

## **Kewanee soldier home from Iraq on July 4 has new appreciation for life in America**

*By DAVE CLARKE Of The Star Courier*

For one Kewanee soldier stationed in Baghdad, it's the little things about life in America he's noticed most since arriving home last week on a 15-day leave.

Sgt. Josh Newman, who was recently promoted to the higher rank, started the Fourth of July fireworks early when he arrived home unannounced from duty with the Galva National Guard unit serving in Iraq the past three months. "I didn't tell the folks because the dates I requested (which cover his birthday tomorrow, July 11) fell right when the handover was supposed to take place and I was afraid things would heat up and the leave would be cancelled. I didn't want them to get their hopes up for nothing," said Newman, a 1996 graduate of Wethersfield High School. He was one of 22 members of Headquarters Battery of 1st Battalion, 202nd Air Defense Artillery, based in Kewanee, which joined to bring Galva's Battery F up to strength for deployment.

He arrived home Tuesday, June 29, hearing the news that coalition authorities had surprised the insurgents by moving the June 30 handover date up by two days. Sgt. Newman was in Germany when he saw the news on CNN in an airport terminal. "I was surprised," said Newman who had just left Baghdad International Airport hours earlier. "It really stole the thunder from the bad guys and saved alot of lives," Newman said.

Arriving in Kewanee, Newman surprised his ecstatic, but somewhat shocked parents, Jerry and Pat, who had no idea their son was anywhere but Iraq when he walked in the door with a big smile. He then made a bee line for Cerno's Bar & Grille to cool off with old friends and soak up the atmosphere so missed 9,000 miles away where temperatures are now climbing up to 130 degrees.

Under the rotational leave program began in mid-June, each unit gets a number of 15-day leaves which are awarded to soldiers by lottery to be used during their 12-month tour.

Newman said being home on Independence Day reminded him of why he is in Iraq. "I appreciate more what we have here -- and that's mainly the little things," said Newman. "It's the freedom to be able to go where you want when you want and not worry about being shot at or something blow up," said Newman who mans a machine gun on a humvee which recently had the double plywood and sandbag sides they installed in Kuwait replaced by much safer half-inch re-inforced steel.

The difference between there and here became abundantly clear while attending a cookout with relatives in Walnut one night last week. "We were standing out by the street after dark and all of a sudden I realized how quiet it was," said Newman. "Over there helicopters are constantly flying low overhead and trucks and tanks are always rumbling by. It's just constant noise."

The family is also one member short since he has been in Iraq. His grandfather, Cecil Newman, died April 12 at age 99.

Life for the 122 members of Newman's unit, Foxtrot Battery, has settled into a routine in trailer barracks at Camp Victory North, part of a vast U.S. base set up in January outside

the Baghdad Airport. Daily they patrol their "zone," a stretch of a four-lane highway between Baghdad and Fallujah which serves as a main supply route. Although involved in several skirmishes earlier this year and experiencing a close call when a mortar almost broke through the roof over a soldier's bunk failed to explode, their zone has been relatively quiet and efforts have been directed at civil affairs projects like schools and water purification.

Newman said the kids warm up to them faster than the adults. "The kids are all over and want whatever we have -- especially sunglasses. We have to leave someone at the humvee all the time to keep an eye on our stuff," said the Kewanee soldier. "It's a little slower with the adults. We wave and try to act friendly. Some wave back, some don't."

Newman said before he left they learned that Foxtrot Battery would begin patrolling with Iraqi forces after the handover.

With electricity to the barracks on "most of the time" -- making air conditioners little more than wall decorations in 100-plus heat at times -- the men have access to a huge, new PX within walking distance which usually has full power. Now billed as the Army's biggest PX, the center is complete with a Burger King, gift shop, hair salon, and various shops. A large tent just outside the facility houses a bazaar featuring booths set up by local Iraqis selling various items, Newman said.

The men were also recently reunited with an "old friend." Country music superstar Toby Keith, along with rock legend Ted Nugent, gave a short concert on a wooden stage knocked together quickly near their barracks. "We were just 15 feet away," said Newman. Keith, whose hits "American Soldier" and "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue," have become anthems for the troops in Iraq, also performed at the halftime of the Dallas Cowboys football game last Thanksgiving in which members of Battery F also appeared while training at Ft. Hood.

There has also been time for recreational activities with Tom Wallenfeldt, of Galva, representing the unit in several 5K runs, Newman reported. There is also a sand volleyball court nearby, where Newman suffered his first (and hopefully last) "war wound," a sprained ankle that kept him off his feet for two days.

Newman was happy to learn from a news release the Star Courier had received from the 1st Cavalry's 122nd Mobile Public Affairs Detachment on how the troops at Camp Victory North spent the Fourth of July, that Foxtrot Battery had taken second place, Sunday, in a 12-team, single elimination sand volleyball tournament, losing by two points -- 23-21, in the championship game.

Newman watched Kewanee's Fourth of July fireworks show from the shore of the pond on the farm of friends, the Dennis Nelson family, west of Kewanee.

A few meeks before being activated last fall, Newman had just begun studies at Illinois Central College in East Peoria to become a professional firefighter. He is a volunteer member of the Kewanee Community Fire Department.

After spending his 26th birthday with family and friends in Kewanee, Sunday, Newman heads back next week to noisy, nervous Baghdad.

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