

# TELEGRAPH

... SERVING LEE, OGLE AND BUREAU COUNTIES

## Chartered bus gives soldiers, families a road trip to remember

BY JEANNINE OTTO

SVN NEWS REPORTER

[jotto@svnmail.com](mailto:jotto@svnmail.com)

At first the bus ride was quiet as the excitement and tension of the homecoming eased a little. Husbands and wives, boyfriends and girlfriends shared embraces, talked quietly or just sat in silence for a few moments, holding hands, heads on each other's shoulders.

Soldiers passed around refreshments as the bus, donated by Wiersema Charter of Morrison, was escorted by an Illinois State Police car. As the bus and 21 of the 33 F/202 soldiers from the Sauk Valley made their way toward home, they saw homemade signs and billboards thanking them for their service.

Cell phones rang with welcome home greetings, with family and friends wanting to know where the bus was on the return route.

"Check out the convoy," said Mike Bowman of Polo as the bus made the turn onto state Route 40.

"Holy cow," someone said as they watched the line of vehicles, headlights on, behind the bus. The vehicles stretched down the exit ramp back onto the interstate even as the bus was well clear of the other side.

"Hey, look, there's my truck," one soldier said, pointing out his new truck.

"Where's my mom and dad?" another asked.

Bowman's cell phone rang. A call from wife Kim and daughter Michelle told him that they were the 22nd car in the caravan.

The bus moved up state Route 40 and as it neared Rock Falls and the crowds increased, soldiers moved to the front of the bus to see those who had come to welcome them home. There was an atmosphere of disbelief that all of this was for them.

"Just think," one of them said as they looked out at those waving and brandishing American flags. "These people have been out here all day waiting for this bus."

"Look at that," Mike Bowman said as veterans from the Rock Falls American Legion saluted as the bus drove by. Many of the soldiers stood to look. "That's for you guys."

The sense of family that these soldiers have built with each other in the last 18 months was evident as they traveled together this one last time. There were comments to each other, laughter, teasing, little inside jokes that only they understood. The soldiers joked that the ride was similar to many that they had taken in the streets of Baghdad — only safer and a lot friendlier this time.

"It's like a patrol, only in a bus," Spc. Tim Bowman joked.

Sgt. Mark Stach stood with those at the front of the bus, watching and waving.

"You guys just remember," he said to them softly, reminding. "There are about 1,500 people who aren't getting to see this."

To those who were waving signs that said "Thank you," there were replies of "You're welcome" from the soldiers. Wives and girlfriends pointed out family members and friends along the route and the soldiers waved to all who came out to greet them.

"This makes it all worth it," Marcia Wooden smiled as her son Paul Lilley waved, standing with his fellow soldiers at the front of the bus.

© Copyright 2005 Sauk Valley Newspapers. All rights reserved.