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Soldier reunites with brother in Monmouth

BY ROBERT ANDERSON

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Wednesday was just another day at the classroom for Chase Carnes, a second grader at Willits School, until his big brother walked in.

Carnes brother, Eric Werkheiser of Galva, was among the 120 Army-activated Illinois National Guardsmen who returned to their Galva base March 19. The soldiers served on federal active duty for 18 months, a year of which was spent in Iraq. Chase was unable to greet his brother at the Galva armory because he was in Florida.

"We were seeing his sister perform at the Epcot Center in Disney world with her high school band from Bushnell Prairie City during spring break," explained Eric and Chase's mother, Megan Grant of Monmouth.

Grant said she and her husband, Wayne, and Chase's father, Cardie Carnes of Monmouth and his wife, Joyce, kept Chase "informed of everything that was going on over there" in Iraq, including the injuries - some severe - suffered by Werkheiser's Battery F, 202nd Air Defense Artillery.

"He was very inquisitive. He has known everything," she said.

Chase's knowledge - and his great relief - were evident when he saw his brother walk into his classroom Wednesday afternoon. The boy stared in disbelief for a couple seconds, ran into Werkheiser's open arms and burst into tears.

With Chase still holding on around his neck, Werkheiser moved to a chair, put Chase on his lap, and began taking questions from a group of Chase's excited classmates.

"How tall are you?" was the first question.

Werkheiser said he is about 5-foot, 10-inches tall and went on to answer questions regarding the weather in Iraq, sandstorms, giant Camel Spiders and what his favorite weapons were.

"Whatever worked," Werkheiser said regarding his choice of weapons.

"Did you get shot?" asked a student.

"No. I got shot at a couple of times," Werkheiser said, later adding that, "We captured some people," and "We got stuck in a few sandstorms in the desert."

The high winds whipped the hot sand about so hard "it hurt," the soldier told the students.



ROBERT ANDERSON/Daily Review Atlas
Chase Carnes of Monmouth and his brother Eric Werkheiser of Galva were reunited when Werkheiser, who recently returned home after a year in Iraq, walked into Brooke Buchen's second grade classroom at Willits Primary School Wednesday afternoon.

"We wore glasses over there," he said. "When a sandstorm hit, nobody moved - we stayed in our vehicles."

Asked what kind of shoes he wore in Iraq and how long he got to sleep at night, Werkheiser answered that he wore tan combat boots, had no set schedule, sometimes worked at night, and said, "We slept as long as we could, buddy."

"When are you going back to Iraq," a girl asked.

"Hopefully I won't have to go back during the three years I have left in the National Guard," Werkheiser said. "When I signed up, I didn't think I'd have to go to war. But when they called, I had to go. I signed up for it."

Werkheiser described his time in Iraq as "long and hard," with some combat and much patrolling in Humvees in the suburban areas of Baghdad and in the desert. Werkheiser said he is on vacation until July, when his unit will reassemble at the Galva armory for drill in July.

Werkheiser thanked the students for the signs they made to welcome he and his fellow soldiers home.

After a couple dozen of the students' questions were answered, teacher Brooke Buchen concluded the discussion by thanking Werkheiser.

"Thank you," she said. "We're happy that you served our country, and we're really proud of you."

Asked how he felt about his brother's visit, Chase said, "I'm happy and surprised."

On Thursday, Grant told the Review Atlas that having her son in Iraq for a year was "stressful."

"You find your own inner strength. You find a faith you didn't know you had. You pray in places you never thought of. A normal day is checking your e-mail a hundred times," she said.

"I strongly support everything the troops are doing over there," Grant added. "The media is not putting the positive in perspective. The Galva unit helped build a school over there. There are children there who are now getting their first immunizations...There are many things that have been positive for all of the sacrifices that our people are making. If we pulled out now it would be unjust to those who have fallen."

Herself a Blue Star Mother of America, Grant presented Sgt. Jessica Housby's mother with the Gold Star, in honor of Jessica who was killed in Iraq in February.

"I did it at Jessica's funeral in Milan in February," Grant said. "It was an honor, and when I did it I was very apprehensive because this lady's daughter had died in combat. But you find a peace in the support you can give somebody, and being a military mom there's a bond...It's a completely different world."

Grant said that later this year her parents will experience the same thing she has, because her brother Jeff Libby, formerly of Altona and now residing in Killeen, Texas, is being deployed to Iraq.

"He's full-time Texas National Guard," Grant said. "I will be learning from my children because they know what it's like to have a sibling over there."