

*Today's Issue...*

- ▶ [Page One](#)
- ▶ [City](#)
- ▶ [Regional](#)
- ▶ [Sports](#)
- ▶ [Weather](#)
- ▶ [Obituaries](#)
- ▶ [World News](#)
- ▶ [Entertainment](#)
- ▶ [Town Hall](#)
- ▶ [Stock Quotes](#)
- ▶ [Health News](#)
- ▶ [Classifieds](#)
- ▶ [About Us](#)
- ▶ [Archives](#)
- ▶ [Illinois Lottery](#)
- ▶ [e-mail](#)

Star Courier  
[White Pages](#)  
 directory

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[Yellow Pages](#)  
[White Pages](#)  
[Meet Someone](#)  
[My Page](#)  
[City Guide](#)  
[Lottery Results](#)  
[Weather](#)  
[Movie Listings](#)  
[Maps/Directions](#)  
[Horoscope](#)  
[Greeting Cards](#)



## 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 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 wellwishers 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 Sullivan's, 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.

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TOP

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