

SEARCH ARCHIVE

[Weather](#)
[Calendar](#)
[Lottery](#)
[Find Car](#)
[Find Job](#)
[Find Home](#)
[Today's Obituaries](#)



77 F
[more...](#)

NEWS

[Front Page](#)
[Local](#)
[Police](#)
[Obituaries](#)
[Births](#)
[Tom Loewy](#)
[John R. Pulliam](#)
[Tom Wilson](#)
[Alison McGaughey](#)

[FRONT PAGE](#)[WEATHER](#)[SPORTS](#)[LIFESTYLES](#)[OUR VIEW](#)[BUSINESS](#)[CLASSIFIEDS](#)

[Automotive](#)
[Announcements](#)
[Farm & Ranch](#)
[Help Wanted](#)
[Marketplace](#)
[Merchandise](#)
[Personals](#)
[Public Notices](#)
[Real Estate](#)
[Recreation](#)
[Services](#)

[ABOUT US](#)

[Copley Papers](#)
[Directory](#)
[Subscriptions](#)
[©The Register-Mail](#)



DOUG BOOCK/Copley News Service

Galva National Guard Commander Maj. Mike Kessel, left, speaks with Riley McNaught of Galva following the Galva Churchmen's Banquet Sunday night. Kessel was the featured speaker at the event. He gave attendees a glimpse into the year Galva Guardsmen recently spent in Iraq.

Major recalls rigors of Iraq war

'God was watching out for us,' Galva Guard leader says

Thursday, May 19, 2005

BY DOUG BOOCK

COPLEY NEWS SERVICE

GALVA - Eight hours. That's all it took for the Galva National Guard unit to face the realities of war.

Just eight hours.

And a bullet shower from Iraqi insurgents.

"It's like, 'Oh no. Here we go,' " Maj. Mike Kessel recalled. "Little did we know, it was only to get worse from that day on."

The short story is Kessel and his 120 men returned home alive March 19. But the longer story - the one Kessel and his unit actually endured for a year in Iraq - isn't storybook. It's war. Little but.

"We saw things no human being should have to see," Kessel said. "There are going to be (personal) problems down the road."

Kessel made his comments Sunday night to a group of about 25 men at First United Methodist Church. He was the featured speaker for the 71st annual Galva Churchmen's Banquet. What attendees learned is the Galva unit engaged in more combat than most back home realized.

"We fired 33,000 rounds of 5.56 single rounds, 10,000 rounds of 5.56mm linked, 10,000 rounds of 7.62mm and 8,000 rounds of .50-caliber," Kessel said.

"We did a lot of fighting," he said, "and it's only by the grace of God and answers to a lot of prayers" that all soldiers returned home.

Related stories

Major recalls rigors of Iraq war (05/19/2005)

"Even soldiers started saying God was watching out for us. It was very plain," he said.

Just one Galva Guardsman, Dustin Hill of Wyanet, was severely injured. He lost both hands, an ear and an eye, and suffered third-degree burns over one-third of his body when a suicide bomber detonated his vehicle near Hill's Humvee on Sept. 21. The battle weighed heavily on the Galva troops.

"That was probably one of the darkest days right there," Kessel conceded.

Later that evening, Kessel used the incident to focus his men.

"I said, 'Fellas, we've had a bad day. We've seen more bad stuff than anyone should have to. But remember this: As bad as it was here in Baghdad, it's far better that it happened here than if it had happened in Galva or Kewanee or Main Street, USA.'"

Since returning to the states in March, Kessel has visited Hill at Brooke Army Medical Center, San Antonio, Texas, where he's slowly recovering. Kessel said Hill is handling his tragedy with courage and honor - symbolic of his unit.

"You'd think he'd be very bitter," Kessel said. "But when I talked with him, he said, 'Sir, if I had it to do over again, I would.'"

"That's the kind of guys we had."

Kessel spoke highly of his men, officially known as Illinois Army National Guard F 202 Air Defense Artillery. He called them "heroes," and noted that about a fourth of them received Purple Hearts for their service in Iraq.

"In fact, their fears about getting injured were that if they did get hurt, they'd have to go home," and not serve any more, Kessel said.

As a whole, the Galva unit displayed bravery and excellence that earned respect among coalition forces. They had a reputation for providing excellent support to coalition soldiers who'd come under attack, Kessel said.

The Galva unit spent much of its time patrolling Route Irish, a two-mile road leading from Baghdad International Airport on the southwest edge of Baghdad to the Green Zone. It was an assignment few would want.

"The State Department calls it the most dangerous two miles in Iraq, and we got stuck with it," Kessel said.

Despite that, Kessel asked his men to conduct their service guided by three P's:

- Be polite.
- Be professional.
- Be prepared to kill.

If the soldiers took care of the first two P's, the third one wasn't usually necessary, Kessel said.

But he admitted those guidelines were challenging at times, including once when an Iraqi leader betrayed him and fired on the Galva unit.

"I told him (later) I really had to do a lot of praying and soul searching, because my natural instinct is to retaliate and bring soldiers in here and (annihilate them)," said Kessel, a Mahomet resident who's a stock broker in Champaign.

"We actually gained a lot more respect that way."

After speaking with the church men for about 35 minutes Sunday night, Kessel fielded questions for about another hour. One man asked if it was hard to tell which Iraqis were friendly, and which ones were enemies in disguise.

"At times," said Kessel, who estimated that 85 percent of Iraqis liked U.S. soldiers and wanted them in Iraq.

"You were always on guard. Usually you would walk around like this (raising a hand near his belt line), with your hand ready to switch to automatic and pull the trigger."

Several times Sunday night, Kessel credited God with protecting his men. He noted that before leaving Iraq, he called that belief to his unit's attention, and encouraged them to use their Iraq experiences as a springboard for worthwhile living stateside in the years ahead.

" 'I think ultimately that He did this for such far greater reasons than what we accomplished,' " he told the soldiers, " 'so when you go back home, don't waste this.' That was my challenge to them."

Contact Web Editor | Copyright | Make us your home page | Subscribe | Contact Us | Archives | Submit an Ad

© 2005 GALESBURG REGISTER-MAIL :: ALL RIGHTS RESERVED
140 S. Prairie St., P.O. Box 310, Galesburg, IL 61401 :: 1-309-343-7181