

# A day they'll never forget

## Thousands line route for 'awesome' welcome of returning troops

By **DAVE CLARKE**  
*Of The Star Courier*

**GALVA** — "Awesome!" was SFC Larry Comer's reaction to the miles and miles of signs, ribbons, banners, flags and people who lined the route Saturday morning from the Quad City airport to Galva as 110 men of Battery F, 202nd Air Defense Artillery, Illinois National Guard, based in Galva, returned from an 18-month tour which included a year of combat duty in Iraq.

"We knew there were plans, but we didn't realize the magnitude until we got into it," said Comer, a Galva native now living in Orion.

"We were really impressed with the reception," said SSG Jason Adams, of Toulon. "We kind of expected a turnout, but weren't ready for what we saw. There was nothing but a wall of Carharts at the

Hatzer-Nordstrom sale in Annawan. I felt like the President of the United States."

The unit, with an initial strength of 120, was slightly reduced in size Saturday since several soldiers are still receiving medical care while others are in a follow-on detail bringing equipment from Kuwait.

A deafening roar of sirens announced their arrival at the armory where the men were welcomed with cheers of "U-S-A!" The gym walls were completely covered with posters by area school children.

"Ladies and gentlemen, you have the best soldiers in the state of Illinois," announced 1st SGT Paul Peterson of Roseville as the unit stood in formation after arriving at the armory in Galva which was filled to the rafters with more than 1,000 family members, happy to see their soldiers for the first time



**A big crowd** gathered under the large Ratiiff Bros. flag put on display in the parking lot of Sullivans Foods Saturday morning. Additional coverage and photos on pages 2, 4, 7 and 8.

in many long months.

"There never has been another (National Guard) outfit from the state of Illinois to engage in active combat in Iraq and day out," Peterson said. "These men have cleared routes of bombs, secured convoys, saved the lives of American soldiers, Iraqi citizens and their own comrades," he continued.

Peterson said members of the Galva unit "did what it takes to earn the Combat Infantry Badge, Combat Medic Badge, or Mechanic's Badge" during the tour. At least 25 members were wounded and have received Purple Hearts.

The most seriously wounded, SGT Dustin Hill, was remembered by unit commander Maj. Michael Kessel and applauded by his fellow soldiers as his stepfather, David Kelm, was introduced. Hill is still undergoing treatment in Texas

and was unable to attend the homecoming. "This young man (Hill) is a fighter and very determined. He will recover and accomplish great things in his life," said Kessel.

Kessel, of Mahomet, also looked back over their year in Iraq. "They fought us hard for four days last April, and when they found they couldn't budge us, they went elsewhere," Kessel said.

"We built a school and repaired several more," said Kessel. "We delivered 100,000 gallons of fresh water and built half a dozen water treatment plants. We have guarded the most dangerous two miles of road in Iraq (on the way to the Baghdad airport) and helped support a fledgling Iraqi police station," the major said. "But the most lasting impression of our stay was on Jan. 30, 2005, when we supported the first free election in the history of Iraq."

# Soldiers greeted with flags, signs and fanfare

By **MIKE BERRY**  
*Of The Star Courier*

A small group of people parked next to the fence around the freight terminal at the Quad City Airport early Saturday morning, waiting.

They were joined by squad cars from Henry County and

the Illinois State Police, and airport security forces. On the other side of the fence, two big charter buses and two airport fire trucks equipped with water cannons also waited.

Then, a few minutes ahead of schedule, the red and blue Southwest Airlines plane appeared in the east sky. It

descended in front of the waiting group, and the wheels touched down.

A few minutes later, the airliner taxied into the freight area and passed under an arch of water launched by the fire trucks. A ladder was rolled up

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**The lead bus** pulls up to the National Guard Armory in Galva, left, bringing soldiers from Battery F home including SFC Andy Trigg, of Kewanee, shown above being greeted as he enters the building. Below left, SFC Mike Bumphrey, Kewanee, gets a hug from son Bryce, 5, as wife Jerril looks on. Below, heads are bowed as Chaplain Jon Prain leads a prayer of thanks for the return of all the soldiers. At the bottom, the troops deplane at the Quad City Airport in Moline.



**Star Courier photos by Mike Berry, Dave Clarke, Sue Griffith, Janel Smith, Carol Townsend, Tammy Wilkinson and Wendy Wilson**

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# Welcome Home



This group of people (above left) at Routes 78 and 6 in Annawan were among the first to greet the troops on their way home. Above, right, these girls wrapped themselves in blankets as they waited along Northwest Third Avenue in Galva in the chilly weather for the troops to arrive. Below that, Maj. Michael Kessel addresses the overflow crowd at the Galva Army. And at right, Illinois National Guard Adj. Gen. Randal Thomas is shown with State Rep. Donald Moffitt, R-Gilson, who assisted the troops several times while they were in Iraq.



Outside the Galva Army (left), friends and family members gathered to wait for the Guardsmen to arrive. Below, an overall shot of the inside of the Army as Foxtrot Battery, 202nd Air Defense Artillery, stands in formation.

Star Courier photos by Mike Berry, Dave Clarke, Sue Griffith, Janel Smith, Carol Townsend, Tammy Wilkinson and Wendy Wilson







# Welcome Home



## How the Star Courier covered the story

With the possible exception of the downtown Kewanee fire in 1942, the Star Courier has never had as many people working on one news story in our 107-year history than we did for Saturday's return from Iraq of Battery F, 202nd Air Defense Artillery, from Galva.

The team of seven was stretched strategically along the route.

Star Courier Editor Mike Berry was embedded with Henry County Sheriff Gib Cady in the lead squad car from the airport in Moline to the armory in Galva to get a "soldier's-eye" view of what the troops saw from their buses along the route as they returned.

Next, photographer Wendy Wyffels-Wilson was positioned in Annawan to capture the reception there, including the "Wall of Carharts," as one of the soldiers called it, when those attending the Hatzer & Nordstrom farm sale stopped and lined up along the road to wave.

Star Courier Publisher Sue Griffith was waiting at the north edge of Kewanee and was invited on board the Kewanee Fire Department's aerial ladder truck by Fire Chief Tom Weston as he passed by, allowing her to shoot pictures from the truck through Kewanee and into Galva. Star Courier Creative Director Janel Smith was positioned at Tenney and South streets to get shots as the buses passed under the huge flag suspended from Ratliff Brothers crane in Sullivan's parking lot.

Reporter Tammy Wilkinson and Regional Coordinator Dave Clarke were waiting with the anxious crowd at the National Guard Armory in Galva and, joined by Berry, photographed the emotional homecoming ceremony and the reunion of the soldiers with their loved ones.

It was also the first time the newspaper has used a combination of cell phones, scanners and digital cameras to cover a major, multiple site event.



The Star Courier's Dave Clarke, left, and Mike Berry check with other members of the coverage team on their cell phones from the noisy National Guard armory in Galva.

## Where they're from

With the 110 members of the Battery F, 202nd Air Defense Artillery, 70 towns are represented. Most of the soldiers reside in Illinois, though four other states appear on the unit's roster. Unit officials were not allowed to release a list of names, but hometowns were furnished. Members are from:

- Albany
- Aledo
- Alpha
- Amboy
- Andover
- Annawan
- Atkinson
- Bartonville
- Bloomington
- Bolingbrook
- Bushnell
- Cambridge
- Canton
- Carbondale
- Chicago
- Chillicothe
- Cleveland
- Clinton, Iowa
- Coppell, Texas
- Davenport, Iowa
- DeKalb
- DePue
- Dixon
- East Moline
- Erie
- Farmington
- Forreston
- Galesburg
- Galva
- Geneseo
- Gwinn, Mich.
- Henry
- Kewanee
- LaFayette
- LaSalle
- Macomb
- Madrid, Iowa
- Mahomet
- Maryville
- McNabb
- Metamora
- Moline
- Monmouth
- Mt. Morris
- Neponset
- Normal
- Oregon
- Orion
- Oswego
- Peoria
- Polo
- Prairie Duchien,



The Atkinson Fire Department greeted returning troops at the Galva-Atkinson overpass, top photo, while Galva Iron and Metal trucks, top right, spelled out a special welcome on the east edge of Galva, and Toulon firefighters, right center, greeted SSG Jason Adams, a member of the department, near Black Hawk East. Above, Maj. Mike Kessel is met by Illinois National Guard Adjutant General Randal Thomas as he steps off the bus, and at the right, is part of the large crowd that met the troops as they passed through downtown Galva.

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### ▼ Soldiers

To the plane's front door. A group of soldiers who had been wounded in the Iraq war lined up on the concrete, and the plane's door opened. After a couple of minutes, the first khaki-clad soldiers emerged from the plane, and a whoop went up from the onlookers.

It was official. Foxtrot Battery, 202nd Air Defense Artillery, was home.

After being gone for 18 months, 12 of them spent in the war zone in Iraq, Foxtrot Battery — the first Illinois National Guard to see combat in this war — were back in Illinois, and a little more than an hour from being reunited with their families.

It didn't take long for the troops to climb aboard the buses, and for the buses to get in line behind a police escort provided by the Henry County Sheriff's Office and Illinois State Police.

Sheriff Gib Cady was in the lead car, and as he waited to start the parade, he called the dispatcher's office in Cambridge and said he would report the caravan's location every few miles. Dispatcher Kevin Clarke, in turn,

broadcast the location to all of the county's law enforcement and fire units.

As the procession headed east on Interstate 80, it was greeted by emergency-service people from every town along the way. The Colona Fire Department was first, with trucks parked in the median in three places.

Then came the Geneseo Fire Department, and Geneseo police, whose two squad cars were parked in an Interstate turnaround as the parade approached, then swung into line.

One of the Geneseo fire trucks bore a sign saying "Welcome Home Ben" for Ben Sleaford, a Geneseo fireman who was one of the Guardsmen coming home.

Atkinson fire and rescue vehicles also were in place next to the expressway.

One of their rescue vehicles was parked on a township road overpass and its crew held up a "Welcome Home" sign as the buses drove underneath.

Cady pulled off the Interstate at Annawan. Parked along the offramp was a string of Henry County Sheriff's cars and other emergency vehicles, which also joined the parade.

In Annawan, the soldiers got their first look at

how much the folks at home appreciated their efforts. From the Holiday Inn Express all the way down Route 78 to Hatzer-Nordstrom, groups of people had gathered on both sides of the highway, waving flags, holding signs, aiming video cameras and cheering.

By coincidence, the homecoming was taking place on the same day as the semiannual consignment sale at Hatzer-Nordstrom.

Pickups lined both sides of the highway, and so did those who were attending the sale. The auctions were halted so everyone could walk out to the road and watch the troops pass.

Small knots of people, some with flags and signs, found spots along side roads all the way from Annawan to Kewanee.

A squad car from the Kewanee Police Department took the lead at the first curve north of the city, and when the procession reached the north city limits of Kewanee the soldiers saw the first of many groups of well-wishers who waited for them in the city.

The Kewanee Fire Department's aerial ladder truck, parked across from Northeast Park, became part of the parade and followed the group to Galva.

Along North Main Street, through downtown

Kewanee, on South Main, at Main and Prospect and at Wethersfield School and other Tenney Street locations, groups of dozens of people of all ages had gathered to welcome the Guard unit home.

At Sullivans, Ratliff Brothers had put up the huge American flag that it uses for the Hog Days parade each year.

Next door on the lawn of The Kewanee Bank, the Kewanee Veterans Council lined up in formation and saluted the troops.

Passing displays at Advance Metalworking and Kleine Equipment, the now-lengthy parade came to the junction of Routes 34 and 78, where the Kewanee squad car peeled off and two Stark County Sheriff's cars joined.

The closer the group got to Galva, the more welcoming signs were evident.

And along Route 34 on the east edge of Galva, there were many signs — including the words "Welcome Home Troops" painted in the beds of three semi trailers that had been raised at Galva Iron and Metal.

Crowds with flags and signs had gathered throughout downtown Galva, and lined Northwest Third Avenue.

Finally, the buses reached their destination at Morgan Road, the

National Guard Armory, where another large crowd waited.

In all, the troops must have passed thousands of onlookers between the airport and the armory, who came out to show their support despite the chilly temperatures and wind.

All were glad to have them home safe and sound.

## Effective April 1

Insight will have new office hours:

MONDAY: 8 a.m.-5 p.m.

TUESDAY: 8 a.m.-5 p.m.

WEDNESDAY: 8 a.m.-5 p.m.

THURSDAY: 9 a.m.-5 p.m.

FRIDAY: 8 a.m.-5 p.m.

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**A group** of Galva High School students (top photo) watches one of the buses of troops turn onto Morgan Road to the Galva Armory. Above, the soldiers walked past a color guard of American Legion members from Galva and Toulon on their way into the armory. At left, Cris Wallenfeldt and other supporters react to seeing Chris' son Tom during the ceremonies in the armory. Below left, SSG. Jason Adams is flanked by his daughters Teryl, 10, and Joanna, 9, as they enjoy a sandwich following the ceremonies. Below, Capt. Greg Reinhardt, foreground, former Wethersfield teacher and coach now of St. Louis, and other members of Foxtrof Battery salute during the playing of the national anthem at the start of the ceremony. And in the bottom photo, Henry County Sheriff squad cars, Annawan police and other emergency vehicles lined up on the Interstate 80 offramp at Annawan to join the parade from the Quad City airport to Galva.







# Welcome Home



The huge farm sale at Hatzer and Nordstrom in Annawan came to a stop on Saturday as the crowd at the event offered a welcome home wave to the troops of the Galva National Guard enroute to the Galva Armory. The first of two chartered buses can be seen in the photo above as they pass through Annawan on Route 78. In the photo to the right, several farmers waved from the roadside at the sale. In the top right hand photo, a sign honoring injured soldier Sgt. Dustin Hill, who is currently recovering in a hospital in San Antonio, Texas. Hill is a graduate of Annawan High School.



SPC Paul Calhoun, of Kewanee, is greeted by members of his family including his grandmother Betty Swan, also of Kewanee.

A loyal supporter pictured above cheers as the members of Foxtrot Battery assemble in the Galva Armory. In the photo at right, a sea of red, white and blue could be seen in the bleachers as members of the Galva National Guard were cheered by family members and friends as they entered the armory Saturday morning.



Star Courier photos by Mike Berry, Dave Clarke, Sue Griffith, Janel Smith, Carol Townsend, Tammy Wilkinson and Wendy Wilson