

The Boston Globe



Sgt. Bryan Horihan, with the 118th Medical Unit of the National Guard Reserve, greets his mother, girlfriend and grandmother in Waltham, where Raytheon set up video conference calls for service members' families. (Globe Staff Photo / Esdras M. Suarez)

Live satellite feed brings love, longing home from Iraq Video lets troops and their families talk face to face

By Peter DeMarco, Globe Correspondent | November 21, 2004

WALTHAM -- Seeing his family yesterday for the first time since he was sent to Iraq four months ago, Sergeant Bryan Hourihan of Douglas proudly rubbed his belly to show how much Army food he has been eating. Asked about his new sideburns, he flipped up the collar on his tan fatigues, furrowed his brow, and did his best James Dean.

"Nice 'fro you have, grandma," Hourihan, 22, joked when he saw the coifed, silvery mane of his great-grandmother, Marjorie Garrepy.

"You're looking good," the no-nonsense Garrepy said. "And I'd tell you if you didn't."

For 30 precious minutes yesterday, it was as though Hourihan were home again, instead of 10,000 miles away. But he was still very much in the Army and in Iraq, and his family members and girlfriend were still very much in Massachusetts.

Hourihan and his loved ones were able to see each other face to face, thanks to a live, satellite video feed provided by a nonprofit group, Freedom Calls. Yesterday 10 local National Guard members from the 118th Medical Battalion, based in Concord, took turns in front of a video teleconferencing camera set up in a storage room at Camp Cooke in Taji, an airfield north of Baghdad.

On this side of the planet, family members watched on 50-inch plasma screens in a far plusher conference room at Raytheon's global headquarters in Waltham.

Freedom Calls, based in New York City and co-founded by Holden native John Harlow, began linking families to soldiers via satellite video feeds in April. Since then, the group has provided video feeds at graduations, weddings, birthday parties, promotion ceremonies, and even hospital delivery rooms, to allow soldiers in Iraq to participate in significant moments of their family's lives.

Several hundred families and soldiers have used the service so far, but that number is expected to soar into the thousands and tens of thousands within the next six to 12 months. Raytheon became Freedom Calls's first official corporate partner yesterday, offering its video-conferencing equipment and facilities for the first time to Massachusetts families. Harlow envisions hundreds of other businesses across the country following suit once word gets out about his group.

"It will be as easy for families to talk to their loved ones [in Iraq] as it is for them to walk into a Starbucks," Harlow said.

"We use this technology every day," said Rebecca Rhoads, vice president of information technology at Raytheon. "But it's such a treat for the families. They really are there in front of them. They really are connected."

At about noontime, seven members of Specialist Megan Strid's family marched into the conference room. Her smiling face was already on the screen.

"Oh, my God! Oh, my God!" she cried as she saw her family.

"Hey, Megster. What's going on? Anything?" asked her father, Paul of Oxford. "Did you get the Red Sox stuff I sent you? And your soap opera books, too?"

"What do you miss the most?" her dad asked.

"I miss you guys," she said. "All of you, very much."

Families regularly keep in contact with soldiers through e-mails and phone calls. But while video teleconferencing is by no means new technology, few families with soldiers in Iraq have access to it, lending yesterday's sessions an air of excitement.

Given a chance to see their families, the soldiers in Iraq, accustomed to wartime conditions, were surprisingly nervous, said Major Richard Durost, an Army volunteer who runs the video operation at Camp Cooke.

"They're fixing their hair, pulling up their socks, and straightening out their clothes," Durost said via the satellite linkup. "One of them put on hand cream. I told them they can't smell you on the other side."

Garrepy, 83, Hourihan's great-grandmother, fought back tears as she recalled life during World War II, when she went two years without seeing her brother, who was in the Navy.

Harlow said he hopes to set up eight more facilities in Iraq and Afghanistan if Freedom Calls can raise enough money to purchase and install the video equipment. So far his group has raised \$1.5 million in funds and donated services, far short of the \$600,000 per-site cost of setting up and maintaining equipment, he said.

Hourihan, a baby-faced X-ray technician, was the first soldier to sit in front of the camera yesterday.

His girlfriend, Elisha Oliver, was speechless as she blushed and stared lovingly at his sometimes static-riddled video picture. His mother, Deb, a nurse, quickly asked him about his haircut. His great-grandmother noted that he looked like he had gained weight.

"How long did it take you to get there?" Hourihan asked.

"About an hour," his mother said.

"But you're worth it." ■

© Copyright 2004 Globe Newspaper Company.