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Guardisman at halfway point

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Derrick Glisan expected flood duty, not desert warfare

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GALVA - Derrick Glisan didn't know Todd Engstrom personally, but it was still a shock to hear of the fellow Galva High School graduate's death in Iraq.

"When it hits home like that it sinks in, it really does," he said.

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By rights Glisan might have been serving in Alabama or Florida, getting water and food to hundreds of thousands of people stranded by Hurricane Ivan.

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Instead, on a sunny Thursday last week, he was sitting on a bench in Veterans Park, knowing Saturday morning he would leave for Iraq.

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After three months in Iraq already, he's at the halfway point before the final home stretch.

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"It's been a pretty long six months," he nodded. "I can't think of any time that the time's gone this slow."

"Every day seems faster," he added. "Before you know it, it'll be time to come home."

Any assurance their deployment won't be extended?

"I don't think there's ever any insurance of that, but we're pretty sure," he said. "We're hoping, anyway."

Did he ever dream signing up for the Guard would take him to such a place in such a time?

"No, no I didn't," he said. "I figured the worst would be flood duty, but I got my college out of it. I have no problem with going over there. I got a lot of benefits out of the Guard. This gives the opportunity to see the world, travel and help out, and I have no problem with that."

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Glisan said when they were initially told their unit was alerted, he thought it would never go through and get to that point.

"They actually did, and it was a big surprise," he admitted.

Once in Iraq, the going got rough early, which Glisan is grateful for. He said they saw the most action during Holy Week in April, with attacks on a supply route they needed to keep open.

"It was a real eye-opening experience. They really got everyone on the page of what's going on," he said. "I'd rather have it be at the start of it all. Everybody woke up and said, 'OK, this is what we have.' Everybody has stayed focused and done a great job since that point."

Glisan works as section sergeant for a platoon recently assigned to a smaller part of its former patrol area outside the Baghdad international airport. He said as section sergeant he works with three teams in the section, ensuring they have what they need to complete their missions or if they need help in direction, he provides it. Originally they were in regular Humvees; gradually they've all switched to armored Humvees.

"It's a relatively safe zone right now," he said. "There have been a few moments in the past where people get a little excited but it's pretty safe right now."

Glisan said almost daily he has the opportunity to talk to Iraqis through interpreters, generally asking them how things are going, whether they need anything, how their water is or whether their water system is working.

"Things of that nature," he said. "It seems like every day we're trying to implement them more on their own with just a small amount of assistance."

"From what I see things are getting a lot better. Fighting is getting sporadic and not continuous. I feel it's going to continue in that direction."

Glisan recalled that at first, there was panic whenever shots were heard. Sometimes it was later proven to be celebratory gunfire at weddings or, more commonly, soccer games.

"You can see tracer rounds going straight up off in the distance, for an hour or so as people hear the news," he said.

"It takes others a little more time to find out, so it's continuous for a while. Now they announce it, 'Iraq just won

a soccer game,' so you know what's going on."

He said headquarters now even announces when Iraq's ahead in a soccer match.

Glisan said this six-month break is his first time away from Camp Victory since he starting serving in Iraq. For relaxation on the base, he said they sometimes play volleyball, and many have PlayStations, televisions and DVD players. Once they played a round-robin softball tournament. There is a cookout now and then.

It was 125 degrees when Glisan left Iraq to come home, but it will be a little better when he goes back. He said even 75 or 80 is miserable on a 12-hour shift "but you get used to it."

Temperatures moderate, but humidity picks up in winter, he said.

"After sunset it seems like is the hottest part of the day, when the humidity kicks in," he said.

He enjoys keeping in touch with his girls, Alexandria, 5, and Arika, 4, and even seeing them over the Internet with a Web cam when his parents set it up. Voice is choppy via Internet, so sometimes he walks to a phone center and talks to them.

Christmas might be tough, but he said he can give a phone call to tell them "Merry Christmas" and see them on the Web cam with their presents Santa got them. His "present" will be the fact he's that much closer to getting out.

"Just a couple months left at that point," he said.

Thursday was a time of finality for another part of his life; he had been a production supervisor at Maytag. The Galesburg plant closed down Sept. 16.

"When I get back I'm not real sure what I'll do," he said. "It's kind of up in the air at this time."

He said he has an associate's degree and will probably pursue his bachelor's degree in business management.

Lisa Hammer is a writer for the Galva News.