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Star Courier City

KEWANEE
ILLINOIS



Report from Fort Polk

By DAVE CLARKE Regional Coordinator

Galva's "Foxtrot" Battery is "getting antsy" with training and are anxious to get to Iraq, according to their second in command.

Arkansas National Guard Public Affairs Officer Capt. Christine Munn took a cell phone out into the field where the troops were training, Friday, so we could ask Capt. Greg Reinhardt. Wethersfield's former head basketball coach was on duty at the forward operations base of the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC), at Fort Polk, La. Reinhardt, a former teacher and basketball and baseball coach at Wethersfield High School, is Executive Officer of Galva's Battery F, 202nd Air Defense Artillery which has been training at the Louisiana Army base since arriving there Feb. 1, following three months of training at Fort Hood, Texas. The 121 men of the unit left Galva Nov. 2.

The unit, composed of men from the Galva, Kewanee and Dixon National Guard batteries, is attached to the 3,500-man 39th Enhanced Separate Brigade Combat Team of the Arkansas National Guard and is being prepared for deployment to Iraq in one to two weeks. They are assigned to the 1st Cavalry Division which is replacing the 1st Armored Division, in Baghdad since the capital fell to coalition forces last March.

"We've been doing various patrols, simulating what we'll be doing in-country," Reinhardt said. He said Fort Polk is "probably one of the best training areas the Army has to simulate real conditions."

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The Army has set up towns and business districts is identical as possible to what the troops will encounter in Iraq and set up various scenarios from handling civil disturbances to negotiating with local leaders. About 200 Arab-speaking Iraqis have been brought in to play the civilians for ultimate realism. "They've even got live goats," Reinhardt said.

The local Guardsmen are involved in around-the-clock Mission Rehearsal Exercise (MRE) which began Feb. 15 and continues through Thursday (Feb. 26). Reinhardt said platoons go out at midnight, 7 a.m. or any other time, depending on the type of mission. The JRTC focuses primarily on training light infantry brigade task forces in low-to-mid intensity conflict, according to its website. "Training is accomplished through the use of tough, realistic conditions," the site states. Three operational phases include insertion and counter-insurgency, defense, and attack into a state-of-the-art Military Operations in Urban Terrain (MOUT) complex.

As for morale, Capt. Reinhardt said it's "mixed." The men are positive about their mission, he said, but are "ready to get it over with," feeling that the sooner they get to Iraq, the sooner they'll come home. The Pentagon has stated most deployments will be for at least a year, some may be longer. Several members of the unit have commented to family and loved ones on how close the group has become and dedicated to "watching each other's back."

"They've been together, essentially, since October," Reinhardt said. "They've become a pretty solid unit." Some soldiers have already left, escorting equipment to the staging area in Kuwait. Some are scheduled to leave with an advance party late next week with most of the unit departing the first week in March. Family visits are scheduled for Feb. 28-29 with many local loved ones planning to make the trip to Louisiana.

Reinhardt said the training at Fort Polk is different than that received at Fort Hood in that the three months at the Texas post were primarily spent on individual training in weapons, civil affairs and skills needed to be effective on the ground in Iraq. "The training here at Polk is more unit oriented," Reinhardt said. "There we were practicing, now we're playing the game."

Battery Commander Maj. Mike Kessel, a Champaign stockbroker, recently spent a week in Iraq going on missions with the units the Galva Guard will replace and said in an

interview with the Galesburg Register-Mail that's "It's not nearly as bad as the mainstream media say (in Iraq). It's more routine." He said within one 24-hour period, different patrols found and safely defused seven roadside bombs before anyone was hurt, but all that was reported in the news was the one that exploded. Kessel said the Galva unit will be stationed on the southwest side of Baghdad.

He said Galva unit surpassed most other units in training at Fort Hood, including the use of a new, digitized air defense system "most civilians would never even dream." He said contractors were so impressed with how quickly the Galva soldiers picked up the new system several were offered jobs teaching when they return from Iraq.

Reinhardt said 35 members of the Galva unit were among those from the 39th Brigade selected to have lunch with President George Bush during his visit to Fort Polk Tuesday. Capt. Reinhardt arranged for Staff Sgt. Larry Comer, formerly of Galva and now of Orion, to e-mail us the names of those from the Galva, Kewanee and Stark County area who in the group that lunched with the Commander in Chief. They included Thomas Wallenfeldt, Kenneth Girken, Derrick Glisan, Eric Werkheiser, Tom Brock, Marcus Johnson, John Taylor, Jeremy Stout, Tracy Doubler, Jason Adams and Ryan Peterson.

One member of Battery F -- Spec. Nathan Piper, of Dixon -- was among those picked to sit at the President's table. "Nathan said the President took three bites of an enchilada MRE (Meals Ready to Eat)," said Reinhardt who, along with the rest of the unit joined an audience of about 10,000 in hearing Bush's speech in a hanger on the base

Reinhardt taught History and coached basketball and baseball at Wethersfield High School from 1992 to 2001 and was head basketball coach while on staff there. He is now an investment counselor with Edward Jones living in Smithton, near Belleville, in southern Illinois.

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