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Baldwin helps get troops home

By **Chuck Nowlen**
 December 20, 2003

Thanks to an intervention by U.S. Rep. Tammy Baldwin, 45 Wisconsin Army National Guard troops were scheduled to arrive home from the Middle East, ending a twice-extended tour of duty that the weary troops had expected to last until March.

The arrival of the pilots, crew chiefs and mechanics from the 147th Aviation Battalion - scheduled for around midnight Friday at Volk Field in western Juneau County - came after some soldiers' family members complained that their loved ones were being kept in the Middle East unfairly.

In response to the family members' concerns, Baldwin wrote a Sept. 8 letter to U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld noting that the 45 Wisconsin soldiers had volunteered to extend their Operation Iraqi Freedom duty until this month after their original deployment in Kuwait in March 2002.

The volunteers had originally expected to return home in mid-September with 160 other members of the battalion, but at the last minute, the military said the volunteers needed to remain until mid-December "to sustain the unit's flying mission," explained Baldwin, a Democrat from Madison.

However, for unspecified reasons, the military then abruptly added three months to the voluntary extension, which Baldwin noted would have meant a full year for the group in Kuwait.

That would have been six months longer than the normal active duty for regular Army troops in the Middle East, Baldwin reminded Rumsfeld.

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Rep. Tammy Baldwin



It also would have followed a previous tour of active duty for the battalion from July 2001 to August 2002, prompting Baldwin to write, "The unit members and their families are proud to serve our nation in time of need. However, two lengthy activations in an 18-month period is asking a great deal of a National Guard unit."

Baldwin added in the letter, "I am most concerned with the lack of predictability for National Guard members and their families. In their view, it seems that the Army tells the unit members one thing and then changes are made and made yet again."

Defense Department and National Guard officials could not be reached for comment Friday night.

In a statement issued late Friday, Baldwin said she began working in September with the troops' family members, Wisconsin Guard commander Maj. Gen. Al Wilkening, the Defense Department and others "to facilitate their oft-delayed return."

The statement added that Baldwin had received more than 350 letters from constituents about the volunteers and that Baldwin's communication to Rumsfeld "set the ball in motion for this earlier-than-expected and most welcome return."

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