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Proud and passionate

November 2, 2003

By JOANIE STIERS
of The Register-Mail

GALVA - Sometime Saturday afternoon, 11-year-old Brandon Peterson of Roseville hoped to play a card game with his dad, a National Guard 1st sergeant, before he left to serve his country in Operation: Iraqi Freedom.

But Brandon had more than cards on his mind.

"Right now, I'm thinking of my dad coming back, not hurt," Brandon said, following a ceremony honoring his dad, Paul, and about 119 other National Guard soldiers who have been called to active duty.

A crowd approaching 1,000 people gathered at the Galva High School football field Saturday morning for a departure ceremony for members of Battery F, 202nd Air Defense Artillery, an Army National Guard unit of Galva. The unit departed early today.

When Paul is away, Brandon plans to e-mail "maybe once or twice a week," he said. He'll probably tell his dad that everything's OK back home with mom, Kathryn, and sister, Chelsea; that he's having fun with friends, and that he is thinking about him.

"I'm thinking about what it's going to be like without him," Chelsea, 14, said, "and trying to think about what we can do today to have great memories."

The citizen soldiers had eight hours available after the departure ceremony to spend time with family or friends before reporting to the armory. Brandon hoped to play cards - a favorite family activity outside fishing at Grandpa Alonzo's farm - and maybe go swimming at a local hotel to have fun with his dad before he leaves.

During the eight hours, David Salter, a section sergeant, planned to get out for lunch with his wife to celebrate their anniversary, which is Monday.

The Galva unit was informed Sept. 29 it would be deployed in late October or early November. It was told in mid-October of today's date.

Salter, a Galesburg police officer, has spent the last month finishing up last-minute details and repair work around his Galesburg home, where his wife, Kim, and a stepson live. He has another stepson in college.

"I've got a bathroom window that needs to be fixed," he said, smiling.

That will have to wait for his return.

They've also shared as much family time as possible, which included sailing on the Mississippi River in the Quad Cities - something the family enjoys.

Alan Dennis, a unit team leader and a single father from Galva, took his 5-year-old son to Chuck-E-Cheese and McDonald's playland this month to share some special time and memories. Dennis said his son is too young to understand, so he hasn't talked about his deployment with him.

The boy's mother will be keeping him while Dennis is on active duty. Dennis plans to keep in touch by cell phone.

"I'm kind of getting the jitters a little bit," said Dennis, while waiting in the Guard armory for the ceremony to begin. At the same time, he's also excited.

"It's something new for me," he said.

Outside, a mass of people packed the bleachers and people lined the chain link fences on each side of the stands of the high school football field. At 10 minutes before 10 The Galva High School band began playing and the crowd fell silent except for a few young chattering children as the Guard unit marched onto the field on the still and sunny 50-degree morning.

Gretchen Almquist of Galva stood near the fence and video taped as they marched. She wore a gray jacket with ARMY written on its left side. Her gray T-shirt said the same, and her hair was pulled from her face with a red, white and blue clip. Her children, a 4-year-old girl and 9-week-old boy in a stroller, wore crocheted camouflage stocking caps.

She and her husband have many friends in the unit, she said. Her husband, who is part of another Guard unit, was unable to attend because of his Guard duties, so she taped the ceremony for him.

As part of the ceremony, Galva mayor Don Hagaman presented the unit with a Galva flag to remember where they left from and will return to.

"We look forward to another ceremony, when we can welcome you home," he said.

State Rep. Don Moffitt, R-Gilson, praised the troops and raised applause from the crowd.

"You are heroes," he said loudly. "Never forget that, and we appreciate it."

After more words from guests and the featured speaker Brig. Gen. Randal Thomas, the troops circled to leave. The band again started to play and the audience clapped and whistled until each soldier had left the field. Several in the stands waved small American flags.

The crowd began to move toward the Armory, where the Family Readiness Network of the Galva unit had refreshments. Some walked out hugging, some with tears. Many wore shirts with American flags on them or yellow-ribbon pins.

Early this morning, the unit departed for Fort Hood, Texas, to continue preparation for deployment. The troops are projected to leave for Iraq March 1.

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