

Dixon Guard unit soldiers moved to new location

The following is an update from Galva National Guard unit commander Maj. Mike Kessel, based on questions from The Galva News. The interview was first printed in The Galva News. Thirty-five members of the National Guard Unit from Dixon are serving with the combined Dixon-Galva-Kewanee unit in Iraq.

Are you all moved now?

Yes, we are all moved. It took about six trips to get all of our equipment up here; because we still have several months remaining, everyone kept the personal items, like TVs and refrigerators, etc. to bring here.

Those things won't come back with us, but they took a lot of space to get up here.

Where are you, and when did you complete the move?

We completed our move on Nov. 15 and started our new mission on Nov. 16. We are located on what was once one of Saddam's premier bases. It housed the Median Division of Saddam's Republican Guard. The closest town to our location is Taji.

Where are you in relation to Baghdad (the unit's former base)?

We are approximately 20 miles north of the city near the Tigris River.

Are the new location and duties seemingly less dangerous than your former assignment at Baghdad?

Well, actually, I would say that most of Iraq is equally dangerous at times.

Of course our mission before we moved was the security of the road between the airport and the Green Zone, the airport road. Since many have called that the most dangerous two miles in Iraq, the mission is somewhat less dangerous.

I really hesitate to say that because of the fact that every time you go outside the wire, the dangers are right there. Sometimes the danger comes to us inside the wire in the form of mortars and rockets.

Again, no place in Iraq is completely safe; we just learn to live with it. For most guys, it doesn't even faze them anymore, not that they are getting complacent; they just don't let fear rule them.

Of course on our last mission, we witnessed a great deal of carnage and took our worst casualty, so no one is really disappointed to be away from that mission. We just continue to look out for each other and put it all in God's hands.

How did the unit spend Thanksgiving? Special meal? Watch football? Anything else?

Thanksgiving was about the same as any other day, except there was a special meal.

We continued to patrol our area of responsibility like we do every day; we have pretty much been patrolling by platoon 24/7 since the battery arrived in Iraq. We have found that this is the best way to keep the terrorists off balance and thereby defeat them in our area of operations.

But the thing I love so much about these guys is that they don't complain. They have come to understand that doing this is one reason we have suffered so few casualties.

So again, Thanksgiving was pretty much a normal day for us, everybody did their normal routine.

One bit of excitement on our new FOB (Forward Operating Base) was the new PX and dining facility that opened up. Also opening was Burger King and Pizza Hut. They soon will be joined by Subway. Of course the inaugural meal in the new dining facility was Thanksgiving, so the place got a work out that day.

The Thanksgiving meal consisted of: turkey, ham, chicken (baked and fried), prime rib, crab legs, shrimp, mashed potatoes and gravy, macaroni and cheese, corn bread dressing, blackeyed peas, green beans, corn on the cob, collard greens, and several salads and desserts.

The commanders and senior staff officers in the division served the meal.

As far as the new surroundings, the trailers are about the same as before, they are a lot closer together and things like the motor pool, headquarters building, chapel, etc. seem a little more spread out, but the guys have adapted. Of course we continue to do what we have come to be known well for and that is going after the terrorists and keeping everything secure and moving.

There were no special guests (Thanksgiving Day). I think there might have been a start-up band here, but haven't heard of anyone going to see them.

How did you feel the men handled being away from family for this holiday?

I think they did well. As I said above, we pretty much treated it like a regular day, and no one really had a time to dwell on the fact they were 9,000 miles away from home. Of course about 10 guys were home on leave and did get to spend Thanksgiving with their families.

What "good news" would you like to share?

Well, we will actually manage to get everyone home for leave by the end of December. We didn't think that would be possible, but we had to do some lobbying back in the summer to get more slots and that was able to put us into position to get everyone home.

Dusty Hill is continuing to improve. He actually sat up in bed on his own for the first time since he was seriously injured on Sept. 21. He still has a long road ahead of him, but he is a strong young man and he will prevail.

We had couple of injuries last week that were very minor and the soldiers were returned to duty as soon as they got their wounds checked out. So we are still very grateful for the loving hand of God that continues to protect us.

Other than that, I feel very confident in saying this will be the last holiday season we will spend in Iraq for this go-around.

Are you still thinking you'll return to the U.S. in the spring?

I feel we should be back in the States no later than late spring/early summer. I know what dates we are currently tracking, but I am keeping those a highly guarded secret — the reason being that anything can change, particularly with some political organizations in Iraq calling for a postponement of the election in January.

The dates we are tracking have stayed in pretty tight area for several weeks, but until we are on the plane back to Illinois, anything can happen. The Army can keep us until Oct. 12, without changing any laws.

Any personal thoughts you'd like to share?

The guys still continue to do great and wonderful things. We are continuing to make a difference every day. Some days more than others, but we are still making a difference.

Even with Christmas just around the corner, morale still seems to be high. I see a lot of Christmas trees and other decorations starting to go up in the guys' rooms. And we are getting a lot of homemade cookies sent to us. While I was home on leave, our association director, Duane Davis, asked what the churches in the East Central Illinois Baptist Association could do for us. I mentioned maybe send some homemade cookies. At last count we have over 150 dozen already here and devoured or on the way.

Other Southern Baptist churches have joined my association and the state pastors' wives group is sending goodies. Of course, I know that soldiers are getting packages every day from friends and families, so everyone will make the best of it.

I know that there are and will be times of loneliness over here, but we continue to do what we do, so that the rest of the world can enjoy a peaceful Christmas. As I said before, it is not a fun job, but someone has to do it. I am still very thankful to have the opportunity to lead and accomplish this mission with the outstanding men that I am blessed to have in F Battery.

Thanks to everyone for the continued prayers, cards, letters, e-mails, and packages. It is truly appreciated by all of the soldiers.

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