

TELEGRAPH

... SERVING LEE, OGLE AND BUREAU COUNTIES

Back from Iraq: 'Thanks can't even begin to say it'

Many families across the Sauk Valley heaved a deep sigh of relief Saturday as Dixon-based members of the Foxtrot 202/Air Defense Artillery unit came home. They were met with hugs and cheers, smiles and tears after completing their year-long deployment to Iraq.

The Dixon Armory soldiers, 33 in all, were among a larger contingent of Illinois National Guard soldiers from the Galva area, a town that welcomed the troops home in grand fashion.

An overcast day did nothing to suppress the high spirits of well-wishers who packed the Galva Armory by the hundreds. The crowd expressed its happiness and pride in so many ways. The cheering was better than at any ball game. When the soldiers arrived, they were greeted by a tremendous roar of jubilant voices and applause. Chants of "U.S.A., U.S.A." filled the building.

One speaker after another had their remarks peppered with applause, particularly those of F/202's commander, Maj. Michael W. Kessel. His pride in his soldiers was evident. Kessel's declaration of "Mission accomplished" and his thankfulness that all his men came home alive drew more ovations.

Flags and signs were everywhere en route to Galva from Kewanee. Messages covered the interior of the armory like wallpaper. Others waved signs: "Welcome home Daddy" and "We love you." Some families all wore the same special shirts. A band played patriotic music as rambunctious children danced and played, waiting for the moment when more than a year of separation would all be over and they could run and greet that special soldier.

Yes, they did it up right in Galva.

"That was sweet," one soldier said to another as they boarded the chartered bus for their next destination — Dixon.

It got even sweeter. More celebrations were on the way. A police-escorted bus ride carried them through Henry, Bureau and Whiteside counties toward an awaiting welcome home in Dixon. Along the way in Rock Falls and Sterling, people stood by the street waving to the soldiers while flags, yellow ribbons and signs heralded their arrival.

Once in Dixon, the men climbed into National Guard Humvees near their home armory and happily drove along a parade route through town. People braved the chilly wind and drizzle to smile and wave. At one point the soldiers drove beneath the Dixon Memorial Arch, bringing to mind how that rich Dixon tradition got started 86 years ago when the city's first arch was built to help welcome returning World War I soldiers.

Now the F/202 soldiers have a lot of catching up to do as they pick up their civilian lives from where they left off back in October 2003. They will find many things have changed during the past 17 months, but what has remained constant is this area's patriotism and support of its troops.

One sign seen along the route says it best for all of us: "Thanks can't even begin to say it."

While we are ever grateful that this unit has returned home, our jubilation is tempered by the knowledge that soldiers in the 1644th Transportation Co. based in Rock Falls and other enlisted soldiers remain in harm's way in Iraq and Kuwait. They are expected to serve there until early fall, transporting supplies where they are needed.

These soldiers, and all others still serving overseas, need everyone's continued support and prayers.

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