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Emotion overload

Tears of joy flow as Galva-based Guardsmen, families reunited

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By DOUG BOOCK

Copley News Service

GALVA - Tami Siemers reached out and touched her son Lucas Siemers again. One more time. She just had to be sure.

"I've just got to make sure it's him," Siemers, of Galva, said. "Make sure it's real."

It was real: Her son was home. And so was nearly all the rest of the 120-man Galva National Guard unit.

That was cause for celebration.

"It's the greatest feeling ever," said Seth Malcom, a 2001 AlWood High School graduate who'd just returned with his comrades from Iraq. "It's been a long 18 months."

Indeed it has. Since the Galva National Guard unit was deployed in October 2003 - and especially during its 12 months in Iraq - soldiers and their loved ones had looked forward to their return. Finally making it here made life look much different.

"It's a great day. It really is," said soldier Derrick Glisan of Galva, who was reunited with his daughters, Arika, 5, and Alexandria, 6.

Glisan, a production supervisor at Maytag in Galesburg before deploying, will have to look for a new job since that plant closed while he was gone. He's not in a hurry.

"I'll take a few weeks and figure it out," he said.

Meanwhile, he's got bigger plans: He's taking his daughters to Disneyland in California. Perfect reunion activities.

"Really glad to be home, really glad to be home," added

Larry Comer of Orion, a 1980 Galva High School graduate. "The days couldn't go by fast enough."

Comer wasn't alone. It was hard to tell Saturday who was most excited about the soldiers returning - the soldiers or their loved ones. Tears flowed, handshakes were pumped and hugs were a dime a dozen as soldiers reunited with family and friends, some for the first time in a year. In Comer's case, it was an opportunity to see his son, Tyrus Troy, who was born in May 2004.

"When I hold him right up next to my face, it's me!" a joyful Comer said of his young likeness.

"It's just wonderful," said Carol Little of Galva, aunt of Galva soldier Eric Werkheiser, a few minutes before the Guard arrived at the Galva armory. "It's finally here. I knew it was going to happen. It just took a long time."

"I'm really excited," said Pam Sparrow of Galva. "I can't believe the day's finally come. It's been a long year."

Sparrow had a special reason for celebrating. Her fiance, Alan Dennis of Galva, was coming home.

"We were going to get married," Sparrow said. "But when he got called up, that kind of threw a wrench into those plans."

At least briefly, those plans will stay on hold. Dennis has to return to Oklahoma for an MRI next week.

"When he gets back, then we can start making plans," she said.

"It was an experience I'll never forget, because we helped out people," said soldier Kevin Mundy of Alpha, formerly of Knoxville.

Mundy, who was seen bidding an emotional goodbye to his family when the Galva unit left Illinois to go to Fort Hood, Texas, in November, 2003, said returning home was equally emotional.

"Very," he said. "It's just been hard on my wife and the kids."

Mundy, who has four children, Nicole, 16, Melissa, 14, Nathan, 11, and Jacob, 6, said the emotions hit him when the Guard's plane from Fort Sill, Okla., landed at the Quad City International Airport in Moline at 7:32 a.m. Saturday.

"I had tears when I got off the airplane and I saw all the

police cars and stuff," said Mundy, who builds semitrailers at Pines in Kewanee.

Ron Werkheiser of Galva monitored the progress of the two buses carrying the soldiers from the Quad Cities to Galva.

"Al just called and said they just went by his place," said Werkheiser at one point. He'd received a cell phone call from his brother, Al, who lives south of Kewanee on Illinois 78.

Asked what time he'd risen Saturday morning, Werkheiser indicated it was early.

"About 3:30," he smiled. "And we didn't go to bed until after midnight."

Werkheiser, who's overjoyed in getting son Eric home from Iraq, expressed empathy for soldiers still serving in the Middle East, and their families.

"We're still praying for them," Werkheiser said.

The buses carrying the soldiers from the Quad Cities made a triumphant trip through Annawan and Kewanee on their way to Galva, picking up supporters along the way. Along the way, the soldiers were touched by countless sign of appreciation. Semitrailers pulled over out of respect, some vehicles passed the buses, honked their horns and flashed their lights. At Annawan, attendees of the huge annual Hatzler-Nordstrom farm equipment auction stopped the proceedings and lined Illinois 78 to salute the soldiers.

Handmade signs greeted the soldiers throughout their route home. The support hit home.

"The drive back here ... I couldn't believe it," Malcolm said. "All of us really appreciated it."

Well deserved, believes Dan Swanson of Woodhull.

The boys from Illinois rose to the occasion and put their footprints into the sand," said Swanson, a retired Army National Guard lieutenant who served nearly 24 years.

"They may be the Galva Guard unit, but the state of Illinois and the area communities have all taken them as their own," Swanson added. "It's great to have them home."

Amazingly, only one Galva Guardsman was critically injured in Iraq. Dustin Hill of Wyanet lost an eye and a hand in a bombing. Some say the unit was divinely protected.

"You could tell God was watching over them all their time over there, just by the different things that happened," said Pat Newman of Kewanee, whose son, Sgt. Josh Newman of Kewanee, returned Saturday.

Newman said another Kewanee soldier agreed with her.

"He told his mother he felt like they were getting moved over (out of the line of fire), being protected," she said.

State Rep. Don Moffitt was visibly moved by the event. He noted how a group of people were asked to move aside so a young boy could run out to see his father. Moffitt's eyes watered.

"Seeing the expressions of the soldiers first spotting their family and little kids first seeing their dad. ... This armory can't hold the emotion of today," Moffitt said. "There's not enough room for it."

"You could sense it the moment you got into Galva."

Troy Wolford felt it the moment he laid eyes on his daughter, Macey, 3½.

"That's when I lost it," said Wolford, who bear-hugged the bouncing Macey the moment she stepped out of the crowd and into Wolford's path.

Onlookers audibly broke down, too. Wolford left a trail of crying adults as he buried his sobbing head into his daughter's shoulder. He was momentarily broken - yet victorious - as he marched his daughter into a jam-packed Galva armory.

"I'm really thankful we had formation (lineup) we had to do," Wolford conceded, "because I'd have been a wreck."

Doug Boock is the editor of The Galva News.