



NEWS SPORTS ENTERTAINMENT BUSINESS LIFESTYLES OPINION CLASSIFIED SEARCH

SEARCH ARCHIVE

Weather
Random Acts of
Kindness
America at War
Obituary listings
Illinois Lottery

NEWS

Tri-County
Regional & State
Nation & World
America at War
Obituary Lists
Death Notices
Police, fire, courts
Local Updates
Causes for Concern
Road Construction
Our Community
Matters of Record
Bankruptcies
Births
Building Permits
Divorces
DUI Dispositions
Felony Dispositions
Marriages

COLUMNISTS

Phil Luciano
Terry Bibo
Statehouse Insider
Hotline
Word on the Street
Sally McKee

GOVERNMENT

State of the Union
Illinois links
State contacts
Federal links
Federal contacts

FRONT PAGE

WEATHER

SPORTS

OPINION

BUSINESS

ENTERTAINMENT

FEATURES

NEIGHBORS

KJS

SPECIAL SECTIONS

MULTIMEDIA

CLASSIFIED

Back home at last

Galva Guard unit returns to heroes' welcome after a year in Iraq

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BY BRANDON COUTRE

OF THE JOURNAL STAR

A long, violent year of fighting in Iraq ended amid tears and cheers from a welcoming crowd Saturday for 120 soldiers of the Galva-based Battery F, 202nd Air Defense Artillery of the Illinois National Guard.

"Being back is great," said Spc. Ryan Carlson, 24, of Annawan. "Not going back is even better."

The soldiers arrived in Galva around 9:15 a.m. with a police escort after traveling from the Quad City International Airport in Moline. Supporters decked Galva and other communities along the soldiers' route with patriotic signs and welcoming messages.

A Galva woman who stapled a hand-drawn welcome home sign to her fence along U.S. Route 34 an hour before the troops returned said she didn't know anyone coming home, but that didn't matter.

"They're family even if I don't know them personally," Susan Weimer said.

Efforts like Weimer's did not go unnoticed.

"There were people everywhere," Carlson said. "Signs, flags . . . everyone was showing their support. It was more than I expected."

The unit left Galva in November 2003 and trained at Fort Hood, Texas, before being sent to Iraq in March 2004. At their homecoming Saturday, many soldiers used the same word to describe their feelings: surreal.

"All the sudden we are back in the United States," said Spc. Bill McDaniels, 26, of West Peoria. "It's been a long road. This is where we started it from, and now we are back."

And what a long road it was. Responsible for securing some of the most dangerous routes in central Baghdad and protecting Iraqi police from insurgents, the soldiers were attacked and engaged in combat

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often. But they all made it back.

"It's so unbelievable," said Barb Bleim of Galva, who was waiting to meet her son-in-law. "Everyone is so happy and very grateful all of them are coming home alive."

As the unit rolled in, family members and strangers holding signs and American flags stood up and cheered, providing a hero's welcome.

After one final lineup, the unit was dismissed. The crowd soon swarmed the troops. Hugs and tears erupted from reunited family members.

Being in Iraq was hard enough, soldiers said, but being separated from family was just as hard. Several of the soldiers, abruptly pulled from their everyday lives, were engaged or were new parents.

Sgt. Tom Brock, 27, of Kewanee has shared only one month of his 15-month-old daughter's life. Thousands miles of separation didn't keep the father from thinking of his newborn, and he said she provided an extra reward for coming home.

"She helped me through it," Brock said. "She doesn't know, but she did. She made me think how much more I needed to get back."

On Brock's list of things to do in the coming days: nothing.

"I'm going to do as little as possible and spend time with my daughter and family," he said.

Many soldiers said they didn't have anything special planned this weekend besides spending time with family - except for maybe grabbing a cold one. Others said they just wanted to indulge in life's simple pleasures, such as eating pancakes for breakfast, a request Sgt. John Taylor of Kewanee made to his fiancée.

It was hard to tell Saturday if the soldiers or family members were more thrilled about the homecoming.

"This is so exciting," said Gina Heredia of DePue while she awaited her brother's return. "The more I think about it, the more I just want to start crying."

Karen Taylor of Kewanee, who waited for her son, said: "I feel like it is the night before Christmas but better."

Spc. Carlos Ortiz, 23, had a small army of his own greet him. Ortiz, who has 13 brothers and sisters, is one of four brothers to serve in the military. Many of his siblings were on hand to greet him.

"I didn't sleep much the night before," said Celeste Hamilton, Ortiz's sister. "I woke up today 45 minutes before my alarm went off."

Hamilton arrived early in Galva to secure a place along the route for a sign made on a refrigerator box to welcome Ortiz home, signed by all his family members.

"We needed something that big to get everybody's name on it," she said.

Saturday's return was about reconnecting soldiers with their loved ones. A more formal welcome home, complete with an awards ceremony, will be held in the next 90 days.

Before being dismissed, the unit's commander and first sergeant gave brief remarks.

"You have the best soldiers in the state of Illinois in front of you," 1st Sgt. Paul Peterson said. "These men are true heroes."

While there were no fatalities in the unit, the war did leave a permanent mark on a number of the soldiers. About 25 received Purple Hearts, said Maj. Mike Kessler, the unit's commander.

"God was watching out for us," he said.

The most seriously injured was Spc. Dustin Hill of Wyanet, who remains at Brooke Army Medial Center in San Antonio, Texas, where he's undergoing rehabilitation after losing both hands and his right eye to burns and injuries sustained when a car bomb exploded Sept. 21.

"He is a fighter and will accomplish great things the rest of his life," Kessler said of Hill.

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