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KEWANEE  
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## A day they'll never forget

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 Hatzler-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 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 these men did it day in 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."

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