

Hundreds welcome home troops

March 20, 2005

By LISA HAMMER

Copley News Service

GALVA - Perhaps a thousand people waited inside the Galva armory Saturday morning with varying degrees of patience - it was only a matter of minutes by then.

Several hundred others needed to see the buses arrive and waited outside - some holding handmade posters, some small children on shoulders holding posters.

(In fact, inside the armory, one big guy sat on the shoulders of another person standing on the floor. But then, the Guard has carried a pretty heavy burden for a year now, too.)

Several times, those in charge warned the crowd outside they would need to stay out of the path between railings. That middle corridor was where the 120 or so Guardsmen would enter the building.

Caring onlookers wanted to make sure the right people had front-and-center spots on the sidewalk. At least one woman turned to people behind her, motioned them forward and said, "Come on up front here. You're family."

Dawn Abbott of Dixon was grinning in anticipation of seeing her nephew, Noland Thomson of Galva.

"I'm just ecstatic," she said. "I'm so glad he's home. So glad all of them are home and safe. I'm proud of them all."

Pam Sparrow of Galva was on "pins and needles" waiting for Sgt. Alan Dennis of Galva, her husband-to-be.

She said the war probably has made their wedding more urgent.

"It makes you realize what you have," she said.

"If it's up to him, (the wedding) would be when he steps off the bus," she smiled. "But he has to go to Oklahoma for an MRI, so it's on hold until that's done."

Galva High School sophomore Matt Brody said he didn't have a family member arriving home, but wanted to be part of the event.

"I just came out to see how the people were. Just to see how

they looked and just to greet them back," he said.

Eventually, as people milled around anxiously outside the armory, all conversations ceased. Fire truck sirens blared in the background.

"They deserve this," said one patient voice in the crowd.

Then cheers.

The Guard arrived.

They hurried inside, most probably looking forward to the end of a brief formal ceremony. At least a couple soldiers noted how chilly it was. The 40 degrees or so was much colder than the temperatures they'd experienced in Iraq.

"USA! USA! USA! USA!" went the spontaneous chant. Applause.

"I take great pride today in telling you, mission accomplished!" Maj. Mike Kessel, commander of the unit, said to thunderous applause.

Kessel thanked everyone for the show of support welcoming the Guard home.

"Every soldier has returned or will be returning soon. Every one is alive," he said to another chorus of cheers.

Kessel talked about Dustin Hill, who received the most serious injuries of any Galva Guardsman in Iraq. Kessel called Hill, formerly of Annawan, "a fighter," who will "do great things the rest of his life."

Kessel mentioned some of the work the Guard had done in Iraq, including water treatment plants, a dangerous two weeks and the Iraqi elections in January. He talked about how democracy appears to be spreading in the Middle East.

Kessel, a Champaign stock broker, said his unit's time in Iraq will be one of the highlights of his life, and the highlight of his military career.

"God Bless America," he said, to many cheers.

"Yea, you're home! Yea!" called out a single voice, drawing both laughter and shushing.

Another leader of the unit, Paul Peterson, called the Galva unit "an elite group of men."

And soon after that, they were free.

Lisa Hammer is a reporter for The Galva News.