

# Daily Herald

## Troops talk face to face with families back home

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Little Nolan Stoll struggles in his grandmother's lap and tips forward, his brown eyes gazing into a computer screen atop a desk in a barren office.

He smiles - big.

"Daa, Dashy, Daddy," he yelps, reaching his tiny arms outward.

From the screen comes a father's gushing voice: "Hey, buddy."

Nolan is 15 months old. Just 2 months after he was born, father and Army Reserve Spc. Jason Stoll was sent off to fight in Iraq.

Jason doesn't know for sure when or if he is coming home.

So this father-son chat is not just a marvel of technology, but also a priceless gift that helps Nolan match the voice he hears on the phone to the pictures mommy points out daily on the fridge. It also helps daddy brush up on his peek-a-boo skills.

The exchange is a present from scores of volunteers who work to connect battlefield soldiers to their loved ones across the world. New York-based Freedom Calls Foundation and suburban volunteers set up four laptops for video-conferencing Sunday in North Barrington, allowing about 15 Chicago-area families to see and talk to their loved ones in Iraq.

The nonprofit foundation has computer labs at Camp Fallujah, just outside the insurgent stronghold city of Fallujah, and Camp Cooke near Baghdad. Stateside, the foundation works with donors and volunteers to round up military families, acquire technology and hold events.

For about five hours Sunday, families - some beaming, some pacing with anxiety - streamed through the offices of Clarke Consulting, which donated the site and Internet connections.

They came from across the Chicago area and Northwest Indiana, and as they sat in front of the computer screens they were closer to their loved ones than they likely ever will be until their homecoming.

"This is the best Christmas present a mother could have," Sheryl Ashby said, as she talked to her 21-year-old son, Marine Lance Cpl. William Michael Acosta, who runs re-supply missions for tanks in Fallujah.

"I'm glad this finally came through. I want you to know how much we love you. We are so proud of you."

Acosta, from Algonquin, said his fellow troops in Fallujah have swooned over the Freedom Calls computer systems, setting up video calls, e-mail and regular telephone calls with loved ones across the United States.

"I'm sure they'll try and pull something together here," Acosta said about holiday activities at the camp. "But the only way Marines here want to celebrate Christmas is with their families."

"This really makes it a lot easier for us. It helps the time go by. Sometimes you get so bored, you get anxious and this, being able to see your family and talk, really helps out a lot."

During Sunday's Internet gatherings, most families chatted about regular matters such as the weather, work or recently sent packages. But even the more mundane matters were charged with emotion.

"The electricity went out yesterday, and I fixed the fuse. I'm getting real good at that kind of stuff now," a somewhat misty-eyed Jessica Stoll said to her husband in part of their conversation.

The families huddled around the computer screens like they were in awe of a golden treasure they had just unearthed. For nearly a minute, the Ashby family just stared at the screen smiling.

"Dead air," said Cristina, Acosta's younger sister, sending the family into fits of laughter.

"Sorry, I'm just so happy to just look at you," Sheryl said.

This was the second Freedom Calls event in the Chicago area. The organization made its local debut in October during a troop-supporting rally in Barrington. The leaders of that rally, members of the volunteer group We Do Care, also sponsored Sunday's event. They hope to pool enough donations to open a third computer lab in Iraq or Afghanistan to reach more soldiers.

The Stolls, who are from Byron near Rockford, attended the first Freedom Calls event.

Jessica said seeing her husband's face and her child recognize him helped alleviate her fears for at least those few minutes. Jason will likely be in Iraq until April or May, or longer, so she is hoping for more Freedom Calls events.

"It has been rough. There has been a lot of praying" she said, widening her eyes to underscore the statement. "It means so much to see him smile."