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Galva Guard preparing to leave Iraq, hope to be home by Easter

By DAVE CLARKE Of The Star Courier

GALVA -- If all goes as planned, the Galva National Guard unit should be home from Iraq by Easter, almost a year to the day since they arrived.

In an e-mail response Friday to questions from the Star Courier, unit commander, Maj. Michael Kessel said the 120 men of Battery F, 202nd Air Defense Artillery, have already begun packing gear and equipment and some is headed for port to be shipped back to the states.

The unit which replace them at Camp Cook, near Taji, north of Baghdad, is arriving for transfer of duties.

"The incoming unit will close on Taji in the next 48 hours and then we will start handing the missions over to them next week," Kessel said. The Galva Illinois National Guard unit has been attached to the 1st Cavalry which is assigned to security and stabilization missions in the Baghdad area.

When they arrived last March, they were stationed at Camp Victory North, near the Baghdad International Airport and assigned to protect a section of the highway in the area. A week later they saw some of the heaviest action since the Fall of Baghdad in April of 2003 when they were involved in several encounters during a Shiite uprising now referred to as "The Battle of Holy Week" leading up to Easter Sunday.

In the months that followed they not only performed security missions, but also rebuilt a school, installed a water purification plant, acquired a wheelchair for an Iraqi boy, and completed numerous other civilian affairs

projects.

Last November they were moved to Taji to continue their security and stabilization mission. "We will leave Taji in the first week of March and about a week later, should be departing for Fort Sill, Okla.," Kessel said. "After about a week there, we will fly back to Illinois. After getting off the plane at an undisclosed airport, we will bus to Galva."

Kessel said Illinois National Guard officials in Springfield will hopefully notify the communities through which they will be passing at least three days in advance of their arrival in Galva which should be during the week of March 21. Easter is Sunday, March 27.

Kessel said the state's current plan is for the men to get off the bus, have a short formation, and then release everyone to greet their loved ones and go home.

"Unlike last year when we were fighting for our lives, I hope to have everyone home by Easter this year," Kessel said.

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