

# Home for the holiday

## Guardsmen's leave stirs excitement in small town

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GALVA - Not many people were in McKay's Bar and Grille at 10 a.m. on a gray Tuesday morning Nov. 16, but it didn't take many to be excited that Noland Thomson, 26, a Galva National Guard member serving in Iraq, was back in town.

Connie Byers, who was waiting tables, came to Thomson's table and was stunned.

"Oh God, that's you!" she said. "It's good to see you!"

Byers, the mother of Thomson's close friend, Michael Byers, offered to make him supper. A taco supper. She took off her glasses and wiped her eyes.

Later, Byers stopped back to say perhaps there was something he would prefer instead of tacos. She would make it. If she didn't know how, she would find someone who did.

Over the top? Not at all, if you look at what Thomson has been through.

For many Galva Guardsmen, their introduction to Iraq came early, shortly after their March arrival - although Thomson describes what happened as being "not real dramatic."

Thomson - who's in Galva until Nov. 29 on two weeks' leave - said Galva Guardsmen had just completed a patrol the night before Easter. They were switching with the next platoon when they "took some attack" that lasted 20 minutes. They blocked off all the roads and began hunting for insurgents.

"It lasted all day," he said, "after that it was pretty quiet."

The enemy could have been shooting at them from homes, so they checked homes but couldn't be sure about what they found. Insurgents might have threatened families if they told.

"They have threatened people with their lives," Thomson said, describing farmers who have been forced to hide insurgents' vehicles in fields, and provide them cover.

Thomson concedes he's seen dead bodies.

"I've seen quite a few," he said. "I try not to put a number on it or think about it too much."

Thomson said the plain Humvees they use for patrol have gradually been switched to armored Humvees. He said one platoon may not see a lot of action, but the next group might.

"It's not the lifestyle I'd like to live, but I joined the National Guard, so I gotta be part of it," he said.

Thomson said although the 60-member Galva Guard was activated with the Kewanee and Dixon units, and some of his 25 to 30 member platoon are from those units, they are still real close.

Patrols may last as long as 12 hours, but in their free time they might go to the gym and work out, or to another area and play foosball, air hockey or computer games or watch TV.

Thomson said his kids, 5-year-old Jonathan and daughter Leia, 3, as well as his wife Kelly, are thrilled to have him home. In Iraq he bought Internet service and shares a Webcam with three others so he can see his kids moving around live, smiling and waving, and his wife types in their words in a text message.

They don't hear his voice, but the kids can see him.

"It's kind of like I get to watch them grow up, but I don't," he said. "Being home is the best, but it helps out a little bit."

Guardsmen in Iraq also are permitted a free 20-minute phone call per day.

Thomson said a lot of Guardsmen calculate when they are likely to get out. He figures they will leave Iraq in February and arrive home in March, which would be a year since they left.

"We've never been told," he said. "We could get extended for six months if we had to."

Thomson already is a member of the Galva American Legion, being "enlisted" by his grandfather, Legion member Wayne Abbott. Thomson has helped with funerals and parades in the past. When he gets home, he will probably be comfortable with his veteran status.

There is one hurdle yet to go: Christmas.

"I'm home for Thanksgiving. Christmas will be kind of rough, but I think the kids'll have a good Christmas with Santa coming," he said.

Outside McKay's on a quiet morning, hardly anyone was around. But two people nonetheless spotted Thomson and approached him like close friends. They were close friends - Nathan and Elissa Stevens.

All a part of being home.

Lisa Hammer is a reporter for the Galva News.