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Galva prepares for Guard return

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March 10, 2005

By DOUG BOOCK

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Copley News Service

GALVA - Life has changed drastically for the Galva National Guard unit. And that's fine with them.

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"The guys are ready to head home, but are keeping busy right now enjoying fast food, playing basketball and softball," Maj. Mike Kessel said Tuesday.

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That's a big change from just a week ago, when Kessel's 120-man F202nd Air Defense Artillery unit was still performing missions near Taji, Iraq. Not so anymore. They're now in Kuwait, and can't wait to get back to life as they knew it before being deployed in November 2003.

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"You can wear civilian clothes here," Kessel said, "so some have even purchased some, just so they could wear them." The Galva unit reached Kuwait Monday evening. They'll stay there until this weekend, when they'll fly to Fort Sill, Okla., before hitting Galva around March 20. The unit's arrival here will likely spark shouts of joy among soldiers and their loved ones - interestingly, unlike when they left Iraq.

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"Surprisingly enough, it was pretty subdued," Kessel said of outward signs of leaving Iraq, where the unit had been stationed since March 2004. "I thought there might be a little whooping and hollering, but there wasn't even a clap." But Kessel's expecting that to change soon.

"I'm sure (their reaction) will be different this weekend, when we start racing down the runway headed west (to the U.S.)," he said.

Signs of the Guard's return were evident at the Galva armory Saturday. Soldiers' family and friends were present for a Family Readiness group meeting, which concluded with attendees making welcome home signs and tying yellow

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ribbons.

"This is the fun part," said Peggy Squires of Sterling. Squires, whose son, Spec. Justin Squires, also of Sterling, will return with the unit, splashed "Welcome Home ... Hoohah!" (Hoohah is a military rally cry.) in red, white and blue on a poster board. She was surrounded by young and old alike doing the same things for their loved ones.

"I love you Daddy," wrote Erica Brokaw of Sterling, for her little daughter, Rylee. They're awaiting their husband and father, Sgt. Dan Brokaw.

Meanwhile, the Galva community is being encouraged to begin making their own welcome home signs. Businesses, groups, families and individuals are all invited. Such outward signs of appreciation can linger with the soldiers for decades, said one Guardsman. "They'll never forget it," he said.

Exactly when the Galva unit will reach Galva isn't clear. The official expected date won't be announced until three days before arrival. That's due to military secrecy. It's also not clear which route the troops will take. Some reports say they'll fly into either the Quad-Cities, Peoria or Chicago and then bus to Galva, perhaps passing through Kewanee on the way, depending on where the plane lands.

Regardless, the soldiers are expected to enter Galva from the east, on U.S. 34. Galva Police will escort the buses from Black Hawk East College, said Galva Mayor Don Hagaman.

"We might even send out a fire truck, to spice it up a little," he added.

Once in Galva, Hagaman said, the procession may travel down Northwest Third Avenue to reach the armory, which is located across the street south of Galva Elementary School on Morgan Road. Parking will be prohibited between Northwest First and Northwest Third avenues, Hagaman said, due to heavy foot traffic and needed bus parking. A grandiose ceremony - like the one at the Galva High School football field that sent the soldiers off Nov. 1, 2004 - won't be held when the soldiers arrive in Galva. That's because state and/or national Guard officials want to wait until about 90 days after the troops return, when they return to Galva for normal drilling.

Doug Boock is editor of The Galva News.

Join the Welcome

People interested in making signs or other forms of decoration to welcome home the Galva National Guard unit are being encouraged to begin doing so now. Individuals, groups, businesses, churches and organizations are invited to make items to welcome the Guard.

The date of the Guard's return has not been officially announced. Latest reports say it should be around Palm Sunday, March 20.

For more information, call the Galva armory at (309) 932-2197.