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## Galva Guard trains for Iraq

### Commander says unit doing tough part now

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By LISA HAMMER  
*Copley News Service*

GALVA - Cmdr. Mike Kessel of the Galva National Guard unit registered his pride in the unit last week and gave an inkling of its role in the U.S. mission in Iraq.

"It's a very, very tough mission that we're going to be working on," said Cmdr. Kessel, whose unit is scheduled to go to Iraq in mid-March. "Us being successful will have a great impact on the stabilization of Iraq. I can't really explain more than that."

Kessel's unit will be located on the southwest side of Baghdad. The unit, 1st Battalion, 202nd Air Defense Artillery Battery F, is training at the Joint Readiness Training Center at Fort Polk, La., having arrived there from Fort Hood, Texas, on Feb. 1.

About three weeks ago, Kessel spent a week in Iraq, going on missions with units the Galva Guard will replace.

"It's not nearly as bad as the mainstream media say," he said. "It's more routine."

As an example, he said within a 24-hour period, different patrols found and detonated seven roadside bombs before they hurt anybody, but all that was reported on was the one that exploded.

"So what I just try to stress to folks and families is it is dangerous, but it's not as bad as on the media," he said.

Kessel said the Galva unit has "without exaggeration" led 30 to 40 other units going through training in measurements such as marksmanship and completing tasks on time.

He said not only is the unit being taken from civilian to full-time soldiers, but also it is learning a new air-defense mission that it had not trained for, and on top of that, becoming digitized with a lot of new computer equipment that "most civilians would never even dream."

He said back at Fort Hood, soldiers from the Galva unit were being offered jobs (after their tour overseas is up) teaching about new equipment from military contractors who were impressed at how quickly they caught on.

"That would be interesting if they end up doing that," he said.

Kessel said he fought to keep a day off for the unit the last week in January.

"It was their only one in January," he said.

He noted the unit will have more time off at the end of February when many families come to Louisiana to say good-bye to their soldiers. He said the training has been so rigorous that the time overseas will seem to go faster.

"Once we get to Iraq, it'll be routine," he said. "It'll be easier. The training is tough, but we'll be able to sail through a little quicker."

Kessel said attitudes are positive.

"Morale is really again good, considering everybody has been living together three or four months now," he said. "In 14 or 15 months, you will see soldiers that have matured and aged - matured higher than their peers, those in college. I think you'll see a big difference."

According to the public affairs office at Fort Polk, the unit is being put through realistic procedures they'll experience in Iraq, including working through translators, learning customs and courtesies, and improving human intelligence.

Fort Polk has 200 Arab-speaking Iraqis who assist in training exercises, acting as real Iraqi police officers among other things. There is a different feel to Fort Polk; for example, the base's enormous training

grounds have international road signs. Kessel termed it "as big a dress rehearsal as you can get."

"We would have them sweat here rather than bleed over there," said public affairs officer Samantha Bingham.

During a mock intensive training this past Monday, Kessel said, his unit intermingled with an Arab-speaking sheik using Iraqi interpreters, working through negotiations regarding a wedding party in which five of his tribe had been shot by Americans.

"Unfortunately that is the real-world scenario that has happened in Afghanistan, and maybe in Iraq," Kessel said. "They fire off weapons in celebration, firing rifles in the air, and what goes up must come down somewhere."

Kessel said Americans are trying to put a stop to celebratory shooting.

"During this incident, my guys immediately returned fire," he added.

"It's unfortunate and we want to do what we can do to prevent it again."

Kessel said the hour-long negotiations were more grueling than a 15-mile march.

It's not clear how long the Galva unit will be stationed overseas. Kessel said Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has said no unit is to be in Iraq more than 12 months, as long as the situation doesn't change. To be on the safe side, Kessel has told his family and clients - he's a stockbroker in Champaign - to expect him in May 2005. That would give the unit a 20-month hitch total, since it was called to active duty in October.

Kessel said he hoped everyone in his unit who marched on Galva's athletic field during a send-off last fall would return in 2005, thinner, older and wiser, in desert gear, sporting Stetson hats as a mark of their achievements.