

## 2 brothers won't make it home for the holidays

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Every soldier who leaves for war takes some reminder of home, whether it's a photo or a letter or some other item that keeps his home and his family next to him in spirit, even if they can't be there in person.

For Amboy brothers Josh and Jason Wittenauer, the reminder of home and family is more than a photo. These two soldiers, both members of the combined Dixon-Galva-Kewanee unit, F Battery, 202 ADA, have each other.

Spc. Jason Wittenauer, who will be 32 in March, is a maintenance clerk and generator mechanic, he's responsible for ordering parts for military equipment.

Staff Sgt. Joshua Wittenauer, 27, is a supply specialist and battery project manager. He manages the unit's fund and orders what the unit needs. Josh joined the National Guard first and was a member of the Galva-Kewanee unit. Jason, who joined after his brother, is a member of the Dixon unit, now combined with the units from Galva and Kewanee.



One of Josh's wishes for Christmas is something with which his family and friends can identify: He'd like to see the white stuff.

"I wish we could have snow here," he wrote in an e-mail from where the unit is stationed.

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Josh and Jason are in the same platoon, and Josh said they usually talk and eat a meal together every day.

The other thing most every soldier in Iraq has in common, besides their reminders of home, is family — a mother, father, sister, girlfriend, wife, child — who will spend this Christmas with their soldier by way of a phone call, the Internet, memories of Christmases past and hopes of Christmases to come.

For Josh and Jason, that family includes their mom, Jan Klausen and her husband, John; their dad, Ron Wittenauer, and his wife, Carol; brother Jeramey, 29, sister Jessica, 22; Jason's wife, Allison, and their son Caden, and Jason's two other children, Keri, 11, and Dalton, 10; and Josh's fiancée, Heather Swartz; plus a host of other family and friends.

"We all feel different," said Swartz. "But the common feeling is that we miss that person in our lives."

### The mother

"Never did I think I'd have a child go to war," Jan Klausen said. What helps her get through is knowing that her sons are together, and it helps them, as well.

"The only thing that's helping is that they are over there together," she said. "They do have each other, so they can kind of watch out for each other."

Josh agreed with his mom via e-mail.

"I feel that it is easier to have family with me," he wrote. "We grew up with a lot of the guys here and have

made new friends since we deployed."

"They're with some of the kids from Amboy," Jan said. "Pat DeGeorge, Nathan Piper and Nathan Haley are all over there with them."

Josh and Jason were home together in August. Their leaves overlapped so they were both home one weekend. Jason came home Aug. 17 and Josh arrived Aug. 27.

The holidays this year will be a difficult time. Jan sent them each a Christmas tree and lights so they could decorate.

"Thanksgiving was really empty," she said. It was made more difficult by the fact that her brother, Charles Koch, died suddenly just before Thanksgiving.

"Christmas will be hard," Jan said quietly, but Jason and Joshua have insisted the family go ahead with their Christmas celebrations.

She talks to them on the phone regularly, and Instant Messenger on the computer has been a lifeline, as it has been for so many families. Also playing a vital role for Jan and her sons in staying in contact is a Web camera.

"It really helps," she said. Another thing that helps is her sons' confidence in their own mission.

"They feel they're doing their share," she said. "They said that people don't see enough of the good things that are going on. They feel that they are doing some good."

"I think they're wonderful," Jan said. "We're all very, very proud."

"You just go from day to day. I think they'll be all right."

#### The father

Jason and Josh each are carrying around an extra dogtag during their tour of duty. Those dogtags belonged to their father when he was in the Army in Vietnam.

"I landed over there on Nov. 21, 1969," he said. "It was my birthday. I was 20 years old."

In Vietnam he was a truck driver on a supply convoy. He returned home the first part of November 1970. Ron had followed his father, Russell, who served in World War II.

"I've been through it, and I was just hoping that they wouldn't have to go," he said. "You're really mad at first when they first go and you just try to find somebody to blame."

"It's an empty feeling without them," he said. "Of course, they're grown and they've got lives of their own, but they'd always stop in the shop here and see me. You think of them a lot when you're on the road."

Ron is a truck driver and sells used farm machinery. He and wife, Carol, live in Lee Center.

He said he talks to his sons every couple of weeks and he is hoping they'll call on Christmas Day. To ask if he's proud is unnecessary; it's obvious. To ask if he's worried is equally unnecessary.

"I'm proud of them," he said. "But I just hope they don't see bad stuff they have to live with for the rest of their lives. We pray for them every night and every day."

He said he thinks the return home will be easier for his sons than it was for him and others who served with

him.

"We didn't have much support back then," he said. "I hope it's easier for them when they get home, and I imagine it will be."

"It's going to be great when they get home," he said.

#### The sister

Jessica Wittenauer, 22, is the youngest of Jan and Ron's children. She lives at home and works at Sensient Flavors in Amboy. She's helped her mom make up boxes to send to her brothers in Iraq. What are some of their favorites? When Jan mentioned candy, Jessica laughed.

"Hot Tamales — we've sent tons of Hot Tamales," she said. Her father confirmed that when asked what he's sent.

"Well, not candy," he laughed. "I think their mom and sister have sent them plenty of candy."

Jessica, like the rest of the family, eagerly is awaiting the day they're all together.

"It's really weird," she said of having both brothers away at Christmastime. "We're really close."

The separation has been equally hard for brother Jeramey.

"I asked Jeramey if he wanted to be here (for the interview) and he didn't," Jan said. Jessica nodded in understanding.

"I think it would have been too hard for him," she said, agreeing with her mother.

#### The fiancée

Heather Swartz has been a little busy. Last October she was working as a substitute teacher in the area. Then one of the teachers at Dixon High School had a baby.

"They called and said, 'You start tomorrow,'" she said, so she did. She got a job waitressing at the Colonial Rose Inn in Grand Detour. This fall she interviewed for a teaching position for Sterling Unit 5 and was hired in four days. Now she's a first-grade teacher at Franklin School.

Oh, and there was the fact that Josh left for his deployment on Oct. 28. Heather found out about the job at Dixon High School the day after Josh left.

They have been engaged since Oct. 23, 2003. He proposed to her on her birthday.

"He cannot keep a secret at all, so I was really surprised," she laughed. "I had no clue he was going to propose."

Keeping busy like she has been has helped Heather with Josh's absence.

"I was thrown into that (teaching job) right immediately after he left. I think that was like a blessing in disguise," she said.

Something else that's helped is named Myrtle Sophia. Myrtle is a golden retriever that Josh picked out as a puppy.

"Before my birthday, we talked about getting a puppy," she said. "That was my consolation prize for him going to Iraq. I thought, 'How hard can raising a puppy be?'"

Josh and Heather had a name picked out. They went to look at a litter of puppies, and when the owners found out that Josh was headed to Iraq, they gave the puppy to him in appreciation for his service.

"Myrtle and I have had some interesting times," Heather said, smiling. "She has been so great for me to go home to. When Josh was home (on leave) we had a birthday party for her."

She said she and Josh talk on the phone two times a week. They're planning to be married Sept. 3. She's also kept busy planning that event plus sending Josh care packages with, of course, Hot Tamales and something else he misses from home: mayonnaise.

"They don't have mayonnaise over there. They do but it's not really good," she said. "So I send him squeeze bottles of mayonnaise."

Her family, who lives in Grand Detour, also has helped. Heather said she tries to stay positive for Josh's sake.

"I stay positive and I am positive," she said. "I am very proud of what he's doing over there. I do believe they are doing good over there."

She also said it's a comfort knowing the brothers are together.

"Having them together, especially on the holidays, will make it easier," she said. "I know they're watching out for each other; they've got each other's back."

And if Christmas comes a little early in 2005 — or a little late for 2004 — that's no problem.

"We'll probably be celebrating Christmas in April," she said.

#### The wife

Jason's wife, Allison, chose not to be interviewed for this story. She and Jason are the parents of Caden, who was born while Jason was in Iraq. Father and son met for the first time about six weeks later, in August, when Jason came home for leave.

"We got to take them into the airport to pick him up, so we got to see when Jason saw his son for the first time," Ron Wittenauer said, smiling. "That was — that was really something. That was just incredible."

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