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Kewanee soldier returns to find his name on Main Street

Spc. Chris Murphy hadn't been back to his hometown of Kewanee for two years, but last week when he returned from a 15-month extended tour of duty in Iraq, he immediately noticed something new. Most of the signs on the four-lane were welcoming him home.

Chris' mother, Ethel Murphy, had contacted businesses up and down the "main drag" and asked them to post "Welcome Home Spc. Chris Murphy" on their signboards. Many gladly took part in the surprise greeting for one of your troops.

Spc. Murphy, his wife, Diana, and daughters Brianna and Kassilynn, are spending part of his mandatory leave following combat duty visiting family and friends. The visit, of course, coincides with Hog Days weekend, but more importantly, his 26th birthday on Friday.

Murphy, who attended Kewanee High School, enlisted in the U.S. Army in April of 2000 after serving two years in the Illinois National Guard. In 2003, he signed up for another tour which will run through 2008 and may include another rotation in Iraq next year. He will return to Germany following his leave in the states.

Initially, he served in the 9th Infantry, 1st Cavalry Division based at Ft. Hood, Texas, where his wife and daughters still live. He was then transferred to 2nd Battalion, 501st Aviation Regiment and shipped to Hannu, Germany, where he was stationed until being sent to Iraq in April of 2003.

A fuel distribution specialist, Murphy spent his tour

working alongside the runway at the Baghdad International Airport refueling helicopters and all rotary-propelled aircraft. Last November he was on duty when a cargo ship was hit by a surface to air missile fired by insurgents and had to quickly move their equipment to make way for the emergency landing of the blazing plane.

Murphy was among the first U.S. forces to arrive in Baghdad after the fall of Saddam Hussein in early April. "It was pretty crazy," Murphy recalls. "We didn't know what to think and were a little scared until we got settled in."

The Kewanee soldier said, fortunately, he was never involved in a firefight while in Iraq, but mortar fire was a constant threat with a round hitting within 50 feet of their refueling point on one occasion. They also had another form of "fireworks" when a barrage started falling during a Fourth of July volleyball game.

Murphy also ran into two Kewanee soldiers during his tour -- John Occi and Tony Segura, now home after being stationed at the Baghdad airport with the 389th Engineers, an Army Reserve unit based in Davenport. "I was lifting weights one day and this guy walks up and says 'Aren't you Chris Murphy from Kewanee?'" It was Segura.

Murphy said the experience of serving in Iraq taught him to take care of himself in a dangerous environment. "It really prepared me for the rest of my life," Murphy said.

At first, the unit set up quarters in a vacant hangar at the airport, then lived temporarily in an abandoned office building where Murphy bunked in the library. Finally, they were squared away in tents.

Murphy is the son of Leslie and Ethel Murphy of Kewanee.

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