

Galva Guardsmen who served in Iraq headed for Louisiana before transferring to new battalion

By DAVE CLARKE Of The Star Courier

In some ways, it's not much different than what they did in Iraq, only this time they're not in a foreign country.

Fifteen members of Battery F, 202nd Air Defense Artillery may be leaving Sullivan, Ill., as early as today for the Gulf Coast to help provide food, water and supplies for evacuees of Hurricane Katrina.

"Friday morning the state put out a request to canvas for volunteers from the Illinois National Guard to go with units already mobilized," said SFC Mike Bumphrey at the Galva Armory, home of Foxtrot Battery. "Several of the guys had already called to ask about volunteering."

Over the weekend, local Guard officers made 25 phone calls and came up with 15 willing to go. All are from the Galva, Kewanee and Dixon batteries who returned last March from a year of combat duty in Iraq. They left at around 5 a.m. Tuesday for Sullivan, southeast of Decatur, where they were scheduled to undergo processing before departure with Alpha Company of the 634th Forward Support Battalion, based there. Their names were not released for security reasons.

"All of them wanted to help hurricane and flood victims, but they also all wanted to do it together," said Bumphrey, who was busy Tuesday trying to get someone to pick up the phone at the armory in Sullivan because he had two more Foxtrot volunteers who had heard what was happening and wanted to join the local detachment.

Gov. Blagojevich announced Monday that 500 Illinois National Guard troops would depart for Louisiana, joining 300 already there. With 40,000 National Guard now in the region, it is the largest deployment for a domestic crisis in U.S. history.

The Galva group had a choice of joining one of two units and picked the 634th since after Oct. 1, the Galva unit will be part of the forward support battalion in a reorganization of the current 202nd Air Defense Artillery where they are currently part of the 1st Battalion. "Our new headquarters will be in Sullivan rather than Kewanee," Bumphrey said.

The local Iraq War veterans will join other National Guardsmen in providing food, water and critical support for people displaced by Hurricane Katrina. They will be prepared to provide security and stabilization, if needed. "It's what we've trained for," Bumphrey said. "In Iraq, we were rebuilding someone else's country, this time, it's our own country."

In Iraq, in addition to combat patrols, the unit built a new school and remodeled several more, installed a number of water purification plants and conducted numerous humanitarian projects for an Iraqi population devastated by 30 years under Saddam Hussein.

Most of the Foxtrot soldiers who volunteered said they did so because they were needed, and they could hopefully go on one last mission together. This weekend will be the last drill for the Galva, Kewanee and Dixon group before Foxtrot Battery becomes Delta Battery of the 634th Forward Support Battalion.

In the meantime, they will be helping those involved in the largest displacement of U.S. citizens since the Civil War.