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From Baghdad to the ballpark

By *DAVE CLARKE* Regional Coordinator

To say these guys are die-hard Cubs fans would be an understatement.

A year ago they had just arrived in Iraq and found themselves in the middle of the worst fighting since the fall of Baghdad.

Last Friday, six of them stood behind home plate in the "friendly confines" of Wrigley Field holding the colors for the opening ceremony of the Cubs' first home game of the season.

For many of the men of Foxtrot Battery, 1st Battalion, 202nd Air Defense Artillery, the familiar Chicago baseball team they had followed since they were kids was a lifeline from home that got them through one of the roughest years of their lives.

The 120 men of the Galva-based National Guard unit, which served in Iraq from March 23, 2004, to March 8, 2005, spent most of their time patrolling a section of road that came to be known as "Ambush Alley," between the fortified "Green Zone" in downtown Baghdad, to the International Airport on the southern outskirts of the city.

After returning from long hours of patrol on the lookout for roadside bombs, suicide bombers and rocket-propelled grenades, they would unwind in their trailers at Camp Victory North by listening to the Cubs.

One of the guys would set up the game on the internet and the rest would gather round, usually losing sleep since the games were played in the wee hours of the morning, Baghdad time. When they could, they watched

games on television.

They also made a flag with a "W" to fly when the Cubbies won. Sixteen of them posed for a photo with their "W" flag and a Cubs banner and e-mailed it to WGN. The Cub's official TV station displayed the photo during a game against the Colorado Rockies last May with sportscaster Chip Caray reading their names and paying them tribute.

Foxtrot's Cubs connection is Sgt. Mike Stach of Dixon. Stach, an employee of Consolidated Grain & Barge before being deployed with the unit in November of 2003, once worked as a security guard at Wrigley Field. He even proposed to his wife, Renee, at Wrigley. He became friends with Dave Kaplan and Tom Waddle, hosts of Sports Central on WGN radio, and Cubs director of operations Scott Nelson e-mailed him several times while he was in Iraq. Stach, who can reportedly spout Cubs statistics like scripture, posted scores, standings, injury updates and trivia questions on a blackboard at the barracks to keep the guys up to date.

When Battery F returned home March 19, the first place Stach headed was spring training in Arizona.

On March 27, he was one of three fans picked to throw out the first pitch from the mound in front of a soldout crowd at HoHoKam Park in Mesa, Ariz. On the way back to the dugout after a successful toss, he was approached by former Cubs great Gary "Sarge" Matthews, now a coach with the team. "I just wanted to meet the soldier," said Matthews, shaking his hand.

From there, one thing led to another, and soon Stach and five of his buddies from Baghdad, all staunch Cubs fans loyal and true, found themselves marching onto hallowed ground -- Wrigley Field -- on the opening day of the regular season last Friday.

Standing at home plate with manager Dusty Baker and the entire Cubs team lined up just a few feet away, the six soldiers stood at attention holding the American, Illinois and other flags while the capacity crowd paused for a moment of silence in memory of Pope John Paul II, whose funeral was held that morning. The tribute was followed by the Pledge of Allegiance led by a group of Cub Scouts, and the singing of the National Anthem.

Representing Battery F, in addition to Sgt. Stach, were Spc. Chase Price of Kewanee; Spc. Chris Lamb of Sheffield (originally from Neponset); Spc. Todd Kavran

and Spc. Jestin Squires, both of Sterling; and Spc. Bill McDaniels of Peoria. McDaniels, Kavran and Squires each received a Purple Heart for injuries sustained in combat, three of 25 received by the unit which was spared any casualties. About 20 members of the unit, also die-hard Cubs fans, also attended the sunny afternoon game.

"This is the one place I want to be right now on the planet -- Wrigley Field, the 'Friendly Confines' -- couldn't ask for anything better," Kavran told Harry Porterfield, a reporter for ABC Chicago affiliate Channel 7, who interviewed the men. "For months we looked forward to getting back on American soil, but never in my life had I figured that American soil would be right here at Wrigley Field," Stach said.

A highlight for Price, a 2002 graduate of Kewanee High School, was getting to be up close as one of his boyhood heroes, former Cubs second baseman Ryne Sandberg, threw out the ceremonial first pitch.

They were also guests after the game on Sports Center with Waddle and Kaplan.

On the downside, the Cubs lost 6-3 to the Milwaukee Brewers in 12 innings that day.

Cubs fans are well known for chanting "Wait 'til next year!" The Cubs fans in Foxtrot serving in Iraq for the past 12 months had no idea as they huddled around a computer listening to a game at 3 in the morning, that "next year" they would be standing in one of the most hallowed places in baseball on one of the biggest days of all.

For them, baseball was more than just a game and the Cubs more than just a team. In a way, it represented the freedom they were fighting for -- something from back home that was going on as it always had, while they were risking their lives in a very uncertain and unfriendly place.

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