

Closing the book on Baghdad

By *DAVE CLARKE* Of *The Star Courier*

Saturday, family, friends and supporters of the "Boys from Illinois," gathered on the football field at Galva High School to mark the final chapter in an emotional and heroic episode in our community's history. The the 120 men of Battery F, 202nd Air Defense Artillery marched back onto the field where they said good bye 20 months ago on their way to Iraq.

When the Galva-based unit with components from the Kewanee and Dixon National Guard unit, was called to active duty, no military unit had marched into combat from Henry County since the Civil War.

Never in 40 years of covering the news did I ever think I would be reporting on people from this area engaged in actual combat.

When we first heard that the Galva National Guard unit had been called up in the summer of 2003, I knew one of the biggest, most dramatic and dangerous stories this area would ever experience. It was certainly a story not many small-town reporters have an opportunity (or obligation) to cover during their careers.

The sendoff on that fall morning in November was like something out of a movie -- resolute faces of students, mechanics, bartenders, farmers and other citizen soldiers plucked from their daily lives, marching in olive drab camouflage uniforms across the football field in front of a stadium filled with a cheering crowd.

No one knew what lay ahead. Everyone was uneasy. Some were downright scared.

Where they were going the war was real and people were dying. We soon learned it wasn't going to be rear guard duty for the Galva unit. First, there is no "rear" in Iraq. The battlefield is everywhere. Second, our boys were going to be trained for combat and assigned to the elite 1st Cavalry Division assigned to Baghdad in the second rotation of U.S. troops since the fall of Saddam Hussein in March of 2003.

It was off to Fort Hood, Texas, home of the storied cavalry division, for training.

From there, they were transferred to Fort Polk, La., for final preparations.

After a brief staging period in Kuwait, Foxtrot Battery rolled into Iraq in March of 2004 and were stationed at Camp Victory North, near Baghdad International Airport.

Just where they were and what they were doing had been somewhat of a mystery since the unit left Galva. Military security is normally tight, but after 9-11, information on the troops was even more sketchy.

Living in the Age of Technology, however, has opened up nearly every corner of the world to everyone -- friend or foe. As soon as soldiers got access to the internet and cell phones, folks back home at least knew they were OK.

One of the main lifelines became a website set up by 1st Lt. Chris Doherty, of Galva, an artillery officer in the 1st Cavalry, who was shipped to Iraq at about the same time as the local National Guardsmen. After deployment, Chis' dad, Jim Doherty, managed the site from their home in Galva and served as a clearing house for as much information as could be publicly known here at home. It also served as the place where families from Galva, Kewanee and Dixon became acquainted. Many, like parent Mike Bowman of Dixon, are now lifetime friends joined by the bond of mutual fear and concern for loved ones.

We also became acquainted with Sgt. Martin Gibson, of Annawan, a veteran of the first Gulf War, assigned

to stay behind as the unit's rear detachment officer. He literally ate, slept and worked at the armory in Galva for the duration of the mission and had daily contact with the unit's commander, Maj. Michael Kessel, Baghdad, which served as a vital link for families, but also for us, when he could.

For obvious reasons, we didn't know -- and therefore could not report -- much of what our guys were doing until months later, and I'm sure there are things only they know that are still untold.

There were some things, however, that made national news. The first was the "Bloody Battle of Holy Week." Within a few days of their arrival in Iraq, the "Boys from Illinois," as they came to be called, were tested in an insurgent uprising. Maj. Kessel said later it was then the enemy learned who they were dealing with and backed off.

The men also performed bravely in coming to the rescue of an ambushed convoy on the highway between the airport and the heavily secured "Green Zone," which we later learned was their primary area of responsibility.

While in Iraq, the unit also built a water purification plant, rebuilt a school, found a wheelchair for an Iraqi boy who couldn't walk, and more, even though they wished they had spent more time helping the Iraqi people than dealing with "bad guys."

Several weeks after the scandal of prisoner abuse at Abu Grahb was in the news, out of nowhere, we heard from Maj. Kessel. In an e-mail to the Star Courier, Kessel said he was tired of all the good things the troops were doing in Iraq getting overshadowed by the sensational news of Abu Grahb. He informed us that, if time permitted, he was sending us a story a week about something positive the Galva Guard had done, a promise he kept.

The defining moment when I knew this was a war different than any that came before was when one of the men in a photo Kessel had sent was not identified. I thought as long as we have his e-mail address, I'd send him a request. Apologizing profusely for bothering a man who undoubtedly had much on his plate, I asked if he could give us that omitted name -- when and if he had time, of course. Within the hour we had received the missing name. It was then it hit me that I, a reporter in a small town in Illinois, had just had one-on-one communication with a man commanding men in battle half a world away. That kind of exchange would never have taken place in any other war in history.

On the homefront, care packages became the main objective. School children, church groups and, of course, family members mailed so many packages in the first few months they had to send a truck just to carry the mail for Foxtrot, much to the envy of regular Army soldiers who were lucky to get a letter from home.

Their performance under fire earned them the respect and admiration of the 1st Cavalry as well as the most Medals of Valor and Commendations for Service of any National Guard unit stationed in Iraq. People heard about them all the way to the Pentagon.

Honor does not come without a price, and for Foxtrot Battery that included 25 wounded soldiers, the worst being Spc. Dustin Hill, of Annawan, who was severely wounded when a suicide car bomb exploded next to his humvee on Sept. 21. Not expected at first to survive, Hill was moved quickly through the medical network from Baghdad to Germany and finally Texas where he was treated in the Army's new amputee center in San Antonio.

It's been a long, hard road, but now, promoted Sgt. Hill is well enough to attend today's ceremony (See related story on page A3).

In March of 2005, the battle-weary boys of Foxtrot were ready to head for home -- and home was ready for

them. A welcome home caravan from the Quad Cities Airport and brief ceremony at the armory in Galva on March 19 marked a day few will ever forget. They had made it home and all alive. I was so glad that day not to have to temper our story with remembrance of someone whose life was lost during the year they were in Iraq.

In an interview after their return, Maj. Kessel said "It was phenomenal. We probably had about 50 roadside bombs detonate on us. We also found about 150 more before they detonated. There were about 40 to 50 attacks with RPGs (rocket-propelled grenades), rockets and mortars. Every day it was evident that God was protecting us. Things would happen, and we'd nearly always walk away from it."

We hope as the men of Foxtrot look back on this experience, they don't forget the good things that happened -- the halftime show with Toby Keith and the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders, lunch with President Bush at Fort Polk, the new PX at Camp Victory, and the bond that develops between people whose lives are in each others hands on a minute-by-minute, day-in-day-out situation like war.

The rest of us in the Galva, Kewanee and Dixon areas learned that "We support our troops" requires more than lip service. We have found no matter what you may think of this war, these men are heroes because they went beyond the limits even they thought they could endure.

To the men of Foxtrot and your families, thank you for sacrificing a year-and-a-half of your lives for freedom and our prayers are with those still putting their lives on the line.

May your return home be a new beginning, and the promise of many wonderful things to come.

You have made us very, very proud! Hooah!