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Injured Erie soldier returns home

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MOLINE -- The bystander said Saturday night, "9:29 is when it's supposed to land."

Friends, family and strangers stood together along the glass gates at the Quad City International Airport. They waited with flags and signs that read "Welcome Home."

At 9:20 p.m., the crowd moved closer to the door. Whistles of a job well done went out to Galva National Guard soldier Jeff Duncan, his wife Paula and his mother Sandy as soon as they saw him.

The wounded Erie soldier was home.

An overwhelmed Mr. and Mrs. Duncan walked in the airport lobby to cheers, tears and hollers.

"This is amazing," Mr. Duncan said. "It's more than I expected."

Hugs and tears grew as Mr. Duncan, a mach gunman, walked to supporters to thank them.

Mr. Duncan was injured Feb. 14 when a roadside bomb exploded, leaving him with wounds in his abdomen and back. He also suffered a fractured hip, said Valerie Inman, Mr. Duncan's sister.

The Rev. Paul Sowden, a friend of the Duncans and pastor of First Baptist Church, said his friend's life was "in His grip."

"The way he got hit, everyone (in Germany) was amazed that he wasn't hurt more seriously," Rev. Sowden said.

Posters and flyers were spread throughout Erie Saturday, telling residents of Mr. Duncan's return. Mrs. Inman gathered with close relatives and friends to set up the makeshift homecoming at the airport after 8 p.m.

With red, white and blue balloons -- and white hats donned with the American colors for trim -- they were ready to welcome Mr. Duncan home.

"We're trying to make him feel special," Mrs. Inman said.

Grandma Tootie Duncan, 80, of Erie, said Mr. Duncan always wanted to be like his grandfather, who fought in World War II. She gave her grandson a round little shell for good luck.

"(I told him that) if you always carry that with you, like your grandpa did, you'll come home," she said. "He's home."

Dave Duncan, 19, Jeff's younger brother, felt overwhelmed with pride.

“It's just never really real until you have someone over there," Mr. Duncan said.

Waiting the last 20 minutes may have seemed like forever to Mrs. Inman.

But to see her brother again, she said the wait was worth it.

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