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Area soldier stationed in Iraq wrote prophetic poem about why we fight

By *DAVE CLARKE* Of The Star Courier

Our nation and people are being challenged more today than they have in many years.

This Memorial Day, terrorism has replaced a long list of previous foes -- Communism, Nazism, Facism, and others.

People are questioning what we didn't do before Sept. 11, 2001, and what we are doing today in Iraq.

In the midst of it all is the American soldier. A young Marine, infantryman, seaman, pilot or Coast Guardsman. And now, National Guardsmen and Reservists.

They don't question political agendas. They just do their job, relying on training, good leadership and each other. In the back of their minds, however, is sometimes the questions -- "What am I doing here?"

A member of the Galva National Guard unit now stationed in Iraq wrote a thoughtful -- and, as it turned out - prophetic poem about what goes through the mind of a soldier as he stands at attention.

Ben Sleaford, 26, of Geneseo, comes from a family familiar with military service. His father is Command Sgt. Major Marvin Sleaford of Headquarters Battery, 202nd Air Defense Artillery of the Illinois National Guard in Kewanee. Ben is also a member of that unit which sent 22 men to help fill out the ranks of Galva's Battery F prior to deployment.

His uncle, Master Sgt. Bob Haverback of Kewanee is

also a member of Headquarters Battery; his aunt, Kolette Haverback, also of Kewanee, is a sergeant in a National Guard unit in Monmouth; and his sister, Sgt. Meg Sleaford of Chicago, is a member of a unit in Springfield.

His grandfather, PFC Robert Collier of Atkinson, served with the Army Air Corps in World War II.

Sleford's civilian job is as a correctional deputy with the Henry County Sheriff's Department. He is also a volunteer firefighter in Geneseo.

The poem is all the more relevant with what's happening today, but all the more striking when you know the words were written in 1991 during Operation Desert Storm when the soldier now serving in Iraq was a 13-year-old Geneseo junior high school student.

His mother, Keitra, who shared the poem with us at the National Guard pancake breakfast in March, said she was not sure what inspired her son to write it, other than soldiers fighting the first war with Iraq were constantly in the news which may have brought up questions in the mind of a teen-ager who had no way of knowing at the time that someday he, too, would be one of those serving in Iraq.

"Do I Believe?"

Sometimes I ask myself what I believe

What is the one thing I will not leave?

I ask myself what is it I want

as I stand in a row with my eyes front.

I ask myself in the back of my head

What is that thing for which so many have bled?

As I stand in that long, green row

I ask myself, "Will I go?"

Will I be courageous?

Will I be brave?

Will I like a soldier

be strong and behave?
Will I stand with feet planted facing my death?
Will I be fighting to my last breath?
Will I be frightened and die all alone
Never again to see my loved home?
And I ask myself "Do I believe?"
Do I believe in what
for my father fought?
Do I believe in what
at the cost of their lives my uncle's bought?
If I'm not brave, if I'm not ready
When the time comes will my hands be shaky or
steady?
In the back of my mind a little light flicks
a mental wheel turns, a brain cog clicks
An answer comes into my head
In a stern voice it is said
You have to believe now and forever
for those who see freedom
as a worthy endeavor
For those who fell for the Liberty Bell
For those who fell in the War of 18 and 12
Who at Gettysburg's high tide believed it
and believing it, died.
For those at Beaulieu Wood
for those who freedom stood
At Iwo and Normandy
Men just like me

You must believe for the men who fell
at the Pusin Perimeter
Oh what a story to tell
For those who went to the jungle to fight
And in that jungle, died one night.
You must believe
for who will?

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