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Wounded soldier returns home tonight

By David Heitz

ERIE, Ill. — The military has awarded an Erie man serving with the Army National Guard a Purple Heart for injuries he suffered when an improvised explosive device went off near him in Iraq.

Spc. Jeffrey Duncan of the 202nd Air Defense artillery unit based out of Galva, had shrapnel blown into his back Feb. 11 as his Humvee passed a makeshift bomb along the side of the road. Duncan, a gunner who rides atop the military vehicle, took most of the explosion's impact.

Duncan, who has been recovering from his injuries at a military hospital in Fort Hood, Texas, is scheduled to arrive home tonight. He is due in about 9:30 p.m. at the Quad-City International Airport.

He will be greeted by his wife, Paula, his mother, Sandy, and a busload of people from the First Baptist Church in Erie.

In addition to his wounds, Duncan suffered a broken hip.

"Jeff, unfortunately, was right there," his wife said. "I was later told by another soldier (who) was there that when they went to get Jeff that they thought for sure he would be dead or paralyzed."

She said her husband saw the bomb lying in a hole, "but as soon as they saw it, it exploded."

Duncan underwent two surgeries at a Baghdad hospital before being flown to Landstuhl Hospital in Germany. There, doctors operated on him a third time. "They went ahead and opened him up to make sure he did not sustain any internal damage," his wife said. "He didn't. That was a blessing."

Duncan received the Purple Heart during his stay at the Baghdad hospital. "He is very proud of it," his wife said, "but I remember a conversation we had at Christmas where he said, 'If it takes getting injured to get a Purple Heart, they can just keep their Purple Heart.'"

He almost made it home uninjured. His unit will be packing up to return to the United States on Tuesday.

Duncan said her husband was able to talk to his children, 10-year-old Kassady and 9-year-old Trey, on the telephone from his hospital bed in Iraq.

"I was lucky enough that a sergeant at the hospital sent a picture of Jeff to my e-mail address showing he was still in one piece and all of that," she said. "I showed it to (the children) and explained what happened. Of course they were upset, but I let them know he was OK."

She said he has "healed very miraculously" and has a positive outlook on his military duty.

"It's dangerous, but my husband knows that he's there for a reason and he believes in his country and he feels he's fighting the good fight," she said.

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