

TELEGRAPH

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Hundreds come out for return of soldiers

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GALVA — The energy level in the Galva National Guard Armory's gymnasium kept rising, and at 9:08 a.m. Saturday the cry went up that the Foxtrot Battery 202 ADA had arrived. The crowd started to chant "U-S-A!" and a school band started to play a patriotic song.

Then, the entire room was filled with a roar as the first of the soldiers entered the gymnasium. The crowd was crying, jumping and clapping, their eyes turned toward the front entrance as the soldiers walked in, dressed in tan fatigues.

The soldiers walked in mostly single-file but also in small groups. At irregular intervals, fresh cheers shook the gymnasium, and the soldiers fell into line in front of the stage. As the soldiers got into formation, people in the crowd were hugging.



Many of the people in the crowd looked near tears, but smiled as well. Some names of soldiers were shouted from the crowd, and fresh chants of "U-S-A!" started to build.

As the last soldiers got into position, the chants of "U-S-A!" built to a thunderous level, and the collected F/202 turned to face the entrance. The crowd cheered again, and families and friends surged forward to within mere feet of the collected soldiers.

As the crowd quieted down, a chaplain led a prayer, opening with the Bible passage, "This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it."

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Sniffing could be heard from a few people during the prayer, which included a moment of silence for servicemen who have died during Operation: Enduring Freedom. A resounding "Amen" was offered as the chaplain closed a prayer, and a huge cheer went up.

After the prayer, the first speaker was unit commander Maj. Michael W. Kessel.

"I take great pride in telling you today, 'Mission accomplished,'" Kessel said to the once-again cheering crowd.

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Kessel thanked everyone for coming, and acknowledged the greetings along the road as the F/202 came into Galva.

"It was great seeing all the signs as we came down the road," Kessel said. "By the grace of God, every soldier has returned or will be returning soon."

Another cheer rang out at Kessel's next words, "And everyone is alive."



"It's been a long 18 months. ... We pushed ourselves to the limit, and when we were tired, we found the strength to continue on. There was the training at Fort Hood, then Fort Polk, three weeks in Kuwait, and then Iraq," Kessel said.

The major spoke about the F/202's accomplishments, and what they endured while in Iraq.

"We observed a very, very hot Middle Eastern summer. We have built one school from scratch. We refurbished several. We delivered over 100,000 gallons of fresh water. We built half a dozen water treatment plants. We guarded the most dangerous two miles in Iraq. And we helped support a fledgling Iraqi police station," Kessel said.

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"But our most lasting imprint on history will always be Jan. 30, 2005, when we supported the first ever election in a free and sovereign Iraq," Kessel added.

Kessel also praised the efforts of the F/202 and other soldiers who are serving in Operation Enduring Freedom.

"These men, and many others like them, have made it all possible. It has been a great privilege to serve with, and lead these men into battle. It will undoubtedly be one of the highlights of my life, and the highlight of my military career," Kessel said.

"It's great for the F/202 to be home, and they are looking forward to spending some time with their families.

"After a couple of weeks of leave, like the men before us, we'll put our rifles away, and go back to work and the life we left behind so many months ago. Again, thank you, God bless you, and God bless the United States of America," Kessel said, to yet another round of applause and cheers.

The soldiers were then allowed to stand at ease. The next speaker was First Sgt. Paul Peterson.

"At the time of our activation, I said I wanted to bring all the men home alive. And through God's watching hand, that happened," Peterson said, to more applause.

"Ladies and gentlemen, you have the best soldiers standing in front of you in the state of Illinois right now," Peterson said.

After Peterson spoke, the National Anthem was played, and the crowd started to sing along in some sections. By the words "rocket's red glare," many people in the crowd had joined in singing along.

Soon, the order was given that the Guardsmen were dismissed, and a human avalanche of family and friends poured into the space the F/202 soldiers were occupying.

Long hugs could be seen, as well as handshakes, while Guardsmen wove their way through the crowd and looked for loved ones.

The Foxtrot Battery 202 ADA is finally home.

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