



“Remember, no news is good news,” Jill Winling told family members of Woodstock-based Illinois National Guard soldiers in September, shortly after the soldiers left for training on their way to Afghanistan.

But when the bad news came Tuesday that three soldiers from Delta Company, 1st Battalion, 178th Infantry had died after a roadside bomb attack Sunday in eastern Afghanistan, the unit’s Family Readiness Group was ready to help.

“We’ll support the families in any way that we can; the affected families and all of the other families, because there’s going to be needs on both sides,” said Winling, leader of the Family Readiness Group, which provides support and assistance for families left behind while their soldiers are overseas.

“When it’s this new, there really isn’t much that [the families] know how to tell you that they need,” Winling said. “I just keep it very open if they need to contact somebody for anything, even if it’s just questions on how things are to be handled.”

Sgt. Robert Weinger, 24, of Round Lake Beach, Sgt. Christopher Abeyta, 23, of Midlothian, and Spc. Norman Cain III, 22, of Mount Morris were killed Sunday when their vehicle encountered an improvised explosive device in Kot, Department of Military Affairs officials said. A fourth active duty airman from Tucson, Ariz. – Staff Sgt. Timothy L. Bowles, 24 – also died from the explosion.

The Illinois National Guard released the soldiers’ names Tuesday after giving the families a couple of days to deal with the news privately, according to standard procedure.

Weinger graduated from Round Lake High School in 2002 and enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard in January 2006. This was Weinger’s second deployment and first to Afghanistan. He also served one year in Iraq, Army National Guard officials said.

“Robert was an energetic, very excellent soldier,” said Capt. Matthew Garrison of the headquarters unit of 1st Battalion, 178th Infantry. Garrison served with Weinger in Iraq in 2007.

“He was an extremely loyal soldier, very dedicated to his mission,” Garrison said.

Weinger was promoted posthumously from specialist to sergeant.

Abeyta graduated from Bremen High School in 2003 and enlisted in 2002. This was his second deployment.

Winling's husband, Sgt. Christopher Winling, was a training officer for D Company, 1st Battalion, 178th Infantry when Abeyta transferred into the unit. He said Abeyta always had a smile on his face.

"He was one of those dudes who, even when it was raining out, he always smiled," Christopher Winling said. "He loved being in the Guard because of the camaraderie with the guys."

In 2007, Abeyta was named Soldier of the Year for Delta Company, Christopher Winling said.

Cain was a 2006 graduate of Freeport High School. This was Cain's first deployment after enlisting in 2007. He left behind his wife, Brigitte, and two children.

A description on his MySpace page depicted Cain as someone devoted to his family who loved working on cars and being outdoors.

Maj. Gen. William Enyart, adjutant general of the Illinois National Guard, said the loss of three more Illinois National Guard soldiers was devastating. The total number of Illinois National Guard soldiers killed in Afghanistan and Iraq now stands at 27.

"Sgt. Abeyta, Spc. Weinger and Spc. Cain were remarkable, devoted soldiers who will always be our heroes," Enyart said. "While this is a sad day for the Illinois National Guard, we will remember these soldiers by their bravery and the sacrifice they made for us all."

The soldiers from Delta Company, 1st Battalion, 178th Infantry comprise one of about 30 units with the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team. The unit provides security for reconstruction teams that help the Afghan government build roads, hospitals, government buildings and other infrastructure.

Christopher Winling, of Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 178th Infantry, said he has been in contact with the unit's leaders in Afghanistan.

"Woodstock's a tight unit. It's a smaller unit than other units so everybody knows each other. It was a blow to the guys, but they realize they still have a mission at hand. They still have half of their deployment left," he said. "They're paying proper respect to the soldiers and continuing on with their mission. They're doing what they signed up to do."

The unit left Woodstock in August and arrived in Afghanistan in October.

Mary Moltmann, who has coordinated a program through Ridgefield Crystal Lake Presbyterian Church to send care packages to the soldiers of Delta Company, 1st Battalion, 178th Infantry, was sad Tuesday to learn about the deaths.

"I feel crushed about this," Moltmann said. "It bothers me with every single death that's happened over there, but ... they are our soldiers, and this just hurts."