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Galesburg officerfighting insurgents

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With Galva National Guard unit in Iraq

November 5, 2004

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By JOHN R. PULLIAM

of The Register-Mail

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GALESBURG - Ordinarily a Galesburg Police Department day-shift patrol officer, David Salter has a new area to patrol - Baghdad, Iraq.

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Salter is a member of the Galva unit of the Illinois National Guard. The unit arrived in Kuwait on March 3 and was in Baghdad by March 23.

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The unit, which has been patrolling a 25-square-mile area southwest of Baghdad, soon will be in the city. Salter said the area he's been in consists mostly of farmers and residents of small villages, with a total population of about 25,000. His unit's goal was to keep insurgents from operating in the area.

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"For the most part, we were pretty successful," Salter said.

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Another unit has come in to take the Galva unit's place, so Salter and his fellow Guardsmen will move to Route Irish, the main route between the Baghdad International Airport and the Green Zone, about a 4-mile stretch.

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Asked if he believes democracy will someday be a reality in Iraq, Salter is optimistic.

"I think so," he said. "The Iraqi National Guard and the Iraqi police have been improving and they're taking on more and more of the patrolling."

Salter said many areas of Iraq are very safe and stable.

"The things that affected us came from Fallujah," he said. "I think once Fallujah goes down and once the Iraqi elections take place, I think the situation will stabilize and improve, possibly dramatically.

"Already in the north, the Iraqis are pretty much doing their

own security sweeps and security operations," he added.

As for the attitude of the Iraqi people toward Americans, Salter said the majority of the people he has met have been friendly, an attitude not often portrayed in reports from the Middle East.

"We always had far more invitations to dinner and to tea than residents stepping out and taking shots at us," he said.

Don't be mistaken and think Salter has a Pollyanna attitude or is simply spouting the government's propaganda. He admitted there are still some problems in the market and mosque areas.

"We had a few incidents of people shooting either RPGs or rifles at us from those areas," he said.

Still, he said many positive things are happening. Attempts to attract publicity to those stories are ignored by the TV networks, he said.

"I don't want to be overly critical of the news profession, but I really think at the national level they're not presenting a fair picture," Salter said.

He said his company commander tried to attract CNN's attention to an effort by the National Guard to rebuild a school and a water treatment plant.

"It was the villagers that did the work. We provided the material, the design," he said.

He said potentially dangerous situations are headed off before they happen. One hundred to 300 insurgents came into the area the Galva unit was protecting.

"They were essentially routed," he said. Intelligence indicated further attacks were planned, but Special Forces rounded them up and bloodshed was averted.

"It's just part of the story," Salter said. "Even the Iraqis I talked to, the Iraqi culture is very complex and even some of them don't understand (all that is now taking place.) But there are some pretty dramatic improvements going on that aren't reported."

Salter said some Iraqi airlines are flying again and more and more civilian flights are going in and out of the country all the time.

Other things are happening, such as a mysterious Iraqi group that is hunting down insurgents and foreign fighters. Salter

said the foreign fighters are enjoying less and less support of the population every day.

"If the borders can be addressed and this flow of foreign fighters, if not stopped, can be reduced," Salter thinks things will improve even more. The election in Afghanistan is another key, he said.

"I think a lot of the Arab world is looking at Afghanistan," Salter said. "I think that is affecting the Iraqis. A lot of them will see we're not just there for their oil, we're interested in a stable government."

Salter said the Galva unit will likely be home by April. No rookie as a member of the Guard, the 18-year veteran thinks it is realistic the U.S. will be out of Iraq in four years, as predicted by some of the most optimistic pundits.

"I actually think it might happen sooner," he said.

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