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Annawan, Kewanee, Galva promise heroes welcome along return route

By DAVE CLARKE *Of The Star Courier*

GALVA -- The welcome will be almost as historic as the return of Battery F, 202nd Air Defense Artillery on Saturday, and apparently about three hours earlier than expected.

Area communities have been busy all week stringing banners, planting yard signs and making plans to greet the troops as they are bused from the Quad City Airport to the National Guard Armory in Galva.

Late Thursday local Guard officials at Fort Sill began e-mailing messages to anxious families in Illinois changing the departure time, originally set for 11 a.m. Saturday, with arrival in Galva at 1:30.

As of this morning, the troops are scheduled to fly out of Fort Sill at 7:40 a.m. Saturday, landing in the Quad Cities no later than 9:15 and arriving in Galva by 10:15. That time could be later, however, depending on flight time and how long it takes to deplane in Moline. Members of the Kewanee National Guard unit will be waiting at the airport to help unload luggage to help keep the troops moving.

They are scheduled to be escorted non-stop by Illinois State Police on Interstate 80 and Routes 78 and 34, passing through Annawan at approximately 9:45 and Kewanee at approximately 10 a.m. Each of the towns has eight to 10 members in the unit.

The Family Readiness Group has arranged to have someone with a cell phone follow the buses and call in reports to radio stations WKEI (1450 AM) and WJRE

(102.5 FM) which will broadcast their progress so people along the route will know when the buses are near their community.

In Annawan, where one of the biggest events of the day is already taking place -- Hatzler & Nordstrom's huge farm equipment consignment sale -- Mike Nordstrom said just before the buses pass, the sale, which involves at least 14 auctioneers and a crowd of thousands, will be stopped for the first time in its 25-year history and the massive group asked to line up along the road and tip their hats as the troops go by.

Annawan Economic Development Director Tracy Diehl said arrangements have been made for someone to call when the buses pass Geneseo. "We will then sound the fire whistle to let everyone know that they are about five minutes away," Diehl said.

The Henry County Sheriff's Office will take the lead at Annawan.

In Kewanee, Ratliff Brothers hopes to suspend a large American flag from a set of cranes along Tenney Street. "Since they are not closing the highway down as they do on Second Street for Hog Days, we can't hang the flag directly over the street, but we have a spot in mind along the four lane near the south end of town where we hope to have it up," said Tom Ratliff.

The sign shop at Breedlove's has been working hard to keep up with the demand for the two versions of "Welcome Home" yard signs being displayed. About 1,000 signs and 15 of the 5-by-8-foot vinyl banners were made for the Family Readiness Group with about 200 more yard signs ordered by others wanting to show support. "This has been special for us since one of our employees, Kay Finney, who helped design the signs and banners, is the mother of one of the soldiers, Sgt. Mike Finney," said Bill Breedlove.

The honor guard of the Kewanee Veteran's Council, in full dress uniform with ceremonial rifles, will stand at attention at Tenney and South streets and salute as the buses pass Saturday.

In Galva -- Ground Zero for the arrival -- students have been painting downtown windows, flags have gone up along Route 34 through town and up Northwest Third Avenue, the route the caravan will take to the armory. Scores of signs have also popped up along the five miles of highway between Black Hawk East and Galva. The

Galva High School Band will be waiting across the street from the armory and the Galva American Legion color guard will salute the troops as they step off the buses.

Police Chief Jerry Clark said his officers will meet the approaching buses at BHE and lead them into town. Mayor Don Hagaman said state officials are discouraging any type of procession. "The buses are going to be escorted through stop signs and signals without stopping. Anyone following won't have that privilege," Hagaman said. "If they fall behind, they won't be able to catch up."

The public is being encouraged to line up along highways or streets on the route to welcome the troops. "Having been through this before, I know it will be something the soldiers will never forget," Maj. Michael Kessel, the unit's commander, told the Star Courier in an e-mail Thursday. "Many have said they just want to go home, but I told them this is an experience they don't want to miss. As we get closer, more and more are looking forward to it."

Only immediate family members and the media are being allowed in the armory for formation and dismissal due to space limitations. Morgan Road, in front of the armory, will be closed from North Center Avenue (Galva-Atkinson Blacktop) to Northwest Third Avenue. Parking in the armory lots will be restricted by permit to families only, however, parking will be available at Galva Elementary and Galva High schools.

Following a brief formation where the troops will be notified of their next drill, they will be dismissed to reunite with their families. An official welcome home ceremony will be held in about 90 days.

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