

TELEGRAPH

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Soldier:'It doesn't get any better than this'

BY JEANNINE OTTO

SVN NEWS REPORTER

jotto@svnmail.com

"Dismissed."

One word set them free.

The instant it was spoken, families crossed the black tape line on the floor of the Galva Armory gymnasium to embrace their soldiers Saturday. Eighteen months of worrying and waiting and hoping ended with that one word.

Then the crowd and soldiers melted into each other.

There were no words at first, only fierce hugs, faces buried in each other's shoulders as wives and husbands embraced, as fathers and children reunited, as mothers and fathers held onto sons.



Tears were quickly brushed away and turned to smiles of joy and relief as the soldiers of the National Guard Foxtrot 202 Air Defense Artillery unit returned to the Galva Armory Saturday. The unit includes 33 soldiers from the Sauk Valley area. The soldiers returned to the United States a week ago today after being deployed in Iraq since March 2004. They spent five days demobilizing in Fort Sill, Okla., before flying out early Saturday.

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"Wonderful, absolutely wonderful," said Carol DeGeorge, about how she was feeling, as she embraced son Pat as his father Jim and Pat's girlfriend looked on.

"We weren't expecting anything like this (celebration)," Pat said as he stood surrounded by his family.

Nearby, 15 members of another family had turned out for the return of brothers Jason and Joshua Wittenauer, who served together in the unit in Iraq. Josh's fiancée Heather Swartz and a friend wore Army green T-shirts that said "The Boys Are Back in Town." Other family members wore tie-dyed T-shirts in red, white and blue.



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"It's wonderful," said the boys' father, Ron Wittenauer. "You can get the knot out of your stomach."

"I'm good," Heather smiled as she wiped away tears and held onto Josh's hand. They are planning to be married in September. "Very happy to have him home."

Everywhere there were happy reunions and family members met their sons' buddies who they had, up to this moment, only seen in e-mailed photos. There were hugs shared among the families too.

"We made it, hon," one mother said to another, her voice muffled in the other's coat as they hugged tightly. "We made it."

"It's great," said Spc. Brian Beckman as he stood with his parents, Glenna and Charles. "Utter joy, that's the only way to describe it."



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Beckman said that there was celebration on the plane as it took off from Fort Sill Saturday morning.

"Everybody was yelling and screaming," he said. "When we landed, it was 10 times louder."

Josh Wittenauer agreed.

"It's great to be home," he smiled. "When the plane took off this morning, it was louder than when we left Kuwait."

The Wooden family of Polo turned out to welcome their soldier, Sgt. Paul Lilley. Paul stood with his arm around his mother's shoulders. His family looked at him as if they couldn't quite believe he was here.

"It's kind of hard to describe," Lilley said of being home. "It's unbelievable."

He said his plans upon arriving home included taking a shower and having some home-cooked food.

"I've got the house all ready," his mother Marcia Wooden said, her arm tightly around her son's waist.

Some of the soldiers greeted children. Among them was Sgt. John Kreps, whose daughter Taylor was a month old the last time he saw her. Taylor is now 10 months old.

"She wasn't quite sure when she saw him," John's mother Joan smiled through her tears. "But to see him, to see him hold his daughter. It's good. It's good. It was a great welcome home."

"I'm speechless," Kreps said. "To see my daughter and to hold her. I'm just happy all my guys are here with me."

"When we first got over there, it seemed like this day wouldn't get here," said Sgt. David Rodriguez as his mother Mary stood next to him and his father Fernando smiled, standing behind his son and wife. "It doesn't get any better than this."

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