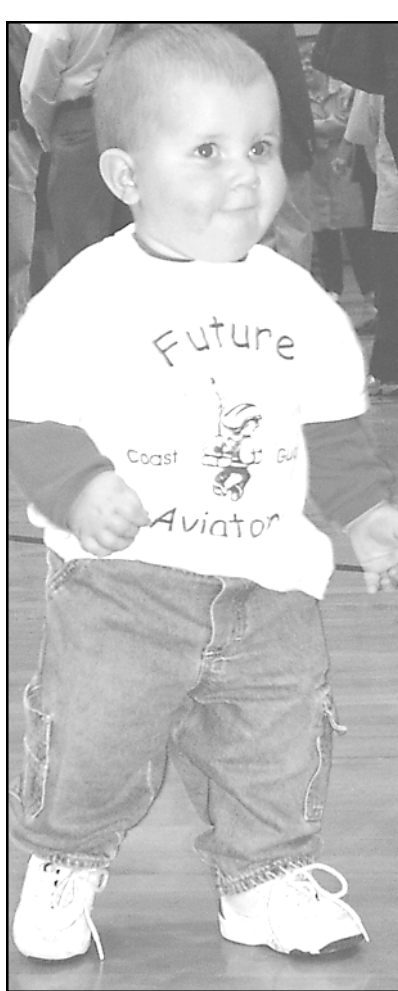
Dr. Travis Daise of Salina, a classmate of Vignery who represented their class, said he was deeply honored to be part of the celebration. He presented Vignery and his wife with a framed Associated Press picture of the couple kissing when the crew arrived in Whidbey Island, Wash.

Daise said their high school class was close and when they did things, they did them together. We would go to Vignery and ask what we should do, he said. Vignery displayed leadership back then.

"Not only is he a hard worker," Daise said, "but he is tenacious after his goals."

He joked that Vignery has a couple of weaknesses — Julie's brown eyes and spice cake.

Even though Vignery has said he is just a regular guy doing his job, Daise told the pilot he is an extraordinary guy and that the class couldn't be prouder of him.



An emotional Congressman Jerry Moran (right), one of many speakers Saturday, told Lt. j.g. Jeff Vignery that he and his family followed the crew's 11-day ordeal closely. Gage Gibson, 1, (above) plans to follow in the Navy pilot's footsteps, or at least that's what his shirt says. Scott and Genevieve Gibson are his parents.

