

Galva National Guard

1 Year

As local soldiers reach first anniversary, their leader reflects back, looks forward

On Tuesday, Oct. 12, — the Galva National Guard unit — reached the one-year anniversary of its entrance into federal active duty, which began with training in Galva and eventually led to its current service in Iraq. In honor of the anniversary, The Galva News asked Major Mike Kessel, commander of the Galva National Guard unit, to discuss several aspects of the unit's first year of service. His answers are seen below. — Edit.

Galva News: Can you give a general assessment of the past year?

Kessel: Over the past year, F/202 ADA has accomplished a lot.

We reported for active duty actually during a drill weekend on Oct. 12, 2003. On Oct. 11, we were three separate batteries; on Oct. 12, we became one. That alone was thought to be a difficult if not impossible task, but the men have responded well, and now we are a cohesive unit.

After three weeks of training, packing and preparing at Galva, we departed for Ft. Hood (Texas). There we took a well-trained and qualified air defense artillery battery and reconfigured ourselves into a motorized infantry company.

In addition to that we went from being 100 percent analog to being 100 percent digital and fielded more new equipment than many soldiers have or will in their careers.

After three months at Ft. Hood,

we went to our "dress rehearsal" at Ft. Polk, La., where the soldiers continued to exceed expectations.

Finally we came to Kuwait linked up with our new headquarters and immediately began to expel any misconceived impressions anyone had about the National Guard.

In a nutshell, we have become a battle-tested,



Kessel

recently that had come to the Battalion Commander from the Division Assistant Operations Officer (assistant G3).

In the email the assistant G3 referred to F/202 ADA as a "highly trained motorized infantry

company, disguised as an air defense battery." Coming from the famed First Cavalry Division, that is

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— Major Mike Kessel

indeed a compliment.

So overall, the past year has been a good year. Yes, we miss our families, our work, our homes,

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but we have a job to do and everyone down to the youngest soldier has given the mission their all.

Unfortunately, as we knew was going to happen, we have had some soldiers who have had to sacrifice more than any of us would have wanted.

Galva News: Have you seen your men grow personally and as a unit?

Kessel: Absolutely. For some, the only time they had ever really been out of the state of Illinois was when they went for training. For others, they had worked their whole career to get the opportunity to pay back something to their country.

I have also seen guys get a better understanding as to why we are here and what our purpose is. And then there are those who maybe were not the best soldiers back home but here, they are our stars.

As a unit, as I said above, when you take soldiers from three separate units and combine them into one, there is a potential for friction. They are all used to doing things a different way and they are now out of their comfort zone, but I am blessed with having some of the best officers and non-commissioned officers in the Army and they have worked together to make this very cohesive unit.

Galva News: What's on the minds of you and your men as you pass the one-year mark?

Kessel: I think everyone is ready to go home. Over 50 percent of the battery has now been home for two weeks R&R and after getting back, most everyone has what we call the "R&R Blues."

I know personally while I was home last month, I enjoyed my time at home with my wife and family, but there was a point in the last few days, where I was ready to come back. These guys are family

too, but two days after getting back, someone tried to blow us up and then I was ready to go back home.

As much as everyone is ready to go home, I also think that everyone has grown close over here and hopefully we will all be able to stay in touch in the years to come. I also think that once it is over and we are all home, many will look at this as a growing experience.

And for the younger guys, it will have opened up new possibilities for their careers that maybe were not possible before this deployment.

Galva News: What has surprised you about your time in Iraq?

Kessel: The conditions we live in is a pleasant surprise. We all live in trailers and have the ability to take a shower every day. We eat well, have several gyms around the camp, and a fairly large PX.

When I was over here for the first Gulf War in 1991, we slept in tents the whole time, were lucky to get a shower every other day, and had a hot meal maybe once a day and at times only once a month.

Also frankly (no offense to you guys) but the media bias that is over here. The media, as I have said before, is just reporting the bad stuff and rarely if ever reports the good stuff, like the schools we have built, the medical clinics, the canals we have dug out, and the water stations we have built, just to name a few.

Galva News: Do you feel support from home, particularly from the Galva area?

Kessel: Yes, we do have and feel a lot of support coming from home. The residents of Galva and particularly the American Legion have been outstanding in their support of us.

Because soldiers in this battery

represent 70 different communities across five states, we have a lot of support from all over.

Everyone is always asking what we need, but in reality, we are very blessed and there is nothing anyone "really" needs. Despite that, we have the record for the most care packages of any battery in the battalion, and possibly the brigade.

Galva News: How dangerous is it in Iraq for the Galva unit? That's what people back home often wonder.

Kessel: Interesting question, because I had a discussion with CPT (Greg) Reinhardt about that two days ago.

In previous wars (World War I and II, Korea) there was a front and that was where you encountered the enemy. The units would move forward until they met the enemy, they would fight, the enemy would retreat and the unit would continue its push forward.

In Vietnam, units would patrol for a week or so at a time and then come back to a base camp where it was relatively safe.

In Iraq we have no front, the enemy is around us 360 degrees. That is the nature of this enemy.

Our camps are reasonably safe, but from time to time, mortars or rockets do land inside of them. We are outside the wire daily conducting combat patrols.

We do everything we can to mitigate the danger, short of not conducting the mission, but the mission must be accomplished so we do it.

All of the soldiers wear a vest that is bullet proof, a Kevlar helmet, and safety glasses when on patrol. In addition, all of our vehicles are now either armored or have been up-armored, to provide additional protection.

So in a nutshell, Iraq is still a

dangerous place, I would not make any vacation plans for over here just yet. We do face danger every day.

Galva News: If you had one thing you could stress to people living back here, what would it be? Any clarifications to make?

Kessel: Well, there are some people that want to politicize this conflict. They keep saying Iraq is a distraction from the "War on Terror." I would like to say that in fact that is not true, it is very much a part of the "War on Terror."

One of the main groups we are constantly fighting is headed by Abu Masab al-Zarqawi, and he is al-Qaida. In fact he took responsibility for the car bomb attack that injured SPC Dustin Hill on 21 Sept.

One candidate for President has said "Iraq is becoming a haven for terrorists." In my opinion, that is great, it saves us having to chase them all over the world if they come to us here.

Also, these terrorists want us all dead anyway, so we either take care of them here or we take care of them in the U.S. I personally would rather take care of them here.

Also, it often gets overlooked, but there are now 100,000 Iraqis in the Iraqi National Guard and nearly as many Iraqi Police. These two elements make up the core of the Iraqi Security Forces. They fight and die right alongside of us. They have had over 1,000 killed this year and that does not include those that were killed while waiting in line at the recruiting station.

As the Iraqi Security Forces get larger and better trained, they are taking over missions that the Coalition currently conducts.

Speaking of the Coalition, it was recently said that the Coalition was made of countries that have

no military to begin with. Let me list just a few of the countries that we see over here: Great Britain, Italy, Australia, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, Japan, and the Republic of South Korea and the Philippines.

Again, that is just the countries that we see on a regular basis; there are over 30 countries represented here other than the United States.

Galva News: It's been estimated that the Galva unit will leave Iraq and return to the States in March or April. Are you getting any sense of a possible extension of your stay in Iraq?

Kessel: Actually there has been no official announcement about any date. The tour in Iraq is 12-14 months. Going off of that, we can say that since we got here in March, we may leave as early as March, but could stay longer.

The Army can keep us on active duty for two years, so it is possible – and I stress only possible – that we could stay here until late Summer 2005, but I rather doubt that. My gut feeling is we will be back in the U.S. by late March, April at the latest. You might remember that the 1st Armored Division was extended 90 days last spring.

Galva News: How is the Galva unit's morale?

Kessel: We currently have a very tough mission, so that is wearing on everyone a great deal. But everyday, despite it all, the guys are out there conducting patrols.

Considering what we have seen, what we have done, that we have been away from our homes and families for a year now, and that every day someone may try to kill us, morale is still decent. Not as high as it has been but not nearly as low as I have seen in other units.

Of course, I know that as we approach the holidays, particularly

Christmas, it will get tougher. But the good news is that after Christmas comes New Year's, which means there is only a few more weeks left.

Galva News: Do you have any other thoughts you'd like to share?

Kessel: We had a formation the other day, which we only do rarely here, and I had a chance to address most of the battery at one time.

I told them, and I truly believe this: we are indeed blessed. There are a great many people that are praying for us daily. Some churches I know are praying for us by name on a daily basis.

I don't know what the future holds for us, but God has been very good to us thus far. We have been shot at, had RPGs (rocket-propelled grenades) fired at us, grenades thrown at us, and been blown up by roadside bombs and car bombs. Yet, miraculously, we have only had three serious injuries, and two of those should recover fully.

We have had 11 total injuries and eight of those have been minor enough the soldier was returned to duty the next day. If that is not Divine Intervention, then I don't know what is. The miracles abound over here.

Also, I know that everyone is proud of this battery. I am proud of this battery and consider it an honor to command it at this time.

But until we get home and we can fully share our story, those of you at home will not know how proud you should be. These guys have risen to every challenge with pure guts and determination.

They have faced the terrorist threat head-on and have granted many their wish to meet Allah; others we have put behind bars and the rest have learned not to mess with "the boys from Illinois."