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## Galva's 'Boys from Illinois' leaving thumbprint on Iraq

Sunday, March 13, 2005

Advertisement

**BY LISA COON**

OF THE JOURNAL STAR

**GALVA** - They built and refurbished schools and water treatment plants, secured some of the most dangerous roads in central Baghdad, made sure the main supply route in Iraq remained clear and witnessed the history-making Iraq elections.

They showed their mettle in some of the fiercest battles, even when introduced to a new weapon: the suicide car bomber.

"They have faced death and destruction and continued to do what they were trained to do," Maj. Mike Kessel, commander of the Galva-based Battery F, 202nd Air Defense Artillery of the Illinois National Guard, told the Journal Star in an e-mail late Friday just 13 hours before his unit was to leave Kuwait for Fort Sill, Okla., a several-day stop before heading home.

Hoorah!

The F/202 ADA is coming home.

As one commander put it, during its year's service in Iraq, the 120-member unit became a "highly trained and lethal motorized infantry company, disguised as an air defense battery."

Members have received dozens of commendations - Purple Hearts and Army Commendation Medals for valorous actions, to name a few.

Kessel said the members' experience will always set them apart from their peers.

"The one thing that I will always remember (is) how these guys have taken a beating and been bloodied; yet they simply picked up the pieces and continued the mission."

One of their fiercest encounters happened April 7, 2004, just eight hours after having been officially transferred the authority for their zone. The unit was bombarded by rocket-propelled grenade attacks and small gun battle.

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### Edit the Editors

Nobody's perfect, right? Well, the Journal Star strives to be. Do you see misspelled words, incorrect grammar, things that don't make sense? Do you have questions about why we covered a specific event in a certain way? Do you have a news tip, or a question about this story we didn't cover? Or would you like to write a letter to the editor? We want to know what you think.

"This was being done in the back of our trucks with just plywood and sandbag walls for protection," Kessel explained.

On Easter 2004, the unit was ambushed by about 20 followers of insurgant Muqtada al-Sadr. A drawn-out battle ensued over the next five hours.

"That was the week ... everyone began to realize that we were being protected by an army of angels," Kessel wrote.

"They now have shown that they are willing to lay their life on the line for what they believe in. In our society today, that is such a strange concept; they will always stick out among the crowd."

The unit, made up of union laborers and carpenters, college students, mechanics, health field workers and others, likely will arrive in the Henry County town of about 2,725 people on March 20.

But it will be more than Galva residents on hand to welcome them. The surrounding communities are home to many of the unit's members. They'll be represented, too - Kewanee, Annawan, Cambridge, Sterling, Toulon, Wyanet.

Ribbons tied around trees and hanging from lamp posts, fences and doors for the past year are being replaced with new ones.

Signs of all sizes - hundreds of them - are on order with Breedlove Sporting Goods in Kewanee.

Businesses are ready to decorate store fronts.

"Oh boy! We're going to be having some patriotic displays. ... Uncle Sam waving ... bunting up at the top of the window. Lots of red, white and blue," said Scott Caravello, manager of Galva Pharmacy.

"It'll be good to get them home," he said. "Everyone is gearing up for it."

The excitement, anticipation and relief is building. The armory has seen plenty of action the past two Saturdays, as people have shown up to make hand-made signs, tie ribbons and just rejoice in the knowledge their guys are coming home.

"Everybody is excited, and right now, they're relieved. Every time you heard a news broadcast that someone was killed or injured over there ... everyone took a double breath and hoped it wasn't one of our guys," Galva Mayor Don Hagaman said.

The unit certainly had its share of injuries, some serious, Kessel said. One member, Spc. Dustin Hill of Wyanet, remains at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas, where he's undergoing rehabilitation after losing both hands and his right eye to burns and injuries sustained when a car bomb exploded Sept. 21 near the Humvee he was manning. Another soldier, Spc. Jeremy Wrotny, 25, of LaSalle was injured in some of the early fighting when he was struck in the face by a sniper round. The blast passed through his left cheek and

out his mouth. Both Hill and Wrotny received Purple Hearts.

Gary McDaniel's son, Spc. William McDaniel of West Peoria, was with Wrotny when their Humvee was ambushed in April 2004. William McDaniel received minor injuries that day and returned to duty.

"They were hit by an RPG ... shrapnel hit. He got a Purple Heart for that," said Gary McDaniel, a supervisor for the Illinois Department of Corrections Transitional Center in Peoria.

"It's been a long year and a half," Gary McDaniel said. His son plans to continue his criminal justice studies at Bradley University. He had been attending Western Illinois University before being called up.

"I think it's terrific they're coming home - they're a really close group," he said.

While it's unclear yet which airport the unit will fly into (Chicago O'Hare, Quad Cities or Peoria), Hagaman said the welcome squad will meet the buses about 6 miles outside of town. If they fly into O'Hare, the buses will go through Dixon, the home base for members of a companion unit. The caravan will then travel U.S. Route 34 through Kewanee and into Galva to the armory at 200 Morgan Road.

Cindy VanDeGenachte has been helping organize things in Kewanee.

"We plan to decorate Main and Tenney streets. We have banners being donated to us. We want everybody to be out on the streets," she said. "We want to show them we still remember them and appreciate what they've done."

She has a personal reason - her son, Sgt. Randy VanDeGenachte, 28, has been working as a weapons specialist in Iraq.

"As far as I know, he hasn't had any major injuries. He's pretty private about what's happening there," she said. "The things they've done over there - the majority will keep it to themselves. They've seen some tough stuff."

VanDeGenachte has arranged for a full-sized billboard to be erected south of Kewanee along Route 34. The billboard reads: "Welcome Home F/202 ADA. Well done. Hoorah!"

"They deserve it," she said. "We just want everyone to let them know you care."

Since the Iraq elections, Kessel explained, it has been quite an experience to see how the "floodgates of democracy have opened."

"For the first time in recorded history," he wrote, "free elections are being held in Egypt, local elections are being held with women voting in Saudi Arabia; Syria is beginning to withdraw its troops from Lebanon; Palestinians have held free elections for a new leader, and, finally, Israel and Palestine are talking.

"As the dominoes continue to fall throughout the Arab world, we, the men of F/202 ADA, the 'Boys from Illinois,' can take pride in the fact

that we have helped to make it happen," he wrote. "We have left our thumbprint on the history."

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