

## First Galva Guardsman returns from Iraq

June 5, 2004

By DOUG BOOCK  
*Copley News Service*

GALVA - It takes about 18 hours to fly from Baghdad to Illinois. But for Larry Comer on May 21, it seemed an eternity.

"It couldn't go by fast enough," Comer said May 28. "Every airport we hit, you said 'It's one step closer.' "

Comer's countdown is understandable. His flight was bringing him home. And he had a lot awaiting him - including a new son, and a daughter's high school graduation.

"It's overwhelming," Comer said somewhat wearily. "The one thing I will tell the guys when I get back (to Iraq) is to slow down when they get back home. You've got to stop and take time for yourself and your family."

Comer's the first Galva National Guard member to return home since the unit deployed to Iraq in March. His arrival on leave encouraged many, and he gave a glimpse into life overseas.

Good conditions

"Our living conditions are better than anybody could expect," said Comer, whose 15-day stay here ends Monday.

"It's not home, but we're living the best we could possibly live. We were told going into this that they would be, but sometimes what the military tells you and what actually happens are two different things."

Comer, a 1980 Galva High School graduate, said soldiers live in one-man or two-man air-conditioned trailers. Hot showers and bathroom facilities are available in the compound - Camp Victory, where 5,000 soldiers are stationed outside Baghdad.

Most soldiers bought TVs and refrigerators for their trailers, Comer said, and some lease Internet services.

"Our mess hall looks like a restaurant. It has good food, a dessert bar and unlimited drinks," Comer said.

Danger's present

But that doesn't mean all's perfect.

"Don't get me wrong. It is dangerous," Comer said of the soldiers' duty. "We have occasional mortars and rockets that fly into our camp. A few weeks ago, we had four mortars come into near where we sleep.

"And guys have a risk of getting shot at every time they go on patrol, or of (running into) IEDs" (improved explosive devices, such as car bombs).

Despite that, Comer, 42, said the soldiers' mood is "good."

"It's upbeat," he explained. "They understand what we have to do. ... But it's a long ways away from counting down days (until returning home)."

### Being Home

Comer said mentally adjusting to being home from the war wasn't that difficult.

"It was comfortable to be home. It wasn't like I was out of place or that anything was new. It just felt like I had never missed a beat," he said.

Comer's visit has helped allay the concerns of family members of others serving in Iraq. He's verified what their soldier has told them.

"We can tell them (from Iraq) how we're doing, but when someone comes and verifies it, that's reassuring," he said.

### A soldier's duty

A 26-year member of the Guard, Comer is an operations sergeant. He works in the Tactical Operations Center, planning strategy and electronically tracking patrol teams while they're on missions. By computer, he can pinpoint where soldiers are and alert them to known dangers.

Comer's work schedule is a 12-hour daytime shift followed by an off day and then a 12-hour nighttime shift.

"I think the difference I have from the others is I don't intermingle with the Iraqi people as much as the others do," Comer said. "These guys go out on patrols and I don't. I only occasionally go out with them and see what's out there. I don't have a feel for what it's like out there and what these guys go through."

### Iraqi relations

He knows, though, that peril's always possible. Even some Iraqis who seem friendly sometimes turn on the soldiers.

"It's tough to tell who your enemy is," Comer said. "One minute they'll wave as you go by, and the next minute, they're not waving (they're shooting)."

But Comer said most Iraqis are supportive of U.S. soldiers.

"They're sympathetic and have an understanding of why we're there doing what we're doing. Especially around the schools - they're all supportive of us helping reestablish the schools.

"Ninety percent of the Iraqi people want us there and they're supportive of us. There's just a small group that doesn't want us."

Comer, noted, though, that even Iraqis who support the soldiers' presence want the troops to leave once the Iraqi government is established.

#### To-do list

Besides seeing his family and friends, Comer's fulfilled two personal "musts" while home: going out for Chinese food and watching the NBA playoffs. He's also made sure to see the new Galva Super 8 motel and the Galva AutoVue Drive-In Theatre.

And he's watched the news with a new interest.

"I didn't watch a whole lot of news before I left," he conceded, "but now I check it in the morning ... reading the ticker at the bottom of the screen, just to see what's going on over there."

Comer said local Guardsmen won't likely be seen on the news since most news coverage originates in Baghdad, several miles from Camp Victory. He gives CNN credit for being pretty accurate in its coverage; other news carriers are failing, he believes.

"The IEDs ... all the public hears about is the one that exploded. They don't hear about the six other ones we found that day that didn't explode because we detonated them. They only hear about the one that hurts somebody," he said.

"That one that goes off makes it look like they're winning. But the six that we're disarming, we're defeating them."

#### Various reactions

Iraq seems a long ways from the Galva area for many soldiers. But Comer said the distance is probably actually harder on family members.

"We're all together. We're with friends," Comer said of his comrades, with whom he plays basketball and volleyball nightly. "But they're (family) all alone. Brandie (his wife, the former Brandie Burnett of Galva) works all day, but when she gets home, she's all alone."

Brandie has new company, though. She gave birth to a son, Tyrus Troy Comer, the day before Larry got home. Larry's enjoyed getting acquainted with his new son.

"It was a good moment," he said of first seeing Tyrus Troy. "I'm glad I've seen him as a baby."

Support appreciated

Comer said the support the Galva Guard is receiving from back home is "tremendous."

"I bet we get 30 to 40 boxes a day from family members, churches, schools. I've got a stack this tall I need to reply back to," he said, holding his hands three inches apart.

Mail takes about three weeks to arrive, he said.

Asked what the public could send as gifts, Comer said there's nothing greatly needed, including toiletry items, which soldiers can buy.

Time ahead

The Galva unit - F Battery 202 Air Defense Artillery, a member of the Illinois Army National Guard - has initial orders to be in Baghdad one year, returning to the U.S. in March. That's too far off to start counting days, Comer said, especially since there's no guarantee they'll return then.

"That's our biggest fear and prayer," he conceded. "We hope that when it's our time to come, we don't have an extension."

Comer firmly noted there have been no hints that a March return is unlikely at this point.

Asked if he had any advice for the Galesburg Guard unit that has been put on alert, he offered: "Enjoy the time they have now. I don't know their situation, if they have to go through (long) training or not, but it's going to seem like a long time (before their mobilization orders end.) Still, you can see the end (coming home). Be supportive of the family."

He added, "Digital cameras were the best thing we took to Iraq."

Comer said some soldiers are keeping diaries of their time in Iraq. He began one himself, but decided not to continue.

Other members of the Galva unit are to return home for 15-day furloughs in coming months, with the first batch coming the third week of June, Comer said.

<\*R>

*Doug Boock is the editor of the Galva News.*