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## Families urging public to help welcome soldiers home from Iraq

By DAVE CLARKE Of The Star Courier

GALVA -- "Operation Homecoming" was launched Saturday by the families of Foxtrot Battery, 202nd Air Defense Artillery to welcome the soldiers home from Iraq later this month.

The unit's Family Readiness Group (FRG) met at the National Guard Armory in Galva where the troops are expected to arrive around March 20. At last report, they were to begin their journey home late this weekend with brief stopovers at the Baghdad airport and Kuwait followed by a week of demobilization at Fort Sill, Okla., before flying back to Illinois.

Wives, parents, children and other family members spent Saturday afternoon ironing out plans for the homecoming, painting signs and making large yellow ribbons. They are urging area residents and businesses to also make plans to display yard or store window signs, post "welcome home" messages on reader boards, fly American flags, tie yellow or red, white and blue ribbons on trees, utility poles and porches, or any other way to give the arriving soldiers a welcome greeting after a year in Iraq and nearly a year and a half away from home.

Families are contacting schools, mayors, police and fire departments, veteran's groups and businesses in their communities asking them to make signs, put up avenues of flags and join reception parties for soldiers passing through or heading for their town as they travel home after dismissal in Galva. The family of Sgt. Randy VanDeGenachte of Kewanee has arranged for a "welcome home" billboard on Route 78, south of town.

Just where the soldiers will land will not be announced until at least three days before their arrival. For that reason, the group is making contingency plans for several routes leading to Galva.

SGT. Curt Rowen of Headquarters Battery, 202nd ADA, Kewanee, said if F/202 ADA lands at O'Hare in Chicago, or the Quad City International Airport in Moline, they will travel by bus on Interstate 80 to Route 78 at Annawan, get on Route 34 in Kewanee and proceed to Galva.

If the Greater Peoria Airport is the landing point, the buses will travel on Interstate 74 to Route 78, then go north to Route 34 south of Kewanee, and on into Galva. "Either way, they will be going on the Black Hawk East to Galva corridor on Route 34," said Rowen. "The state police want to keep them on main routes as much as possible for security reasons," Rowen said. The caravan will enter Galva from the east on Route 34 and make its way to the armory on Morgan Road. Rowen said at that point, it will be up to the unit's commander, Maj. Mike Kessel, as to how the troops will be dismissed.

The FRG recommended that if formation is held inside the armory, that access be limited to immediate family members and news media due to the size of the facility. They encouraged members of the public to welcome the troops home along the streets and highways of their approach route, or outside the armory where the Galva High School Band and city officials will await their arrival.

The group is working with Breedlove's in Kewanee to make at least 500 "Welcome Home from Iraq" and "Thank You F/202ADA" yard signs and six large banners for display in soldier's front yards and along the homecoming route.

It also was suggested that someone with a cell phone follow the buses from the airport calling their progress to a local radio station which could let the public know when they will be passing their area.

At the armory, plans call for a brief formation at which time the troops will be told the date of their next drill, then be dismissed to reunite with their loved ones. "The emphasis will be on getting them home," Rowen said. Their next meeting will most likely be the official public welcome home ceremony which will tentatively be held in three months and will hopefully be in the Galva High School football stadium where their mobilization

ceremony was held in November of 2003.

Rowen said all 120 members of the unit will probably not be coming home with the main group. Some who were promoted in rank while in Iraq will be attending NCO school and may be delayed, and several will stay behind to accompany equipment home. Rowen also said several also require medical treatment which was delayed until their return to the states.

The FRG voted to pay the plane fare so two soldiers, Marcus Johnson and Jason Baldwin, who are currently undergoing medical treatment out-of-state, can be there for the homecoming. The unit's most seriously wounded soldier, Dustin Hill, who is undergoing extensive treatment in Texas, will not be able to attend. The FRG is helping his mother, Liz Kelm, with expenses in Texas.

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