

Families worry about soldiers, wait for news

"My son Charlie left with others from the National Guard unit in Dixon to go to Iraq," said Vickie Thomas of Dixon. "The meetings for parents have been in Galva, so I haven't gone to very many."

Parents and spouses who have loved ones in Iraq who left last fall talk to each other during Family Readiness Group meetings to learn what the soldiers are asking to be sent from home. The group meets Sunday in Galva. The next meeting will be in Dixon.

Sometimes one parent will get news about their son from another parent who just received a phone call from their soldier. Some of the things the soldiers need from home are toothpaste, socks and phone cards.

"You only want to send AT&T phone cards with a lot of minutes because other phone cards don't work over there," said Thomas. "When they use the minutes, they don't get a 1:1 ratio, so minutes are used up fast."

Other care packages might include eyedrops and nasal sprays to help clean out the sand. Plastic sandwich bags are needed because once something is opened, it is difficult to keep the sand out.

"Our son Brian and some friends over there were going to play football during some spare time," said Judge Charles Beckman of Dixon. "By the time they were leaving the tent a sand storm had started and they could only see for a few feet."

The soldiers went through advanced training to prepare themselves for serving in Iraq. They stopped in Kuwait before going into Iraq,

The news on television and in newspapers can cause daily worries about loved ones in Iraq to turn into crying.

"There is a lot of crying," said Erica Brokaw of Sterling, who is the secretary of the Family Readiness Group. Her husband, Sgt. Dan Brokaw, is with the National Guard unit that combined Dixon and Galva. "He joined the National Guard six years ago when I became pregnant because he needed money to finish college. Back then we had no idea he would have to go to Iraq."

The phone calls the parents get are for only five minutes in length because that is all the time the soldier has for his turn. E-mail has not yet been set up at the base where the soldiers are located. However, daily letters from family members are encouraged because soldiers can

reread them.

"Our boys are not the only ones who are over there from this area," said Thomas. "Ours went over in a group, but there are others who are with the military who are in Iraq, too."

Family members know where their loved ones are in Iraq, but they do not want tell the public. They still watch the news to see if there is fighting where the unit is located.

"Brian says he is working long hours," said Beckman. "He is not allowed to leave the base except when he is in a convoy."

Despite living in tents a long way from home, soldiers over there have tried to bring a few things with them. Many have laptop computers with DVD players so they can watch movies, and video consoles are also popular. Just finding a way to keep up with favorite baseball teams can keep them busy.

"My husband is trying to set up the satellite so he can watch the Cubs," said Brokaw. "I was talking to him when the score of a game was shown, and I told him they lost and he was upset."

None of the families know when their sons and husbands will return home. Until they return, the families will keep waiting for the phone calls, watching the news and reading the newspapers — hoping their loved ones are OK.

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