



Serving North  
Central Illinois

# NewTribune<sup>★</sup> online

## **Soldiers back from Iraq**

**Monday, March 21, 2005**

**By Craig Sterrett, [ntlocal@newstrib.com](mailto:ntlocal@newstrib.com)**

Men from the Princeton area, Henry and Putnam County are back home and putting their lives back together after a 17-month deployment and one violent year in Iraq, but their thoughts are still with wounded members of their National Guard unit.

Sgt. E-5 Michael Maddalazzo, a longtime Dover resident, Spc. E-4 Jeremy Spears of Princeton and Spc. E4 John McKirgan of McNabb came home Saturday along with the rest of the members of Foxtrot battery, 202nd Air Defense Artillery, a Galva-based unit activated in October 2003.

After returning to Fort Sill, Okla., this month, members of the unit had wanted, Maddalazzo said, to go to San Antonio, Texas, to visit Dustin Hill, a rural Wyanet man who suffered severe wounds and burns to an eye and his hands in Baghdad.

But, they never received orders they needed.

In September, an improvised explosive device wounded five members of the unit, including SSgt. Daniel Quimby of Henry, but Hill's injuries were the most severe.

Quimby also returned Saturday. Hill, who attended Annawan High School, is continuing to recover in a Texas hospital after having his right hand and fingers of his left hand amputated and his gall bladder removed.

"I think the unit has been real supportive of him," Maddalazzo said.

Hill's 1st sergeant, as well as a major and a lieutenant from the unit drove to Texas to see him. Maddalazzo said an Illinois-based family readiness unit was supportive to Hill and the unit.

"He seems to be in pretty good spirits from what I've heard. He's a good guy," Maddalazzo said. "I know a bunch of them are planning to go down there next weekend."

Spears said going to see Hill ranks high on his "to-do list."

"He was in the same platoon as I was. We were both mechanics and got moved (after going to Iraq) to line platoon," Spears said. Spears was on patrol on the other side of Baghdad when Hill was wounded.

Maddalazzo only had one close scrape, but it was too close.

Maddalazzo, Spc. Jeremy Wrotny, formerly of Tiskilwa, and others were on patrol in Baghdad when Wrotny received facial wounds. "He came home right away," Maddalazzo said.

"There were 12 of us last Easter in that initial ambush where Specialist Wrotny got shot in the cheek. We had just started patrolling, three vehicles strong," he recalled. He said the platoon had reached the end of its patrol zone and was turning around and heading back when insurgents started firing, mostly with small arms and rocket-propelled grenades.

"They had taken a position in a two-story school that was brand new, just built there," he said. "We thought it was a safe area because it was in front of a school, and a church, and a graveyard. Apparently it wasn't as sacred as we assumed it would be."

He said it's hard to describe exactly what it's like to go on patrol in Baghdad, other than "basically waiting to get shot at."

The unit spent the first several months of last spring and summer at Camp Blackjack, patrolling Baghdad from the airport.

For the last part of the deployment, Maddalazzo said he was in a town about 20 miles north of Baghdad. He said the "local nationals" there didn't shoot at them as often as people in Baghdad and seemed to realize the Americans had to be there, but "they didn't necessarily like us there."

Spears, Maddalazzo and McKirgan are looking forward to the future.

Spears said he's getting ready to go back to work at L.W. Schneider, a Princeton manufacturer of M-16 gun parts.

And he's planning to use savings and benefits to attend night school at Illinois Valley Community College and to buy a pickup with a cab and a half.

The 21-year-old said he's also looking forward to becoming a civilian again and buying a house.

"It's a good feeling to be back," Maddalazzo said. "Kind of scary; starting a new family, no job lined up. I've got like a hundred things to do."

Just over 17 months ago, the 23-year-old Princeton graduate had been working as a cadre member — a disciplinarian and a sort of father figure — for troubled students at the Lincoln Challenge Academy at Rantoul. Then, he received orders to report to active duty. He has some catching up to do; he was unable to watch the progress of his now-18-month-old daughter.

He said he has saved some money to study construction management through the Western Illinois University extension, and he's looking for work and health insurance.

McKirgan, 25, was out with friends in Hennepin on Sunday night, relaxing, reflecting on life in a war zone and looking forward to "three months of freedom."

The main message he wanted to share was how much he and others appreciated messages of support they received. He said days and nights patrolling in Iraq would have seemed meaningless without the letters and packages and the knowledge that people at home wanted them to make it home OK.

"Tell everybody thank you for supporting me and supporting everybody over there," McKirgan said.