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Soldiers On Leave Given Airline Discounts

Troops on R&R must pay their own way once they reach the U.S. Some faced big bills to get home.

By Brad Foss, Associated Press

Major airlines are offering discounts to soldiers and their families taking advantage of the military's new rest and relaxation program, which has received some criticism because the last leg of soldiers' vacations is not paid for.

Under the first major R&R program since Vietnam, the government pays for flights from Iraq to Germany, and then the United States, at which point the troops must pick up the tab for domestic travel.

Before Delta Air Lines Inc. and Southwest Airlines Inc. this weekend began offering the troops special fares requiring no advance purchase, soldiers on vacation with little notice faced buying extremely expensive last-minute fares.

"What family can afford to pay \$2,000 or more for a same-day plane ticket?" said Sherry Billups of Blackduck, Minn., whose husband, Steven Baazard, is a 15-year veteran of the National Guard.

Under the terms of the discounts offered by Delta and Southwest, no advance purchase or minimum stay is required and fares are refundable. American Airlines, which had been offering soldiers discounts on three-day advance purchase tickets since May, updated its policy yesterday to match its competitors.

Northwest Airlines Corp. yesterday said that it matched the deals being offered by American.

The carriers' discounts are good for travel between Baltimore-Washington International Airport, where troops have been arriving since last week, and anywhere else in the United States.

All three of the carriers are offering roundtrip fares in the continental United States to soldiers and their dependents that cost less than \$200.

"We want our servicemen and women to get home as quickly and as hassle-free as possible because we know their time is limited," said Joyce Rogge, Southwest's senior vice president of marketing.

Southwest's offer is valid through Jan. 7, while American's and Delta's are valid through Sept. 15, 2004.

Aware of the minor stir caused among soldiers facing high-priced, last-minute fares, the Army said it could have done a better job informing carriers before the R&R program went into effect.

"One thing the Army might not have done well was coordinate with commercial airliners," Army spokesman Joe Burlas said yesterday. "We're glad they're getting the word now and offering these discounts."

Burlas said more than 700 soldiers a day would be flying in and out of the country under the home-leave program. He said that, in addition to Baltimore, the government would eventually begin flying soldiers to Atlanta, Dallas-Fort Worth and Los Angeles.