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Sergeant serves as vital link between troops and home

By DAVE CLARKE *Of The Star Courier*

GALVA -- Battery F of the 202nd Air Defense Artillery is stationed on active duty in Baghdad, but it has a "branch office" back in Galva.

Staff Sgt. Martin Gibson was selected as the unit's rear detachment officer while the unit was undergoing three month's training at Ft. Hood, Texas, earlier this year.

When the unit left Texas for overseas training at Ft. Polk, La., on Feb. 1, SSG Gibson stayed behind for additional training for his special assignment.

A 1978 graduate of Kewanee High School, Gibson now lives in Annawan. A six-year veteran of the U.S. Navy, Gibson served during the Gulf War as an electronics technician aboard the U.S.S. Willamette. He is a 10-year veteran of the National Guard. In civilian life he is employed as an electrician at the Kraft-Oscar Meyer plant in Davenport.

Gibson now staffs an office in the National Guard Armory literally around the clock Monday through Friday, actually sleeping on a cot across from his desk. He also is on duty at the armory on the unit's regular drill weekend once a month and attends Family Readiness Group (FRG) meetings usually held on weekends. Meetings are rotated between Galva, Dixon and Kewanee, where the units comprising Battery F originated.

He essentially has to be by the phone should Major Michael Kessel, commander of the Galva National

Guard unit in Baghdad, needs to contact him. Gibson and Kessel communicate by e-mail about various matters involving the unit.

Gibson is the strategic link between Baghdad and Galva. He also is the lifeline between the troops and their families.

He said the additional training he received at Ft. Hood has been invaluable. "It was a good thing I had the training," Gibson said. "I had to put it to use the first day I arrived back in Galva."

Gibson was selected from the 120-man unit by the head NCO, 1st Sgt. Paul Peterson of Roseville.

"They were looking for maturity, trust and someone they could rely on to run things back here on their own," Gibson said.

One of his primary duties is providing assistance to the families of those deployed in Iraq which ranges from mailing care packages to securing financial assistance. "I'm here if they just need someone to talk to," Gibson said.

He also is in charge of regularly shipping medical supplies provided by Kewanee Hospital to the unit now housed in trailer barracks at Camp Victory North near Baghdad International Airport. He also has found himself involved in rumor control as worried parents call about something they've heard. "Usually, the family hears the news before I do," Gibson said. He pointed out that Army regulations require a soldier to call his family within 24 hours of being injured. "Whether it's a gunshot wound or their Humvee hit a goat, they have to call home, tell their family what happened, and that they are OK," Gibson said.

One thing which has impressed Gibson since taking on his current assignment is how the members of Battery F come from all over Illinois. "They come from as far south as St. Louis and as far north as Rockford, and even out of state from Iowa and Texas," Gibson said. The diversity of the unit, which contains members of the Galva, Kewanee and Dixon batteries, has caught the attention of a Chicago TV station which is planning to do a documentary on F Battery.

"This unit is getting noticed both here at home and overseas," Gibson said.

Battery F has been in Iraq since late March and, so far, soldiers in the unit have received two commendations and four Purple Hearts.

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