

TELEGRAPH

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Tie a yellow ribbon

BY DAVID HOLSTED

SVN NEWS REPORTER

dholsted@svnmail.com

DIXON — The house on Lanewood Drive was like hundreds of other homes and businesses in the area. Yellow ribbons adorned the light pole and signs welcoming Foxtrot Battery 202 ADA home graced the lawn.

However, the ribbons and signs at this particular home had an extra-special significance.

On one of the welcome-home signs, in big, black, handwritten letters was the name "Charlie."

This is the home of Charlie Thomas, a member of the National Guard unit that has served a year in Iraq. On Saturday afternoon he will get to see the sign.

Inside the house, Thomas' parents, Charles and Vickie Thomas, had trouble containing their excitement over the prospect of seeing their son. Upon Charlie's request, Vickie said, they were not planning anything special. He wanted time to just relax.



Charles, who is still in active service in the Army and works out of the Rock Island Arsenal, understood that desire.

"They've been in a high-stress environment," he said. "They need time to relax."

Charles, though, thinks the outpouring of support from the community in the form of signs, ribbons and other expressions of gratitude will mean a lot to the returning servicemen.

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"When they come home and see that," he said, "they appreciate that."

Not only has the support for the Guardsmen been there, but the Thomases said the support group among and for the families of the men has been a tremendous asset the past year.



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"The families have been great," Charles said. "Dusty Hill's mom — she's been the 'Rock of Gibraltar.' Jeff Welker — if anyone deserves Volunteer of the Year, he does."

He said that at times it seemed the Thomases got better information from the support groups than from the television news.

Charles served tours of duty in many parts of the world, including the Balkan peninsula during the early 1990s conflict. Vickie talked about being a military wife and mother.



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"It was hard to part with him before," she said, her voice cracking and tears coming to her eyes as she motioned toward her husband. "It's harder for a son."

Charlie's uncle and aunt Floyd and Carolyn Thomas came into the house. They said they had just seen their son Michael off to Marine Camp Pendleton in California after a 10-day visit. Michael Thomas also had served in Iraq. Carolyn Thomas said her son was in Fallujah during the heavy fighting.

"We had Michael on the rooftops and Charlie on one of the most dangerous roads in Iraq," said Vickie, her emotions getting the best of her again.

She said that in his e-mails home, Charlie expressed concern about his cousin Michael.

"He would hear things on the media that he knew would upset us," Vickie said. "There were a lot of reassurances."

Charles was impressed with the perspective of things shown by the men of Foxtrot.

"They told me, 'It's our time. It's our generation's time to defend our country. It's time to pass the baton.' I'm very proud of them," Charles said.

Vickie agreed, saying, "I never heard any of them say, 'I wish I hadn't gone.'"

"There's no doubt they're doing the right thing for their country," Charles said.

Charlie will receive a hero's welcome on Saturday from his parents, his sisters Amanda and Cynthia, his girlfriend Hillary Schwartz and three friendly dogs.

Floyd Thomas sat on the couch, drinking a beer.

"They're going to want a beer and a McDonald's," he said, as Charles laughed.

Vickie said her son already has rented an apartment in Macomb and will attend Western Illinois University.

"I think the National Guard has done a wonderful job," Charles said. "I was very impressed with the training they received before they left. They handled every mission. It speaks very highly of these guys. They showed they can be good soldiers."

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